Public Space and Public Faces: Masks and The Man Who Left His Will on Film

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Nagisa Oshima's *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1970) was originally translated into English as *The Battle of Tokyo*, which gives a sense of the political climate of Japan at the time of the film's production. The Japanese Communist Party's membership numbers were increasing, which resulted in a more heated forum of political discussion, including demonstrations in the city that made visible this battle between old and young, conservative and liberal, state and students. This essay investigates the role the city plays in this political discourse in Oshima's film, where the tension is deliberately set against its urban backdrop, which seems to offer the circumstance that allows these student protestors to meet, develop their ideas and form their resistance. However, the urban setting also impacts the individual and by looking at the notable film within the film, which is tied to the protests, we understand cinema's position as a modernist medium that is capable of mirroring what modernity theorist, George Simmel, characterized as the shocks of the modern city. Yet in documenting this personal experience through the film, the main character is criticized by his peers. This intrapersonal urban tension is something we will explore through Richard Sennett's thesis that the masks of public life in the 18th century, which made these political discussions less likely to cause strife, unfortunately gave way to a conflation of public and private in the 19th century. This theory can be used to elucidate an otherwise complex narrative that is increasingly concerned with negotiating the private existence within a public sphere – here, a student group supporting the Japanese Communist Party. By engaging in filmmaking, the personal urban experience is given expression, conflating the private and the public, but is rejected by the community it hopes to document, conveying the ultimate impossibility of artistically existing in the public sphere and, specifically, the political

community.

The film begins with a dispute over a movie camera that films a man in the process of capturing some of the cityscape. This results in a chase and while unable to reach the filmmaker in time, the man recorded on the film witnesses the filmmaker's suicide. When the police and ambulance arrive, the onlooker impulsively steals the camera briefly before the police retrieve it and he blacks out. Upon waking up, we find the man, Motoki, amidst a group of Communist students. They had been filming a rally prior to the incident and are determined to retrieve the film from the police. One member, Yatsuko, is the girlfriend of Motoki, though he does not remember this. He insists upon witnessing a suicide, but the closest event she can locate is another member of the group, Endo, falling and losing the camera. Unable to negotiate the two possible situations, Motoki believes that Endo has died and Yatsuko, unable to convince him otherwise, agrees and assumes the position of dead Endo's girlfriend. The two attempt to understand a portion of the returned film as the last will and testament of Endo, as its presence does seem to corroborate Motoki's version of the event. The film is composed of seemingly unrelated segments of city "landscape" shots, which the two attempt to locate and decipher after the Communist group discards the film as bourgeois nonsense. As Motoki sets out to reshoot the scenes on the film in order to better understand the final moments of Endo's life, Yatsuko's insistence to insert herself into the shots causes catastrophe. Eventually, a car accident she causes provokes a group of men from one of the vehicles to kidnap and rape her. Motoki attempts to stop them, but is incapacitated during his effort. Afterward, Motoki attempts to complete his remake of the film, though in the process is confronted by the Communists looking for the return of their camera. This sets into motion a recapitulation of the opening scene, this time with Motoki unambiguously taking the part of the filmmaker who commits suicide.

To better understand this film, we'll look at its preoccupation with the city space, which is so prominent to the film within the film and the restaging that follows. One prominent study of the relationship between cinema and urban space is Ben Singer's modernity thesis, which posits three ways that film is identified as relating to modernity. Singer notes that at a general level, there are "key formal and spectatorial similarities between cinema-as a medium of strong impressions, spatiotemporal fragmentation, abruptness, mobility-and the nature of metropolitan experience" (6). He believes that it is possible to "express in film style the tempos and shocks of modern life" (7). In Oshima's film, the more accessible format of 16mm film allows Motoki to artistically represent the "landscapes" of the modern city and it is these very landscapes that are seen as a testament – what summarizes his life. Let's take a look at how the film within the film represents the city. The first shot shows the roofs of houses, presumably from the window of one further up on the incline. The second is of a street filled with shops and pedestrians, including a sake shop and bookshop that both may have connections to the group, though they identify the locations in an ambiguous, unsure manner. The third shot is from a low-level camera placement and shows the guardrail of a road as cars pass by, quickly consuming and vacating the shot. The fourth shot features a tunnel in the right side of the frame for front-to-back traffic and traffic signs on the left for the left-to-right traffic. At the top of the frame is the guardrail for the overhead traffic. The fifth shot features an internal frame from fence posts surrounding a shop. The street and train tracks lie between the posts in the foreground and shop in the background. The sixth shot is predominantly of the sky, with several power lines in the bottom half of the frame. The final shot is the one that began *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* and notably features a self-referential flooding of the film with light, creating a white image that calls to mind the equally modernity-minded *L'Eclisse* (Antonioni, 1962). The response to these shots is telling:

the “muddy mixture” is at once seen as a deeply personal statement, while also being imperceptible, the latter justified solely by what the group understand to be modern living. The juxtaposition of these shots – “creating meaning through paradox” as one member labels it – is a distinct ontological feature of the film medium, theorized by many early critics as the definition of the form. Each of these shots depicts the city and the traversal of individuals or information throughout, but they all result in a singular personal statement.

The central interest of the film, then, becomes interpreting how these images convey this personal meaning. The images in the film can be described by what De Certau observed in the process of walking through a city: “[W]alking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (97), where the trajectory forms “an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes” (102). It is for this same reason that the characters are compelled to see the film as a testament, providing a personalized message despite depicting geography that is intended for a mass experience; the images are selected and arranged in a way that necessarily grants them a specific meaning, the way that a pedestrian chooses a pathway, rhythm of walking, that is unique to their experience.

From this experience, we can also observe how the film relates to Walter Benjamin’s theorization of what Charles Baudelaire called the flâneur, who is “like a detective seeking clues who reads people’s characters not only from the physiognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the streets” (Shields 63). In Oshima’s film, Motoki pursues an individual as he walks through the city, but the specificity of the task has evolved from what Benjamin observes in Charles Baudelaire’s 19th century by removing the actual individual and leaving only his trail. This is how the mise-en-abyme of Motoki following himself may occur. The difficulty in understanding this trail, however, speaks to the failure for Motoki to fully realize the role.

Discussing Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin remarks that the "[f]lâneur, apache, dandy, and ragpicker were so many roles to him. For the modern hero is no hero; he acts heroes" (97). Thus, the flâneur is yet another role adopted in public life, which Richard Sennett found to be a defining aspect of 18th century society. However, the intervening period has resulted in a conflation of public and private life in a manner that has since made this mask wearing process uncomfortable. Consequently, Motoki does not succeed as a detective, primarily because he is unaware that the fundamental obstacle is that he is pursuing himself. The pursuit itself mediates this reality he is incapable of facing, even as Yasuko attempts to tell him. He is neither comfortable in the mask of flâneur, nor capable of understanding the personal expression of the film. Unable to read the individual he pursues in either manner, the cycle is doomed to continue. That his failure in reading the text is synonymous with the failure expressed in the text itself – a failure of coping with the shocks of modern city living – only corroborates the necessity of this Ouroboros structure.

If the personal meaning of the film is imperceptible to Motoki, the individual's relationship to society is even more problematic. Benjamin considered that "through [the masses] previously unknown chthonic traits are imprinted on the image of the city" (qtd. in Damisch 14). In this sense, communities that exist create layers of meanings, texts written through their movement within the city, which may be subscribed to by an individual. The subterranean connotation of the word "chthonic" speaks to the specificity of one such community in *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*: the radical student movement, within which the individual may find completely different ways of perceiving society. According to Sennett, this process of aligning one's self with a particular community is indicative of the loss of self-criticism made possible by the conflation of private and public life. Gone are the days when opposing viewpoints or criticism

could be synthesized with a pre-existing understanding of self. Sennett writes of the 19th century: "The people on the left increasingly found themselves in the position of defending personal 'integrity,' 'commitment,' 'authenticity,' in defiance of changing material conditions. They exchanged dialectic for the sense of belonging to a radical community, a Movement" (255). Not only can Motoki not grapple with the criticism of his work, nor can he grapple with his own relationship with the city. The film itself, through its editing, represents a kind of dialectic between images, as well as the public space and the personal experience, and it was summarily rejected for not 'fitting in' with the Movement. Notably, the accepted use of the camera was to film the rally, but this footage is never shown. Instead, the work of the group is reduced to a polemic from which condemnation of other modes is launched. In this sense, the city is the locus where communities naturally create conflict with one another, where the translation of the title as The Battle of Tokyo is apt. In this environment, Sennett's concept of the public mask is necessary to not have the effects trickle down to a personal level and cause irreparable damage, which we see at the beginning and end of the film.

This failure to belong fundamentally speaks to the beginning and end of the story, where the suicide that occurs originates from the conflict over the use of the camera. Finding no sympathy from the community for his personal project, suicide is the only recourse for Motoki. This is due to the backdrop of modernism and the intense desire to seek these communities in the face of the conflation of public and private following the 19th century. Indeed, according to Benjamin, "The resistance which modernism offers to the natural productive élan of a person is out of proportion to his strength. It is understandable if a person grows tired and takes refuge in death" ("Baudelaire" 75). Yet, suicide lacks the heroic performance Baudelaire associated with the flâneur. Instead, the inability to divorce public, political disagreement from personal

indictment means that the rejection of his élan by the group is insurmountable. Ironically, while the film allows Motoki to adopt a distanced, self-critical role as flâneur, this position consistently causes him to suffer the personal attacks from his community and later society as a whole.

Yasuko is the most effect opportunity for Motoki to escape from this cycle. Even after her attempts to explain the situation have been refused, she persists in joining his personal quest. However, her desire for him is not equally reciprocated, which imbues the film they reshoot in symbols of unequal gender relations. As Friedberg notes, "The panoptic gaze has been invoked by feminist theorists to underline the one-way power of gendered looking, where women have internalized the voyeuristic gaze and are always subjectively 'objects of the look'" (16). Yasuko ultimately concedes to a similar, visual subservience, masochistically deriving pleasure from Motoki projecting on her in two key instances. Initially, Yasuko allows Motoki's film to be projected on her, aligning his vision artistically and literally (as he watches the film) as dominating forces. However, as soon as she derives pleasure from the process through masturbating, Motoki becomes agitated. It is her integration into his egomaniacal project that angers him. When he attempts to reshoot the sequences on film, her physical presence in the frame is undesired, primarily because it includes the representation of his experience of the shocks of the city. In a sense, the initial visual overlay of the film projected on her naked body conveys the mask that she too is wearing. The film they watch prompted her to act a part when she no longer attempts to convince Motoki that he is Endo. It is a consequence of this role that her rape provokes no significant display of animosity towards the perpetrators; she has distanced herself from her surroundings.

Though unwilling to confront the realities it presents, especially Yasuko's vocalization of these realities, Motoki's dogged persistence in exploring the sites depicted in the film indicates a

subconscious desire to face the truth of his experience. Using the paradigm of psychology, this may be understood as psychic life responding to the modern city, with the filmic medium offering a space where the two may be conflated. Damisch states:

> If it is true, as Freud maintained, that the unconscious has no history and does not want to know that it is mortal, it nonetheless retains traces of all the successive stages of [...] events and experiences constituting it. It is up to the subject to give first-person narrative, or historical, form to this dark ground that it can know only through scraps and figures, and whose return, whose surfacing, whose emergence into the light eludes all conscious control (17-18)

If Motoki's suicide while filming was a conscious decision to extremely ignore the psychic life beneath his personal narrative surfacing, the cyclical structure of the story testifies to a very lack of control: beyond all reason, this confrontation occurs infinitely through inescapable repetition. This impossible Escher-like circuit is the only method within which the modernist first-person narrative can exist.

Whether this first-person narrative can ever mesh with the public, political community is less sure. The overarching thesis of the film is clearly the impossibility for shifting ideologies to be understood by dogmatic political communities, but the question remains whether this is the long-lasting failure of the 19th century, as Sennett would argue or instead the natural human desire to publicly acknowledge the personal experience. Regardless, it pays credence to another aspect of Sennett's thesis: the actor in the public sphere of the 18th century could maneuver and shift opinion without worrying about the same personal tensions. *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* provides a compelling case for the value of its resurrection precisely for the modern urban environment and its shocks.

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