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TO THE LIGHTHOUSE
URBAN SOLITUDE AND MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS IN *AKUNIN*, BY YOSHIDA SHŪICHI*

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Abstract
In his literature, Yoshida Shūichi (Nagasaki, 1968) presents a critique of contemporary urban life as an alienating experience occurring in delocalized and dehumanized spaces; his acclaimed novel *Akunin* (*Villain*, 2007) depicts secondary cities and peripheries where mobile phones, websites, dating services, street networks and mass media mark the edges of a postmodern cartography of urban Japan whose main features are an inescapable sense of solitude, the complexity of intersubjectivity and human relationships and the segmentation of selfhood. Authors of the last decades appear specifically concerned with solitude, and Yoshida represents a telling example of this tendency, because solitude is, in his works, first and foremost the incapacity and unwillingness to deal with otherness: such a pessimistic view conveys a profoundly critical stance vis-à-vis the current state of global communities and raises key questions about the meaning of life and emotions in contemporary society.

Keywords
Japanese literature, Twenty-first century, urban space, solitude, criticism

要旨
吉田修一の文学では、現代都市の中の生活が帰属性や人間性に欠けている経験として批判的に扱われている。有名な小説『悪人』（2007年）では、第二都市や郊外などが描かれており、それは携帯電話、ウェブサイト、出会い系サイト、道路網、大量伝達媒体からなる日本の都市空間のポストモダン的な地図の要素になっており、その特徴は避けられない孤独感、複雑な間主観性と人間関係、自我の分裂であると

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されている。ここ数十年間活躍してきた作家たちは孤独に興味を示しており、特に吉田はその傾向を著しくしていると思われる。彼の作品の中で孤独というのはまず他者とのコミュニケーションに対する無能力、不本意という意味を持っている。上のような厭世的な態度は、国際社会の現状に対する非常に批判的なスタンスを含んでおり、現在の社会における人生と感情に関して重要な問いかけを生み出している。

キーワード
現代文学; 孤独; 都市空間; 批評

1. Introduction

Early in *Akunin*[1] (2007; *Villain*, 2011), Yoshida Shūichi[2] (b. 1968) introduces us to the crime scene, an "infamous" location in Kyūshū, in the south of Japan. The place is called Mitsuse Pass and it is a liminal, transitional space that nonetheless I would hesitate to define a "non-place," because it has plenty of history and connotations, also for being the setting of a variety of urban legends; in other words, it is a transitional space which is charged with anthropological meaning, thus it does not fit into the existing negative definition of "non-places".[3] The pass is described as follows:

> Mitsuse Pass has always had ghostly, otherworldly stories connected to it. In the beginning of the Edo period it was rumored to be a hideout for robbers. In the mid-1920s rumor had it that someone murdered seven women in Kitagata township in Saga Prefecture and escaped to the pass. More recently the pass has become infamous as the place where, so the story goes, someone staying at a nearby inn went crazy and killed another guest. Aware of this tale, young people liked to dare each other to drive over the pass. There have been supposed sightings of ghosts as well, usually near the exit to the Mitsuse Tunnel on the border between Fukuoka and Saga. (Yoshida 2011, 28)[4]

Reference to the "stories," the "rumors," and the "supposed sightings" reported by the extradiegetic narrator of this section of the novel are of particular

[1] 悪人.

[2] 吉田修一.

[3] Here I refer, obviously, to Marc Augé's work and to de Certeau's seminal notion of space, a direct reference for Augé himself. See Augé 1995, 77-78; Certeau 2002, 115-130.

[4] Quotations of Yoshida 2011 come from the Kindle edition of the book, so I cite location numbers instead of page numbers.

interest if we think that one of the main themes of *Akunin* is human communication—and especially its absence and annihilation. The idea that multiple stories conjuring up the shared meaning of a place can circulate by word of mouth and be the object of a sort of oral tradition contrasts markedly with the overall narrative, dominated by a pessimistic notion of humanity, whose main culpability resides in the inability to build whatever natural and un-mediated relationship between individuals.

Born in Nagasaki, Kyūshū, in 1968, Yoshida later moved to Tōkyō where he set many of his novels, such as *Parēdo*[5] (2002; *Parade*, 2014), *Tōkyōwankei*[6] (A View of Tōkyō Bay, 2003) and *Randomāku*[7] (Landmark, 2004), that reveal a predilection for urban settings. His critique addresses contemporary urban life, narrated as an alienating experience unfolding in delocalized spaces devoid of any proper humanity; alongside the representative works mentioned above, *Akunin* shows how this author implicitly dismantles the modern myth of Tōkyō's homogeneity and particularism and depicts secondary cities and peripheries where the urban diseases of solitude and anguish develop within an intricate web of urban transportation, social media and urban icons systematically deconstructed and turned into a set of incoherent signs. What I set out to investigate is to what extent, in *Akunin*, mobile phones, websites, dating services, street networks and mass media mark the edges of a postmodern cartography of urban Japan whose main features are an inescapable sense of solitude, the complexity of intersubjectivity and human relationships and the segmentation of selfhood.

As a novel, *Akunin* challenges widely-held assumptions underlying the notions of genre and narrativity and is inherently subversive in its construction – and deconstruction – of shared moral values. Despite being about a murder and revolving around a police investigation, the murderer's identity is clear from the beginning. Often labelled a "thriller," Yoshida's work does not so much rely on the mysterious and frightening events occurring throughout the narrative; rather, it emphasizes what is intrinsically uncanny in the human condition in the global twenty-first century. The plot revolves around the topic of violence, but the young woman brutally killed and dumped near the infamous mountain pass close to the highway is hardly the only victim; violence is in the everyday experience of urban spatialities, depicted as tangled webs that frustrate and inhibit people's desire for mutual understanding and truthful communication. The characters can only express their emotions

[5] パレード.

[6] 東京湾景.

[7] ランドマーク.

via telephone or by text message; they only seem to feel alive along the internet line, and hope to find love, or only a surrogate of it, through online dating services. "Love" is thus conceived in two distinct forms, either as a commodity – massage parlors, virtual sex, subscription-based dating services – or as an abstract, and mostly delusional, state of mind that can only exist in the parallel dimension of memory and reverie and in the interstitial and peripheral spaces of the city.

Yoshida calls into question the notion of agency in his meditation about truth and guilt, belonging and solitariness, empathy and sacrifice. The Japanese title, *Akunin*, refers explicitly to evil (*aku*[8]), but, as I argue, the greatest evil is to be found in one of the author's paramount concerns: the inability to communicate and the avoidance of any direct encounter, or clash, with the "Other". Failing to face alterity, Yoshida's characters appear ill at ease formulating any kind of coherent self-image.

Further, I contend that Yoshida's claim testifies to an important transition within the recent history of Japanese literature. While literary works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thematized otherness as the essential marker of Japanese modernity, authors of recent decades appear specifically concerned with solitude, and Yoshida is a remarkably telling example of this tendency because solitude is, in his works, first and foremost the incapacity and unwillingness to deal with otherness: such a pessimistic view conveys a profoundly critical stance upon the current state of global communities and raises key questions about the meaning of life and emotions in contemporary society.

2. Multiple polycentric selves

In the modern period, within the context of intensive modernization wrought by the Meiji Restoration (1868), the encounter with the foreign "Other" represented by Europe and the United States, but also with a rediscovered Asia, and especially China, was a paramount concern and influenced the country's urbanization and its perception in literature.[9] For some writers, Tōkyō itself,

[8] 悪.

[9] For a thorough discussion of this topic in English, refer to Maeda Ai's *Text and the City*. Another essential reference is Isoda 1990. Satō Yoshio's 2010 monograph also highlights important aspect of the relationship between Tōkyō and modern Japanese literature. A study that also takes in other urban realities (Shanghai, Okinawa) is Taguchi 2006.

with its foreign architecture, became the "Other" against which to best assess the modern experience, so they engaged in a confrontation with the city, approaching a variety of topics from the perspective of the relationship between the individual and Tōkyō, and conceptualizing a notion of "native place" (*furusato*[10]) as a complement to the capital (Narita 1993, 20).

Now that concrete buildings and iron bridges are as familiar in Japanese cityscapes as in the United States and Europe, the urban experience reflected in literature seems to be characterized by a fractioning of the center, both in the polycentric representation of Tōkyō's spatiality and in the narrative rendering of life in secondary cities. The "dramatic" transformation that occurred in most Japanese cities during the last three decades (Waley 2013, 46) is something that literary characters struggle to cope with, more intensely so since the 1980s, when no effort was spared to make Tōkyō the next global financial center (Sand 2013, 14), and after the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, when a widespread sentiment of precarity[11] and nostalgia emerged in conjunction with the period of economic downturn known as the "lost decade," contributing to the recasting of *furusato* as an emblem of "temporal and spatial situatedness" no longer identified with spaces *other than* the capital, but also *in* the capital: its neighborhoods (Thornbury and Schulz 2018, x).

Yet the reappraisal of Tōkyō's neighborhoods and the proliferation of centers within the city had been underway long before the 1980s. In 1969, Yoshimoto Takaaki[12] (1924-2012) founded a magazine titled *Toshi*[13] (City) whose introductory essay encouraged readers to re-discover the "old" Tōkyō, the popular neighborhoods of the city, left behind by the Meiji architectural revolution and pushing back urban (and human) standardization (Yoshimoto 1969, 32). Further, Yoshimi Shun'ya discusses the fragmentation of the urban self in pho-

[10] 故郷.

[11] Precarity is indeed the prism through which Japanese contemporary culture is seen by the contributors of a timely and thought-provoking volume edited by Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt and Roman Rosenbaum in 2015. Suzuki Sadami's foreword adds this notion to the debate on social stratification that is closely related to the collapse of the bubble economy, and many of the contributors whose work focuses on literature address the fracturing of the self and identity issues, including the difficulty of conceiving an idea of self within a specific group or social type, often connected to the workplace. Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum 2015. Anne Allison's ethnography of contemporary Japan through the lens of precarity provides valuable insights especially as regards the interconnections between this very sense of precarity and instability and notions of home and belonging (Allison 2013).

[12] 吉本隆明.

[13] 都市.

tographic terms in relation to the transformation of city imagery over the last few decades, theorizing a "double take" on the urban fabric enhanced by contemporary familiarity with satellite images and the street-level of smartphone photographs. Despite Google Earth and iPhones, however, this dual perspective is not entirely a prerogative of the 2000s but should be considered as a continuation of wartime aerial photography and the multiplication of viewpoints that occurred when people started to go out in the street with their cameras and chronicle the conditions in post-war Japan (Yoshimi 2016, 435-436).[14] Japanese artists in the last decades seem to have acknowledged and absorbed these ideas, hence notions such as instability, nostalgia, precarity and solitude recur so often in recent critical debates.

Of the writers whose work testifies to this kind of approach, Yoshida is particularly interesting for many reasons, including his tendency to interweave the lives of individuals and the life of the city itself into his narratives. To be sure, other writers, including Murakami Haruki[15] (b. 1949), Yoshimoto Banana[16] (b. 1964),[17] Furukawa Hideo[18] (b. 1966), and authors of noir fiction such as Nakamura Fuminori[19] (b. 1977), Miyabe Miyuki[20] (b. 1960), Kirino Natsuo[21] (b. 1951)[22] and so forth, often place their characters in urban settings, emphasiz-

[14] This dual perspective is at work, for instance, in *Pāku raifu*, where panoptic views of Hibiya Park and photographs portraying a residential district that stirs a sense of intimacy and nostalgia in one of the characters appear to complement a narrative of loss, desolation and individuation of identity. An in-depth analysis of this work can be found in Fukagawa 2011.

[15] 村上春樹.

[16] 吉本ばなな.

[17] On the urban paysage and media culture in writers from the 1980s—and in particular Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana—see Amitrano 1996, 10-11. On the representation of Tōkyō in the works of these two authors see also Chilton 2009.

[18] 古川日出男.

[19] 中村文則.

[20] 宮部みゆき.

[21] 桐野夏生.

[22] For a recent survey of contemporary noir fiction (selected within a corpus of works translated into English and focusing on the perspective of the non-Japanese reader of these translations) representing Tōkyō as a locus of violence refer to Widmaier Capo 2018. Widmaier-Capo takes into account also translated novels from different genres, such as *Parēdo* and Yoshimoto's *Moshi moshi Shimokitazawa* もしもし下北沢 (2010), whose urban implications I have myself discussed in my 2014 contribution, sometimes providing similar interpretations. While timely in its emphasis on global resonance, Widmaier Capo's focus on translated novels does not appear en-

ing the deep-rooted relationship and tensions between humans and the space they live in, but in Yoshida's fiction space appears more closely connected to the sense of unease and seemingly inescapable solitude that characterizes urban existence in contemporary literature. From this perspective, we may argue that Yoshida's claim eloquently testifies to the important transition from the thematization of otherness as the essential marker of Japanese modernity, typical of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century authors, to the concern with solitude and longing for stability that characterizes literary works from the last decades. The novelist Murakami Ryū[23] (b. 1952), a member of the committee that awarded Yoshida's novel *Pāku raifu*[24] (Park Life, 2002) with the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 2002, praised his work for being effective in grasping the sense of hopelessness, immobility and distress of an entire generation, that awkward feeling of "something that might be about to begin, but that has not begun yet" (Murakami 2002, 386).

Masubuchi Toshiyuki has likened Yoshida's mode of description to the bird's-eye view characterizing the maps of another Yoshida, Hatsusaburō[25] (1884-1955), cartographies of real spaces that nonetheless subsumed the cartographer's imagination and his idea of what prospective users (tourists) expected to see (Masubuchi 2008, 49). In these maps, as well as in Yoshida Shūichi's visual descriptions of urban environments, the "double filter" of "individual experience and […] conventions of representation" that Peter Burke considers an essential part of urban sources (Burke 2013, 439) is certainly at work, but in the writer's case it is yet another critical device alerting the readers to the risks of urban homogenization and destabilizing their sense of belonging. As Marco Del Corona pointed out in his review of the Italian translation of *Akunin*, Japan is described as "hostile, inhospitable, anti-touristic, steering clear of stereotypes." (Del Corona 2017, 19)

3. About a boy

Serialized at first in the *Asahi shinbun*[26] between late March 2006 and late January 2007, *Akunin* became a best-seller shortly after its publication in 2007;

tirely convincing because it fails to highlight a number of dynamics of the "politics" of translation and the publishing industry.

[23] 村上龍.

[24] パークライフ.

[25] 吉田初三郎.

[26] 朝日新聞.

following the book's success, the story was adapted for cinema in 2010 and the movie, directed by Lee Sang-il[27] (b. 1974), featuring Hisaishi Jō's[28] (b. 1950) soundtrack, and with Tsumabuki Satoshi[29] (b. 1980) and Fukatsu Eri[30] (b. 1973) playing Yūichi and Mitsuyo respectively, was also a big hit.

Although the book is fairly long, the story is quite simple. A young woman, Yoshino, is found dead near the Mitsuse Pass as her murderer, Yūichi, falls in love with another woman, Mitsuyo; pursued by the police, Yūichi and Mitsuyo desperately try to escape, hiding in an abandoned lighthouse, but, when he hears the policemen approaching, Yūichi is caught trying to kill Mitsuyo. While Mitsuyo is extremely confused, the reader is left with the firm impression that Yūichi's alleged attempt to murder her was in fact a way to save her from being accused of complicity, thus an act of love. Fairly soon, we discover that Yoshino met Yūichi through a dating service and had sex with him and let him take nude photos of her for money. As the police investigation goes on, testimonies and flashbacks inform us that there was more to the characters' lives than the single murder episode seems to suggest. Yoshino appears superficial and prone to lying, obsessed with luxury brands and status symbols and incapable of figuring out what her true aspirations are. Yūichi has been abandoned and betrayed all his life; he has sought love relentlessly, but in the form of virtual sex and prostitution, always avoiding direct and honest communication.

The majority of critics commenting on *Akunin* stressed the novel's insight into the complexities of selfhood, adulthood and, of course, evil. The *New Yorker* noted the absence of heroes or a "clear-cut villain," with the author constantly "widening the frame, exposing cruelty and alienation at all levels of Japanese society" (Sept. 27, 2010); Jessa Crispin wrote that *Akunin* "plays with our modern identity issues" (Crispin 2010); writing about the movie, Ryan Cook invites the reader to take into account other characters' responsibilities to explain the crime committed by Yūichi – including the "mean-spirited" Yoshino herself (Cook 2011, 65). As these comments seem to imply, despite the abundance of secondary characters and subplots, and the emphasis Yoshida places on the spatial setting of the narrative, *Akunin's* greatest interest arguably lies in the characterization of the protagonist, Yūichi. Through his personal story, a universal narrative of isolation, social estrangement, vulnerability and loss of self unfolds. This is, however, a familiar pattern in Yoshida's literature. Many of his novels portray young characters coming up against, and usually oppos-

[27] Korean: 이상일; Japanese: 季相日.

[28] 久石譲.

[29] 妻夫木聡.

[30] 深津絵里.

ing, the values and logic of the dominant culture that they often fail to embrace, missing the chance to become assimilated into the adult society. They must either align themselves with dominant patterns of proper "adult" behavior or exist as juxtaposed – and contrasting – alternatives to the normative (male) subject.

According to the scholar Kuroiwa Yūichi, the topic of masculinity is a central concern in Yoshida's literature and is closely related to that of youth (Kuroiwa 2011, 330-331). Not only in *Akunin*, but also in other works – *Parēdo* is probably the most striking example – his characters have to face the difficult, twofold challenge of finding a place in the world as male adults, of fitting in to a society whose notions of adulthood and masculinity appear excessively fixed and inhibiting. Yoshida's strategy to overcome this rigidity seeks to deconstruct his characters' selves, a process of segmentation that brings to the surface the incongruities and misconceptions underlying the notion of "social being": he pursues this with great clarity in *Parēdo*, a novel structured in five chapters narrated by five characters who describe each other in sometimes diametrically opposing ways, stressing the inevitable partiality of all human perspectives. In *Akunin*, he resorts once again to the stratagem of multifocalization (the alternation between several focalizers) but also makes strategic use of a variety of communication devices to offer multiple, and systematically contrasting, perspectives on each character and situation. These devices include traditional narrative stratagems such as flashback and interior monologue, as well as tools of communication like newspapers, television and mobile phones.

Let us now look more closely at how this complex characterization applies to the protagonist of the novel. Yūichi is a young man whom women find physically, but not emotionally attractive; he is not rich nor successful, so not a great "catch" according to the "regular" young women's criteria. Yoshino's opinion of him is quite clear:

> "He's good-looking, all right, but a complete bore. It's no fun being with him. Plus he's a construction worker, which doesn't turn me on […] The only thing is, he's good in bed. […] The sex is great," Yoshino whispered again, a knowing smile on her lips […] "He's like, so good at it […] It's like I completely lose it, and can't help screaming. […] And the more I cry out, the more I lose control, and it's like I know we're in a small hotel room but it feels like we're in some vast open place […]." (Yoshida 2011, 847-863)

Unlike Yūichi, whose interest in Yoshino seems deeper than sexual attraction, Yoshino keeps on seeing Yūichi because "he's good in bed," which asserts his masculinity, whereas her comments on his being "a complete bore" and a construction worker seem to negate it, while framing her notion of the desirable man within a general discourse that values social status and de-emphasizes ethical virtues, completely absent from Yoshino's assessment of Yūichi.

Conversely, such virtues occupy a central position in another woman's account of her acquaintance with him – that nonetheless does not fail to stress Yūichi's fitness as well. The woman's name is Miho; she is a sex worker at a massage parlor who, frightened by Yūichi's strong attachment to her, has left her job. In fact, thanks to the testimony of Yūichi's only friend, we discover that he had fallen in love with Miho and, misinterpreting her kindness, had gone as far as to rent an apartment where he wished to live with her. It was at this point that Miho disappeared. However, there was nothing in Yūichi's behavior that could possibly justify Miho's fears: from the very beginning, the man had appeared respectful and even naïve; he took her delicious, often homemade, food every time he went to see her, treating her like a kind boyfriend would do, and she felt so much at ease in his company that at times she would even fall asleep while lying next to him. In the Miho episode, the inconsistency between space and emotions is dramatized to great effect. Yūichi's good intentions, his sincere, caring affection for Miho and his longing for love produce a comforting atmosphere that is out of place in the claustrophobic space of the massage parlor room. As part of a microcosm with its rules and customs, where "love" does not exist as such, but as an overtly decontextualized concept sustaining the system of commodity transaction that is the sex industry, Miho feels threatened rather than flattered or moved by Yūichi's feelings for her, becoming one of the many women who would ultimately betray him.

Even Mitsuyo, who would fall genuinely in love with Yūichi, gets to know him through the same dating service used by Yoshino and accepts meeting him because she wants to have sex with him: "Sex I can take or leave. I just want somebody to hold me. For years that's what I've been looking for. Somebody to hold me" (Yoshida 2011, 2493). Though this sentence clearly suggests that Mitsuyo is trying to escape solitude rather than seeking sex as a merely physical act, at the beginning of her short relationship with Yūichi she also appears driven towards a surrogate of love rather than the real thing. The couple's life on the run is a trajectory leading towards true love, and it comes as no surprise that it culminates in a non-urban environment: the abandoned (thus non-functioning) lighthouse. The farther they get from the efficient, functional, mechanized and thus de-humanized city the truer, and less commodified their feeling becomes.

Through the many different accounts – often contrasting and always incomplete – about Yūichi, Yoshida brings to the reader's attention the inherent multiplicity of the individual's self. There are as many Yūichis as there are people looking at him and commenting on his life and personality. His self is fragmented, each of the other characters can only see him partially, yet they seem to entertain the illusion that the Yūichi they know is the real one rather than the sum of their convictions, projections and prejudices. In order to enhance this opacity regarding the main character's identity, Yoshida resorts to

a stratagem that he had successfully employed in *Parēdo*: polyphony. In the 2002 novel, the alternation of narrative voices, with the five characters telling the same story from different points of view, determines a systematic deferral of each character's definition (Follaco 2014, 108). By the same token, in *Akunin*, Yūichi's story is told by several secondary characters who are either long-time acquaintances like Hifumi, relatives like his mother, or strangers who nonetheless played a part in his life, albeit briefly, like Miho. As the accounts multiply, the image of Yūichi fades into this conflation of reality and representations, resulting in a multifaceted and fragmentary simulacrum of the self rather than a comprehensive definition of its reality.[31] This disconnectedness from other people, their incapacity to grasp Yūichi's character in its entirety, sanctions his marginalization from society. While none of them actually seems able to explain why, Yūichi is the villain; what led him to murder, and whether he deserves forgiveness or not, are questions nobody will ask.

4. Urban solitude

Despite being the "villain," the monster who killed a young woman apparently without reason, Yūichi seems to be the only character who comes to know what he is looking for. In the middle of the crisis that ensues from the murder, he receives an unexpected message from Mitsuyo through the dating service and feels a sudden, desperate urge to meet her. At the same moment, he realizes something that strikes the reader who, after knowing his story, is most likely left with the impression that Yūichi has felt lonely all his life:

> He'd never felt lonely before. He hadn't even known what it meant. But ever since that night he'd felt terribly lonely. Loneliness, he thought, must mean being anxious for somebody to listen to you. He'd never had anything he really wanted to tell someone else, before this. But now he did. And he wanted someone to tell it to. (Yoshida 2011, 2062)

Abandoned by his mother and reared in a backward neighborhood surrounded by old people, betrayed by every woman he has ever felt affection for, lacking ambitions and aspirations, Yūichi did not know the meaning of the word "loneliness," and the reason is that he never felt he had anything to *tell*. The author, here, places emphasis on the most direct form of communication: the

[31] The opacity of Yūichi's character is further emphasized by the fact that he is the only one who accesses the dating service with his real name rather than resorting to a pseudonym.

act of speaking, a mode of relationality completely cut off from the notions of masculinity, social status and commodification that hamper Yūichi's attempts to find a place in the world and lead a fulfilling existence. This is indeed a crucial scene, for it marks the moment when, as literary critic Yamagami Hideo notes, "a young man who has fallen to the lowest depth tries to carry out a self-revolution." (Yamagami 2011, 48) A revolution that he will never be able to accomplish, for he has already made the mistake that would cost him his freedom: murder, a further demonstration of the inherent hopelessness of Yoshida's literary world, described so brilliantly by Murakami Ryū.

The kind of solitude that Yūichi acknowledges at this point in the novel brings him closer to Mitsuyo, who has been living a dreary life that the author seems to graft on to the streetscape in the sequence that introduces her:

> Mitsuyo Magome was staring out the window of the men's clothing store Wakaba as the rain-swept cars went rushing by. The shop was on the outskirts of Saga City, next to Highway 34, a kind of bypass route around the city. There was usually a lot of traffic on the highway, but all the drivers saw was a monotonous repetition of the same scenery they'd seen a few minutes before. (Yoshida 2011, 1866-1870)

The scene described could be visible from any window in any part of Japan. The Wakaba clothing store was most likely inspired by the retail chain AOKI, that counts several hundred shops across the country, most of which are usually built along major highways in suburban areas and so-called "newtowns".

Japan experienced a sharp increase in the urban population immediately after World War II and especially since the mid-1960s. Alongside the three metropolitan areas – Tōkyō, Nagoya, and Ōsaka – Fukuoka, where the novel is set, underwent rapid and steady population growth that prevented the city from suffering demographic loss even between 2000 and 2005, when all the other prefectures in southwest Japan experienced a drop in population (Flüchter 2012, 18-21). The region is thus a densely populated urban area whose landmarks are shops and street segments differing little from one another. Yoshida seems particularly concerned with these processes of delocalization. In his analysis of *Randomāku*, Masubuchi has convincingly argued that Yoshida uses the quintessential urban nomenclature made of shop signs, brands, and means of transportation, to describe peripheries that all look the same and secondary cities that renounce and destroy their local cultures only to become a partial reproduction of Tōkyō (Masubuchi 2008, 44-49). In *Randomāku*, the so-called Saitama-shintoshin (literally "Saitama new city center") provides the spatial setting for a narrative whose overall aim seems to be a cynical reproduction, and deconstruction, of the newtowns built in the proximity of Tōkyō, resulting in

a replica of the capital but without any of its appeal and dynamism. The Kantō region is imagined as having the shape of a donut, with Tōkyō in the middle—being the hole—as something removed from the rest, and protected (Yoshida 2004, 130). Protected from what? From a homogenization that deprives other urban spaces of the possibility of providing people with a home, and thus of their inevitable fate as temporary havens for (young) people whose final destination, and promised land, is and always will be Tōkyō (116).[32]

The juxtaposition of cityscapes, with the illusion of the capital's particularism fading into the background of a proliferation of reproductions and imitations, seems to be confirmed by the resemblance between the scene described above and the opening sentence of *Parēdo*, which is set in Tōkyō:

> It was such a weird sight. I was on the fourth-floor balcony looking directly down on Kyukoshu Kaido Boulevard, and though thousands of cars passed by here every day, I'd never seen an accident. There's an intersection directly below the balcony, and when the traffic light turned red a car stopped right at the line. The car behind it came to a halt, leaving just the right amount of distance so they didn't collide, and the car behind that one also stopped, leaving the same exact gap. When the light turned green the lead car slowly pulled away, with the second and third cars following at a safe distance, just like they were being pulled along. (Yoshida 2014, 1)

This chapter of *Parēdo* is narrated by Sugimoto Ryōsuke, a third-year student at the Faculty of Economy of H. University who is trying to figure out his place in the world and in the meanwhile shares an apartment in the quiet suburb of Setagaya with Kotomi, Mirai, Satoru and Naoki. One of the main themes of *Parēdo* is the devaluing of friendship and human relations in contemporary urban society, and the scene quoted above is a powerful metaphor representing the impossibility and unlikelihood of direct communication. The sense of urban boredom suffusing the five flat mates' lives is anticipated in the endless, monotonous traffic sequence witnessed by Ryōsuke, who notices that the cars never collide, that there has never been an accident, and the vehicles follow one another as if "being pulled along" rather than by their own will; likewise,

[32] The space of Tōkyō is juxtaposed to the *furusato* in another work by Yoshida, the short story *flowers*, published in the literary magazine *Bungakukai* 文学界 in 1998 and later included in the *Pāku raifu* volume (2002). Here, the I-narrator (*boku* 僕), a man from Nagasaki, moves to Tōkyō hoping to forget the past only to realize, as Kido suggested, that the past stays with us wherever we go (Kido 2016, 39), thus Tōkyō, despite not being *lieu de mémoire* in the personal history of *boku*, does not provide a refuge from his distress either.

the five characters lead a seemingly peaceful existence and never come into conflict with each other, but the reason is that they cannot, or do not desire to come into contact, to be in touch with one another, they do not communicate, nor do they make decisions about their lives: they drag themselves through life, trying to avoid disturbance, sacrificing companionship for tranquility. Harmony in the house is preserved at the expense of truthful communication—and the apartment becomes an allegory of the entire nation.

Ryōsuke and Mitsuyo share the feeling of solitude and boredom that she tries to overcome by going out with Yūichi. In time, however, the bond between the two main characters of *Akunin* becomes increasingly stronger, until they realize they cannot live without each other. After Yūichi confesses the murder to Mitsuyo, they run away and head towards a lighthouse in an isolated area far from the city. The farther they go, the deeper their love grows; ironically, however, they experience this genuine feeling in spaces that epitomize the homogenization and commodification of romantic love: love hotels. Once again, Yūichi's emotional life unfolds in spaces that do not befit the truthfulness of his intentions. What follows is the description of the place where they make love for the first time:

> A panel at the self-service check-in counter showed that two rooms were vacant. Yūichi chose the one named Firenze. He hesitated for a moment, then selected "Short Time" above the panel. Immediately the panel indicated the price, ¥4,800. […] A room called Firenze, ¥4,800 for a short-time stay. A room in a love hotel that tried to have its own personality, but from which all sense of the personal had vanished. (Yoshida 2011, 2491-2510)

The hotel reception is automated, one could enter and leave without meeting any human being. This impersonal and neutral space, devoid of humanity, contrasts markedly with the intensity of the emotions the two experience during the "Short Time" they spend in the room.

Although Yūichi is the only young character in the novel who does not lie throughout the narrative, he lies in the epilogue, when he and Mitsuyo have finally reached the lighthouse, a place detached from urban areas and surrounded by a nearly pristine nature, where they spend the last hours of their love story with a peace of mind they could not possibly find in their daily lives. The image of the lighthouse has brought the two together, because during their first contacts through messages they discovered a shared passion for lighthouses. At some point while they are on the run they begin to long for the lighthouse as one longs for home. And it is there, *at home*, that they can experience true love until the denouement, when Yūichi's first and single lie is told; he lies when he pushes Mitsuyo away, with the patrolmen approaching, and tells her: "I'm not… the kind of guy you think I am." (4746)

5. Conclusion

Back in 1994, Yokoo Kazuhiro stressed how challenging it is, in post-capitalistic societies, to establish true communication among human beings. Accordingly, such difficulties hamper the individuals' efforts at self-definition because it is only through contact and dialogue (*taiwa*[33]) with other people that identities can emerge; in present-day societies, however, people merely cross each other while avoiding any direct contact (Yokoo 1994, 148-149).

Drawing on Yokoo, Fukagawa considered the absence of communication a trademark of Yoshida's *Pāku raifu* and placed it in direct relation to the sense of precarity that dominates the narrative (Fukagawa 2011, 54). The panoptic view of Hibiya Park suggests to the I-narrator the idea that the park itself might resemble the human body, with the pond representing the heart, and this body-metaphor was anticipated by a meditation on organ transplantation that led him to think that everything we own is borrowed, and therefore temporary (51-52).

This idea of impermanence and temporariness colors Yoshida's entire literary output and intertwines with his major concerns: human relationships, identity issues, youth, and masculinity. Urban centers are increasingly indistinguishable from one another and are temporary; they are transitory havens for young people heading towards adulthood, like Ōmiya in *Randomāku*: a partial reproduction of Tōkyō whose inhabitants' major aspiration is to leave for the real thing as soon as they can (Yoshida 2004, 116). Given this temporary nature, urban areas neither favor nor support the emergence of sincere, long-lasting feelings; their structures and mechanisms interfere with direct communication, thus with mutual understanding and identity individuation. This is clear in *Akunin*, where Yūichi and Mitsuyo can live their love to the fullest once they are far removed from the urban *paysage*, and where Yūichi, the only truthful character, is out of place as long as he is in the city because he cannot adapt to its system. Yūichi's drama originates from his inability to relate to other people no matter how hard he tries, which will ultimately determine his failure to achieve self-definition. In the sequence describing the murder, he and Yoshino seem to speak different languages, to live in two separate dimensions, hence the absurdity of that violence surfaces. Ironically, none of them will ever know that they did meet once, when they were children, and the ingenuousness and spontaneity of their age allowed them to communicate; the reader knows it thanks to a recollection of Yoshino's father who, however, does not realize that the small, cute boy his daughter ran into was the same man who would kill her several years later. This

[33] 対話.

single episode seems to suggest that human contact is only possible before the struggle with adulthood begins.

Truthful communication, dialogue, sharing, and mutual understanding are increasingly at risk as efforts at assimilation into dominant models intensify. The spaces of everyday life seem to frustrate individuals' attempts to live life, experience feelings and find themselves through interaction with other individuals. Yoshida's literature aims to bring to the surface the incoherencies imposed by contemporary society, explore the possibilities of retrieving a sense of self and belonging, and pose questions about the meaning of being and emotions in the individual and collective dimensions of contemporary urban life.

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