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Death in Mixed Media

Mishima Yukio

Perhaps no artist more relentlessly entangled his art with his suicide than Mishima Yukio (1925–70). According to one critic's count, thirty-five characters commit or attempt suicide in twenty-six of his literary works. Several die by seppuku in an uncomfortable echo with Mishima's own suicide on November 25, 1970.[1] In the last years and even weeks of his life, Mishima arranged to have himself photographed again and again in an array of dying poses. Those taken by Shinoyama Kishin are at last belatedly available in a photo collection released on the fiftieth anniversary of his death to offer another haunting series of images depicting *The Death of a Man* (*Otoko no shi*).[2] In that collection alone, he dies by seppuku twice (once as a fishmonger, once as a samurai). As an actor, he commits seppuku twice in films—the first, a soldier's grueling, prolonged disembowelment in his 1965 film adaptation *Yūkoku* (based on a short story also of his own making), and the other, a samurai's swift, decisive seppuku in the 1969 period-piece *Hitokiri*. In his essays and interviews, he repeatedly wrote and spoke about death, dying, and suicide as well as about suicidal artists and art.

In *The Savage God*, A. Alvarez has noted the impermeability of suicidal logic to outsiders, calling it "the closed world of suicide."[3] In the case of Mishima Yukio, it is not that this world is closed at all, but rather that it is all too open—in multimedia, from both before and after his suicide, scripted by a variety of parties that include himself, his intimates, and outsiders from decades and worlds apart.

This overabundance of materials from which to choose presents a different set of difficulties for the critic and reader of Mishima. There is the sense that the author is either way ahead of us, or far behind, somehow both on top of and at the mercy of his materials and his audiences. In reading and viewing these texts

in retrospect that so uncomfortably foretell Mishima's own future suicide, at least there is little danger of becoming the inviolable and distant "spectator" (*bōkansha*) that Mishima had warned against in the case of the young marathoner Tsuburaya Kōkichi. We too are implicated with these sets of texts that so tightly imbricate art and suicide.

In this chapter, I focus on a multimedia production into which Mishima inserted himself quite literally: his 1965 film adaptation of his own short story from four years before. As one for which Mishima played so many roles (original storywriter, screenwriter, producer, director, and lead actor), *Yūkoku* offers a relatively compact case study for considering how and why one artist scripted his suicide into a variety of media. It entails not just writing, acting, and directing; literature and cinema, noh theater and opera music; but also a host of other loose adaptations that include his underground short story "gay version," his aborted plans for a kabuki production, and what Mishima called "a seppuku ballet." Before turning to these multimedia texts to consider how they may have worked on and for Mishima, I first consider Mishima's avowed disdain for suicidal artists and arts in theory.

MISHIMA ON DAZAI AND OTHER SICKLY SUICIDAL ARTISTS AND ARTS

Mishima hated writers who committed suicide. His disdain for Dazai Osamu, in particular, is legendary. In January 1947, he attended a party in order to confront the veteran writer with the damning pronouncement "I hate your writing," or as he dramatically put it in retrospect, "with a dagger hidden in the folds of my robes, like a terrorist."[4] In *Shōsetsuka no kyūka* (A novelist's holiday), a series of published diary-like entries written in the summer of 1955, Mishima enumerated Dazai's many flaws: "The hatred I feel toward Dazai Osamu's literature has a peculiar intensity. First of all, I don't like his face. Secondly, I hate his countrified bourgeois ways. Thirdly, I hate that he enacted a role that didn't suit him. A novelist who goes and commits a love suicide with a woman should have a bit more of a solemn mien." He closes this day's entry by asserting that "Don Quixote is nothing more than a fictional character. Cervantes was not Don Quixote. Why do a certain set of Japan's novelists get carried away with the strange doings of their fictional characters?" The very same question, of course, might be asked of Mishima himself. Before doing so, let us first consider what he was objecting to when it came to other artists and other arts.

In Dazai's case, Mishima objected less to any I-novelistic tendency to naval gaze than with the flaccid state of the belly under inspection. Dazai's weak prose and weak body were, in his eyes, one and the same. As he put it, "I don't think that the values for literature and actual life are any different. Strong prose is more beautiful than weak prose. Just like in the animal world, where strong lions are more beautiful than weak ones."[5]

Mishima was consistent in articulating his anti-Dazai stance for over two decades. In an August 1966 short piece for *Heibon punch*, Mishima ranted, "Even though it's not my own affair, I'm concerned when I see youths influenced by that pale-faced Dazai Osamu—poisoned by literature, gasping for air drowning in the morass and prattling on about being 'sorry for having been born.'" In the summer of 1967 during his forty-six-day training experience with the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), he detected the baleful influence of "my arch rival Dazai Osamu" even among the graduates from sci-tech universities. Surprised to find himself debating literature with a recruit, Mishima explained that he "hated Dazai for emphasizing only human weakness" only to be pained by the soldier's retort: "Rather than capitalizing on strength, is not emphasizing weakness more fitting of a true literary writer?" "Selling strength" (*yatara ni tsuyosa o urimono ni suru*)—bodily, spiritual, and literary—was Mishima's credo after all.[6]

In a 1954 essay, "Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ni tsuite" (On Akutagawa Ryūnosuke), he had lodged a similar critique. Even as this attack feels less personally directed (Dazai oddly goes unmentioned here, but so does Akutagawa for the most part notwithstanding the article's title), it seethes with hatred for any weak literati who turn to suicide. He opens with an unequivocal declaration: "I hate weak people. … I hate people who commit suicide. … I just cannot respect literary writers who commit suicide."[7] In a later piece, even the hypermasculine Ernest Hemingway (after whom Mishima was flatteringly dubbed "the Japanese Hemingway") cannot escape his criticism, or at least a lament: "Although he longed for an adventurous, heroic death even into old age, in the end, he committed a suicide that was completely contrary to these wishes for all such desires were shunned by death. I don't want to follow his path, but I understand the feeling all too well."[8]

A "strong" method alone does not guarantee his approval. Hemingway died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, but it occurred at the belated age of sixty-one. For Mishima, timing is also crucial, ideally dying in one's twenties, or mid-forties at the latest. But this, too, is not a hard-and-fast rule. The drowning death of retired kabuki performer Ichikawa Danzō at age eighty-four is deemed on par with the "splendid" death "by sword" (*jijin*) of the young SDF Olympian Tsuburaya.[9] Despite a tendency to assume that Mishima only endorsed warrior-like decisive seppuku that could be categorized as *jiketsu* (self-determined death), he also allowed for exceptional suicides (*jisatsu*, or self-killing). The reason behind the suicide matters much less than we might expect. Mishima repeatedly deflates any such discussion of motive, for example asserting flatly, "I will not repeat myself again: Akutagawa committed suicide because Akutagawa liked suicide."[10]

Rare is the literary writer who can achieve an admirable suicide in Mishima's eyes, although ones like his teenage mentor Hasuda Zenmei (1904–45) and French Nazi sympathizer Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1893–1945) who committed suicide for overtly political reasons draw his sympathy and admiration. But it is the decisive deaths of the "last samurai" warriors Saigō Takemori (1828–77) and Kaya

Harukata (1836–76) that he unequivocally celebrates. Even at the advanced ages of fifty and forty-two respectively, these warriors managed "to die heroically" and "to accomplish a brave end" (*sōretsu na saigo*).[11] Mishima extols "brave, beautiful deaths," which he designates as the exclusive purview of warriors of old and, by association, soldiers today, like the young SDF lieutenant Tsuburaya. As he put it, "It is not the shopkeeper who not fearing death makes death into a beautiful thing."[12] Nor is it the writer.

What is it about literary writers, in particular, that merit Mishima's scorn? In principle, he did not recognize the suicide of a literary man; "Because literature has no ultimate responsibility, a man of letters cannot find a truly *moralisch* [moral] trigger for suicide. I do not recognize anything other than a *moralisch* suicide. That is to say, I do not recognize anything other than a samurai's killing himself with his own sword [*jijin*]."[13] (We should again note how quickly his preoccupation here shifts from motive to a discussion of form.) As he explained in his essay on Akutagawa, the problem is that the act of suicide is incompatible with the act of literary composition. A writer's "day-to-day joys and pains of literary creation" belong to an "entirely different category than suicide [*jisatsu*]" while a "warrior who commits seppuku or some other form of self-determination [*jiketsu*]" is working within the bounds of the warrior moral code on the battlefield.

According to Mishima, writers who commit suicide "in both east and west" share an unusually strong sense of themselves as artists. In an ideal world, this affiliation should position them on the side of strength and health, but instead often leaves them siding with the sickly patient. He elaborates on the medical analogy:

> Suicide and art are as antithetical as sickness and medicine. If the medicine is ineffective and the illness cannot be cured, then the medicine is no good. Even if the patient does not subscribe to this belief, the doctor firmly should. When we embrace the dual propositions of suicide and art, naturally, we are simultaneously both the patient and the doctor. But the problem is on which side do we place our convictions? Should a doctor recognize an incurable illness?[14]

Mishima offers a curious analogy here. Medicine/art offers a potential cure for sickness/suicide, but a problematic one for the doctor/artist whose cure fails. Artists who simultaneously embrace art and suicide (or cure and disease) are stranded between the incompatible roles of doctor and patient, active healer and passive sufferer at the mercy of the very same medicine: art. In sum, suicide is an occupational hazard for artists and yet also an incompatible and imperfect proposition.

The natural question is how to square all these rather definitive pronouncements with Mishima's own suicide. Especially given his own penchant for embracing the dual propositions of suicide and art throughout his career. And especially since he acknowledged that his negative assessments of these literary men and their chosen ends were as much about himself, as they were about them.

On the surface, Mishima's stark rhetoric and actions provide easy answers to resolve many of the apparent contradictions. Suicide was easily divisible into two types, he claimed: "There are two kinds of suicide. One is suicide from weakness and defeat. One is suicide from strength and courage. I despise the former and praise the latter."[15] He chose a method that displayed strength and courage in abundance. Moreover, in the end, he died not as a literary man, but a military one. He had signaled this break with literature in many ways: by requesting that his posthumous Buddhist name contain the character for martial (*bu*, as in bushidō), but not *bun* for literature (although his parents ignored this request and included both characters); by signing a blood oath in which he pledged his life to the Shield Society on February 26, 1968, in his birthname of Hiraoka Kimitake, which was also the name under which he enlisted as a SDF trainee in June the previous year; and finally, by signaling his retirement from the literary world with the submission of his magnum opus tetralogy signed with the day of his death on November 25, 1970. Both dates resonated with symbolic finality, declaring the symbolic death of the literary author.[16]

If we follow Mishima's own writings in *Taiyō to tetsu* (*Sun and Steel*, 1965–68), the fundamental problem is that novelists tarry in the world of impotent, abstract words rather than engage in the powerful, concrete actions of the warrior. This line of reasoning feeds into the conventional understanding of his death as a rejection of art in favor of action, an acknowledgment of the failure of words in the end. Alternatively, his final act itself is turned into its own form of performance art with the artistic representations that preceded it offering rehearsals. The act of suicide is either the antithesis of art, or its apotheosis.[17]

Although either interpretation is plausible, each has its limitations. One is the lack of nuance. Both seem to buy into Mishima's own stark rhetoric all too eagerly while ignoring his other equally definitive statements that point to the exact opposite conclusion. It embraces his self-identified "either/or proposition" where he can choose to pursue either literary glory (*bungō no eikō*) or a hero's glory, either the inefficacious words of passive literature or "active heroism" (*kōdō-teki eikō*).[18] At the same time, it ignores statements he made even late in his career that acknowledge literary creation to be an active, physical act as well. For example, in his June 1967 interview in the *Sunday Mainichi* after his forty-six-day stint as an SDF trainee, Mishima clarified that soldiers represent the most extreme form of "action" (*jikkō*), but "I believe that literary writers too, in the end, are also 'incarnations of action' [*jikkō no gonge*]."[19]

Moreover, any assertion of a clean divide between word and action is belied by his final action that entailed quite a few words—a speech initially planned to be over twenty minutes long, a lengthy manifesto painstakingly handwritten on a sheet hung from the SDF headquarters' balcony and also printed in dozens of mimeographs dispersed to the onlooking crowds (and to two journalists in case police tried to suppress it), several suicide notes (in both his penname and his

birthname), two death poems (*jisei*), the final manuscript of his tetralogy, and a final quote left on his desk that read, "Human life is limited, but I would like to live forever" (*Kagiri aru inochi naraba, eien ni ikitai*).[20]

Finally, the most serious limitation is that the focus becomes his spectacular suicide rather than the art he generated in the face of that suicide. This interpretation was starkly encapsulated in a comment by filmmaker and critic Iwasaki Akira in March 1971 about Mishima's film *Yūkoku*: "It is not a film with a seppuku *in* it. It is a film made *for the purpose of* seppuku. There has never, in any place or era, been a person who before enacting suicide—much less by such an abnormal method—rehearsed, practiced, and displayed in such detail the bloodthirst, pain, and final death throes on a public screen."[21]

Conceiving of Mishima's art as "rehearsals" for the eventual "final act" suggests that texts are not important in their own right, or only insofar as they can be retrospectively linked to his spectacular suicidal act. It also seems to suggest that suicide *is* easily rehearse-able—something that one practices in one's mind, one's word (written and oral), and finally, one's actions (first fictional then real). In pitting the literary artist against the warrior in such stark terms, "art" becomes a monolithic entity where important distinctions among genres and mediums are erased. Such an approach is particularly unhelpful for this book, which seeks to understand the nature and function of scripting suicide in a variety of media. It is also unhelpful to understand an artist like Mishima who so relentlessly entangled his suicide with art in mixed media, from literature and poetry to theater, film, and photography. For Mishima, all "art" was rarely treated equally, each medium entailing its own advantages, disadvantages, and even hazards.

Over the course of his far-ranging career as a novelist, playwright, photography model, film screenwriter, actor, and one-time film director, Mishima developed an eclectic, and often paradoxical, theory of media. He tackled the powers and limitations of various media, from one of his earlier essays "Eiga to shōsetsu wa raibaru desu ne" (The rivalry of films and novels," March 1951) through his last serialized piece *Shōsetsu to wa nanika?* (What are novels?, May 1968—November 12, 1970). As he was remaking his story "Yūkoku" into a film, he revisited this theory that he had developed first from the perspective of a novelist and avid filmgoer in the 1950s and later revised as a film actor in the 1960s. The distinctions he draws among media suggest not just an abstract, theoretical media hierarchy but a highly self-conscious consideration of what certain media afforded him personally as creator and as an audience member. Art offered nothing less than the prospect of losing oneself entirely, and depending on the medium of choice, this quasi-suicidal experience was either an entirely desirable pleasure or utter peril. At least, in theory.

Below, I first consider two of the most relevant examples of his media theory before turning to his multimedia experiments in practice. Given Mishima's penchant for provocative soundbites, interweaving his theory and practice

offers an important check on some of his starker rhetorical claims. The two essays I discuss—his 1955 "A novelist's holiday" and "Bōga" (Self-oblivion) from August 1970—conveniently bracket the time period of his most entangled multimedia production in which he embraced the dual propositions of suicide and art while playing the role of doctor and patient: his January 1961 short story "Yūkoku" turned short silent film *The Rite of Love and Death* (1965), which he directed and starred in as a young lieutenant committing a seppuku that would presage his own five years later.

MEDIUM MATTERS: MASOCHISTIC MUSIC AND MOVIES

In his 1955 "A novelist's holiday," Mishima's rant against his fellow suicidal author Dazai Osamu comes in the middle of another diatribe against another equally formidable enemy: music. Although he does not explicitly note the ties between the two topics, the juxtaposition is suggestive of the ways that Mishima implicates certain media for the suicidal impulses of the artist and audience. Both were poison.

Music is likened to a "poisonous gas that brings certain death. The sound overflows and in the formless darkness surrounds the listeners' spirits thick and fast, and, without their knowing it, plunges them into the abyss. … As someone who is always tired from the act of artistic creation, I do not seek such pleasures of facing the abyss in music."[22]

As a literary writer, Mishima distinguishes himself from those music lovers who applaud only because they believe fully in the musician's control and mastery over the material. They are like circus spectators whose appreciation would crumble should the animal's cage break. To illustrate, he cites Aubrey Beardsley's 1894 drawing *The Wagnerites*, which depicts the blithe ignorance of such music lovers who, not surprisingly, are depicted almost exclusively as female opera audience members in low-cut dresses. (In an intriguing tie-in, the opera they listen to in this print is *Tristan und Isolde*, the very Wagner score that Mishima later chose for his film adaptation *Yūkoku*, as discussed below.)

In the next day's entry, Mishima turns abruptly to his above-noted aversion to Dazai for, among other things, his tendency to "get carried away with the strange doings of [his] fictional characters." The following day, he returns just as abruptly to music out of a feeling that he has not done justice to the topic. He has not adequately explained why, when plays and novels also "play on the abyss of the human spirit, it is only music that makes me feel unease and danger." His answer is "the strange terror I feel toward the formlessness of music." This time, he remains on the side of the audience rather than the creator, explaining, "With other arts, my aim is to get sucked up right into the work [*sakuhin no naka e nomerikomō to suru*]. This is true of plays, novels, paintings, sculpture, all of them. But with music, it comes at me from another place and tries to surround me. That is what makes me uneasy, and I cannot help but resist. Music aficionados can probably clearly see

the constructed nature of music and so they feel no such anxiety. But for me, *it is impossible to detect the sound*" (19, emphasis in original).

He claims sonic impotence yet visual mastery here. Whereas his body retreats from the formlessness of sound, when he is faced with beauty in "clear visual form," even though it first appears to resist him, he can "calmly melt into it and become one" (*anshin shite sore ni tokekomi, sore to gōitsu suru*) (20). His ability to merge into the work as an audience member is predicated on his ability to "see" its form and actively choose self-erasure.

Mishima concludes by dividing the reception of the arts into two types: sadistic and masochistic, placing himself firmly in the former camp and music lovers in the latter. He asks, "Are not the pleasures of listening to music the pure delight of being encircled, embraced, and dominated?" (20). Employing such deliberately sexualized language enables him to implicate the bodies of the audience and of the artist who fail to demonstrate adequate mastery over the materials. If mapped onto the rant against Dazai that he sandwiches between this media critique, Dazai is being unflatteringly likened to a masochistic, feminized, passive music lover, whereas Mishima is depicted as a sadistic literary man on top of his materials and his audience, even when he *is* the audience. Except there is one important exception to this rule. Film, Mishima tells us, offers him the one medium "among the passive entertainments" in which he can comfortably be a masochist. What about film, in particular, appeals to the self-described masochism of Mishima? He does not explain further in this 1955 essay what makes film an exceptional media beyond writing:

> Of all the temporary images made by mankind, the ghostly images passing by on the film screen are the most reassuring and the most delimited to the occasion.
>
> Kono firumu no ue o utsuroiyuku kazō wa, ningen no hatsumei shita kazō no uchi de, mottomo anzen na, mottomo ba-kagiri no mono. (20)[23]

In "Bōga," one of his last essays, Mishima returns to this topic to describe the sensation he seeks upon entering a movie theater as "self-oblivion" (as per the title). Here, Mishima explains his idea of disappearing into art in language that is provocatively similar to suicide. He opens by explaining that since long ago, when overcome with worry, his drug of choice was not alcohol but film. Far from the mere escapism that the label "entertainment" (*goraku*) might connote, watching a film transports him so effectively as to "completely eliminate [*kanzen ni jyokyo shite kureru*] my surrounding reality for the moment." It offers a masochist's delight, in which pleasure rests in the spectator's willing *and* unwilling surrender; its appeal lies in the "inescapable collective effects" on the film spectator, its multimedia (sights, sounds, and colors) "appeal to the senses, even if they do not want it [*iya demo kannō ni uttae*]." For Mishima, no other medium can compare with the immersive effects of cinema, which "unlike television, with its big screen and stereophonic sound, surrounds us in the darkness and for a period, whether

one likes it or not, drags us into a second reality [*iyaōnashi ni dai-ni no genjitsu e hikizurikomu*]. Not even great literature can compare with an art built upon so many tacit promises."[24]

Anticipating the turn to apparatus theory in cinema studies in the 1970s, Mishima identifies the theater architecture as crucial to its powerful effects (albeit with little concern over any ideological repercussions). As in Roland Barthes's short essay "Leaving the Movie Theater" (1975), the appeal lies in the erotics of the dark enclosed theater space "as a dim, anonymous, indifferent cube, … as a site of availability (even more than cruising), the inoccupation of bodies."[25] For both writers, the bodily effects of the cinema are not only a consequence of going to the movies, but rather a precondition. Mishima goes to the theater already seeking "self-oblivion" (*bōga*), or more literally "forgetting oneself" (忘我).

For both writers, losing oneself at the cinema depends on the power of the "lure" and the tacit promise of its possession by the spectator. For Mishima, the relation is explained in terms of sexual desire and conquest. He complains that recent films no longer offer the promise of the star system: "a beautiful person" (*utsukushii ningen*) appearing on-screen, whose presence guarantees the spectator both a "sexual monopoly" and "sexual anonymity" (*sei-teki dokusen*; *sei no mumeisei*). Mishima's logic here is a bit hard to follow, but at the root of his discontent is big budget studio mass-marketed films that deny the possibility of "entering into a sexual relationship with the film image based on a one-to-one relationship between spectator and actor."[26] The problem seems to be the lack of this singular "other" in whom he might forget himself.

For Barthes, this possessive relation between the spectator and the film image is more explicitly identified as one of narcissistic identification: "The image is there, in front of me, for me: coalescent (its signified and its signifier melted together), analogical, total, pregnant: it is a perfect lure: I fling myself upon it like an animal upon the scrap of the 'lifelike' rag held out to him; and, of course, it sustains in me the misreading attached to Ego and to image-repertoire."[27] Importantly, the desire to lose oneself in the film image is not just self-obliterating; it is also self-sustaining.

And yet, as Barthes's language suggests, this absorptive identification is not entirely desirable. Instead, Barthes proposes a model for spectatorship that would enable him to have it both ways: simultaneously to be inside *and* outside the story, to be beneath *and* on top of the image-repertoire in a way that enables sensual and critical pleasures to coexist. "Another way of going to the movies is … by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings—as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theater, leaving the hall."[28]

Barthes's proposal offers an intriguing possibility for considering Mishima's own bodily and critical investments as an avid film spectator cum novelist turned

filmmaker and actor and amateur film critic, too. It is a similar doubling (or quadrupling) of bodies that I propose was central to Mishima's own multimedia experimentation *Yūkoku*, where he was simultaneously a director and critic on top of his creation and an actor and spectator beneath it. The metaphor of tops and bottoms is an apt one for an artist like Mishima, who so explicitly phrased his theory of artistic creation and consumption in terms of sexual conquest and surrender. It is especially apt for an artist who delighted in straddling so many positions and for the queer set of texts I discuss below.

THE ALMIGHTY ARTIST: *YŪKOKU*, A QUEER SET OF MULTIMEDIA TEXTS

Many commentators have noted that Mishima's penchant for multimedia experimentation was atypical of literary writers of the time. Graphic design artist Yokoo Tadanori, a close friend and artistic collaborator, wrote that "Unlike other literati, Mishima Yukio displayed his polysemous nature by not distinguishing between major and minor, and by mixing together media." British film critic Tony Rayns similarly notes the rarity of novelists-turned-film directors worldwide: "For many years the French had the syndrome almost to themselves: Cocteau, Genet, Robbe-Grillet, Duras. … But very few novelists from other cultures followed suit."[29] Mishima would have appreciated the comparison. In a discussion with filmmakers and critics back in March 1951, well before his own forays into film, he had identified Cocteau as an exceptionally versatile artist while bemoaning the absence of anyone in Japan who could tackle screenwriting and filmmaking as well as novels and plays. "It doesn't seem like any almighty artist [*bannō sakka*] is going to appear anytime soon," he claimed.[30]

With his 1965 film *Yūkoku*, a production for which Mishima occupied no less than five roles—original storywriter, screenwriter, producer, director, and lead actor—it would seem that the almighty artist had, at last, arrived.

In his lengthy account of making the film, Mishima notes that he had been quite laissez-faire when his other literary works were adapted by other film directors, but *this* story was different: "I came to feel that if I were to make the film myself, I would want everything done in a very particular way, right down to the last detail. Included in those 'details'—underpinning them, in fact, was the idea that *I* should play the lead."[31] Although he had planned to act in disguise (his famously large eyes hidden beneath the military cap) and under the stage name of Maki Kenji, upon seeing the rush prints and his all-too-recognizable face and buff physique, Mishima quickly abandoned that idea. At the premier, he noted his chagrin that Japanese audiences burst into laughter upon seeing the opening credits.[32] In fact, these credits were scrolls handwritten by Mishima himself (in multiple languages to facilitate international distribution). His gloved hands are the ones that appear unfurling the title scrolls and the final credits. His hands are literally all over the production.

Borrowing one of his favorite lines from Baudelaire, Mishima likened his doubled role as director and actor in *Yūkoku* to playing "both the executioner and the executed" (*shikeishū to shikei shikkōjin o isshin ni kasaneru*).[33] This metaphor is gruesomely realized in the film where Lieutenant Takeyama Shinji commits seppuku after the failed coup d'état of February 26 in 1936. After a final bout of torrid lovemaking where the usual gendered rules of decorum are suspended for this "last time," Shinji disembowels himself before the eyes of his loving wife, Reiko, who then follows him by stabbing herself in the throat. This metaphor is also, of course, all too literally realized in Mishima's self-killing. On November 25, 1970, after months of planning, he and four members of his self-styled army attempted a military coup by taking a hostage at the SDF headquarters and delivering a rousing speech to the young cadets, which failed to gain either their support or respect. Seemingly anticipating the plot's ultimate failure as a political action, he then committed seppuku as planned. His alleged young male lover from the group, Morita Masakatsu, was appointed as his second (*kaishakunin*), charged with beheading him and then following with seppuku as well.

Around the time he was writing "Yūkoku," Mishima penned another version of the story: "Ai no shokei" or "Execution of love." This one appeared in a gay underground publication under a pseudonym in October 1960, three months before "Yūkoku" appeared in the mainstream literary journal *Chūō kōron*.[34] It offers an alternative gender-bending story of sexual desire and seppuku featuring a hypermasculine young phys ed teacher who is attracted to his feminized young male (*bishōnen*) pupils. In a reversal of the usual hierarchies, the teacher commits seppuku at the bidding of one of these young pupils before his loving eyes. If the contemporaneous composition and the plot similarities between this story and "Yūkoku" are not convincing enough to consider them adaptations of sorts, in Mishima's initial draft, the teacher's first name was Shinji.

With his seppuku and its many echoes of *Yūkoku* and "Ai no shokei," Mishima appears to have fallen into the very trap of Dazai and other "weak" literary artists who "get carried away with the strange doings of their fictional characters." The almighty artist appears to have been felled by creations of his own making that anticipate his own self-destruction.

From this set of texts alone, we can sense how complicated it is to analyze Mishima's entanglement of art and suicide. One plausible interpretation posits him as a narcissistic mastermind who was in total control of his creations, while the other suggests he was entirely at their mercy. What makes his case all the more complex is the way that Mishima, in characteristic fashion, anticipated and deflected our inevitable questions, as well as any easy answers. He identified "the great riddle [*saidai no nazo*] that anyone who sees the film *Yūkoku*, or even more so those who haven't seen it, will ask as: 'Why would someone star in their own production?'" but quickly warned against "trudging out the tired old language of psychoanalysis that might label it narcissism or masochism or such. These methods will not solve the mystery."[35]

TABLE 1 Select timeline of Mishima's works and activities

November 25, 1948	Self-declared start date for his first "I-novel," *Kamen no kokuhaku* (*Confessions of a Mask*, 1949)
March 1960	Stars in *Karakkaze yarō* (*Afraid to Die*, dir. Masumura Yasuzō) as a yakuza who dies by gunshot wound to the back
October 1960	Finishes writing "Yūkoku" Publishes "Ai no shokei" (Execution of love) under pseudonym Sakakiyama Tamotsu in gay underground magazine *ADONIS*
January 1961	Publishes "Yūkoku" in *Chūō kōron*
January 1965	Writes screenplay for *Yūkoku* in two-day marathon writing session
April 1965	Films *Yūkoku* secretly at Okura Studio in a two-day marathon film shoot
April 1966	*Yūkoku* opens in domestic theaters
February 26, 1968	Pledges his life to the Japan National Guard (later Shield Society)
July 1968	Attends Ozawa Kinshirō's "seppuku ballet" adaptation of *Yūkoku*
August 1968	Cameo appearance as a dead taxidermied statue in *Kurotokage* (*Black Lizard*, dir. Fukasaku Kinji)
October 5, 1968	Official launch of Tate no kai (The Shield Society)
August 1969	Costars in *Hitokiri* (dir. Gosha Hideo) in the role of Edo-period samurai who dies by decisive seppuku
September–November 1970	Models in photo shoots with photographer Shinoyama Kishin
November 12-17, 1970	Mishima Yukio Exhibition at Tōbu Department Store in Ikebukuro
November 20, 1970	Meets with Shinoyama to finalize photo selections for *Otoko no shi* (*The Death of a Man*)
November 25, 1970	Dies by seppuku after failed coup attempt at SDF headquarters in Ichigaya

What might solve it, then? To answer his own question, Mishima turned to the fundamental distinctions he drew between his core identity as a novelist and playwright compared to his stints as a cinematic actor. Whereas writing requires "a willful autonomy" (*ishi no jihatsusei*), film acting is utterly lacking in precisely these qualities. Paradoxically, this evacuation of will and autonomy endows the film actor with "a sense of presence or existence as a thing that can be apprehended by the eyes [*me ni mieru mono to shite no sonzaikan*]." Writers, on the other hand, were in a metaphor he borrowed from Goethe, "like a mother pelican who nurtures her children with their own blood," endowing their offspring with an existence in their own stead. "As an artist starved for a sense of existence," he explains, "it was only natural that I would seek to become this strange occupation of a film actor."[36]

Yūkoku was neither the first nor the last film production in which Mishima sought out "the strange occupation of film actor" or in which he died a spectacular death on celluloid, or in other media for that matter (see table 1 above).

As a film star, Mishima dies a spectacular death three times.[37] His on-screen deaths shift from being unexpected, and even feared, to totally self-willed—from a punk yakuza gangster shot in the back in Masumura Yasuzō's 1960 *Karakkaze*

yarō (*Afraid to Die*) to a samurai's decisive wordless seppuku in Gosha Hideo's 1969 period-film *Hitokiri*. In the middle comes his stoic performance of a grueling seppuku as a lieutenant in his silent short film *Yūkoku*.

In broad outline, this arc would seem to suggest a gradual rehearsal and mastery of self-death and embodiment of a self-appointed role that he would enact in real life at the Ichigaya headquarters on November 25, 1970. His trajectory from disembodied literary author to embodied actor, too, conforms to the self-described arc of his career, from words to action. As a story-turned-film with Mishima at its center, *Yūkoku* seems to fit squarely into this trajectory.

As I aim to show below, in moving from story to film, the goal (and effect) was not only, as many have suggested, a move from literature to action, the word to flesh, the word (literature) to the image (cinema), or even life to death. Instead, it entailed also an opposing move away from these things. Far from any stark "either/or proposition" and far from any neat mapping of a trajectory from word to image, literature to film, gay to straight (or vice versa), rehearsal to performance, or art to action, this queer set of texts suggests that theory and practice were rarely united. If Mishima was sometimes delivered the self-oblivion he sought, he was also sometimes betrayed in practice by the very medium he sought to embrace.

DEATH BY PROXY IN *YŪKOKU*

Because Mishima's own unusual choice of seppuku dovetails so closely with that of the lieutenant's (with the notable exception that instead of a faithful wife, Mishima was accompanied by a young male lover in death), we assume that the lieutenant acted as a proxy of sorts for Mishima, especially since he insisted upon playing him in the film adaptation. This may be a flawed assumption and is one I return to question below when considering the possibilities of queering this straight reading of *Yūkoku*, especially when juxtaposed with the so-called "gay version" of the story. For now, I begin with this intuitive assumption that the texts themselves invite.

What makes this theory compelling is that the characters themselves appear to possess these same vicarious abilities. The lieutenant and his wife offer proxies for one another, each seeing their own death through the other. I am suggesting a doubling here where the characters experience the impossible—their own self-deaths—and the author-turned-actor-director experiences his own via theirs. Importantly, for all parties, this proximate experience is just that; it is by proxy and highly mediated. They are able to see themself dying or dead only through the eyes of another. When this human proxy fails, art offers the medium of last resort.

Before considering what Mishima might have been attempting by staging self-death in multimedia, I suggest we need to first look carefully at how the characters experience these self-deaths in each text. At the center of these works is the question of the knowability of suicide to oneself and to another, and the degree to which self-death is knowable depends largely on the medium in which it is

represented. What we find in both the literary and cinematic mediums are both the possibilities and limits of representing suicide to oneself and to another.

The basic plot of the story and the film is the same. After a brief preface that offers historical context for the February 26 incident, the action proceeds as neatly outlined in the film chapter titles

I. Reiko [at home alone, waiting and remembering her beloved husband]
II. The Lieutenant's Return [the couple making a double suicide pact]
III. The Final Love [the couple making love for the last time]
IV. The Lieutenant Commits HARAKIRI (*seppuku*, in the original Japanese)
V. Reiko's Suicide (*jigai*)[38]

For the lieutenant, his wife, Reiko, is central to the conceit that he can see his own dying form. She is the crucial bookend, present from start to finish. She first conjures him during his physical absence from the home, then unites with him bodily in sex until separated again in body and spirit during his seppuku, and finally seeks a blissful reunion in death at the very end. She is so central that the story ends in medias res with Reiko's thrust of the sword leading abruptly to the film screen going blank.

Throughout the seppuku, Reiko acts as a crucial witness, as required by the rather conceited lieutenant who wants to ensure that "there should be no irregularity in his death."[39] He has made an exception to "the usual rule for double suicide pacts [*nami no shinjū no yō ni*]" and opted not to kill her first so that she may fulfill this role. Appointed to die second, she is not, however, appointed *as* his second, or *kaishakunin* in charge of delivering the coup de grâce. She is not to participate in his manly execution, merely to watch to the end as he has bidden. While watching him in excruciating pain, she has to remind herself of this: "The moment the lieutenant thrust the sword into his left side and she saw the deathly pallor fall across his face, like an abruptly lowered curtain [*tachimachi maku o oroshita yō ni*], Reiko had to struggle to prevent herself from rushing to his side. Whatever happened, she must watch. She must watch unto the end. That was the duty her husband had laid upon her."[40] Curiously here, he is referred to interchangeably as her husband and the lieutenant. The same is true, even more curiously, in the sex scenes during which she is allowed, in another generous exception to the general rule, to be on top for once.

This doubled appellation makes sense because the lieutenant/husband seeks to repair his own fractured identity in sex and in suicide. He assumes that he has been left out of the coup d'état attempt by his army buddies because of his newly married status (although in an interesting twist, in an interview in 1966, Mishima also suggested this was merely the lieutenant's own self-serving rationale).[41] Joining his beautiful wife in sex and death is crucial to bring together his otherwise incompatible identities: as a newlywed husband now part of a heterosexual dyad, and as a soldier in a larger homosocial community.

The merging of these two identities is highly successful during sex. In the height of sexual ecstasy, "the lieutenant panted like the regimental standard-bearer on a route march." (In the film, amid her throes of pleasure, Reiko suddenly pictures her husband in cap and uniform saluting her.) Allowed to look for the first "and last time" (*onagori ni*, お名残に), Reiko memorializes his body parts one by one: "her husband's masculine face, the severe brows, the closed eyes, … the powerful chest with its twin circles like shields and its russet nipples, … the lieutenant's naked skin glow[ing] like a field of barley."[42] His two halves merge as completely as the couple, "tightly joined, every inch of the young and beautiful bodies had become so much one with the other that it seemed impossible there should ever again be a separation" (106–7).

Death, too, is to follow the pattern established by these orgasmic "little deaths" (*les petit morts*). In the story, we are told that the lieutenant recognizes the "special favor" of having "every moment of his death observed by those beautiful eyes—it was like being borne to death on a gentle, fragrant breeze" (111). Reiko's constant gaze is central to construing meaning especially in the silent film that lacks dialogue, much less interior monologues like these, that would give us access to the characters' thoughts. During the five-minute-long seppuku sequence, six extreme closeups show her eyes staring at him unceasingly despite her flowing tears. For the film, Mishima asserted that "everything … had to be expressed through the face of the woman playing his wife."[43]

In the story, when we do get Reiko's point of view during the seppuku, rather than any triumphant vision of it, she feels only an acute sense of her increasing distance from him. "Reiko felt that her husband had already become a man in a separate world, a man whose whole being had been resolved into pain, a prisoner in a cage of pain where no hand could reach out to him. But Reiko felt no pain at all. Her grief was not pain. As she thought about this, Reiko began to feel as if someone had raised a cruel wall of glass high (*mujō na takai garasu no kabe*) between herself and her husband" (113–14).

As this passage suggests, it is her role as spectator that causes this divide. Separated by an inviolable fourth wall, or, as in the earlier passage, by "an abruptly lowered curtain," she cannot access his embodied experience of self-inflicted pain; she can only watch it from the outside.

This is also true for the lieutenant himself during the lengthy and grueling seppuku. He, too, is estranged from his own bodily actions and reactions. "After his first strike … despite the effort he had himself put into the blow, the lieutenant had the impression that someone else had struck the side of his stomach agonizingly with a thick rod of iron" (112). In the final effort to deliver the saving blow to his throat, his right-hand moves "like a marionette" (*ayatsuri ningyō no yō ni*).[44]

He toggles between an embodied perspective of physical pain and a disembodied one that looks on the suffering body from an intellectual distance. "In some far deep region, which he could hardly believe was a part of himself, a fearful and

FIGURE 30. Shot-reverse shots of Reiko gazing at Shinji gazing at Shinji. Mishima Yukio, dir., *Yūkoku* (*Patriotism, or The Rite of Love and Death*), originally created in 1965; restored version by the Criterion Collection, 2008.

excruciating pain came welling up as if the ground had split open to disgorge a boiling stream of molten rock. … Was this *seppuku*?—he was thinking. It was a sensation of utter chaos, as if the sky had fallen on his head and the world was reeling drunkenly" (113).

He is here able to somewhat objectively (and perhaps even critically) evaluate the experience of what is referred to in the original Japanese as "this thing called seppuku" (*Kore ga seppuku to iu mono ka*).[45] During these passages, his mind attempts to grasp the lived physical experience by capturing it in language with a series of similes that liken the event to natural catastrophes—it is *as if* the ground had split open, *as if* the sky had fallen. The similes become even more pronounced and immediate as his seppuku climaxes: his pain becoming "like the wild clanging of a bell. Or like a thousand bells which jangled simultaneously at every breath he breathed and every throb of his pulse" (114).

The use of similes rather than metaphor is important; the pain is not the ground splitting open, but *as if* the ground had split open. These similes work to transform the thing as it is into something comparable and comprehensible. But because they fail to complete that action in the way a metaphor might, they suggest a struggling consciousness that attempts, but fails to transform or master experience through language.[46] If the embodied experience of dying can be just barely captured with these skittering similes, death itself requires a wholly disembodied view.

In the film, his dying struggle is visually conveyed by shots that separate his body into discrete parts during the seppuku. Extreme closeups of his grimacing face are juxtaposed with ones of his increasingly bloody torso. Once the seppuku begins, there is never a two-shot of the characters for its duration. Instead, in a series of over thirty shots, the screen isolates one and then the other, creating a shot-reverse shot pattern with Reiko gazing at the lieutenant, but his pattern indicating that he looks only at himself (fig. 30). It is only through Reiko's unreturned gaze that we get a full picture of his body bathed in blood at the very end.

Even Reiko, his faithful witness, ultimately refuses to assimilate the unremittingly gory spectacle unfolding before her eyes. As the bodily excretions and parts spill, Reiko cannot even look at him, but instead "with her face lowered, gazed in fascination at the tide of blood advancing toward her knees" (115). Only at the very

end when she is "unable to bear being an onlooker anymore [*tōtō mikanete*]" does she participate in the most minimal way.[47] She ensures that there is no irregularity in his death by loosening his collar so that the saving blow lands at last, piercing through his neck.

In both the story and the film, his dying is undeniably the main act. Like the sex scene, which, as the intertitle puts it, prioritizes "First the Lieutenant, and then Reiko," death also follows this pattern in similar proportions. His suicide occupies almost six pages of the story and five minutes of the film; Reiko gets just one page and less than a minute. But we do not die with the lieutenant. Instead, we continue on with Reiko as our proxy until her own death blow to the throat.

In dying, she seeks to replicate his embodied experience of pain that she only vicariously experienced twice before. The first time was when the couple enact a gestural rehearsal of the double suicide after making their pact. With the lieutenant seated behind her, we see his hand enacting seppuku as if it were a sword, and then Reiko guiding his hand to stab her own throat. Positioned right before "Chapter III: The Final Love," this bloodless rehearsal serves as foreplay.

The second time, Reiko experiences his suicide as an onlooker: "In her husband's agonized face there had been something inexplicable which she was seeing for the first time. Now she would solve that riddle. … What had until now been tasted only faintly through her husband's example she was about to savor directly with her own tongue" (117–18).

In the film, her firsthand "tasting" of this experience is literalized when she licks the dagger that is soon to enter her throat. Only in this final "Chapter V: Reiko's Suicide" will dying in pain enable her to close the gap that has opened between the living and the dead.

The symmetry between the "his and hers" suicides—notwithstanding the fact that she is not privy to the ritual of seppuku but instead follows the traditional feminine *jigai*—is especially clear in the film. The two scenes are shot in parallel fashion and evoke yin/yang symbolism. For both, a tightly framed closeup of just their torsos, his hand tightening around the sword and hers poised at the throat, is followed by an abrupt cut to a blank screen. In his case, a white background gets a neat spattering of tiny black bloodlike dots, and in hers, a black screen with a thicker spray of whitish fluids (fig. 31).

Dying proves difficult to represent, whether it is one's own or another's. Both appear as mysterious excretions that splatter onto a canvas in the fashion of a Jackson Pollack painting. Interestingly, only her splatter-art depiction is included in the screenplay notes: "*Shot 137: Shomen ni chi ga buchimakerareru*," while the mirror image of his death is not. Like the elusive representation of female sexual pleasure that Linda Williams has claimed finds its outlet in the "money shot" of pornographic films, female death is especially elusive.[48] The story does not even attempt to depict Reiko's self-death to completion, instead ending in mid-action with her vision blurring as she "gathered her strength and plunged the point of the

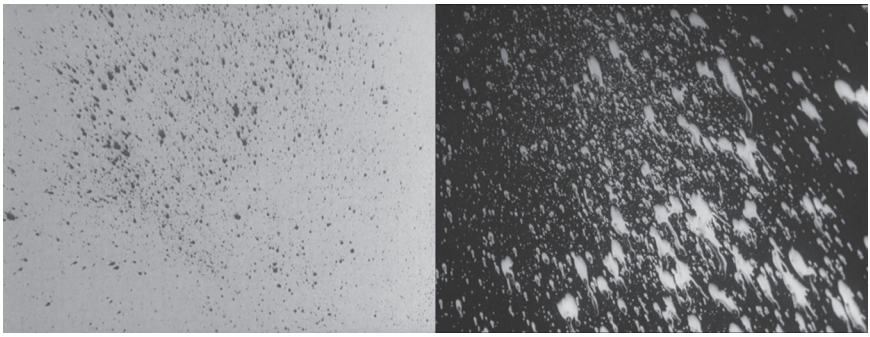

FIGURE 31. His-and-hers suicides, yang and yin. Mishima Yukio, dir., *Yūkoku* (1965); *Patriotism, or The Rite of Love and Death*. New York: Criterion Collection, 2008.

blade deep into her throat" (118). As our (and his) proxy dies, access to dying is foreclosed for character and audience alike.

THE PLASTIC ARTS AS PROXY

In the film, it is at this moment that art rushes in to rescue the death of the image and of the characters. The camera cuts abruptly from the splatter art rendition of Reiko's death to an idyllic vision of the couple reunited in death. An overhead shot magically transports them to a Zen rock garden. Not a drop of blood is evident. Reiko's eyes are peacefully closed, her head rests atop his uniformed chest. If not for the sword piercing his neck, a viewer could believe they were merely asleep. The next and final shot cuts to the background calligraphy scroll "Sincerity" (*shisei*, 到誠), which, like the intertitles, were inscribed by Mishima himself. It then pans down to their stilled bodies. As the camera zooms outward and upward to a more distant overhead shot, their faces become obscured in shadows and their figures are rendered into abstract patterns that blend into the raked sands of the Zen garden (fig. 32). The closing title scroll punctuates this immortal image: "The End" framed again here by the gloved hands of the husband/lieutenant/Mishima.

Although the story ends in medias res, at earlier moments, it flashforwards to similarly transcendent visions of after-death. The lieutenant is an especially privileged witness to these visions. After shaving in preparation, the lieutenant joyfully regards "his death face [*shinigao*]" and thinks, "Just as it looked now, this would become his death face! Already, in fact it had half departed from the lieutenant's personal possession and had become the bust above a dead soldier's memorial [*kinen-hi*, 記念碑]." He imagines his living body not just as a dead one but as a statue, an object of commemoration or an objet d'art. The traces of future death on "this radiantly healthy face" even lend it "a certain elegance" (102). Although he precedes Reiko in death, he can see her death face, too. Looking at her features

FIGURE 32. Penultimate shot of reunited lovers in a Zen rock garden. Mishima Yukio, dir., *Yūkoku* (1965); *Patriotism, or The Rite of Love and Death*. New York: Criterion Collection, 2008.

one after the other, he conjures a "vision of her truly radiant death face," allowing "the unforgettable spectacle to engrave itself upon his heart" (*wasuregatai fūkei o yukkuri to kokoro ni kizunda*).[49]

Reiko has carefully assembled her own remains, as well as his. Both leave behind a brief suicide note (*isho*)—hers stating, "The day which, for a soldier's wife, had to come, has come," while the lieutenant's reads, "Long live the Imperial Forces."[50] In anticipation of the posthumous reception of the suicide scene by a larger audience, she makes up her face "for the world she leaves behind," cracks the door open so they will be discovered by their neighbors while their corpses are still fresh, rearranges her husband's body, wipes the blood off his lips, and covers her waist with a blanket to prevent any derangement of her skirts. Equally important are the incorporeal remains that will stand in for the dead when their bodies are no more. Before the lieutenant arrives back home confirming his own intent to die, she organizes keepsakes (*katami*, 形見) for the people she will leave behind. As the term *katami* (形見) suggests, these objects offer a "glimpse at the form" of something that is no longer present, a substitute for the physical body.[51]

In both the story and the film, a variety of media offer substitutes that promise to preserve and represent the dead. As film theorist André Bazin wryly noted,

"If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation." In his formulation, two-dimensional media like photography and cinema depend on the mimetic "trace" or "imprint" and thus can be linked to ancient burial customs of embalming the dead—mummies, death masks, shrouds, and so on. Above all, cinema has an especially privileged relationship to death, "as a mold both temporal and spatial" capable of showing "at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable, dead without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!"[52]

At key moments, Mishima's screenplay makes clear how the cinematography is meant to present the couple's bodies as objects of timeless commemoration. Before and after their lovemaking scene, the couple are posed on the dais "in a sculptural pose" (*chōkoku-teki pōzu*); during sex, his "naked body like a bronze" (*buronzu no gotoki ratai*). In the final scene, their insensate corpses are transformed into objects of religious art. As the screenplay stresses, the overhead perspective offered by the film's final crane shot is what enables the focus to move away from the corpse to this prettified and aestheticized distanced view:

> Shot 139. Closeup → Pull Back → Overhead Shot. 15 seconds:
>
> The two corpses collapsed atop one another.
>
> The camera pulls back to show the two corpses atop one another underneath the "Sincerity" scroll in the background.
>
> It then moves even higher overhead to show around the two corpses, the beautifully stylized undulating white cloth that looks like the broom swept patterns in the rocks of Ryōanji Temple garden.[53]

If in the film that final overhead shot is what enables this transcendent vision of the afterlife, the story offers multiple glimpses in multiple media. It opens with an overview of the incident that begins in the clipped tone of a newspaper article—"On the twenty-eighth of February, 1936, (on the third day, that is, of the February 26 Incident), Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama of the Konoe Transport Battalion …"—and then shifts registers to a mythic epic style: "The last moments of this heroic and dedicated couple were such as to make the gods themselves weep" (93). Time, whether historical or mythical, and narrative, whether journalistic or epic, conspire to commemorate the dead in what Thomas Garcin has aptly called "a textual mausoleum raised in honor of Lieutenant Takeyama and his wife Reiko."[54] The story works conspicuously harder than the film to enshrine the dead. Its radical shifts in tone suggest a narrator that sifts through various media, genres, and points of view to try to adequately capture and re-present them.

Immediately after this vertiginous opening, the story's next chapter begins with another representation: a photograph. After a detailed description of the handsome young couple in their commemorative wedding picture comes an explanation of what Bazin might have called "the irrational power of the photograph:"[55]

> After the suicide, people would take out this photograph and examine it, and sadly reflect that too often there was a curse on these seemingly flawless unions. Perhaps it was no more than imagination, but looking at the picture after the tragedy it almost seemed as if the two young people before the gold lacquered screen were gazing, each with equal clarity, at the deaths which lay before them. (94)

The photo enables a magical feat of time travel for all parties. In retrospect, viewers can see death foretold in the photograph. But what is even more unusual here is the way that the characters *in* the photograph are also imagined capable of seeing the future "deaths which lay before them." All can simultaneously view death both prospectively and retrospectively.

The question that remains is whether Mishima might have, too. "Perhaps it [is] no more than imagination, but looking at the picture after the tragedy," we naturally see Mishima's self-willed self-death in these artworks. Moreover, we cannot help but also see Mishima seeing his own eventual suicide in (and through) them. To what degree might Mishima have experienced his own death by proxy through the lieutenant? Or his wife? Through the story? The film? As a writer, actor, or director? Or later, as spectator and critic?

In the next sections, I turn to these thorny questions, albeit with a sense of caution, for they are impossible to answer definitively. This part of Mishima's art and suicide is closed to us now, and perhaps was also to him then. For such a prolific writer who discussed both suicide and art at such length, he wrote surprisingly little about his own investment in repeatedly depicting and enacting self-death *in* art.[56] Mishima did, however, write extensively about his theories of acting in general and about the filmmaking process for *Yūkoku* in particular. Both suggest that any singular identification with any singular character was never the goal and that the end of any one production was far from The End.

THE FILM, PRODUCT AND PROCESS: *NAKA-NUKI*, TIME ON ITS HEAD, EVACUATED ACTORS, AND STRIPPED SCREENPLAYS

"It's good to be an actor, isn't it? You can be reborn over and over again."
—MISHIMA ON-SET OF *HITOKIRI*, 1969

When reflecting back on making *Yūkoku* forty years later, no one on the crew could recall how or when its final scene of the Zen rock garden got added. It was not in the initial script that Mishima showed to his collaborator, the kabuki expert Dōmoto Masaki, and yet it was ultimately incorporated at significant expense. A crane had to be borrowed from another studio, and its delayed arrival cost them precious time and money that was already tight on this two-day shoot. As Mishima explained in his account, this scene required "the couple bathed in blood

a moment earlier, had to be shown perfectly cleansed, in a symbolic, otherworldly setting." Because this was a low-budget production with just one set and one set of costumes, it required that this last scene be shot first.

It was always Mishima's plan to start at the end. But the unanticipated delays with this shot forced an adjustment to the entire shooting schedule so that all subsequent shots were rearranged into a *naka-nuki* block shooting schedule. Mishima explains: "This meant that we would line up all those shots in the film that used the same focal distance and the same light and camera positions and shoot them one after the other, regardless of where they appeared in the film. None of us preferred this system, but as we had to economize on time, … it was a necessary evil." Even the climactic seppuku scene was not shot continuously. As Mishima reveals, it was neatly divided into the "part that did not require blood before dinner" and the rest after their evening meal.[57] This offers a useful reminder that Mishima's experience of the film as an actor does not match ours (or his) as a spectator.

At the time of his earlier debut appearance as a lead actor in Masumura Yasuzō's 1960 gangster film *Karakkaze yarō* (*Afraid to Die*), Mishima had marveled at the ways that the filmmaking process created a sense of temporal discontinuity for the actors themselves. What impressed him was the fact that film, unlike literature, did so out of practical necessity, employing a "purely mechanical and meaningless time-play … utterly unmotivated by psychology or artistry." The resulting estrangement of the actor from his own body, he writes, is nonetheless "a delightful feeling."[58]

His experience as an actor on the set of *Afraid to Die* led Mishima to develop what he called an "object theory of film acting" (*eiga haiyū obujé-ron*). Elsewhere I explore in depth how his "theory" entailed a simultaneous inhabitation and evacuation of the film actor's body that belies any notion of a simplistic identification process.[59] Here I would stress the ways that Mishima insistently distanced himself from his character. In his capacity as director, Mishima demanded that both he and his costar Tsuruoka Yoshiko play their roles "robotically, as if they were bunraku puppets." She was not to display any "individualized emotion" and he was "to make the lieutenant's each and every act that of a cap and uniform as opposed to that of a living, breathing human being."[60]

If Mishima's actors in *Yūkoku* were not meant to fully inhabit their characters, the roles available for occupation themselves were conspicuously vacant. The screenplay offers a crucial intermediary step in this evacuation, meticulously stripping the literary characters bare of all interiority. As he explained to screenwriter Funabashi Kazuo, he refused to include any "literary psychological ambiguity" (*bungaku-teki shinri-teki aimasa*) in his barebones shooting script.[61] Even in the most dramatic moments, there are rarely any emotional cues for actors.

What does all this suggest about Mishima's own role enacting the part of the lieutenant/husband? Taking on this role was undeniably a move *into* a character's body, but this is a character who himself is depicted as increasingly disembodied,

both literally and figuratively. That an actor's performance in the final film product would be forever distant from their embodied experience of that role was further ensured by the practical demands of filmmaking—especially in this low-budget, time-strapped production where narrative chronology was so skewed that "The End" had to be filmed at the beginning. And especially when that end is nothing less than a magical rebirth.

RITES OF LOVE AND DEATH: HIS & HERS, HIS & HIS

It is worth noting again that it is her, not his, death that ends *Yūkoku*. Mishima's character's seppuku may be the climax, but it is not the final endpoint of either the story or the film. Although Mishima was often criticized for his vacant, stereotypical female characters, the male lead here is equally devoid of characterization. And he is dispatched earlier in the production. As the last woman standing, or "the Final Girl" (to borrow a term coined by film scholar Carol Clover), might Reiko instead have offered a potential proxy for Mishima?[62] After all, as we saw above, the insertion of the wife as a spectator-in-the-text is the crucial mechanism by which the lieutenant hopes to see his death through to the end. For her part, Reiko seeks to move from a position of vicarious observer of another's death to that of active participant in her own. She does this to better know another's experience of self-death. Might then the hyperfeminized character of Reiko, rather than the manly lieutenant, offer a more apt parallel for Mishima?

If so, this proxy is depicted as imperfect. As they approach death, characters are estranged not only from themselves but from each other. Both characters have limited access to this extreme bodily experience. In the moment, no one is privy to the state of death itself. Neither the embodied position of actor (the lieutenant) or spectator (Reiko)—neither experiencing suicide firsthand nor witnessing it secondhand—enables proximity to self-death. At the same time that the story and film both stage the desire to close the gap between life and death, between self and other, each also highlights the complexity in doing so. Rather than suggesting that art offers an easy means to rehearse suicide, instead these works repeatedly point to the difficulties of replicating self-death in any medium.

Of course, there is no reason that Mishima, as author, actor, or director, had to identify with any of his characters, much less only along strictly gendered lines. Some scholars have celebrated the potential for queering even Mishima's seemingly most heteronormative of texts, interpreting them "as homosexual texts through queer reading and imagination which read female characters as men."[63] When "Ai no shokei," the "draft, gay underground version" of "Yūkoku," was finally included in Mishima's complete works in 2005, Dōmoto Masaki celebrated its potential to expose the gay underpinnings of the canonical "Yūkoku," or what he called "the decorative New Years' version … geared for public consumption, wrapped in a paulownia wood box."[64]

"Ai no shokei" was published in October 1960 (the same month Mishima completed "Yūkoku") under a pseudonym (Sakakiyama Tamotsu) in *APOLLO*, a special edition of the underground gay magazine *ADONIS*.[65] It features Ōtomo Ryūkichi (originally named Shinji in Mishima's handwritten draft), a hypermasculine phys ed teacher in his mid-thirties who teaches at a boys' high school. He commits seppuku at the bidding of one of his beautiful, young *bishōnen* pupils, Toshio, after the death of yet another of his beloved *bishōnen*. With its doubled (and even tripled) characters, this so-called gay version of "Yūkoku" defies any easy mapping of one text onto another, much less onto Mishima's own life and death. It does suggest Mishima's enduring interest in exploring sex and seppuku in yet another gender and genre-bending medium.

The story opens with Ryūkichi, sitting at night in his rented secluded farmhouse alone and brooding over a regrettable incident at school that has left him "wanting to mess himself up" (*jibun de jibun o metchametcha ni shite shimaitakatta*) (41). His guilt stems from the recent death of his student Tadokoro, another beloved, slender *bishōnen*, who recently died of pneumonia after he forced him to stand in the rain as punishment for being insolent in class. That night, Toshio appears like an avenging angel on a mission to force Sensei to atone for this classmate's death by "committing suicide via the most agonizing means possible: seppuku" (46). Toshio is clearly a double for this dead classmate—he is "like a beautiful medium" (*utsukushii miko no yō na*)—and also a foil for the hirsute, firm-bodied Ryūkichi, who once caught a glimpse in the school showers of "his rose-colored small nipples, immaculate sunken bellybutton, and not a single hair-like hair on his entire body" (42). What Toshio seeks is not a confession of guilt per se but of "love" (*ai*).[66] Once Sensei's belly is pierced by the sword, confessions of mutual love and desire spill.

If the opening of "Ai no shokei" suggests Ryūkichi's parallels with Reiko as both wait alone in a secluded house conjuring their absent loves until their appearance in the second act, then his manly seppuku squarely aligns him with his namesake, Shinji. As he is dying, Ryūkichi is estranged from his own bodily reactions after the first plunge of the sword, "feeling no pain, only a sharp excitement … the sword entering so deep as to be noteworthy … that he thought, 'Is this all that seppuku is?' [*'Seppuku'tte kore dake no koto ka?'*]" (51). In both stories, what leads these men to commit suicide is their guilt over dead male comrades: Shinji's army buddies and Sensei's pupil. Each story has a crucial spectator-in-the-text present to witness that spectacle: the perfect wife Reiko and a *bishōnen* of unparalleled beauty. Ryūkichi, too, will die by "manly seppuku" (*otoko-rashii seppuku*) (46) before the eyes of a feminized spectator. Most importantly, this fulfills "his deepest desire to be seen off in death by a *bishōnen* like [Toshio]" (45).

Here is where the roles of the witnesses depart. Whereas Reiko, as expected of any perfect soldier's wife, is united in mind and body with her husband, intent to die even before he has returned home, the pupil-teacher relationship is splintered from start to finish. Unlike Reiko, who can hardly stand to look on at the painful

spectacle unfolding before her and eventually helps bring it to a close, Toshio prolongs Sensei's agony to satisfy his own desires to watch him die in excruciating pain. Toshio looks on eagerly and asks, "Sensei! Does it hurt? Are you in agony? Hmm? What does it feel like?" (51). Sensei's response of "Not so much really" discloses little to the eager and sadistic spectator. (In this respect, however, the divide between teacher and pupil is not so deep after all. Just as Sensei tortured Tadokoro, Toshio now tortures Sensei. And Toshio finally confesses that he shares Sensei's own confessed deepest desire: to watch a beautiful male suffering in pain before him dressed in matching tennis whites.)

As the seppuku continues, the gap between the two men only widens, as do any parallels we might draw between Reiko and Toshio. If Reiko was moved only to sympathy, Toshio is moved by antipathetic arousal. While Reiko seeks to know her husband's pain firsthand, Toshio plans to die painlessly by cyanide. He imagines collapsing atop Sensei's body in what he imagines will seem to the world "a strange double suicide" (*fushigi na shinjū*) (53).

"Yūkoku" and "Ai no shokei" share so many parallels that it is easy to gloss over significant differences.[67] Both feature the intense aesthetic and somatosensory experience of a seppuku for one character that is witnessed by another. In both works, there is a reversal of the usual hierarchies during the ritual preparations: Reiko literally gets to be on top for once (and Shinji also puts away the bedding for the first, and last, time), while Toshio orders the teacher around as if he were a tyrant director of an underbudget production. As both stories make clear, neither features a "normal" *shinjū*. The protocol does not follow, and the usual hierarchies do not apply. In both, the bottom will die second—except that in "Ai no shokei," no one actually dies. This is the most curious aspect of this story—the interruption of the suicidal act and the insistent divide between the two lovers.

In fact, this male-male couple is denied any climactic union; both sex and suicide are deferred. There is no "last time," or first for that matter; as Arashi Mansaku notes when republishing the story in the gay magazine *Barazoku* in 1983, "for an underground publication, one would expect much more explicit scenes of male-male sexual desire."[68] The couple do exchange one single brief passionate kiss at Sensei's dying request and they manage a few covert gazes at each other's bodies, most notably during the pre-seppuku bathing ritual when Toshio marvels at Sensei's voluminous pubic hair and "his erect penis with its head shining a purplish red that makes him wonder what excites him so" (48). Sexual pleasure is implied in their mutually eager gazes; as the spectacle unfolds, Toshio repeatedly claims, "This is what I wanted to see" (51, 52, 53), while for Ryūkichi, "just thinking of dying before the wide-eyed gaze of these beautiful, glinting, black pupils, experienced an indescribably sweet spasm run through his whole body" (50). Sensei had resolutely determined to "satisfy this youth by showing him a model example of a manly seppuku!" (*Ore wa, otoko-rashii seppuku no otehon o misete, kono shōnen o manzoku sasete yarō!*) (46). Satisfaction will be achieved by proxy, however. The

sword, Toshio's family heirloom, is the only object that will penetrate the body in this exchange.

For his part, Sensei is never made aware of Toshio's double suicide plan or of his planned sequel to his seppuku, a "ritual purification by blood" in which he will strip the still-living Sensei "naked as the day he was born," tie him up with rope, and carve off his flesh little by little prolonging Sensei's agony and his own joy (53). Each man is initially an equally eager participant in this symbiotic seppuku ritual that satisfies both men's deepest desires, but the sequel is a solo-directed operation by Toshio alone. For all the mirroring and doubling that came before it, the two diverge from one another wildly here.

Death remains in the offing, the sequel unfolding only in Toshio's imagination to which readers are privy in a lengthy interior monologue qua imagined dialogue with Sensei. Until this point, readers have had complete access to each man's mind in alternation (in the form of clunky interior monologues marked off by double quotes). By the end, Sensei has been reduced to a "groaning beast," uttering the bodily moans that Mishima claimed he was keen to avoid in *Yūkoku*: "Uuumu … … guguuu … … uuumu" (54, 52). Toshio, on the other hand, becomes a loquacious narrator cum stage director describing his detailed fantasy of an "execution of love."

This story too ends in medias res, and at its most distant remove from either character. Sensei has become an object inserted into a script entirely of Toshio's making, a "seppuku-mono," or literally a "belly-cutting thing."

> And then across the old uneven tatami mat floor, from the pool of blood of the belly-cutting thing, a streak of blood came rushing toward the beautiful young boy, drenching his toenails.
>
> Soshite furuku natte kashiida tatami no ue o, seppuku-mono no chi-damari kara tsurutsuru to ichijō no chi ga hashitte kite, tatte iru bishōnen no ashi no tsumasaki o nurashita. (54)

In the end, death is forestalled here yet again; any emplotted arc that neatly goes from life to death is foiled. This time, there are no reassuring visions of a symphonic reunion in art. There is only the threat and promise of bloodshed, which has turned from the executed toward the executioner. In this final twist, the spectacle has turned on the spectator.

SURVIVING ONESELF AS SPECTATOR

> *We cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators.*
>
> —SIGMUND FREUD, *REFLECTIONS ON WAR AND DEATH*, 1918

Theories of identification that depend on conflating Mishima, as writer or actor, with his characters are a dead-end.[69] I would suggest nonetheless that Reiko's role

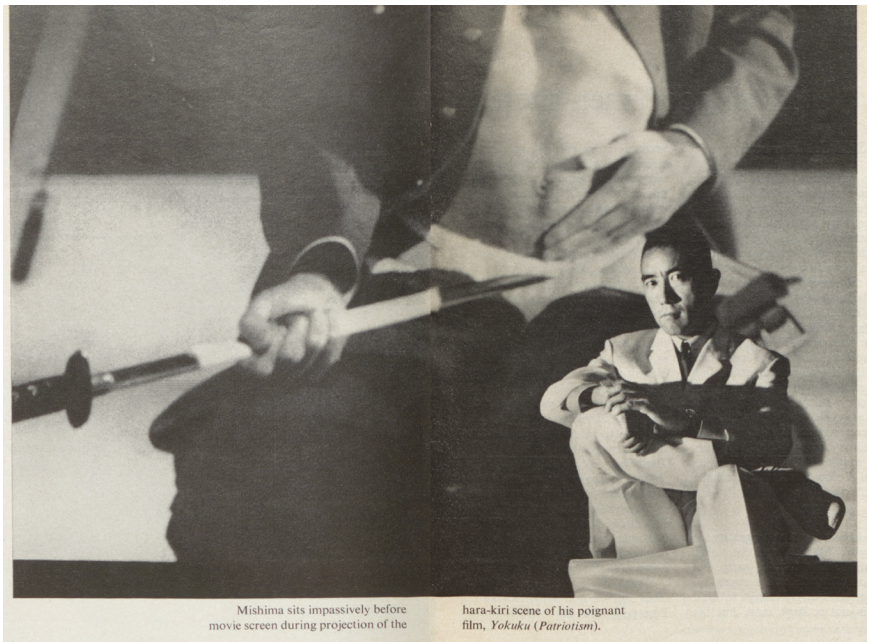

FIGURE 33. Mishima, actor and spectator. Photograph by Eikoh Hosoe, in John Nathan, "Japan's Dynamo of Letters," *Life* (September 2, 1966).

as a proximate yet distanced spectator-in-the-text offers a way out of this deadlock. As we saw above with Mishima's actor-object theory, Mishima's fascination with acting was less about embodying the role of actor than in his doubled role as a spectator viewing his own actor's body onscreen. In his 1959 essay, "I want to become an obujé," he wrote:

> If I become a film actor then somewhere in there *a me that is unknown by me* might be seen.
>
> Boku ga eiga haiyū ni narikireba, boku no shiranai boku o, dokoka de mirareru ka mo shirenai.

He desires to be seen as other, but he does not specify by whom. His wording suggests that he himself is as much, if not more, the audience for this other debuting self. This is a point he clarifies later in the essay:

> Wouldn't it be delightful to find that the me-here is not me at all, and that instead the one-in-the-screen is in fact me?
>
> Koko ni iru boku ga boku de wa nakute, sukuriin no naka ni iru no ga boku de aru yō na jitai ga okottara, yukai de wa nai ka.[70]

Whether Mishima experienced this transcendent discovery of another self in the screen is impossible to know. Even after the film was completed, he continued to seek out multimedia productions in which he entangled art and suicide, often along with a large dose of sex. In July 1968, Mishima described his plans to make "Yūkoku" into a kabuki play. He aborted the plan when he realized that while seppuku is a staple scene in kabuki, the love scene that preceded it posed major problems. Conversely, he agreed to allow Ozawa Kinshirō to remake it into a ballet, although not without a mixture of trepidation and delight: "I expect the love scene will go splendidly, but I really look forward to seeing how the seppuku would be handled. I suspect that never in the history of all the world has there been a seppuku ballet."[71] Just as Mishima juxtaposed the abstract world of noh with cinematic realism in *Yūkoku* and reveled in the "so very bloody seppuku scene that one would never expect to occur on the noh stage," here, too, he delighted in bending and defying mediums.[72]

In retrospect, it was not the film but the story "Yūkoku" that Mishima credited with allowing him to achieve things unimaginable in his real life. In September 1968, he reflected on the text with a combination of complete satisfaction and utter despair: "It would be no exaggeration to say that the singular greatest happiness I hope for in this life is the perfect synergistic unity of Eros and Great Principle depicted in the scenes of love and death [*koko ni kakareta ai to shi no kōkei*]. But sadly enough, in the end, this kind of happiness can likely only be realized on paper [*kami no ue ni shika jitsugen sarenai*], in which case I should perhaps be satisfied that I was able to write this story as a novelist."[73]

As promotional copy for his afterword to a short story collection that contained "Yūkoku," his statement here might be dismissed as mere marketing. But it is intriguing for his attention to what the two-dimensional medium of literature afforded him as a creator. It was not his role in the film as a flesh-and-blood actor or director but instead the story that he claimed came closest to realizing his fantasy, at least on paper. Again, the medium of art—this time in the literal form of a piece of paper—intervenes. If what separated Reiko from the spectacle of self-death unfolding before her was akin to a lowered curtain or high glass wall, for Mishima, sometimes it was the film screen, and sometimes the literary page, that enabled his distant proximity to that spectacle.

What is clear is that after the film was completed, Mishima becomes an outside observer once more, a spectator of his own production (fig. 33). And as we saw above, many of what he regarded as the film's crucial effects were available to him only as a spectator: the sutured gazes of husband and wife, the overhead view of the couple in the afterlife, and, most crucially, the musical soundtrack. That the maligned medium of music was central to Mishima's filmic practice and

imagination offers a way for us to circle back to the beginning of this chapter in the hopes of closing the circle at long last.

MUSIC AND FINALITY, STARTING AT THE END

> *What is music, to me? It is neither one of life's necessities, nor is it a pleasurable diversion. It is temptation.*
> —"YŪWAKU: ONGAKU NO TOBIRA" (MARCH 1967)

In his 1967 essay "Yūwaku: Ongaku no tobira" (Temptation: The doors of music), Mishima returned to discuss his aversion, and his perverse attraction, to music. It stemmed from its ability to draw people toward "something that is not now there" (*ima soko ni nai mono*). In this respect, it is like "film, which is also of course, mere phantoms" (*mochiron tada no maboroshi de aru eiga*). It is music, however, that has the unmatched "power to tempt" (*yūwaku no chikara*), although he notes, "Rare is the film that does not borrow music's powers of temptation."[74]

Yūkoku was no exception. For the film soundtrack, Mishima chose the nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. The choice was a natural one given the thematic ties between the two works as stories of doomed love and death, especially the opera's final act, "Liebestod" (Love death), where Isolde sings over her lover's dead body as her own consciousness fades and she finally joins him in death. For *Yūkoku*, Mishima insisted on two things: the soundtrack needed to be a wordless version, and the music and image must converge in the end.

Using an orchestral version enabled Mishima to strip the film production of words, or what he called the all too "natural human sounds—moans and the like—that we hear in most films, that [he] had feared from the beginning would sully the purity … in the love scene or during the seppuku." Mishima excised not only the spoken word but all diegetic sounds and even the non-diegetic song vocals. As his screenplay stresses in its first line, this pure wordless music must play seamlessly alongside the film images: "The music of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* runs throughout the entire film without any subtitles or gaps between the threads [*ongaku o jimaku mo orime mo naku nagasu*]."[75]

Mishima timed it precisely so that the climactic final chord of Wagner's opera score would converge with *Yūkoku*'s final film image. While the ending was crucial, the beginning mattered little. What made Wagner's music such a perfect choice was, as Mishima explained, the way "you never knew exactly how long it would continue or where it would end, which meant you could pick almost any phrase at random and begin there."[76] When the crew previewed the result on April 27, the result was kismet. As a spectator of this film of his own making, he was delighted to find that the music conformed to on-screen

FIGURE 34. Framing the beginning and the end, the hands of the lieutenant/husband/Mishima. Mishima Yukio, dir., *Yūkoku* (1965); *Patriotism, or The Rite of Love and Death*. New York: Criterion Collection, 2008.

actions throughout, matching perfectly, "almost all too perfectly [*iya ni naru hodo atcchau*]."[77]

The film's first image opens amid total silence. The white gloved hands of the lieutenant/husband appear in an audiovisual vacuum against a black background to unfurl a scroll with the title, credits, and first intertitle (fig. 34). Wagner's music enters about two minutes into the film toward the end of this first lengthy intertitle that gives background on the February 26 incident and on the lieutenant's predicament. Over the course of Mishima's twenty-eight-minute film, the music swells and speeds, circles and slows down repeatedly, to create the effect of never-ending looping, and even dizzying, music for which Wagner's original score was famous (and famously controversial).

The opera score opens with the famous so-called Tristan chord, an exquisitely unstable four-note chord whose harmonic function is fluid and uncertain. As one music critic has put it, "The chord, and the way the following phrase peters out, set the work's pattern for creating musical expectations that are never resolved"—or rather, are resolved only when "we finally reach resolution at the close of the opera over 5,000 bars and four hours of music later" with the climactic and consonant B-major chord that concludes the work. One of Wagner's contemporaries, the 1903 Nobel laureate Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, unflatteringly likened the score to "seasick music that destroys all sense of structure in its quest for tonal colour. In the end, one just becomes a glob of slime on an ocean shore, something ejaculated by that masturbating pig in an opiate frenzy!"[78]

Even without this famous opening chord, the soundtrack in *Yūkoku* strains a listener, thwarting a desire for closure until the very end. The long-awaited final chord coincides with the film's final image of the lovers laid out serenely atop a Zen rock garden. This chord is not struck until the camera has moved to its most distant overhead position that renders the lover's corpses as artistic patterns in the

waves of sand. For twenty seconds, this chord endures as it repeats three times and the screen cuts to the closing title: "The End." Like the opening credits, this text, too, appears on a handwritten scroll presented by the gloved hands of the lieutenant/husband/Mishima. As the final chord concludes, his hands neatly roll up the scroll, and the screen fades to black in silence.

As noted above, it was always Mishima's intent to begin at "The End." Music and film image converge here to resolve at this predetermined and overdetermined endpoint. Like the insistent camera pan moments before traveling down from the handwritten scroll to the lovers' bodies that forces reading the suicidal acts as sincerity incarnate, here our eyes and ears are guided to rest. The final movement of the camera and the music is complete. Images and sounds resolve together, at last converging to offer release and rescue from the discordance caused by death.

That this end was not the end of Mishima himself should go without saying. And yet as we have seen above, there is a tendency to stress the contiguity and continuity of this production with Mishima's own suicide as if there were "no gaps between the threads," to borrow Mishima's phrasing. As I hope to have shown here, in practice, many such gaps exist amid these threads and among his fivefold roles in this production. Perhaps nothing more clearly demonstrates his own playful awareness of this than the final scene. Here Mishima's hands appear even after his character is dead (fig. 34).

What to make of this pointed gesture? It was not merely some editing continuity failure. These gloved hands had inexplicably returned posthumously once already in the film to unfurl the final chapter title—"Chapter 5: Reiko's Suicide"—just after the lieutenant completes his lengthy seppuku. The reappearance of these hands points to someone's survival after death, but whose? The character's? The actor's? The writer cum director's? Although Mishima had repeatedly insisted that he had to expunge "any trace of 'the novelist Mishima Yukio'" from his portrayal of "Lieutenant Takeyama Shinji," it is difficult to take him entirely at his word.[79] The resurrection of the hands of the creator after those hands have taken that creation's life seems all too deliberate.

Again, Mishima appears to be inside, outside, underneath, and on top of the production, simultaneously encircled by, and encircling, it. As we have seen, many of his artistic choices were underpinned by a desire for control. But each also entailed some abdication of control. Playing the lead actor also meant giving himself over to the production and to the director (even if it was a self-authored and self-directed film) and expunging himself (or at least his novelist persona) from the production. Producing this film independently outside of a studio system enabled him to avoid being strong-armed by "evil capitalist" forces, even as he covertly borrowed staff from Daiei and equipment from Tōhō and shot the film at Okura Films studio.[80] The low-budget indie production also came with its own financial and time constraints. By Mishima's own account, the music was the most crucial and unexpected aspect of the production that he left "entirely to chance,"

but it fit the actions throughout the film "almost all too perfectly." Here, too, however, any assertions of lacking control were ambivalent at best. As Mishima put it, "It was, of course, a coincidence. But that coincidence was the goal."[81]

In choosing Wagner as the soundtrack for *Yūkoku*, Mishima seems to have been asserting mastery over a medium and a musical artist that he also claimed to feel mastered by. This state of submission was not an undesirable one as he had clarified in his earlier 1955 essay when asking, "Are not the pleasures of listening to music the pure delight of being encircled, embraced, and dominated?"[82] A later painting done by his artistic collaborator and close friend Yokoo Tadanori depicts the famed image of Mishima posing as the martyr St. Sebastian tied to a tree. Here, rather than any arrows, the bound and encircled Mishima appears pierced by the consoling sounds of Wagner (fig. 35).

In his 1959 primer on literary style, Mishima had invoked Wagner as the model for his ideal literary prose, albeit one he felt he failed to achieve. He likened his decades-plus work as a novelist to that of a conjurer, or more modestly, a pharmacist "who makes medicine, extracting chemicals from thin air and fixing them into prose. But if sometimes I can write with ease, at others, I cannot write at all." He recognizes the importance of "literary prose that has visual beauty" (*bunshō no shikaku-teki na bi*) but aspires also to prose that "moves one easily with its uniquely thick rhythms [*isshu no jūatsu na rizumukan ni kandō shiyasui*]. Yet, no matter how I try, I cannot achieve a similar Wagner-like literary style."[83] Overlaying the Wagner opera music onto a silent film adaptation of one of his earlier literary works would seem to offer one way to achieve this goal of marrying musical rhythms to literary prose.

But Mishima again anticipates and disarms any line of reasoning that might assume film merely compensated for the perceived deficiencies of literature. In discussing *Yūkoku* with screenwriter Funabashi Kazuo in April 1966, Mishima balked at the suggestion that writing the screenplay and then directing and acting in the film offered him artistic fulfilment that he could not achieve as a literary author, or vice versa. When asked if he felt frustrated by the experience of transposing the powerful original story into a screenplay and film, Mishima challenged that premise head-on:

> By your way of thinking, you believe that it must've felt impossible to transpose words into film images—that turning this or that image of a word [*ji no imēji*] into a film image [*eizō*] was impossible. But, in fact, since I myself wrote the original work, there's an opposite way to look at it. What I mean is that words enter into our heads through a process of abstraction, and, from there, the image grows. So, for example, when confronted with the word "mountain" or "sky," we employ our poetic imaginations. When we read novels, that sort of process is always the case. But, in this case, because it is me, [the original author of "Yūkoku"], who is fixing the image into words, I fix them into a place that does not come after the word, but before it. That is the way I think about it. What I'm saying is that reality may

FIGURE 35. Mishima, the martyr, enrapt and encircled by Wagnerian bodhisattvas (Yokoo Tadanori, *Otoko no shi arui wa Mishima Yukio to R. Wāgunā no shōzō*, 1983). Courtesy Yokoo Tadanori, 1983.

> be lacking, but I suspect something exists that is even rawer, something even more filled with some raw dripping essence. Only by making words abstract can they be communicated to us, but what I wanted to do was return them to the stage prior to that. And so, it was not an attempt to adapt the original, but instead an attempt to return that original work to its origins. I wanted to return the original work to my subconscious, or to put it even more boldly, to return it to the universal subconscious of the Japanese people.[84]

Leaving aside his bolder claim of bardic status here, Mishima suggests that writing the film screenplay offered not a rewrite or adaptation, and certainly not a rehearsal of something to come in the future, but rather an unwriting, a move back to before. This was a return to a preverbal state before the abstraction of words forces the thing to become estranged from its origins. The ultimate goal is not necessarily the image (film or otherwise). Instead, something much less (and more) tangible, more visceral (*doro doro to shita mono*). Elsewhere he called it "the chaos that predated the process of abstraction" or "the original inner chaos residing inside me" (*orijinaru na konran wa watashi no naibu ni aru no de aru*).[85]

Later in his discussion with Funabashi, Mishima asserts that the mediums of film and music, especially a composer like Wagner, offer privileged access to this state of inner chaos:

> Isn't [the cinema] just like music? Not at all like novels. In music—and Wagner is like this too—we are enrapt [*tsutsumikonde*], thrown into the midst of extreme chaos, and inside there is no sense of shame, no anything at all. And we are freed from all erotic feelings inside of us. Or we are chased into a tight corner and suddenly put face-to-face with death. That is what music is like. … Novels too should immerse us, but there is a screen in between. With music, no such screen exists. And with films, this is even truer since the music and visuals come together as one.[86]

Mishima again expresses his phobic wonderment over the powers of music and film to obliterate the self. Paradoxically, novels possess a "screen" (*sukuriin*) that interferes with a reader's immediate reception of a text, while music and film are screenless mediums that immerse listener-viewers completely. Their immersive effects resemble a state of death.

Writing in the late 1930s, Theodor Adorno had identified these self-obliterating tendencies of Wagner's operas as the evils of the modern culture industry. In *In Search of Wagner*, Adorno critiqued their dubious enchantments for tending "towards magic delusion, to what Schopenhauer calls 'The outside of the worthless commodity', in short towards phantasmagoria.'" Their undesirably immersive and illusory effects had been inherited by bourgeois cinema, appearing in its most debased form in Hollywood films, but as the origin of the term "phantasmagoria" suggested, could be traced back to early nineteenth-century proto-cinematic magical lantern shows.[87]

The problem, according to Adorno, is that Wagner's operas offer "consoling phantasmagoria" that make time stand still. They offer "the mirage of eternity" often by presenting "the idea of metempsychosis" at a thematic level where characters transmigrate at will, "detached from time." In other words, they promise the eternal return of the dead. This promise is not just proffered thematically but through the medium of sound, the "acoustic delusion" of "distant sound" in which "music pauses and is made spatial, the near and the far are deceptively merged." Wagner's looping music with its "absence of any real harmonic progression becomes the phantasmagorical emblem for time standing still." Adorno fears that such invisible all-encompassing spatialized sound will paralyze its audiences and foreclose the potential for political critique.

From the perspective of a Marxist modern culture industry critique, the key problem was that phantasmagoric media conceal the labor behind their own production. In so doing, the creator is effaced while the creation (and the world it re-creates) is reified. As Adorno made clear, this was problematic not just for the audience but for the creator as well:

> The phantasmagoria tends towards dream not merely as the deluded wish-fulfilment of would-be buyers, but chiefly to conceal the labour that has gone into making it. It mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labour, but in such a way that the labour that has gone into it is no longer identifiable. The dreamer encounters his own image impotently, as if it were a miracle, and is held fast in the inexorable circle of his own labour, as if it would last forever. The object that he has forgotten he has made is dangled magically before his eyes, as if it were an absolutely objective manifestation.

With the means of production concealed, the creator can instead conceive of themselves as a spectator of a magical phantasm that appears magically before them. As Adorno puts it, the artist and artwork alike become "a passive, visionary presence."[88]

It is not difficult to map Adorno's critique of Wagner onto Mishima's own quest for a "total artwork" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) that synthesized multiple art forms and one that would allow Mishima to become not just the almighty artist par excellence but also the audience for his own authorless and autonomous creation.

It is worth stressing again that as important as Mishima's musical choice of Wagner was for *Yūkoku*, there is no pretense that the characters (or actors playing them) can hear this music. The soundtrack was non-diegetic, and it was added in postproduction. It is only as spectator that Mishima is privy to this perfect accordance of image and sound in the film's final moments. If film allowed Mishima as a spectator to achieve a desired "self-oblivion" (*bōga*), then his many stints dying on celluloid might seem to offer him the apotheosis of the cinematic experience. But instead, it is only as the film spectator of the final omniscient shot, untethered to any one bodily perspective, that the reassuring film images and dreaded music converge at last.