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## **Death of the image/the image of death: Temporality, torture and transience in Sunohara Yuuri and Akita Masami's *Harakiri* Cycle**

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### **Abstract**

*Sunohara Yuuri and Akita Masami's series of six seppuku films (1990) are solely constituted by images of fictionalized death, revolving around the prolonged self-torture of a lone figure committing harakiri. I contend that the protagonist's auto-immolation mirrors a formal death, each frame 'killing' the moment it represents. My analysis aims to explore how the solipsistic nature of selfhood is appositely symbolized by the isolation of the on-screen figures and the insistence with which the six films repeat the same scenario of protracted agony across the cycle. The centralization of suffering, I argue, parallels the distance between viewer and image with the isolating nature of embodied existence. Thus, this article seeks to probe the relationship between form and content, asking what the image of death reveals about the death of the image.*

**Keywords:** film, photography, pain, body, suicide, horror

The cycle of *harakiri* films made in 1990 and directed by Sunohara Yuuri (*Onna harakiri: Sange*, *Jogakusei: Harakiri*, *Onna harakiri: Seisan*, *Shiro-shôzoku: Hara-kiri*, *Bijo kenshi: Futari seppuku*), and the single entry directed by Akita Masami (*'Shitsurakuen': Jôbafuku onna harakiri*, also known as *Lost Paradise*) are solely constituted by fictional images of death. These 'plotless' videos revolve around the prolonged self-torture of a lone figure committing *harakiri* (ritualized suicide by blade).

<sup>1</sup> Since these films are relatively rare (Unearthed Films released a DVD box-set of the films, limited to only 1000 copies), it is probably worth expanding on the content in detail to evince the plotlessness to which I refer. In *Onna harakiri: Sange* (which is indicative of the content of the rest of the series) we encounter a lone female looking at a soldier's uniform. This two-minute sequence is the only hint of backstory or motivation we are permitted. The scene then cuts to the same woman in a barren room. She picks up, unsheathes and then replaces a small sword. After some contemplation, the eight-minute sequence cuts, only to return to precisely the same scene. This time, the woman disrobes to the waist, caressing her torso. After five minutes has elapsed, she again unsheathes the knife, delicately wraps half the blade in cloth, and strokes the tip across her torso. The film has reached the twenty-minute mark before she stabs herself in the abdomen. She then writhes in agony for nearly 25 minutes. The third scene lasts 34 minutes in total, and contains only 28 instances of editorial intervention, all of which are jump cuts. Given that the set-up does not change, the purpose for these cuts seems to be to allow the effects crew to add more blood. The final shot is of the woman's corpse.

Because these films contain fetishized images of bloodshed, they straddle a generic boundary, and have been received as niche pornographic films.<sup>2</sup> Having purchased them from Unearthed Films (who specialize in horror rather than pornography), my response to them has been shaped by this contextualization. I will therefore refer to them as

objects of horror rather than discussing the potential sexual (and accompanying orientalist) connotations of their being sold in America.<sup>3</sup>

The starting point for this article was based on my initial response to the films. By centralizing suffering, not offering contextualization via plot, and offering little in the way of editing or compositional variation to distract the viewer, the films made for uncomfortable viewing. The presence of the camera recording an intimate performance of death concerned me, as did the duration of the torture. I felt implicated in the characters' suffering; in refusing to turn off the film, I felt that I was situating myself as a kind of accomplice or optical murderer, as if the sadistic gaze Mulvey (1975) posited in 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' had reached a pinnacle: that here the scrutiny of the gaze appeared in some sense to facilitate the suffering of the protagonists, becoming the only entertainment these films offer. Instead of occupying a traditional role of *kaishaku* – that is, “to attend” the harakiri to lessen the victims' 'long drawn-out agony' (Seward 1968: 61) – my presence as spectator (and my inability to hinder the anguish) seemed to me to add to the degradation of the victim. As Mayerfield contends, 'when other beings do not act to relieve our suffering, but are themselves the source of it, our hope is [...] metamorphosed into its opposite [...] The helping human presence on which we had counted has become a tormenting presence' (1999: 90). This is the role I felt I was willingly undertaking as witness to suffering for my entertainment.

The primary source of my own discomfort arose from how prolonged the agony seemed to be. I began to contemplate how these films differed from the conventional modes of depicting suffering that I and viewers of mainstream horror are used to. Even the alleged 'excesses' of torture porn (see Cochrane 2007; Queenan 2007) feel brief compared with these *Harakiri* films' renditions of atrocity, because those Hollywood studio films employ editorial interventions, narrative arc and expected conventions regarding the length of the film (between 90 and 120 minutes on average) (Durie et al.

2000: 29). *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005), for example, conforms to these generic modes, while the films of the *Harakiri* cycle seem to actively eschew those tropes. The repetition of prolonged suffering across this cycle (not to mention the objectification of the protagonist's pain) makes this cycle a true contender for the category torture porn (as Sarrachino and Scott 2008: 161, among others, aver). This is consolidated by the dual status of the films as straddling the genres of horror and pornography.

A series of questions arose for me while I watched these films, which grew in intensity as I progressed through the series: at the centre was 'Why am I watching this? What kind of entertainment does this offer?' One answer is concerned with the pleasures that can be derived from any horrific depiction; as Sontag argues, '[t]here is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching' (2003: 37). I could not shake the feeling that the endurance required to sit through these segments of suffering was an intentional parallel for the agony of the protagonist, particularly since the 'teasing' that constitutes the first half of each film seems to serve the function of drawing the spectator in. The promise of inevitable action is offered, and is inevitably fulfilled with aplomb in the second half of each film. A further question I began to contemplate was concerned with what I could learn from these films about my desire for narrative action. Ultimately, I found myself willing the victims' deaths because it quickly becomes apparent that suffering is *all* that is offered by these films. But, again, feeling like some kind of accomplice, this desire for 'something' to fill the plot, *some* recognizable movement, poses a moral problem when that 'something' is someone's torturous demise, even if it is fictional.

This article seeks to respond to these films, based on these questions. My central concerns revolve around duration and distance. Temporality is central to my response, and, as I will go on to outline, the prolonged duration of the torture has led me to consider not the conventions of representing agony per se, but the ways in which the

content solely constituted by suffering mirrors these films' formal aspects, and the film form more generally. The combination of time and topic raises the question as to what the image of death reveals about the death of the image. Blanchot's assertion that the image is a 'cadaverous presence' (1989: 156) implies that the image is haunting, excessive and zombie-like. Here I will be asking whether fictionalized suicide lays 'the moment' to waste as well as the victim, and whether the body on-screen is a kind of residue of the individual. Suicide positions the self *as* waste (to be disposed of), but its performance and recording means the victim remains hauntingly present, despite her apparent death.

My interests lie in how this cycle of films may bring to our attention aspects of form and apparatus that could be overlooked in favour of the 'extreme' content. This will allow me to scrutinize how the image interacts with, problematizes and is complicated by notions of time, as well as a subjective experience of lived and perceived duration. The protagonist's auto-immolation, in my view, is paralleled by a metaphoric, formal death, in which each frame 'kills' the moment it represents. The protraction of the torture is matched by repetition within the cycle, where lengthy static takes are employed as the same incident is enacted upon anonymous, isolated bodies. This combination of narrative and form allegorizes life's trajectory to death – the passage of which is the central 'story' of existence. Despite the fetishization of suffering in these films, it is the final extinguishing of life that punctuates the cessation of the narrative.

In order to dissect these formal concerns, I will first discuss medium in detail. Beginning with photography, then film, I will consider how these media record instants in time, how film relates to photography in this respect, and how both media have shared a history concerned with recording death (fictional or otherwise). One of the implications of my argument is that the *raison d'être* of both forms – in stilling or extracting moments out of the flow of time – is foremost concerned with a kind of death of time,

and this is reflected in the persistent thematic relationship between death and photographic/filmic representation in this cycle. I will then examine these films to identify the connections between form and content, both of which revolve around death.

Here is where the second key term – distance – becomes central. If film and photography kill the moment, they do so by extracting an instant out of time, leading to a distance between the moment as it happened and the moment as it is recalled via the recording. While this is inherent to my early discussions of medium, I will return to the issue of distance when discussing the *Harakiri* films' centralization of suffering as theme. My response to the films connotes that one of the problems I encountered was centred on emotional and moral proximity to the action – my inability to hinder the torture, and even my unwillingness to do so. In the latter stages of the article, I wish to contemplate how the temporal, geographic and fictional spaces separating viewer from character speak to problems of the self, particularly where empathy for others and suffering are concerned. Entrapment within a body isolates the individual and hinders an ability to truly empathize with the pain of others. This, in my reading, is played out in these films via the formal isolation of the fictional victim.

### **Killing time: Photography as death-image**

Before I consider the implications of 'motion pictures', I will begin with an investigation of cinema's root element – photography – asking how photography has been discussed in terms of its relationships with time and death. This in turn will highlight how cinema utilizes movement (which is the focus of the next section). Because of their lack of narrative drive and a distinct absence of editorial interference (as I will detail in due course), the case study films are akin to photographs of suffering, inasmuch as they

depict isolated, decontextualized incidents. Photographic theory will inform my discussion by drawing attention to an aspect of image-nature that film (via its continual movement) seems to negate.

Interestingly, photographic theory has more often been concerned with the opposite – photography's ability to seemingly freeze the moment and how this preserves the life of that instance rather than killing the moment by apprehending the image. Bazin claimed that 'by providing a defense [sic] against the passage of time [ – preserving life by representing life – photography] satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time' (1967: 9–10). Bazin implies that photography halts time, and while this is somewhat true of the image itself, he overlooks the fact that the photograph, being inseparable from the narrative contexts of those depicted and decoding the image, always-already indicates movement and change.

The motivation underlying photography is to concretize the present for the future in a way that memory cannot. Thus, Mulvey's assertion that '[t]he reality recorded by the photograph relates exclusively to its moment of registration; that is, it represents a moment extracted from the continuity of historical time' (2006: 13) is only partially true – its reality is also of the moment of decoding. The photograph's representation requires that the image is placed in its 'narrative' context, and is also contingent on the observer's moment of processing. It therefore belongs to two simultaneous moments (one of the instance of the action captured, and one of the moment of decoding). Arguably, it is the latter of these conjoining moments (of decoding) that has more impact on the interpreted 'meaning' of the image, and perhaps this is what Barthes meant when he stated, 'I am the reference of every photograph' (1980: 84). Banfield summates the problem of photographic temporality neatly in her claim that 'the photograph's moment *was now*' (quoted in Mulvey 2006: 57) (rather than 'was then'). Banfield articulates the problematic presentness of the image – which is more



accountable to the viewer's decoding in the present than a stilling of time between two separate instances (that depicted, and the moment of decoding).

Thus, the image is 'cadaverous' as Blanchot claims, being of 'confusion' and 'loss' (1989: 142–57), occupying a position that renders the present as a future –divergent from the present depicted – and as an incident that can never be reclaimed because it is already of the past. The image is also of history (1989: 155), again implying that temporality is crucial to interpretation. It is for these reasons that Barthes claims each photograph (being permanent) signifies the death of the individual depicted; 'whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe' (quoted in Mulvey 2006: 62).

The *Harakiri* cycle manifests that catastrophe by creating images that depict horror in a literal sense. Horror is central to what photography is because as Sontag notes, the photograph is unique in its ability '[t]o catch a death actually happening and embalm it for all time' (2003: 53). Photography has been commonly employed for precisely this reason; death-mask photography, for instance, was common practice in the nineteenth century (see Henning 2004). Yet, Barthes further recognizes that the depicted party is horrifically already dead (literally or figuratively) because of the future implied by the permanent present of the photograph. The subject of the photo embodies his or her own going-to-die, whether it has literally passed or not, because the recording of his or her existence implies that there will be a time when the photo exists and the subject no longer does (Barthes 1980: 96). It is the slippery nature of photographic time that makes it 'excessive, monstrous' (Barthes 1980: 91), and thus an apt mode for representing horror in terms of form, even before we have encountered content.

Read in such a light, Barthes' description of photographers as 'agents of Death' (1980: 92) implies that photography is a form of representational murder. Images produce

'death while trying to preserve life... *Life/Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final click' (1980: 92). It is no accident that the camera is described as gun-like here, or that photographic sessions are referred to as 'shoots'. According to Barthes, this moment equally signals suicide – 'at the end of this first death [of one whom I love most], my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting' (1980: 93). It is in this sense that the theme of self-mutilation that is played out in the *Harakiri* films is intertwined with the formal roots of photography. This metaphor is exacerbated by the addition of time into the equation; it is for this reason that I will consider film (photograms in motion) according to this same paradigm.

### **Running out of time: Cinema and the mo[ve]ment of death**

If photographs resurrect the past as an Uncanny present, the subject becomes a doppelgänger, or more accurately a zombie: 'in the case of photographing corpses [...] the photograph then becomes horrible [...] because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing' (Barthes 1980: 78–79). Mulvey follows suit with her assertion that '[t]he photograph's freezing of reality [...] marks a transition from the animate to the inanimate, from life to death. The cinema reverses the process, by means of an illusion that animates the inanimate frames of its origin' (2006: 15). Here I will discuss how cinema exacerbates some of the problems posed by its photographic forebear, film's relationship with photography, and what the illusion of movement inherent to film adds to the theoretical discussion of photography's relationships with time and death.

There can be no doubt that cinema and photography share a kinship, even if their mode of displaying images is differentiated by the illusions of time and motion. As Stewart

puts it, '[p]hotographs are taken from time. Movies take time...But it takes photographs to make a movie' (1999: 1). While Sontag refers to photography as 'testify[ing] to time's relentless melt' and allowing us to 'participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability' because of its 'freezing' of time (1979: 15), I argue that cinema's 'moving pictures' are more apposite to manifest the problem she describes because film inherently places stress on metamorphosis. Minute changes occurring between photogram frames give rise to the illusion of movement. It is precisely because of this fantasy that cinema is able to embody the vulnerability and mortality that Sontag refers to, and these themes are mirrored in the victimizing content of the *Harakiri* cycle that shows life slipping into death. Perhaps these films then evince Bazin's argument that 'film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant [...] now the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified' (1967: 14–15).

It is this problem on which my analysis hinges. Coming first from the perspective of the still image, we can see that filmic motion is a falsity that is magnified by hiding its immobile parts. Of course, this may itself parallel the way in which life (via an emphasis on incidents) masks the static truth of death. As Mulvey asserts, 'cinema combines [...] two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human, figure' (2006: 11), which again may be understood as a kind of resurrection of the dead (or zombification). Stewart considers this paradox of stillness and movement to be integral to what motion pictures are: 'the film medium owes a more immediate – rather than just historical or mechanical – debt to the photograph than we can ever (quite) see on-screen... movies *are* their difference from photographs one after the other' (1999: 4). The order of frames on the film strip and differences between concurrent images suggest a certain inevitability that is paralleled by the victim's movement towards death

on-screen in the *Harakiri* cycle. The inexorable forward motion of film is akin to the journey from life to death, and as such, metaphorically forces the on-screen victim to die. Hence, according to Jean Cocteau, the camera ‘film[s] death at work’ (Burgin 1996: 85) – which may be further expounded by Barthes’ assertion that ‘everything which happens within the frame dies absolutely once this frame is passed beyond’ (Barthes 1980: 57).

But we should also address the past/present question if we are discussing cinema as ‘photographs + time’. Much like the photograph, the film is of the present in which it is observed/decoded, while also being of the past (the present recorded on the film strip in the moment it was filmed). The future is also implicated inasmuch as the event can only be witnessed in retrospect. Yet, because of the speed at which each frame passes in film (which gives rise to the illusion of movement), the image always ‘dies’ on-screen before the brain can apprehend it. In this sense, the image only lives in the spectator, not on-screen. The moving image is always dying because it is moving, and is replaced 24 times every second. Film is then arguably less guilty of Blanchot’s idolization of the image (1989: 79) than photography because the ‘permanence’ of the moving image is continually refuted by the fleeting presence of the photograms on-screen, and the temporal dimension that gives the film object a transience that photography seeks to overcome through stasis. It is the movement of film that is integral to its complexity – as Rodowick has it, ‘[t]he movement-image provides only an indirect image of time because time is reduced to intervals defined by movement and the linking of movements through montage’ (1997: 11), and it is difference between each frame and the one that preceded it that allows us to perceive movement.

Its montage of photographs is an aspect of film that the form seeks to negate via movement. Again, film, in this respect, reflects our lived experience of time. As Rodowick observes, ‘[t]he present is a constantly moving division of the future into the

past...[we cannot] grasp the present and distinguish it absolutely from that past it has already become, and the future it is too rapidly overtaking' (1997: 125), and therefore, 'in spite of these residual "memories" of stillness within movement, the relation between the aesthetics of cinema and mobility is transcended by the camera, by editing and ultimately by narrative, all of which tend to disguise the other side of the divide' (Mulvey 2006: 68). While I will address the ways in which form mirrors content in my next section, it is worth noting that the *Harakiri* cycle accentuates the duration of the suffering undergone by the on-screen victim contrary to Mulvey's suggestions, offering little in the way of narrative and editing. Thus, in my case study, the problems of movement and temporality are horrifically present, or are not suppressed enough in the conventional senses. Before I look more closely at the form/content issue, I will first address the philosophical problem alluded to by this lost movement – the death of the photogram and the moment it represents via 'ocular suppression in the apparatus' (Stewart 1999: 5): that is, a willingness to forsake the individual frames in favour of the illusory movement offered by film.

Film's movement is a source of discomfort inasmuch as it is an illusion well understood by the viewer, even if enjoyment of the motion of movies is contingent on overlooking the trickery involved. The discomfort can only be overcome by halting (taking control over) the image – in this sense, all films, by nature of their movement-illusion, are horror films. This desire is asserted technologically (as is the inspiration for Mulvey's 2006 book *Death 24x a Second*) by advances that allow viewers to readily halt the movement of the image, especially in a digital age. But pausing is also a source of tension, because the film kinetically waits to restart.

Just as time cannot truly be halted, its direction cannot be altered, just as the path towards death is an inexorable element of human experience because of time's motion. While Barthes states that '[p]hotography's noeme will therefore be: "That-has-been", or

again: the Intractable...it has been here, and yet is immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred' (1980: 77), this is more clearly true of film, which combines the movement of time with forward motion – in the *Harakiri* cycle, this motion is from life to death. Form thus mirrors the causal path that Barthes finds befitting of photography's relationship with time (which continues despite the image's attempt to freeze it).

Time is defined by change (i.e. the changing of states from a to b, whatever those criteria might be). If there were no change then humans would not be able to distinguish the passage of time. This is why the progression of images captured on the film strip appears to so naturalistically parallel lived experience of time. The films here do not make use of stills or deceleration (slow motion) to accentuate the torture, or disrupt time. They simply let the pain play as it would. The underlying horror is not just to do with the paradox of stilling time in photography, but of reality itself, and its passage. Barthes suggests that in the age of the photo 'everything [...] prepares our race [...] to be no longer able to conceive *duration*' (1980: 93). The film-makers mediate as little as possible, instead letting the movement in the frame do all the work: in doing so, I contend, the apparent duration of the torture is augmented.

### **Present/presence and Past/passed**

Having outlined the theoretical premises on which my analysis hinges, and having explained the problems inherent to photographic and filmic imagery of concern to my analysis, I now turn to the case study films themselves. My primary concern is to expand on the ways in which form and content mirror each other in the *Harakiri* cycle, underscoring the horrific nature of the cinematic image I have already delineated. The creation of the image 'kills' the moment inasmuch as the woman on-screen enacts this

'death' as a literal bodily massacre. As she strokes the blade for the first half of each film, she is signalled to be inevitably doomed or marked as already dead, just as the previousness of the performed and recorded event has. Perception of the event after the fact is not just a matter of witnessing the act in retrospect – the film plays out the past 'as' present (due to the immediacy of the movement on-screen). While each frame captures and makes her death permanent, the form also marks the moment as infinitely replayable. The illusion of extracting the moment of death from the original space–time context of its performance (it has been 'captured' on film, and belongs more to the context in which it is replayed than the context of recording) itself seems violent, metaphorically murdering the moment, while also preserving it for posterity.<sup>4</sup>

As I have already outlined, the filmic form utilizes movement in a manner that can be read as symbolizing the directional thrust of life to death. The passage of 24 still frames per second across the screen parallels the blood draining from the protagonist's body. Read in this way, the pulse of the projected frames becomes a cinematic contusion – just as the blood vacates her body and leads to her death, the film voyages from a narrative point of origin to the 'end'. The narrative is constituted solely by her performance of suffering, each film comprising lengthy, fixed static shots. The lack of editorial 'cutting' draws further attention to her eviscerated body as a formal device – minimal violence is done to the scene in terms of editorial intervention, while maximum damage is done to her body (even if one stab is enough to kill her). Where editing *is* used (violent jump cuts) it *stands out*, just as the violence done to her body is the sole purpose of the text (*standing in* for plot).

In connecting movement/image to the deconstructed, dying, bleeding body, I am suggesting that both movement and image are finite and transient – this is accentuated by the series' privileging of form over narrative, and the repetition of event across the cycle of films. That such central concerns should be articulated through a cycle of almost

identical films is not surprising given Freud's conception of 'the *compulsion to repeat*' that is a fundamental facet of human psychology, especially because of the death content here. The 'picture which life presents to us' (that is formally presented as a series of moving pictures here) 'is the result of the concurrent and mutually opposing action of Eros [including "the instincts for self preservation"] and the death instinct' (Freud 1995: 36, original emphasis; see also 1995: 645–47). Freud contends that the death instinct is founded on an acknowledgement that death is inevitable, balanced with a desire to attain this state. The *Harakiri* cycle literalizes that aspect of death drive by focusing on suicide. Eros is the pleasure of life embodied in a wish to extend life (and thus experience more pleasure) – which is an impossibility that the finitude of film attests to. Eros also causes the death instinct to become outwardly destructive – projected towards the external world rather than the self. The ritualized suicide film appropriately manifests this problem via its crossing of the private/public boundary.

While these films may be read according to these psychoanalytic paradigms, the lack of narrative content bears consideration – as Sontag has it, '[n]arratives make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us' (2003: 80). Again, it is worth considering that these films play more like motion photographs than fiction narratives because they de-emphasize narrative context. In this sense, the moment is dead – it has no cause–effect driving motion (story), only suffering. This is accompanied by the knowledge that fictional narratives are only ever substitutes for the uber-narrative of the movement of life to death. That the *Harakiri* cycle offers a collection of films rather than a single movie emphasizes this point. The death spectacle is all the films offer us, and thus the entire weight of the image rests on on-screen demise, not stories that contextualize the characters.

It is not the photographs themselves, but the movement in which the individual photographs are lost that signals 'the present' in film. Like memories, the specific



moments that constitute that story are divorced snapshots – single frames, only apparently connected by illusory movement. The insistence of this message of disconnection is emphasized by the presence of six films in the cycle, and the lack of context surrounding any of these characters' voyages into oblivion. The characters are near-identical yet solipsistic, and are comparable to the single (only fractionally different) frames that depict the victims in each film.

If the intangible, ever-vanishing presence of the photogram is an inescapable part of film's formal design, again it matches the horror-content of the *Harakiri* cycle. As Scarry contends, 'the most crucial fact about pain is *its presentness*' (1985: 9, original emphasis). The photogram is at once present yet also past (passed), each frame vacating the screen before it has been registered by the viewer's mind. As subject matter, pain is at odds with film's reliance on chronology – if pain is present, recording makes it of the past, and this fundamentally contradicts the nature of suffering.

The difficulty is in articulating the past movement into the future via language or image (film or photography) as both image and language are used to fix meaning – to record, to ascertain, to imbue – which is contrary to the nature of time's flow. The imagery of pain here is vital (as is the fact that it defies narrative), for as Scarry avers, pain's 'resistance to language [...] is essential to what it is'; it 'centrally entail[s], require[s] this shattering of language' (1985: 5). Because pain is beyond language, films of suffering are apt to articulate the quandary posed by time: film is reliant on continual movement, while horror fiction (especially when presented *as real*) connotes that it is impossible to capture the terror of presence/the present. The *Harakiri* cycle also rewrites and reconstitutes the body by portraying it only as an object that suffers. According to Mayerfield, '[i]n severe pain, we are deprived of the world. Our pain begins to occupy all our thoughts, and to the extent we remain conscious of any other reality, it seems to us

disconnected, unintelligible, false, empty, absurd' (1999: 26, fn 31). This is expressed by these films, which isolate their victims, and lack plot – form is taken over by anguish.

The fundamental problem of articulating pain (or any other emotional state) is that the image cannot fully encapsulate inner experience, since it is removed – it observes. This is similar to our lived experience of selfhood and empathy, as an individual can never truly know or be the Other; as Mayerfield contends, '[b]ecause they are another person's feelings and not our own, we cannot peer into them directly' (1999: 55). This effect is augmented by each character's isolation as the sole focus of each film. However, while the protagonist is the only point of identification provided, I contend that the formal design of the film, which excludes other characters, dialogue and editorial intervention, exacerbates the character's remoteness. The film frame's two-dimensional approximation of reality, the geographic and temporal distance between viewer and enacted event, the fictionality of the performance, and the illusion of movement (the suppression of the apparatus) all distance the viewer from the character.

This is also reflected in her isolation on the film strip; individual frames imprison her as much as her body does. The 'invisible' black lines that separate the photograms from one another on the film strip metaphorically reflects the victim's position – the separation between life and death that is played out in each film. Furthermore, the borders between frames symbolize the invisibility of pain, which is inadequately represented by the excessive carnage on display. The gratuity of the representation cannot convey an abstract emotional state such as pain, no matter how intimate the framing is (individualizing her as the sole point of focus during an ultra-personal/private ritual). The form allows a spectator to witness the performance, but the lack of situational, contextual and narrative information (which is what makes the *Harakiri*

cycle more akin to photographic extracts of time than narrative films) hinders emotional connection.

Even though the spectator is distanced from the victim depicted, the image is a bridging point – it is contained in the mind of the viewer, and decoded according to the viewer's own frame of experience. The fictional victim is at best a symbolic entity, and is as incapable of manifesting pain as the film or photograph is of possessing abstract concepts such as suffering (Parent 1990: 205–11). Scarry views the problem from the perspective of the state (pain) rather than the image that depicts suffering; 'pain only becomes an intentional state once it is brought into relation with the objectifying power of the imagination' (1985: 164). While direct empathy with fictional suffering is made difficult by a number of formal distances, it is entirely plausible that the viewer may understand the character's distress because of the nature of decoding, which hinges on relating depiction or description to the decoder's experiences; 'my past experience [...] gives me an idea of how I would feel even though I never occupied the same exact state' (Mayerfield 1999: 56).

Portrayal of pain constitutes the content of each film, and this has motivated my reading of the films in relation to form and photography primarily because of how pain is psychologically experienced. The memory does not adequately bring to mind the sensation of pain, even if one has experienced prolonged periods of suffering. As Mayerfield has it, pain and terror are eventually forgotten; 'the actual experience leaches out' of our memory (1999: 87). Like film, pain is transient. In this sense, the films of the *Harakiri* cycle seek to document a performance of suffering, and successfully articulate the distances inherent to witnessing and remembering pain via their fictional and ritualized (constructed) nature, the prolonging of the agony and the repetition across the cycle.

### **The 'I' in 'Die': A conclusion**

Severed-Cinema describes Sunohara's cycle thus: 'bla, bla, bla, the 20 minute mark hits and we get our initial close up cut scene of her stomach. Finally!...she considers "should I, or shouldn't I", as if to bring the viewer suspense (tedium)' (Mayo 2008). While the reviewer may come across as callous in his or her desire for torture, I can sympathize with this position, not least since the films promise horror but purposefully seek to delay its occurrence. My concern here has been to recognize that this response reveals much about how I have been conditioned by my expectations of narrative cinema and the horror genre. If read as artistic avant-garde statements – and the involvement of sound noise artist Merzbow (aka Akita Masami) as director of part of this cycle may suggest they should be interpreted as art – the films may be more sympathetically received than they were by the reviewer cited above.

However, having subjected the films to a kind of distanced formal dissection, it is worth returning to my opening conjectures – the discussion of pleasure sought and frustration felt. Perhaps in undertaking a formal analysis I have sought to retreat to science to evade the spectacle of suffering,<sup>5</sup> to avoid answering the questions I set myself in the introduction. Even if this is the case, such a position marries with the point at which I have arrived regarding distances wrought between viewer and depiction, which are for me intertwined with the formal distances of filming and photography.

Sontag observes that 'Shock can become familiar... one can become habituated to the horror of certain images' (2003: 73), and this is not only true of the prolonging of torture in any given chapter of the series, but the repetitious nature of the cycle itself. The shock for me when watching these films was not based upon the violent content – the twenty-minute sequences of squirming and writhing on-screen – but on my inability to

sympathize with the atrocity depicted, and my willingness to enter into a contract of atrocity with the on-screen victim as agent of her suffering. I may have been seeking to excuse that such a failure 'of imagination, of empathy' positions me as 'a moral monster' (Sontag 2003: 7). The latter would be truer if the depictions were of real suffering rather than a fictional performance. Yet, it is worth paralleling the fictionality of the text with an inability to empathize with off-screen responses to others' pain. As Scarry avers, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty', while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt'. (1985: 4)

One cannot fully relate to another person's pain, and the fictionality of the agony in my case study films manifests that 'doubt', tying visual cruelty or lack of empathy in viewing practices to the formal structure of the images. Finally, then, the fictional status of the films (depicting events that did not 'really' exist, even if they were recorded by the camera) alludes to, I contend, a separation of fantasy and reality that parallels the past/present and movement/stasis illusions of film, all of which attempt to create a state of 'seeming to be'.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the significance and ritualization of harakiri see Seward (1968) and Suematsu (1905).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the reviews of the films on Severed-Cinema.com and AVManiacs.com directly deem them to be a type of fetish porn (see Mayo 2008; Jane 2009).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this small cycle of films is not alone in depicting the self-sacrifice of females, especially in the context of Japanese extreme horror: see also *Satsu satsu (ayame)* (Anaru Tamakichi, 1999) and *Watashi no akai harawata (hana)/Women's Flesh: My Red Guts* (Anaru, 1999). While the potentially misogynistic and orientalist



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connotations of these films would benefit from analysis, as would their situation within the cultural contexts of Japan, I do not have space to do so here.

<sup>4</sup> Note that throughout I will refer to suicide victims in these films as she/her (singular) – they behave and are framed in the same way in each film, meaning that there is not a great deal that makes them distinguishable.

<sup>5</sup> I am particularly indebted to Chuck Kleinhans for his commentary on an early draft of this article, especially for raising this concern.