

Article

# “Disarmed”: Disability, Trauma, and Emasculation in Contemporary Japanese Cinema

Sean O’Reilly

Japan Studies Center, Faculty of International Liberal Arts, Akita International University, Akita 010-1292, Japan; seanoreilly@aiu.ac.jp

Received: 24 January 2018; Accepted: 8 March 2018; Published: 13 March 2018

**Abstract:** Disability, especially when war-related, is dangerous ground for entertainment films. Depictions of battle-scarred living bodies are necessarily political, since they cannot avoid commenting on the conflict of which they are a stark visual reminder. Yet depictions are politically multivalent: seeing the disabled has a wide range of effects on audiences. Unsurprisingly, then, disabled survivors of the war have rarely appeared on postwar screens. But the trend of avoiding the messy reality of war-related disability, and disabled bodies more generally, has ended, as the emphatic success of period drama *Love and Honor* (2006) can attest. In the new century, many films have tackled this once-taboo topic, winning success at the box office or, like *Caterpillar* (2010), at film festivals. In this article, I analyze depictions of disabled war survivors and other disabled bodies in recent Japanese films, drawing a contrast between *Love and Honor* and the aforementioned *Caterpillar*; I explore what motivated this more visceral retelling of both war trauma and general disability, and why each succeeded either commercially or critically. The trend towards depicting disability coincides perfectly with Japanese cinema’s resurgent success against Hollywood. Visceral depictions of traumatized bodies that are symbolically—or literally—disarmed have resonated with domestic audiences, perhaps because disability not only emasculates, it can also empower: the disabled, many believe, can speak with greater authority on the war or the human condition than anyone else. But what will they (be made to) say?

**Keywords:** disability; Japanese cinema; trauma; memory; emasculation; masculinity; war

## 1. Introduction

While riding on a train in Tokyo recently, I noticed my five-year-old daughter was mesmerized by the “priority seating” sign. One by one, she interpreted the four pictures showing the types of people entitled to sit there: parents with small children, pregnant women, anyone who is injured (the picture is of a person holding a crutch), and . . . what? The fourth category, with its picture of a person holding a cane, was not so easy to decipher. To her, it showed a person who, if using a cane, must have only one leg. So she concluded, after a hesitation, that only people whose bodies are visibly “incomplete” are allowed to sit there. When I pointed out that the picture (intended to have high iconicity, though apparently not enough to convince my daughter) was actually meant to suggest the elderly, who might need the assistance of a cane to walk, she countered that only someone who was seriously infirm would need a cane, so, functionally, it is almost like such people are missing a leg.

This memorable episode taught me the value of thinking of impairment as a spectrum rather than an absolute presence or the absence of an able body. In disability studies, as with all fields, it is important to choose terms carefully, which is why I will primarily speak of “impairment” hereafter; this term indicates an acknowledgement that a person’s *body* (or mind) lacks some component or function (for example, his eyes cannot see well), without necessarily concluding the condition must or even should be “fixed”, contra the pejorative “disability”, which implies an inability for the

person to function “normally” (he is blind, and consequently is assumed to be unable to do “regular” things like walking unaided, watching movies, reading “normal” books, etc.) and assumes that the desirability of “fixing” the condition is self-evident.<sup>1</sup> With this powerful distinction in place, we need not insist dogmatically on adherence to the social model of disability; we can accept, in a medical or interdisciplinary sense, the reality and ramifications of a particular person’s impairment, yet do so without pigeonholing the individual as disabled. For instance, a person impaired by non-functioning legs is not necessarily disabled, as she could use a wheelchair or other means to achieve roughly the same mobility as an individual with functional legs—nor should her entire identity necessarily be subsumed into the category of “disability studies” or her body need “fixing”.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding impairment and “normality” as a spectrum is an important framing and explanatory device for this entire inquiry into the recent explosion of interest, in Japan’s popular culture, in the topic of impaired bodies. Where is the tipping point, after all—when does “old and infirm” become “impaired”? Moreover, not all bodily impairments are as jolting to the able-bodied as the sight of a visible lack (whether it be arm, leg, etc.); for that matter, some impairments are nearly or completely invisible to outside scrutiny. This brings up an interesting question as regards the popular culture of Japan (and indeed the world): how best to depict physical impairments to generate empathy—or possibly even self-incriminating disgust—in the viewer?

Here I will focus on the contrast between two recent high-profile films, *Love and Honor* (a.k.a. *Bushi no ichibun*, Yamada et al. (2006)) and Wakamatsu Kōji’s *Caterpillar* (Kurosawa and Adachi 2010), with regards to their physically-impaired protagonists, and what these impairments imply on a deeper, non-physical level for masculinity and wartime memory. Their timing is no coincidence; starting about ten years ago, impairment has been on display in Japan’s popular culture in a manner that had not been seen since the postwar golden age, the latest era in which there were frequent depictions of war-torn and generally male bodies.

Examples of this (re)new(ed) interest in impaired bodies include the recent *In This Corner of the World* (2016 animated film on wartime Japan, in which the heroine loses an arm) and *A Silent Voice* (*Koe no katachi*, 2016 animated adaptation of the 2011–2013 manga by Yoshitoki Ōima), about a deaf girl and her mistreatment. But many such projects seem to be centrally concerned with the psychosocial effect of impairment on male bodies—for instance, the 2010 anime *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* and its alchemical process of giving up limbs in an equivalent exchange. Another example is the original net animation (ONA) *Gundam Thunderbolt* (2015–2017, based on manga from 2012–present): the Zeon pilot first gives his legs, then loses a hand, then volunteers to have his remaining limb cut off so as to better pilot a prototype. After being defeated by him, the “good guy” nastily remarks: “I lost to someone like THIS?” Then there is the highly successful live-action adaptation of *Dororo* (2007, based on Tezuka Osamu’s manga of 1967–1968 and the anime from 1969, as well as the 2004 PlayStation 2 game), perhaps the quintessential story of “fixing” impairment (the protagonist Hyakkimaru is fighting to recover missing parts of his body), as well as several explicitly war-themed blockbusters like *The Eternal Zero* (2013), which features a one-armed veteran, perhaps for the visual shock value the dramatic revealing of his missing limb provides. However, while many of these recent depictions of impairment might seem unconnected to the strong theme of emasculation running through the early postwar depictions of impairment relating to the Second World War, I will argue the opposite: films depicting impairment today, particularly *Love and Honor* and *Caterpillar*, seem to be even more focused than were postwar films on addressing the issue of whether an impaired man can be manly.

<sup>1</sup> The impairment/disability distinction is a well-known one in the standard literature on disability studies. See for example (Davis 2013, p. 46) and passim.

<sup>2</sup> In the American TV drama *Switched at Birth* (Weiss 2011–2017), many hearing individuals assume, a priori, that deaf people would wish for a Cochlear implant if able to purchase one, utterly unable to anticipate the ambivalence some feel due to the sense of belonging offered by the deaf community, etc.

## 2. Part One: *Love and Honor* as Anti-Emasculation “Inspiration Porn”

*Love and Honor*, perhaps unsurprisingly given the presence of the very image-conscious superstar Kimura Takuya, has a conventionally heroic storyline, in which the main character overcomes an impairment to prove beyond doubt his continued manliness. The film, set during the relatively tranquil *pax Tokugawa* in eighteenth-century Japan, strongly implies that the protagonist Shinnojō’s initially weak-willed response to his physical impairment (blindness acquired from toxic shellfish in the line of duty as a poison taster for his feudal lord) allows that impairment to become a disability (being unable to fight to defend his honor, and thus maintain control over his wife). This leads to emasculation and the loss of his wife to another man, the only escape from which is heroically to reassert his virility and, in a sense, to reassert his “claim” on his wife.

Despite this optimistic, even redemptive trajectory, the film is steeped in melodrama, filled with sympathy-inducing close-up after close-up of Shinnojō’s sightless eyes, and rivers of tears from all the principal characters as they are overcome with the sorrow and unfairness of the situation. Exposing star Kimura’s hypersexualized male body to the threat of disability was a very effective way to increase the emotional impact of the story, even if in the end he manfully proves he is not disabled after all, merely impaired. By the end of the film, he has even recovered his sense of humor, and the viewer is left deeply satisfied, confident in the knowledge that life is back to normal, the minor impairment of blindness notwithstanding—sightlessness has no power over him anymore.

The combination of the storyline about the imperiled male body and the appearance of superstar Kimura in this heroic role ensured massive box office returns. This leisurely-paced “slice of life” film, inferior in some ways (in terms of both content and aesthetics) to many of his Tora-san films and the other two films in his so-called Samurai Trilogy, became the biggest hit of director Yamada Yōji’s four-decade career and, unusually for a recent period drama (*jidaigeki*), much less a Shōchiku film (given Tōhō’s ongoing monopoly, or in fact stranglehold, over the cinema of Japan), with an incredible fifth-place finish among all the 407 Japanese films playing in 2007.<sup>3</sup> It is based on a short story, tellingly entitled “The Spirit Returns to the Sword of the Blind” (*Mōmoku ken kodama kaeshi*), serially published in the late 1970s by Fujisawa Shūhei.<sup>4</sup> One symptomatic question that immediately occurs is simply: why did it take thirty years to produce a filmic adaptation of this tale? In other words, how have attitudes changed in Japanese society of the 2000s versus the 1970s, such that a physically-impaired protagonist overcoming his blindness in a (more or less) realistic manner would achieve such success today, yet fail to receive a film adaptation closer to the date of the story’s publication?

One cannot answer this question without referring to the looming specter of the most famous blind swordsman of them all: Zatōichi. In fact, it might well be the case that Fujisawa’s original story is itself a response of sorts to the impossible successes of the blind masseur.<sup>5</sup> Just as Tolkien allegedly disliked the resolution of the prophecy in *Macbeth* enough to “correct” that story in his depiction of the fight between Eowyn and the Witch-King of Angmar, perhaps Fujisawa found the unrealistically exaggerated exploits of Zatōichi—the film series had continued until 1973, while the TV show ran from 1974–1979, meaning it was on the air just as he wrote his own story about a blind swordsman—a sort of negative inspiration, “correcting” the excesses of that character by focusing on a more realistic, limited portrayal of what would be possible for a blind person.

<sup>3</sup> Note that while technically *Bushi no ichibun* was released in 2006, its 1 December wide release means that statistically it is counted as a 2007 film. For box office results from 2007, see (Eiren 2007), available online: [http://eiren.org/toukei/img/eiren\\_kosyu/data\\_2007.pdf](http://eiren.org/toukei/img/eiren_kosyu/data_2007.pdf). Even with the 403 foreign films included, it placed 9th.

<sup>4</sup> (Matsuda n.d.), available online at: <http://www.shonai-nippo.co.jp/square/feature/fujisawa/book06.html>.

<sup>5</sup> While I know of no evidence precise enough to place Fujisawa at, e.g., a movie theater watching a Zatōichi film in the 1970s, it can be established that at least some of Fujisawa’s ideas for stories arose in dialogue with Japanese cinema. He himself noted that part of his inspiration for the entire “Hidden Blade, Autumn Wind” series of stories came from his childhood viewing of the 1952 Bando Tsumasaburō (Bantsuma) star vehicle *Mazō*. See Fujisawa’s postscript (Fujisawa 2004) in *Kakushi ken shūfū shō*.

Yet for our purposes, focusing on the visual depiction of impairment, there is one very important change from the original short story to the film. While in Fujisawa's tale, Shinnojō manages to strike the neck of the man who was having an affair with his wife, killing him instantly, in the film—tellingly—he literally disarms his opponent, all but severing one of his arms and then choosing to leave him alive, forcing him to confront the bitter reality of severe physical impairment. His cowardly opponent, of course, chooses suicide over the embarrassment of being a one-armed samurai (a warrior incapable of wielding violence), and of having been defeated by an opponent who (in his eyes) was a mere half-man. In other words, the enemy was not heroic enough to rise above impairment, instead allowing that impairment to become a disability: Shinnojō may have cut off his arm, but he turned *himself* into a cripple and chose to be overcome by despair.

This is an issue of spiritual and mental toughness. Shinnojō's essential virility is precisely what allowed him to return to "normal", fueling his ability to stand up to and defeat anyone who slighted his honor, and letting him relax after reasserting control over his life at the end, laughing with both his servant and his newly returned wife. In fact, the film's depiction strongly suggests he has become even more capable than before in at least one respect: his other senses heightened in compensation for the loss of eyesight, he recognizes his wife Kayo's cooking instantly once she begins working in secret as his "kitchen maid". But the film's rhetoric that Shinnojō is avenging his wife's honor, not his own, is deeply suspect: it is, after all, a duel between two men over a single woman, and he cites "samurai's honor" for why he must fight the duel. An insult to one's wife, who in feudal Edo-period society was sadly little more than a man's property, was an insult to oneself—by reasserting his *own* honor, he is able to welcome his wife back into his home, because he has *won* her back.

The film's story resembles the well-trodden trajectory of *Zatōichi* surprisingly well. Once again, we have the specter of a man beset by impairment, who seemingly ends the film no worse off, possibly even better off, than before he went blind (and indeed, Shinnojō's samurai stipend is continued unchanged, even though he is judged unable to fulfill any formal function in the domain's government). It offers potentially comforting reassurance to any career-oriented men who watch the film: not only will worker's compensation protect them if they are impaired on the job, but any such impairment need not emasculate them, unless they choose to let it. The essential optimism of this film is clear. It declares that impairment has no effect on quality of life, provided the person impaired remains in high spirits.

### 3. Part Two: *Caterpillar* as an Unflinching Exploration of Emasculation

The contrast of *Love and Honor* with Wakamatsu Kōji's relentless depiction of the struggles of a Japanese soldier after he is violently deprived of *all* his limbs could not be starker. In *Caterpillar*, which takes place from 1940–1945, and shows both the initial savage advances and the grueling later defeats of the Japanese war machine, the main character comes to resemble exactly that: unable to move except in an inching motion, unable to feed himself or perform any daily task without assistance, he becomes completely and totally emasculated, dependent on the sadomasochistic relationship with his wife for everything. Unlike Shinnojō, this man is truly disabled, in the sense that his physical impairments prevent him from any meaningful degree of mobility, and Wakamatsu forces us to watch the disquieting spectacle of his life in agonizing detail.

Yet one cannot shake the impression that it is the man's spiritual or mental un-manning, not his physical injuries, which are the more severe threat to his virility. Physically, he continues to demand sexual services from his wife, a potent reminder that while his arms and legs may be gone, the physical symbol of his virility remains intact. But increasingly, this one-time perpetrator, guilty as an able-bodied man of the worst crimes a man can commit (rape and murder), begins reliving these horrors, and the spectacle of his breakdown is hard to watch: unmanned by fear, he cries piteously and even froths at the mouth, apparently tortured by the thought that his current state is punishment for his earlier cruelties. The audience, thirsty for melodrama (in the formal sense, of righting injustices), is also implicated by our ready agreement with this conclusion.

Just as with the filmic version of Shinnojō's tale, Wakamatsu's *Caterpillar* takes several major liberties with the original source material, Edogawa Ranpō's psychosexual 1929 short story "Imomushi" (Edogawa 2008). This story was banned from reprinting in 1939 due to censors' objections to its supposedly disturbing sexual content and adapted to manga format by ero-guro provocateur Maruo Suehiro in 2009. Whereas the original tale concerned Lt. Sunaga, an essentially innocent victim of an exploding shell in the Russo-Japanese war who ends up limbless, Wakamatsu shifts the story forward in time to World War II, and shows the soldier, Kurokawa, incontrovertibly to be victimizer as well as victim, the better to focus his blistering critique of postwar right-wing nationalism, given its preoccupation with "rescuing" the country's wartime experience from moral condemnation.

Right after the opening sequence, in which credits are overlaid onto archival footage of Japanese advances in mainland China in 1940, comes a horrifying faux-archival scene in which the still able-bodied Kurokawa violently rapes and murders a Chinese woman while screaming racist invectives at her. Through it all, darting flames are superimposed onto the image, and then appear dancing in his own eyes, while throughout the entire sequence, patriotic military chants and music are heard. This initial condemnation of the Japanese soldier as victimizer is very important, considering the melodramatic depths of suffering into which Kurokawa is about to descend; by foregrounding his extreme guilt, Wakamatsu avoids the Japan-as-victim trap of so many otherwise fine films depicting World War II, which often choose to frame events not from 1940, but from 1945, to make Japan's suffering clearer. The shifting forward in time from the less controversial Russo-Japanese War to the Second World War makes Wakamatsu's target (a resurgence in revisionist nationalism in twenty-first century Japan) quite clear.

There are also medium-specific differences, which are no less important to note. The original story begins three years after the soldier's injury, at which point the couple's married life has already settled into a routine. In it, Edogawa takes the wife Tokiko's perspective, giving us glimpses into her interior state of mind—in which she is openly contemptuous of her husband, mentally calling him "lump of flesh" or "the bundle", and coming to the telling realization that "he was no longer a man" but a living corpse, whose only pleasures are eating and sex.<sup>6</sup> Giddy with the power she holds over him, she eventually pokes out his eyes, depriving him of his last real way to communicate with the world—except for his final, defiant act of suicide.

In the film, however, Wakamatsu endeavors to show us not only the wife's perspective, but also the husband's. First he dehumanizes the husband, by opening the film with his terrible crimes, followed by reaction shots of his family, especially his wife Shigeko, reacting with extreme horror at the spectacle of his body, which has yet to appear on camera—like the proverbial "do not show the monster" adage in monster films, Wakamatsu waits several minutes to show Kurokawa's limbless state. About ten minutes in, lest the audience fail to register Shigeko's aversion to her mangled husband, in the first moment she has alone with him, Shigeko's first act is an attempt to strangle him to death, which she abandons only after she discovers he is (with extreme effort) able to communicate his needs after all, though the truth of his painstaking effort is far more quotidian than in Edogawa's original story, where his first act is to request to be shown his medals: in the film, he simply has to urinate.<sup>7</sup>

But then Wakamatsu re-humanizes Kurokawa via the film's attempts (partially inspired by *Johnny Got His Gun* (Trumbo 1971), about a man with locked-in syndrome almost entirely unable to communicate his misery to the world<sup>8</sup>) to render Kurokawa's condition and its pathos legible to

<sup>6</sup> See (Edogawa 2012, p. 77).

<sup>7</sup> This is an interesting structural instantiation of what James Peterson calls an "inference-based model" of communication: almost entirely unable to rely on codes such as language, Kurokawa develops new nonverbal, gestural, and yet effective strategies, in stark contrast with the method developed by Joe in *Johnny Got His Gun* (Morse code). See (Peterson 1997, p. 112).

<sup>8</sup> Wakamatsu notes he was inspired by this film at min 40 of the 2010 Berlin Film Festival press conference (Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin 2010), which is available online at the following URL: [http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2010/02\\_programm\\_2010/02\\_Filmdatenblatt\\_2010\\_20106147.php#tab=video10](http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2010/02_programm_2010/02_Filmdatenblatt_2010_20106147.php#tab=video10).

the viewer. A good example occurs nearly halfway in, from approximately 38:30 to 38:50, during which Kurokawa, in a wagon, resentfully watches his wife taking pleasure in the physical labor of rice planting; the camera dwells on his pained expression and quivering lip, and we can easily guess what he (and Wakamatsu) wants to convey: he is sick with jealousy to see others do so easily things he can certainly never do again. Coded in more allegorical terms, the emasculated state (as represented by the disarmed Kurokawa) resents the traumatized but still hale nation (his long-suffering wife Shigeko), but the gender politics at work here are never given explicit form in the film's sparse dialogue.<sup>9</sup> A film too heavily dependent on voiceover monologues would be novelistic, unwieldy, and word-heavy, so Wakamatsu took full advantage of the filmic medium's potential for wordless storytelling, communicating volumes inferentially in the intense grunts and glares Kurokawa directs at his wife.<sup>10</sup>

In the process of eviscerating right-wing ultranationalism, and excoriating anyone who might seek to rehabilitate Japan's wartime conduct in a search for positive meaning, Wakamatsu is not questioning the oft-touted idea of postwar Japan as emasculated. Instead, he makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that virility itself, in the political context of 20th (and possibility 21st) century Japan, is the true culprit, and impaired, unmanned bodies—and bodies politic?—are preferable to the prospect of the able-bodied at liberty to indulge their worst inclinations. Deprivation of his limbs makes Kurokawa utterly incapable of inflicting violence, even symbolic violence, such as sexual domination of his wife (after his quadruple amputation, he can never again be “on top” unless she physically assists him into that position). Indeed, where before he was the aggressor, raping whomever he pleased during the war as an able-bodied man, now he is reduced to scribbling “I want to do it” on a piece of paper with a pencil clutched precariously in his mouth, then begging via a voiceless “please”. Repeatedly, he attempts to reassert his position, for example by using his only remaining weapon—his teeth—to inflict pain on his wife's body, but his attempts are laughable in the face of Shigeko's total physical domination of his limbless form. The ultimate motivation for his suicide is also in doubt: was it out of despair at his lack of mobility, or about the deeper issue of his loss of dominance over his wife? Was the true issue disability, or emasculation?

Moreover, in the original story the soldier's wife found herself sexually excited by this power (something we know from the internal monologues throughout the story), but in the film, Shigeko shows few hints of pleasure, only reluctance and endurance. She reveals he used to beat her, and in a moment of spite, dares him to try it now. As she “manhandles” him into his uniform, very much against his wishes, and literally carts him off to showcase his status (and her virtue), his emasculation is complete, and after this incident he begins to lose even his sexual virility, beset by horrible flashbacks of his wartime crimes.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, her supreme endurance begins to falter, and she grows more and more resentful of him, resulting in emotional and occasionally mildly violent outbursts. Wakamatsu continues to explore productive juxtapositions of audio and visual content, as when Shigeko half-crazily sings a patriotic song while tearfully wiping the posterior of her husband's broken body. She has finally begun to doubt the rhetoric of Japan's inevitable victory, and the logic of sacrifice used to explain her husband's current condition.

Later, Kurokawa is beset by more and more extreme visions of his past crimes, but interestingly, assuming the viewer sees what Kurokawa is seeing, he is now writing himself into the subject position of the rape (and murder) *victim*, and yet he sees his own face committing the crime in a POV shot from the perspective of the prone victim.<sup>12</sup> This is partly triggered by a disturbing scene in which Shigeko

<sup>9</sup> My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer who suggested applying the insights of Joshua Goldstein's *War and Gender* to this situation and reading Kurokawa versus Shigeko metonymically (Goldstein 2001, p. 1).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, voiceover-heavy *Johnny Got His Gun* was not a box office success when it was released; it has since achieved cult status only thanks to heavy metal band Metallica's 1988 song “One”, which uses audio clips from the film and purports to express Joe's suicidal frame of mind.

<sup>11</sup> This scene occurs slightly more than halfway through the film, from approximately 44:25 to 45:42.

<sup>12</sup> For example, at approximately 65:59.

attempts to use him sexually—to rape him, in effect, while slapping and punching him in a rage at his sexual impotence.<sup>13</sup> She has lost her fear of him (who used to beat and rape her every day, despising her for allegedly being barren, as a harrowing flashback sequence reveals), partly because of his current emasculation, but also because his own state mirrors the suffering afflicting the entire nation, which the wartime government was having greater and greater difficulty in hiding. Wakamatsu's sporadic insertions of shots of the women of her community jabbing a straw man with halberds and practicing bucket brigade responses to fires caused by air raids are potent signs of the dire situation that was facing Japan.

In the climactic sequence, which begins at approximately 71:36 with a slow zoom-in onto the flickering flame of a standing lamp, Kurokawa's final breakdown begins. Forced to relive his brutal actions on the battlefield from *both* sides, as perpetrator and victim, he cannot endure it, and attempts to bash his own head in.<sup>14</sup> Wakamatsu is in effect asking: is this level of emasculation what it takes to convince wartime perpetrators of the error of their ways? Or the opposite side of the coin: if Kurokawa had returned from the war able-bodied, would he not be free of guilt, lacking any experience of being on the receiving end of suffering? While she is able to maintain the façade of a devoted wife in public, just as the people of the nation publicly continued to profess support for the state's war, Shigeko is obviously deeply resentful of this painful duty imposed on her by society at large. In private, she too breaks down, but into crazed laughter and song, replacing the word *imomushi* (caterpillar) with *gunshin* (war god) in a ditty about a caterpillar rolling around. In an important act of symbolic violence, she tears down the medals and the newspaper story from the wall in a mix of rage and mirth.

The film returns again and again, with an almost obsessive gaze, to Kurokawa's medals and the now-framed newspaper story of his purportedly heroic status as a "living war god", and more importantly to the photo-portrait of the Showa Emperor and Empress, who look down on him panoptically even as he sleeps. These are not POV shots, as Shigeko is out of the house and Kurokawa himself is asleep during several of them. But neither are they innocent details of the *mise-en-scène*: the camera's focus on them reminds them of the characters' position, mired by the imperial ideology of the "weight upon the eyes" infecting Japan's wartime society, and ensuring that all see horrifying spectacles such as Kurokawa's wartime injuries in the proper, patriotic light.<sup>15</sup> Naturally, when confronted with tremendous suffering, one inclination among most any viewer will be to seek someone to blame, and the camera helpfully supplies someone in the image of the Emperor, and the entire system of control he and his ubiquitous and always-watching portraits represent. Even when Shigeko tears down the medals and the newspaper clipping, the portrait photo remains figuratively and literally out of her reach.

Symbolically, Kurokawa inches his way into the pond and his suicide on the very day, indeed at the very moment, that Hirohito is announcing Japan's surrender. With Wakamatsu's focus on everyman "victim" Kurokawa as a perpetrator, the film also exposes the self-serving lies of the ultra-nationalists trying to snatch moral victory from the jaws of defeat and the humiliation of the War Crimes tribunal. Though an intertitle announces "for the sake of the country, they were hanged", it is followed by an intertitle reminding the viewer of the culpability of those very leaders for the disastrous prolongation of the war, which led to the tragedy of the Great Tokyo Air Raid of 10 March. But unlike many Japanese war films, which tend to be content to discuss the wartime suffering of the Japanese themselves, Wakamatsu follows this declaration with another announcing the millions of war victims in Asia and around the world. Considering that the very final image, after the credits sequence, is of the mushroom cloud, it seems Wakamatsu is creating a moral equivalence between Japanese soldiers' crimes and the suffering of the populace, justifying, in an almost karmic sense, the latter with the former. Almost

<sup>13</sup> Around minute 68.

<sup>14</sup> Into this sequence are sutured occasional snippets of archival video footage of bodies being mercilessly ripped asunder by the onslaught of the Imperial Japanese Army, for example at 73:50–55.

<sup>15</sup> See (Irokawa 1988, p. 9).

unique among films which attempt to address the nuclear bombings, Wakamatsu ends rather than begins his film with them, implying they are the logical conclusion to the madness of war. The rest of the movie serves as the context in and through which we must understand those terrible events, and thus overall the film represents a blanket condemnation of war, and the forceful repudiation of the concept of a “just” war and the possession, much less the use, of nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions: Which Type Draws Audiences? Which Should Academics Promote?

What then can we learn from these two films’ depictions of impairment and emasculation, and the vivid contrast they present? First of all, Japanese society of the last dozen years or so seems more receptive to these sorts of impairment-themed film projects, as evidenced by the extraordinary box office success of *Bushi no ichibun*, almost five times higher than that of the two other films in Yamada’s samurai trilogy. But success is not uniform; Wakamatsu’s much edgier film had no chance of a wide release, due to its graphic violence and sexual content, and possibly also due to its pointed political message.<sup>17</sup> Within the confines of the art house scene it did quite well, garnering a Silver Bear best actress award for Terajima Shinobu (“Shigeko”) and a nomination for the Golden Bear award at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival.<sup>18</sup>

The central question, symptomatically, is: “Why, in the 2000s, did attitudes shift enough to reward films concerned with impairment?”<sup>19</sup> I see two main answers to this. One has to do with demographics: as the population aged, an ever-greater number of physically infirm individuals would be likely to empathize more fully with the plight of the physically impaired. To the extent that this answer has explanatory power, the demographics would seem to predict more and more interest in disabled bodies (since more and more people will be entering old age and experience their own incremental impairments). Blindness, after all, is on a spectrum.

The other answer, though, has to do with conceptions of the body itself. For hundreds of years, physical impairments, such as blindness, were widely conceived in concrete Buddhist terms as manifestations of karmic debt: sins of a past life could and did afflict the body in the present. To be impaired thus meant to be pre-judged guilty, always already morally contemptible, leading to deep-rooted suspicion of and some instances of institutional prejudice against anyone without a “normal” body. Yet in the postwar period, Japan underwent a subtle but fairly thorough secularization. While it would be difficult to prove a causal link, it does seem there is a correlation: as religious feeling—and specifically Buddhist conceptions of the disabled body as sinful—waned, so did prejudicial attitudes against impaired bodies, though obviously such attitudes have not disappeared entirely or evenly, as the tragic case of the July 2016 Sagami-hara massacre in Japan makes clear.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> This interpretation is one advanced publicly by Wakamatsu himself, during the press conference at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival at which his film was nominated for the Golden Bear. Video of the conference available at: [http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2010/02\\_programm\\_2010/02\\_Filmdatenblatt\\_2010\\_20106147.php#tab=video10](http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2010/02_programm_2010/02_Filmdatenblatt_2010_20106147.php#tab=video10). He saw this film as a second half to *United Red Army*, showing the generation of the parents of the young radicals in that film, as an attempt to explain their psychological state; the only reason it was released as two separate films was because at a 5 h running time, he suspected no one would exhibit it.

<sup>17</sup> Not to mention its tiny budget. The budget allowed a shooting schedule of a maximum of twelve days, according to Wakamatsu, who mentioned this towards the end of the abovementioned press conference question-and-answer session.

<sup>18</sup> Terajima’s victory was obviously unexpected, as the actress was not even in attendance at Berlinale.

<sup>19</sup> On Japanese TV, there has been, in recent years, a glut of so-called “kandō poruno” or “namida chōdai” documentary programs emphasizing disabled individuals’ “pitiful” struggle to exist, despite evidence as of summer 2016 that a majority of viewers, including an overwhelming majority of those with impairments, dislike the attitude evinced in such programs. See (Murphy 2016b), available at <http://en.rocketnews24.com/2016/.09/09/poll-shows-most-disabled-people-in-japan-dislike-inspirational-documentaries-about-disability/>.

<sup>20</sup> A less shocking, but in some ways more worrying because potentially more systemic, report of discrimination against the invisibly impaired ran in *RocketNews* on 8 October 2016 (Murphy 2016a), relating the tale of a woman with a hidden impairment who was yelled at for using the priority seating on a train in Japan—even after showing the irate man her “I have an internal disability” card. He allegedly grumbled, “That’s misleading. If you’re handicapped, then you should look more like a handicapped person.” <http://en.rocketnews24.com/2016/10/08/disabled-woman-yelled-at-for-using-trains-priority-seat-not-looking-like-a-handicapped-person/>.

So where do we go from here? Continuing to examine Japan's pop-cultural products dealing with impairment is the first step towards understanding the broader implications of this growing trend toward engagement with a multitude of bodies and bodily conditions. In addition to the valuable if speculative light those products shed on cultural developments in Japan, such cultural offerings might be the key to an even wider social acceptance of non-normative bodies in Japan, and indeed (to the extent they are seen beyond its shores) the entire world.<sup>21</sup> But as long as the only films to be widely seen by Japanese (and global) audiences remain those of the first, "inspirational" heroic type (*Love and Honor*), and more provocative films like *Caterpillar* struggle to find exhibitors or distribution channels, the impact of genuinely progressive treatment of impairment/disability will be limited. I end, therefore, with a call to action: please consider recommending films more like *Caterpillar*, not (only) those like *Love and Honor*, to your friends and family. In this small way, academics too can have a role to play in addressing important topics such as disability, war trauma, and emasculation. Thereby, we can help a wider audience begin to reconsider personal and allegorical (state-level) unmanning or emasculation in particular as a potentially valuable safeguard against trauma, rather than simply its undesirable consequence.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, it could also be argued that Japanese pop culture, as opposed to important art-house productions, like Matsumoto Toshio's *Minamata: the Victims and Their World* (1971) and Hara Kazuo's *Sayonara CP* (1972), which were both hampered by institutional obstacles to any sort of wide release, as they were produced after the collapse of the domestic film industry and studio system, is a relatively late arrival to what amounts to a global trend towards greater visibility and acceptance of depictions of once-taboo bodies and topics. In American TV and films, for example, and very much unlike their Japanese counterparts, there has been quite a surge in portrayal of impaired bodies by genuinely impaired bodies (R.J. Mitte, the actor who played Walter White, Jr., a boy with cerebral palsy, on *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan 2008–2013), actually does have cerebral palsy himself, and *Switched at Birth* features many deaf actors as well as unprecedented levels of on-screen use of American Sign Language, culminating in one essentially voiceless episode where all communication happens in ASL and the audience hears only what the deaf hear: nothing). Yet it is far too early to declare victory for social justice. See (Wagmeister 2016) for how 95% of US roles depicting an impaired body continue to be played by the able-bodied. <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/disabled-actors-television-study-1201813686/>.

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