

"A Page of Madness:" Understanding a Work in its Time
by Aaron Gerow

Kinugasa Teinosuke's *A Page of Madness* ("Kurutta ichipeiji") has appeared to most observers to be a remarkable masterwork of experimental, avant-garde cinema, one produced in the mid-1920s in Japan that, in the words of Vlada Petric, "matches the best avant-garde films of the era."¹ Such an appraisal already existed, in fact, when the film was originally released in Japan. One critic called it "a work that has advanced a step ahead of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Perhaps as far as we know, this is a new trend in cinema surfacing in the world for the first time."² This marked the beginning of a new age of film in which, to one newspaper reviewer, "The director has parted from the old notion in cinema of trying to film 'things' and has become conscious of the attempt to take in 'light.' The play of light, the melody of light, the speed of light—this is the way films will be made."³ Given the involvement of New Impressionist or Shinkankakuha writers in the project like Kawabata Yasunari, the Nobel Prize winning novelist who was said to pen the script, *A Page of Madness* has become to scholars a prominent symbol of Taisho modernism, particularly the productive intersection between cinema and literature.

Yet when this film was released there was another discourse about the *A Page of Madness* that seemed to describe a very different cinematic experience. For this film purportedly placing little emphasis on a story, a newspaper at the time offered the following partial summary a week and a half before the film's release, one of many published as a means of advertising the film:

This is the grim inside of a mental hospital, overwhelmed by dancing, shrieking, howling, and yelling. Here one pitiful and tragic tale is born, the drama of a sailor who had mistreated his wife,

¹Vlada Petric, "A Page of Madness: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Silent Cinema," *Film Criticism* 8.1 (Fall 1983): 87.

²Tonoshima Shigehito, "Kurutta ichipeiji sonota," *Chukyo kinema* 2.8 (1926): 60. Unless noted otherwise, all translations from the Japanese are my own.

³Tanaka Jun'ichiro, "Hyogen shugi no eiga," *Hochi shinbun*, 23 June 1926: 4.

forgot his daughter, and eventually drove his wife insane. After a few years, the sailor, tired of life, returned to his hometown and learned that his wife had been saved by a mental hospital. He became a custodian there to gain access. His daughter had grown up beautifully and was about to marry a young man, but she worried about her insane mother. The father's pain, his uneasy fear, was that his insane wife might destroy their daughter's happiness.⁴

There is no indication here that this is an avant-garde experimental film. It is instead presented as just like any other narrative motion picture, one featuring a melodramatic plot not at all different from the stories of many Japanese contemporary films based on *shinpa* theater.⁵ One may dismiss this text as a mistaken effort to commercialize a non-commercial film, but such versions abounded and they differed little story-wise from the script of the film that Kawabata published in July of that year.⁶ The film historian Sato Tadao has defended its *shinpa* narrative:

This film brings forth the painfulness of the familial love between husband and wife and between parents and children. . . . Here are the splendid feelings and emotions of Japan. Such Japanese feelings were the specialty of Kinugasa Teinosuke, a veteran of *shinpa*, . . . and even this "Western" avant-garde film of his younger days was naturally permeated with it."⁷

What then is *A Page of Madness*? Is it an avant-garde, modernist work undermining the very processes of narrative in a quest for a pure and absolute cinema? Or is it a conventional narrative expression of traditional melodramatic emotionality? The question may strike

⁴"Shin eiga," *Yomiuri shinbun*, 13 September 1926: 9. Most newspapers and film-related magazines published plot summaries of new films that were provided by the distributor. Many, like the longer summary of *A Page of Madness* the *Yomiuri shinbun* printed on June 28th, even included the ending.

⁵*Gendaigeki* are films set in the modern (post-1868) period and are differentiated from *jidaigeki*, or period films. *Shinpa* is the "new school" of Japanese theater that introduced modern stories into the theatrical repertoire, but ones that were often conventionally melodramatic, focusing on the sufferings of women who by fate or social circumstance could not fulfill their romantic desires.

⁶Kawabata Yasunari, "Kurutta ichipeiji," *Eiga jidai* 1.1 (July 1926): 122-131. While one can say that the scenario is colder and less melodramatic than the published plot summaries, it does clarify many of the story points.

⁷Sato Tadao, *Nihon eiga no kyoshotachi* (Tokyo: Gakuyo Shobo, 1979): 37.

today's viewers of the film as odd, given how difficult it is to understand on a first or even second viewing. If one defines avant-garde cinema as the conscious attempt to combat, undermine, or find alternatives to dominant, usually commercial codes of film, the most important of which is narrative, then surely *A Page of Madness* is nothing but avant-garde? Yet when scholars have used this very real experience to argue, for instance, as James Peterson has done, that "this experimental style is Kinugasa's war or utter rebellion against film language,"⁸ they risk imposing preconceived notions of modernism on the text, obfuscating the different ways the film was read and even the general struggles over the meaning of such a cinema, if not modernity itself at the time. Additionally, while certainly looking quite experimental today, this probably is not the same film that was shown to audiences in 1926.

Kinugasa's work reveals both conventionality and unconventionality because it was created and received at a time defined by divisions over the definition of cinematic meaning, over the form the movies should take and their place in modern existence. *A Page of Madness* was an intervention in these debates, one that explored and negotiated various cinematic potentials, but as we shall see, in an often contradictory way.

The narrative behind its creation, of an overlooked director, Kinugasa Teinosuke, producing the equivalent of what Abel Gance or F.W. Murnau did, is so tempting that it has seduced even the best film scholars. Donald Richie, for instance, has written that Kinugasa and "his staff were free to make what they wanted" because the film was "made with very little," a kind of "amateur film" lacking an "expensive studio." What was produced "was not a question of influence" from cinematic Expressionism and Impressionism, says Richie. "It was a much rarer thing—a parallel discovery of the resources of the cinema" by a person with "no cinematic training, with no overpowering influences . . . a completely personal poetic statement in cinema."⁹

⁸James Peterson, "A War of Utter Rebellion: Kinugasa's *Page of Madness* and the Japanese Avant-Garde of the 1920s," *Cinema Journal* 29.1 (Fall 1989): 51.

⁹Donald Richie, "Japan's First Experimental Cinema: Two Films by Teinosuke Kinugasa," *Art and Cinema* 1.2 (Fall 1986): 3-4.

While certainly compelling, this is untrue. Such exaggerations are common with *A Page of Madness* and should warn us that this film is not what it may seem at first. Kinugasa was aware of the European avant-garde at the time, even though he gave conflicting testimony about this. He asserted that he had seen none of the Impressionist or Expressionist films before making *A Page of Madness* in an interview after the film was rediscovered,¹⁰ but seemed to have no problem admitting to the effect of both *Caligari* and Gance's *La Roue* in another before that event.¹¹ Especially after the process of modernization called the Pure Film Movement, which in the late teens and early twenties tried to make Japanese cinema less theatrical and more cinematic, Japanese film circles were strongly aware of advances in European cinema, avidly watching the films and translating new French film theory. Japanese works, which had finally topped the foreign product on the domestic market around 1925, were beginning to visibly bear the mark of French film technique.¹² Kinugasa, far from having "no cinematic training," was deeply involved in the various cinematic and artistic trends of the time.

First, Kinugasa was able to obtain the cooperation of many of the well-known Shinkankakuha writers from *Bungei jidai*, discussing the film with Yokomitsu, Kawabata Yasunari, Kataoka Teppeï, Kishida Kunio, and Iketani Shinzaburo before they together decided that Kawabata would write the script. Another important collaborator was Inoue Masao, one of Japan's most famous actors at the time. Even though he was continuing to pursue a dual career on stage and screen, he consented to Kinugasa's request to participate in the film by canceling his May stage performance and agreeing to appear without compensation. The list of famous names certainly helped the project as Kinugasa and the principals met on April 10, 1926, at the

¹⁰Hubert Niogret, "Entretien avec Teinosuke Kinugasa," *Positif* 150 (May 1973): 73.

¹¹Kinugasa Teinosuke, "Le cinéma japonais vers 1920," *Cahiers du cinéma* 166-167 (1965): 46.

¹²The term derives from "flash back" which, while denoting in English a cut back to some moment temporally antecedent in the story, came to be used in Japan to name any form of cut back regardless of its temporality. The designation was later shortened just to "flash" to emphasize especially fast editing. See Yamamoto, *Nihon eiga ni okeru gaikoku eiga no eikyo* : 165-167.

Tokyo Station Hotel to solidify their arrangement and, in what marked the beginning of a successful media campaign, give a press conference.

Then there is the question of the budget. At the time, there existed a model for low-budget independent film production, one offered by the novelist Naoki Sanjugo, who headed the short-lived United Association of Film Artists (Rengo Eiga Geijutsuka Kyokai) where Kinugasa shot several films. It was while directing *The Sun* ("Nichirin," 1925) there that Kinugasa first met Yokomitsu. Naoki had outlined in a series of articles in 1926 a detailed plan on how to make profitable films as an individual producer at 5000 yen a shot.¹³ Kinugasa's original plan to film a story about an old man and a circus probably could have fit in this budget, but *A Page of Madness* ended up costing much more, about 20,000 yen according to the director, far more than the average film of its day, which was about 12,000 yen. This 20,000 yen figure is quite high when you consider that Inoue was appearing for free and that Shirai Shintaro, a managing director at Shochiku, offered to let Kinugasa film at Shochiku's Kyoto production center, the Shimokamo Studio, free of charge. Since the film only made back 7500 yen of that in rentals by the director's testimony, Kinugasa ended up deeply in debt. That was probably the primary reason he subsequently became a Shochiku contract director making *jidaigeki* at Shimokamo.

A Page of Madness was a much more complex film at the level of production than the terms "independent avant-garde film" takes into account, straddling Western and Japanese artistic contexts and independent and industrial production modes. The difficulty of thus categorizing the film seems to set the stage for a more fundamental uncertainty over this text: just what is the text and how was it created? Take the problem of the screenplay. It is widely recognized that the scenario printed in Kawabata's complete works was not solely written by him; he, after all, was only given the credit for "original story" on the film, with no-one credited for the script. But then who composed the story for this film and what was the written basis for actually filming it? Kawabata wrote that he had provided Kinugasa with an only partially-

¹³Naoki Sanjugo, "Shinpen eigakai dorobanashi (ni)," *Eiga jidai* 1.4 (October 1926): 19-21.

completed script in Tokyo before the director went to Kyoto to start shooting on May 5. The novelist did not show up on the set until the 14th, long after shooting had begun. Kinugasa reported that he thus had to film some scenes without a script and even when Kawabata finally did arrive, he, Kinugasa, Inuzuka, and Sawada Banko, Kinugasa's assistant, stayed up late working on subsequent scenes. Recent credits for the film thus give script credit to Kawabata, Kinugasa, Inuzuka and Sawada.

An investigation of Kinugasa's personal papers, however, casts doubt on this story and the degree to which Kawabata was involved. Amongst them is a handwritten screenplay for the film that is 34 pages long on B4 size paper, composed of scenes numbered 1 to 114, covering the story of the film from the beginning until just after the lottery scene, about 3/5ths of the film. This was definitely what was used on the set to make *A Page of Madness* because it is full of notations about the precise shots taken on the set and the planned editing. The papers contain some 94 pages of shooting notes covering the period from May 11 until May 31 that show the filmmakers using the scene numbers from the screenplay. It seems that the script itself was used for writing the shooting notes until May 11, so without a doubt it was the main document during at least the first week of filming. But who wrote it? According to Nakatani Masanao, who has investigated the handwriting on the screenplay, it was penned not by Kawabata, but by Sawada Banko. Nakatani speculates that this was written based on an outline composed by Kawabata, but there is a sort of chicken and egg problem here. Given that Kinugasa has written that the *Eiga jidai* script was written by Sawada and Inuzuka after filming was complete based on their notes and checked and rewritten by Kawabata, possibly Kawabata owes as much to Sawada as the other way around. Since no original story written by Kawabata has been found, it is hard to say what Sawada based his screenplay on.

Interestingly, the shooting notes show that the production was beginning to tackle scenes not contained in the script as early as the 14th, the day Kawabata arrived in Kyoto. Possibly Kawabata had considerable influence over the new direction the film was taking from that day on; however, the notes reveal that filming, which was proceeding out of plot order, was still using the Sawada script as late as the last day of filming, but the shooting notes reveal a mode of production somewhat inimical to Kawabata's involvement. The notes are a curiously

hybrid mix of screenplay and filming record. They were definitely written on the set because they often exhibit the handwriting of several different people—including Sawada—on the same day, are sometimes full of cross-outs and hastily written notes, and record retakes and other events that could have only happened on the set. However, they are not simply the record of what was shot because they usually present the scene in order and even include insert shots or flashbacks that were probably filmed another day. In some sense, they are like a written continuity that was produced on the set and which was followed mostly—though not always—in the subsequent editing. Kinugasa expressed in his autobiography his predilection for working without a script, and these notes appear to prove that. While Kawabata may have provided brief scene outlines beforehand or stood on the set aiding in the story creation, the technical nature of the notes reveal something that had to have been produced by film professionals, not a first-time screenwriter. Mostly likely they were produced under Kinugasa's supervision, with some assistance from Sawada and Inukuza, and perhaps even his camera crew, Sugiyama Kohei and Tsuburaya Eiji (of *Godzilla* and *Ultraman* fame). The notes give us a vibrant picture of multiple figures actively engaging in cinematic creation on the set, working in multiple ways and probably through multiple voices. But although Kawabata's name was used prominently in the advertising for the film, his contribution was probably as the film originally credited him: not script but original story.

Kinugasa quickly edited the film and carried it to Tokyo on June 6 to show it to Yokomitsu and Kishida, both of whom recommending eliminating the intertitles that Kinugasa had inserted, mostly short titles that clarified character identities and their relationships.¹⁴ Despite some troubles in finding distribution, *A Page of Madness* did not suffer greatly because of its independent status. When it opened on Friday, September 24, it did so at the two best theaters in the nation—the Osaka Shochiku-za and the Musashino-kan (home of the great benshi Tokugawa Musei)—and at the flagship theater in Japan—the Tokyo-kan—of an American major, Paramount. Since all were foreign film theaters, Kinugasa's film was one of

¹⁴Kuno Ryuichi reports that they were basically on the line of "Father," "The ill Mother," or "One day..." . "Kinugasa Teinosuke to sono shuhen," *Koza Nihon eiga 2: Musei eiga no kansei*, ed. Iwamura Shohei, et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986): 98.

the few Japanese works to be treated as "equal" to foreign motion pictures in a culture that still looked down on domestic product. Yet this programming also articulated this film as equal to some very normal Hollywood movies. At the Tokyo-kan, Kinugasa's work was narrated by Ishii Masami and Tamai Kyokuyo¹⁵ and shown with music selected by Oshima Kyutaro alongside Herbert Brenon's *The Song and Dance Man* (1926) and Frank Tuttle's *The Manicure Girl* (1925). The Musashino-kan showed it with narration performed solely by Tokugawa in a triple bill with Alfred Green's *Irene* (1926) and Frank Borzage's comedic *Wages for Wives* (1925). In an interesting twist, the Osaka Shochiku-za showed *A Page of Madness* together with Victor Schertzinger's *Bread* (1924) and Shochiku's all-girl dance and theater troupe performing live a section of Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*.¹⁶

If *A Page of Madness* was programmed just like the usual high-class foreign film, its advertising emphasized its avant-garde dimension and the narrative of its creation. The ads that appeared in September and October issues of *Kinema junpo* ran the gamut in design from Cubist to Futurist to Dada, showing how much visual modernism had entered the popular or "vernacular" realm, and that this popular modernism was also being applied to Kinugasa's film.¹⁷ Newspaper adverts played out the story of the difficulty of the film's creation. The ad for the Tokyo-kan took a military metaphor to loudly proclaim in large lettering:

Original Story: Kawabata Yasunari, General of the
Shinkankaku School

Director: Kinugasa Teinosuke, the Film Artist fighting alone . . .

¹⁵It was still the custom at the time to have two benshi share the narration of a single film, switching off in the middle. Tokugawa was one of the first to introduce the practice of one benshi, one film.

¹⁶The programs are taken from contemporary newspaper ads and *Kinema junpo*'s regular listing of theater schedules.

¹⁷One features Expressionist lettering radiating out from a Cubist head and another a virtually Futurist poem (combining roman and Japanese characters, some upside down) set in a collage with a Cubist drawing and inverted photos of Inoue's head cut in half. One of the ads is signed "Mine" but it is unclear who that is.

The art film the Loyalists of the film world toiled and shed tears of blood to realize!¹⁸

Yet statements from those involved in the film provides a very different picture. From 1925, when the Home Ministry took over censorship from local agencies, film producers were required to submit a film for censorship accompanied by a censorship script. This script was required to be an accurate representation of the content of the film. Any modification of the censorship script, even a single word, had to be done under the approval of censorship authorities. The censorship script for *A Page of Madness* is strongly melodramatic in tone. It largely matches the plot of Kawabata's script, but its strong emotionality, lack of ambiguity, and prominent use of dialogue makes one wonder how the original film was presented to actual audiences, especially given that the benshi probably used this script as the basis for their narration.

Another problem arises when one looks carefully at this script, for there are scenes described here which are not in the print we see today, many of which center on the relationship of the daughter and her fiancé. The shooting notes describe a number of scenes, including a particularly long one in which the daughter overhears a friend of the fiancé revealing to him that the her mother is insane, that are not in the film. That could be explained through literary license and the claim, which Kinugasa offers in his autobiography, that Kawabata's script includes some filmed scenes that were cut in the editing stage.¹⁹ The most telling evidence that the existing print is, as Kinugasa implied, not complete is the fact it is over 500 meters shorter than it was when it was censored in 1926. At the present projection speed, that is about seven minutes of screen time. Why this drastic change? Given his previous prevarications about the film, there is the possibility that Kinugasa, upon finding the film,

¹⁸Miyako *shinbun*, 24 September 1926: 1.

¹⁹ Kinugasa, *Waga eiga seishun* 72.

reedited it and excised the more melodramatic scenes that did not quite fit the film's established image as an avant-garde masterpiece. There is little way to prove this we have to consider that *A Page of Madness* is not a complete original version.

While one can speculate that the original film was thus more melodramatic than the one we see now, this does not mean that it was only viewed as a *shinpa* tearjerker at the time. Regardless of whatever cuts were later made to the film, *A Page of Madness* was already subject to competing interpretations when it first came out. Ironically, the cuts to the film, while possibly attempting to hide some of the possible interpretations (and impose others), only underline how much this text was subject to competing and sometimes contradictory interpretations in 1926.

After the completion of *A Page of Madness*, critics attempted to articulate what kind of film it was. Receiving attention rare for a Japanese film, it was reviewed by almost every major newspaper and film magazine, with even critics like Iwasaki Akira who never watched Japanese movies feeling compelled to comment on this work. Working to introduce German cinema and absolute film theory to Japan, Iwasaki was an avowed enemy of Japanese film, quipping that "the greatest harm confronting contemporary Japanese cinema is the fact that Japanese films exist."²⁰ But his encounter with *A Page of Madness* that "if not undermining, at least shook the foundations of my almost complete lack of hope in Japanese cinema."²¹ He summarized his opinions in the October 21 issue of *Kinema jun*

It is the first film-like film born in Japan. I can declare that with certainty. And further, it is the first international film made in Japan. . . .

²⁰Iwasaki Akira, "Nihon eiga to seikatsu yoshiki," *Eiga jidai* 1.1 (July 1926): 54.

²¹Iwasaki Akira, "Zatsu," *Eiga orai* 19 (July 1926): 37.

The beauty he [Kinugasa] sketches is neither theatrical nor novelistic nor painterly; it is, in the end, unrelated (one can say) to any of the existing arts.

It is cinematic beauty.²²

The comment is very typical of the Pure Film Movement and encapsulates much of what was written about the film. First was praise that assumed that existing Japanese cinema was neither cinematic nor respectable. Many latched onto *A Page of Madness* as a film that should, in the words of one, "replace the values of existing Japanese cinema,"²³ and challenge the film industry by striving for the international market. Part of the reason critics thought it could appeal to global audiences was because, to them, it had broken free of Japanese cinema's dependence upon literature—or, more specifically, the word—to transmit its meaning. It was a matter of course to deny the role Kawabata played since he, as a literary figure, might have introduced corrupting novelistic elements. In a burgeoning auteurism, good cinema was seen as the product of motion picture artists like Kinugasa.

The appraisal of *A Page of Madness* as Japan's first pure film, however, exposed inherent contradictions in critical discourse over what constituted such a film. Kinugasa's work was, in the words of a Nagoya critic,

[A] picture that is in the end difficult to explain in words. . . . It is a film that clearly embodies the epithet "rhythm of light"; an impressionistic work that has won victory over reason and human feeling. A work that apparently has no need for standards of value like "enjoyable" or "serious"—that tries to represent cinema itself.²⁴

Here was a different ideal, one emphasizing light and sensation over dramatic emotion and motivation, and thus cinema over all other measures of judgment, including comprehension.

The influx of French films to Japan was accompanied or, in some cases, even preceded by translations of the theory of such leading French film intellectuals as Louis Delluc and

²²Iwasaki Akira, "Kurutta ichipeiji," *Kinema junpo* 243 (21 October 1926): 48.

²³Kato Eiichi, "Eigatekina *Kurutta ichipeiji*," *Chukyo kinema* 2.9 (1926): 45.

²⁴Tonoshima 60.

Marcel L'Herbier, which located cinema's power in a sort of mystical *photogénie*, a rhythmical, poetic, and almost musical editing of images not reducible to the narrative. Those influenced by this discourse read *A Page of Madness* as a non-narrative, avant-garde film. In a discussion of the movie, Iwasaki declared,

When I saw that picture, I didn't understand the plot from the very beginning. But I think cinema is not a question of the story, but of something sensed more directly. I believe that films from now on will in no way be something that audiences will understand.

In that sense, *A Page of Madness* was to him more of an "absolute film" than the European works his fellow critics cited in comparison.²⁵

Not a few critics lashed out at this elitism by attacking the incomprehensibility of the film itself. Naoki Sanjugo was in the forefront in criticizing the producers of this "titleless, plotless, feature length" film, quipping, "If you're satisfied with racking up 'artistic' works for a minority of people, you'd be much better off with literature and not film."²⁶ The film was also defended for its realistic depiction of the insane,²⁷ but it was that very contradiction within the film, its dual realism and experimentalism, that infuriated at least one critic:

Purposely stomping on the content, shaving half of it off and forgetting it in the garbage is such wondrous cinematic recklessness.

As a result:

Grim naturalism loses its way and gets into a grand battle with so-called pure film snobbery. Confusion. Confusion. Everything is confused. Impressions go out the window. Just what the hell have I been watching?

Incomprehension.

Chaos.

²⁵See Iwasaki's comments in "*Kurutta ichipeiji gappyokai sokkiroku*": 61.

²⁶Naoki Sanjugo, "Hankan o kaubeki suko," *Eiga jidai* 1.2 (August 1928): 33.

²⁷See, for instance, Fujimori Seikichi, "*Kurutta ichipeiji o miru*," *Eiga jidai* 1.3 (September 1926): 15; or Tanba 55.

Nonsense?²⁸

Naoki took up the notion that audiences understood the film to level what to him was the most damning blow against *A Page of Madness*. Complaining about the excessive praise of Kinugasa's work, the novelist asked intellectual fans what they thought of "the seemingly wrong but true fact that Tokugawa Musei was explaining a titleless movie? No one says a word about such a bizarre phenomenon but just exclaims, 'Musei's great! He made me understand that incomprehensible film!'"²⁹ Although stripped of the intertitles that, as words, may have sullied this experimental work, one that was, at least to critics like Iwasaki, meant to stymie comprehension, it was being shown with a benshi who articulated the text to ensure viewer comprehension.³⁰

Naoki enumerated this as the film's central contradiction and even some of the film's supporters noted problems with the lack of titles and use of the benshi. In the *Eiga jidai* roundtable talk on the film Kinugasa admitted that he did not intend the film to be without intertitles from the very beginning. To this, Furukawa Roppa said, "I think it's bad this picture doesn't have titles. I'm opposed to leaving things up to the benshi. At any rate, you can't understand the plot with only what's there."³¹ The ideal of the titleless film maintained a strong presence in the discourse of the Pure Film Movement. The model of a pure, visual cinema began pointing to the linguistic titles as a "foreign element" that should be expelled from the cinematic body. Yet the elimination of intertitles did not imply a subversion of understanding. Titles and the benshi were to be dropped only when the image could assume its communication functions and viewers anywhere, regardless of the conditions of reception, could understand the film. If the result was as difficult to understand as *A Page of Madness*, the filmmakers could be faulted for irresponsibly leaving the task of explanation to the benshi. The

²⁸Yoshida Yasuji, "Nansensu," *Chukyo kinema* 2.9 (1926): 46.

²⁹Naoki Sanjugo, "Shinpen eigakai dorobanashi (sono san)," *Eiga jidai* 1.5 (November 1926): 25.

³⁰It should be noted that the critics who commented on the film's incomprehensibility had seen the film at press screenings that, as standard practice, were not accompanied by benshi.

³¹"*Kurutta ichipeiji gappyokai sokkiroku*": 59-60.

main current of pure film discourse assumed that the motion pictures functioned like a fully coded, self-sufficient language in accurately and certainly conveying meaning.

It was then the assertion that a film need not be understood that opened the way for a different conception of cinema. Traces of it can be found in much of what was said about the film: for instance, in Niwa Shin's exclamation that "there's no need at all to understand the damn narrative,"³² or in Tonoshima Sojin's call for Kinugasa to "eliminate even more of that 'story,' give absolutely no room for intellect or feelings to operate, and just directly appeal to the senses through the eyes."³³ Here the image was not bound to narrative, no longer obligated by the laws of language to provide meaning. The image itself could function as an exercise in meaninglessness that could even better fight the "war on language." Cinema would part from literature not because its language was different from writing but because it potentially undermined the processes of signification, understanding, and reason.

But the fact that it was the most vocal proponents of this alternative definition of film, such as those writing for the Nagoya coterie magazine *Chukyo kinema*, who were also the deftest critics of *A Page of Madness*—even as they applauded it—remind us how deeply divided this film was. Okuya Yoshiyuki ultimately declared *A Page of Madness* to be literature, not cinema, since he "could not sense from the raw material, which possesses a literariness that is organized too essentially, a whole, unified rhythm." His complaint was precisely that the film did not maintain the cinematic style of the opening sequence throughout. "At some point in time the rhythm retreats from impression and provides literary material through the faculty of reason."³⁴ *A Page of Madness*, he argues, was ultimately unable to free the cinematic image and its sensibility from the rule of reason and narrative (literary) order.

To the same degree, then, that the writers of *Chukyo kinema* praised *A Page of Madness* for showing the potentials of a cinema free of the restrictions of meaning and reason, they also noted its failures. It was to them both an exciting glimpse at a cinematic future and a sad

³²Tanba 55.

³³Tonoshima 60.

³⁴Okuya, "*Kurutta ichipeiji kan*": 26-27.

admission of the dominance of literary style in contemporary Japanese film. Okuya stressed it was a transitional film, bearing the marks of both the old and the new, and much of the discourse we have seen so far upholds his intuition.

A Page of Madness marked an intervention in the debates over the relation between cinema and literature, the image and the word, ones that often equated literature with narrative and a literary-free film as the absence of story. For the writers at *Chukyo kinema*, the victory of naturalism at the end of the film presented nothing less than the victory of literature over cinema, a result which we could argue signaled the formation of a film culture, peaking in the period between the beginning of sound and the 1950s, dominated by literary adaptations and the celebration of screenplay as both literature and the cornerstone of cinema. As "A Page of Madness," a single page gone "crazy" or "out of order," *A Page of Madness* was emphasizing both its particularity and its literariness. It was simultaneously the page modernist writers took out of cinema in an effort to undermine literary convention in their writing, as well as the errant insertion of literature into the text of the motion pictures.

As text out of order, however, as a hybrid body mixing opposite and divergent substances into a treatise on cinema, *A Page of Madness* also asked for readers who would be unruly themselves, reordering different parts of the text to continue those debates on what composing in light could mean. Its contradictions embodied the divisions that defined that historical conjuncture, covering such issues as the place of cinema in Japanese modernity, the shape of that modernity, the possibilities of modernism in cinema and literature, and how that related to issues of class and cultural capital. To some it represented a new, more modern art; to others the traditional emotions of Japan. To some it was meant to embody a new, more efficient form of language, able to speedily communicate textual meaning to viewers without cumbersome words, one that was to ensure the international cultural status of Japan, if not also the superiority of an intellectual sector in Japan over more backward spectators. Against this vision of modernity was one celebrating the breakdown of language and its power to impose meaning, enjoying a certain anarchy of the spectator's inability to understand. One valorized the control of madness in the film, even as it represented it, the other marveled at the

possibilities of insane perception. My point is not to illuminate this binary so as to argue the film's position on one or the other side. By illustrating the contradictions of this film I wish to underline the difficulties the artists of Taisho Japan faced when negotiating modernity and determining what shape their modernism should take. *A Page of Madness* may exemplify the inherently fissured nature of cultural modernity in Japan, especially one proceeding under the specter of European modernism. Yet it is its imperfections, its contradictions, its ultimately divided nature that reminds us of the richness and variety of cinema, how important it is for us to understand the ways in which people have tried to deal with this film, in continuing the debates on cinema that *A Page of Madness* originally posed.