

Corporeal Discourse and Modernist Shock Aesthetics in Takashi Miike's Film Audition

Absztrakt

Analyzing the shock tactics of the film, the paper discusses Takashi Miike's film AUDITION as an example of a corporeal cinema, in which the body of the spectator is employed as a medium of the film's narration. The article shows how the film's strategies of visceral engagement are indebted to a radical aesthetic modernism.

Szerző

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In recent years, scholars have given more and more attention to the corporeal side of the cinematic means of expression and of the film experience itself. This approach, dominated by Deleuzian and phenomenological perspectives on film, is often understood as an alternative to the textual analysis of film and to the notion of film as a narrative – as well as symbolic – system. Where the corporeal discourse of film rules, where the film asks for a visceral response, aspects like meaning, narration, story and plot seem to lose their significance. In this way, text and body are often pitched against each other. Accordingly, most film theories show a bias towards one aspect *or* the other: for example, while the neoformalist and the psychoanalytic approaches are better equipped to study the narrative dimension of film or the workings of the symbolic and the imaginary in film, a phenomenological approach or a Deleuzian approach will typically focus on questions of perception, of sensibility, of the body. [1]

Rather than seeing 'text' and 'body' as signposts to two different ways of approaching or understanding film, I would like to suggest that the visceral and the textual are equally important and always interacting dimensions of film that should be analyzed in relation to each other. In this article, I want to focus on the analysis of a filmic example, in which the interaction of the corporeal and the narrative is of major importance for any adequate understanding of the film. Just *how* these dimensions interact, I want to show by exploiting the concept of *shock*, which bears some importance to the theoretical issues at hand. Shock, as I would like to understand it, is an *aesthetic device*, that *balances* the symbolic and the corporeal in film – at least it is an aesthetic device that has the *capacity* to do so, when applied in the most rigorous and demanding fashion. I want to suggest, in other words, that it might be of interest to go back to the concept of shock as a site of negotiation between the visceral and the semantic, between corporeal response and narrative understanding. What this could mean I will turn to in a moment in a discussion of the Japanese film AUDITION by Takashi Miike (1999). But first let me elaborate on the notion of shock as shaped by aesthetic modernism.

The Notion of Shock and Aesthetic Modernism

It is hardly original to talk about the concept of shock within film studies. Ever since Walter Benjamin suggested that the aesthetic *dignity* of film rests upon its capacity to shock the spectator – first of all through the mechanisms of montage and through sudden changes of perspectives –

the concept has remained a popular one in film studies. In addition, shock is an important asset of specific genres, especially the horror film and the thriller.

But the way the notion of shock is applied within genre studies and most importantly in the study of the horror film, is not always satisfactory. In many cases ‘shock’ seems to be hardly more than a carefully designed form of *surprise* that registers in the body of the spectator. In an article in *Film Quarterly*, Robert Baird has pointed out the historical genesis of a certain pattern of *mise en scène* and montage that – through framing, sudden cuts, sudden loud noises, speedy movements etc. – evokes automatic reactions called “startle effects” in the spectator’s body. ^[2] This involuntary reaction can even be verified empirically through measurements of skin resistance and pulse rate. ^[3]

But aesthetic questions can hardly be solved by way of physiological answers. While many genre films – because of their formulaic nature – might not deserve more than such an empirical examination, the concept of shock in general can hardly be reduced to a moment of surprise and to a startle response by the viewer. Understood in this way, shock is nothing but a calculated strategy within the confines of a stable genre economy. There is indeed an artistically more ambitious and challenging idea of shock available that has developed as part of aesthetic modernism whose signature it became. It is this concept of shock that I want to turn to now in my discussion of the film AUDITION.

The German literary scholar Karl Heinz Bohrer in his writing has established the principle of shock as a mark of aesthetic modernism. For him, shock is more than just a momentary effect. Using the term “Plötzlichkeit” (“suddenness”), he describes shock as a radical form of temporality, in which the incommensurability – the radical difference – of aesthetic perception is expressed. ^[4] To this extent, shock stands for the autonomy of aesthetic perception in modernism: a moment of intensified *presence* that in its effect and in its significance surpasses the isolated moment of its appearance. According to this aesthetically more ambitious understanding of shock, it confronts us with a dramatic shift, an irruption of narrative coherence, a destruction of temporal continuity and an ecstatic moment of presence which is articulated as horror. As such, it is more than just a visceral effect of calculated formal strategies; rather, in the perspective suggested by Bohrer, it becomes the emblematic trope of aesthetic modernism.

Shocking Movements



Screenshot Audition 1

This modernist idea of shock is reflected in AUDITION. Seven years after his wife's death, widower Aoyama (Ryo Ishibashi) decides on the advice of his almost adult son and of his friend Yoshikawa (Jun Kuniyama) to consider the possibility of a second marriage. Yoshikawa, a producer at a television station, stages a fake audition for a role in a television show. Aoyama is supposed to use the audition as a means to find himself a wife. Even before her first appearance and just by studying her letter of application, Aoyama falls in love with a young woman named Asami (Eihi Shiina). As expected, her appearance marks the highpoint of the audition.

Her melancholic beauty, her elegant yet insecure and shy manner, her submissive habitus, the modest bodily posture, her gracious appearance and her child-like innocent face: all of this does not qualify her for the role she auditions for, but for the role of Aoyama's future wife. From then on, Aoyama pursues the idea of a relationship with her. And as Asami proves open to his cautious advances, the beginnings of a tender love affair unfold within the first 45 minutes of the film.



Screenshot Audition 2

A marked change of story announces itself in one of the central scenes of the film. Asami waits for a call from Aoyama, who struggles to overcome his own shyness and his doubts about having a relationship with such a young woman. An alternating montage shows Aoyama in his office, unsure whether to reach for the receiver, and Asami at her apartment, kneeling before the telephone. In the foreground of this shot we see the little illuminated Asami. In the background, somewhat more brightly lit, we see a room, a wall, and a linen sack, scarcely noticed at first by the spectator.

Finally the phone rings. At the same time the sack in the background moves suddenly to the left, accompanied by a rattling sound. The film cuts closer to the back of the room and the sack now moves back from left to right, now captured in close up.



Screenshot Audition 3



Screenshot Audition 4



Screenshot Audition 5



Screenshot Audition 6

At this point, nothing else of interest happens. The sequence concludes with a close-up of Asami's hand reaching for the receiver. "One of the great shivers of cinema history," as one critic properly put it. ^[5] But this masterpiece of filmic shock is far more than a calculated thrill within the rules of genre.

Trauma and the Collapse of Narrative Stability

Before the backdrop of the previous 45 minutes of the film, in which a melancholic romance of two figures broken by life develops, this moment marks a radical turn that is all the more profound in its impact because the turn of events now expected by the spectator at first does not take place. Instead of turning into a thriller revolving around the hidden secret that the film only pointed to in this chilling scene in Asami's apartment, AUDITION retains the slow pace of its first half, still focusing on an evolving love affair, showing only minor cracks on its narrative and photographic surface.

Thus, instead of learning more about the secret of the sack and of Asami's existence the spectator now observes further scenes between Aoyama and Asami, first speaking in a café, then in a

restaurant, and finally in the room of a seaside hotel. But the moment of shock, embodied in the forceful and unexpected movement of a supposedly inanimate object, accompanies the film as a visual and visceral *trauma* that ultimately will break apart its narrative coherence. It is justified to speak of trauma here, because the film does not present to us a continuous series of shock moments in order to orchestrate the spectator's experience along the well known pattern of the typical *screamfest* that modern horror seeks to be. The first moment of shock is not simply the beginning of a series of further puzzles and partial resolutions, of false tracks and dead ends, of surprising turns and violent encounters that repeat, reinforce, work through and finally resolve the moment of shock that triggers the film's story – as is the case in the typical mode of narration that we find in films relying comfortably on the unwritten rules of the horror genre.

Rather, in AUDITION the irruptive event initially is not further pursued on the surface level of narration. Its ramifications remain latent. Safely stored in the echo chamber of the spectator's own body, this rupture at first only registers on a filmic level not yet recognized by the film's narrative discourse. As we will see, it is only later that the visceral shock slowly begins to threaten the narrative stability and the self-identity of the photographic image we come to expect from filmic narration. Only later, in other words, the effects of the traumatic rupture begin to register on the conscious level of the film. It is this deferred reaction to the visceral shock and its latent, yet continuous impact through which Takashi Miike transforms the mere scare and surprise effect of the horror film into a modernist aesthetic of shock. This strategy of trauma is even palpable on the material level of the film's rhythmic design, as the insertion of *turbulence* (the fast cut moment of shock) is not followed by an acceleration of events but by a return to the *flow* (the slow paced built up of a love story) of the first part, to borrow two central terms from Yvette Bíró's recent book on time in cinema. ^[6]

Just how this shock continues to reverberate as trauma can be seen in a later scene that inaugurates the narrative disintegration. In the middle of the hotel sequence as Aoyama wakes up one morning, the film returns to the first moment of horror. The link, though, is not constructed by the narration, but solely by the physical remembrance of the spectator: a bed sheet moves in close up, and through parallels in terms of movement, speed, sound, and material texture the body of the spectator draws a link to the linen sack, that before rolled through Asami's apartment, and thereby, to the initial moment of shock, that is repeated here in the most indirect and yet viscerally intensive manner. The connection between these two moments of the film is not made by a diegetic or logical link, but only through the embodied knowledge of the spectator. The movement of the sheet is a purely visceral affect image, product of a somatic affixation working beneath the level of conscious narration.

The metonymy of terror

In this way, the traumatic quality of shock within the framework of the film is essentially borne by the physical memory of the spectator, because it is from this moment on – from the moment of a

deferred repetition of the first shock – that the film becomes increasingly puzzling, its narration illegible, its images untrustworthy. What is at work here is a metonymic displacement of shock, separating event and effect, and resulting in the destruction of the film's legibility.^[7] This metonymy of the shock leads from the initial movement of the linen sack to the movement of the bed sheet, to Aoyama's tripping over the sack in a later scene in Asami's apartment, and finally to the solution of the sack's riddle, when the spectator finally learns who or what is inside the sack.

When Aoyama wakes up in the hotel room, Asami has vanished. As part of the metonymy of terror that ensues, the film now leads its protagonist (who is looking for the missing Asami by following traces of her alleged past) and with him the spectator into a surreal delirium where there is no longer any clear distinction between presence and past, between reality, dream and fantasy. Step by step the narrative stability dissolves, and even the images lose their stable identity, because from this point on, earlier scenes between Aoyama and Asami are repeated – but in a slightly changed manner. These scenes are like distorted mirror images of the earlier scenes, uncanny because of their ghostly existence between real past and imagined (but imagined by who?) fantasy. This is leaving the spectator in a state of uncertainty right until the film's final scenes, where two very different endings follow each other, without one being clearly marked as fantasy. From the discourse of images alone, there is no way for the spectator to establish a hierarchy between these incompatible endings by discerning real closure from delirious pretense.

Instead of a clear narrative progression (following the hermeneutic code of puzzle solving)^[8], there is a whole ladder of somatic experience whose steps the film now climbs, starting with a diffuse feeling of the uncanny in view of the strangely altered repetitions. Less and less committed to the reality principle, locations and persons now change at a more rapid speed, until we find ourselves in Asami's apartment, where the aesthetic of shock crescendos to an aesthetic of disgust and the carnal. Not only is the original moment of shock resolved in terms of narrative, in that the secret of the sack and its content is revealed; we also become witness of the reduction of the ego to the purely animal, the reduction of the body to naked, inarticulate flesh: A male figure, robbed of speech, feral and mutilated, crawls out of the sack, to then be subjected to a drastic act of complete abjection that causes many to leave the cinema as the representation crosses the line from the *mimetic* to the *emetic*,^[9] carrying with it the threat of the spectator's involuntary mimesis. The film switches here to the register of disgust, which marks the limit of what can be consumed as an aesthetic spectacle. Eighteenth century writers like Lessing, Mendelssohn and J.A. Schlegel saw the affect of disgust as the absolute limit of aesthetic experience.^[10] Similarly, Jacques Derrida in a study of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, points to the complete incommensurability of disgust with the aesthetic.^[11] For the very same reason disgust was later embraced as a means of aesthetic expression by the romantic movement and by 20th century avant-garde and became a privileged aesthetic device for the articulation of artistic truth.

Beyond Disgust: The Regime of Evil

But this is still not the final station of the film's journey. At the end, AUDITION turns to a further strategy of modernist shock. At the end of the film there is a sadistic excess of physical torture where the horrifying quality lies less in the violence represented than in the *form* of its representation. Asami, now figuring as the grotesque exaggeration of the femme fatale, tortures Aoyama, who has been largely paralyzed by a drug, at his home. With a cold and unemotional precision, she goes to work: she injects a needle into his tongue and unclothes him, after carefully placing him on a sheet spread out on the floor. As if preparing for a medical operation, she carefully prepares his body and begins to insert acupuncture needles into his stomach and in the area beneath the eyes. This torture sequence relies on the contrast between her smile, her almost child-like habitus and the cold, professional attitude she presents, the contrast between her innocent appearance and the brutality of the act, and, finally, the contrast between the pain that the body of Aoyama experiences and its missing expression.



Screenshot Audition 7

As Asami finally severs her victim's feet, the camera accompanies the act of violence as a neutral observer, neither judging nor explaining the things it records. As a whole, the narration remains undecided between complicity with the sadistic attitude of the perpetrator and empathy with the victim. There is no psychological explanation given for the heinous act of violence that would attenuate this bleak ending in any way.

In addition, the body of the victim is robbed of any possibility for an appropriate expression of

affect. In this way, the film captures spectator hostage in an affect of horror, without offering the escape of empathy or expressive mimesis. While the pleasure of the horror film rests upon the pleasurable release of somatic intensities through startle reactions, goose bumps, and screaming, AUDITION blocks these possibilities of energetic release through a strategy of coldness that takes the spectator hostage.

Ultimately, in this way the film places its strategy of shock in a new aesthetic frame: an *aesthetic of evil*. This again is a term coined by Karl Heinz Bohrer.^[12] In the aesthetic of evil, Bohrer saw an exemplary realization of the project of aesthetic modernism. As he makes clear using his cardinal example, Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* (1862), essential for an aesthetic of evil is less the horror of the events presented as the form of representation, a form that refuses any psychological explanation, any empathy, any catharsis, and any moral judgment, and thus has a part in the evil being presented. As a crucial element of this aesthetic of evil Bohrer stresses the visual style of *impassibilité*, the neutral and purely descriptive style of depiction, that is a hallmark of Flaubert's writing. Another characteristic is the indifferent tone of the narration in the meticulously detailed representation of violence. Finally, the "evil" work of art represents an act of evil that utterly refuses integration in psychological or moral terms. All of these characteristics emphasized by Bohrer as features of the decisively modernist aesthetic of evil can also be found in the final twelveminute torture sequence of AUDITION.^[13] When Ernst Robert Curtius refers to Flaubert's *Salammbô* as "absolute nihilism's field of ruins,"^[14] this is also true of AUDITION's domestic torture chamber. By refusing the emphatic identification with the victim just as the rational explanation of the act of violence or an allegorical dissolution of the story (all of which are typical elements of contemporary horror movies), the film closes ultimately in beautiful and abysmal mysteriousness.

From the first moment of shock until its grim ending, AUDITION constantly knits together the narrative and the visceral, the semantic and the somatic, leading the body of the spectator through different stages of a decisively corporeal aesthetic that is intimately linked to strategies characteristic of a radical aesthetic modernism unrestrained by moral inhibitions.

The visceral effects in this film are not the opposite of narrative progression, as often claimed in case of horror and action cinema. Rather, the narration progresses through the visceral effects it orchestrates. Through shock, the haptic image, the corporeal memory, disgust, and the paradoxical inhibition of a somatic (as well as emotional or moral) response in its final scenes, the film throughout employs a corporeal form of understanding. In AUDITION we can find a concept of shock that acts as a mediator between the symbolic, the structural, and meaning on the one hand, and the corporeal, the immediate, the sensual on the other hand. It is a film where, in other words, shock serves as a site of a *strained reconciliation* between text and body.

Jegyzetek

1. Cf. for the phenomenological approach in film studies Sobchack, V. (1992): *The Address of the Eye. A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Sobchack, V. (2004): *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley et al.: University of California Press. For a Deleuzian approach in film studies that relies not so much on Deleuze's work on the time image and the movement image but on the ideas of sensation and affect, both closely related to the body, see Kennedy, B. (2000): *Deleuze and Cinema. The Aesthetics of Sensation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Beugnet, M. (2007): *Cinema and Sensation. French Film and the Art of Transgression*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
2. Cf. Baird, R. (2000): The Startle Effect. Implications for Spectator Cognition and Media Theory. *Film Quarterly* 53.3: 12-24.
3. Cf. Suckfüll, M. (1997): *Film erleben. Narrative Strukturen und physiologische Prozesse – Das Piano von Jane Campion*. Berlin: Edition Sigma
4. Cf. his 1981 study *Plötzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, English translation *Suddenness. On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance* (trans. Ruth Crowley). New York: Columbia University Press 1994.
5. Gardner, G. (2000): Audition (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/00/8/miff/audition.html>; 2008.07.13)
6. Bíró, Y. (2008): *Turbulence and Flow in Film. The Rhythmic Design* (trans. Paul Salamon). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
7. There is, of course, a paradox at work here: the paradox of a (continuous) metonymy of (momentary) shock. As a similar paradox see Jacques Derrida's comment on the "scandal" of the metonymy of the punctum, a photographic trope or figure developed by Roland Barthes, that equals shock in its momentary presence and fulgurous appearance, but that nonetheless, like shock, may yield an expansive power articulated in time. See Barthes, R. (1980): *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*. Paris: Gallimard; Derrida, J (1981): Les morts de Roland Barthes. *Poétique* 47: 269-291. What the film achieves through this paradox is the temporal expansion and perpetuation of shock without taking refuge to the strategy of mere repetition that is characteristic for modern horror film.
8. On the hermeneutic code see Barthes, R (1974): *S/Z* (trans. Richard Miller). New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux
9. In this scene, Asami vomits into a bowl that she presents to the creature from the sack as food. On the concept of the abject, see Kristeva, J (1982): *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil
10. Cf. Menninghaus, W (1999): *Ekel: Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 39-75.
11. See Derrida, J (1975): Economimesis. In Agacinski, S, Derrida, J., Kofman, S. (Eds): *Mimesis des articulations*. Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 55-93.
12. Cf. Bohrer, K. H. (2004): *Imaginationen des Bösen: Für eine ästhetische Kategorie*. München: Hanser
13. As another example of an author who applies Bohrer's concept of an aesthetic of evil to film, namely Stanley Kubrick's *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*, see Kirchmann, K. (2001): *Stanley Kubrick. Das Schweigen der Bilder*. 3rd expanded ed. Bochum: Schnitt, der Filmverlag
14. Quoted in Monika Bosse's and André Stoll's afterword: Die Agonie des archaischen Orients. Eine verschlüsselte Vision des Revolutionszeitalters. In Flaubert, G. (1979): *Salammô*. Frankfurt am Main:

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