

Sex *with* the City: Urban Spaces, Sexual Encounters and Erotic Spectacle in Tsukamoto Shinya's *Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June* (2003)

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What is the difference between a pink film and a blue movie? Pink film, or *pinku eiga*, is a popular genre of Japanese sex films that began in the 1960s and continue to be made in the present, but which probably had their heyday in the 1970s. Made by mainstream studios such as Nikkatsu with purely commercial motives they were shown in 'adult' cinemas to an overwhelmingly male audience. Despite the mode of production, exhibition and the large quantities of flesh on display, the pink film cannot be so easily pigeon-holed as generically formulaic pornography. Pink films carry little of the stigma attached to pornography in a western context, not least because of the public acceptance and enjoyment of explicit sexual themes within Japanese culture.

The woodblock prints of the *ukiyo-e* tradition that developed during the urban expansion of the late seventeenth century, but continued right into the twentieth, often depicted acrobatic and exaggerated acts of penetration. The quantity of pornographic material that fills contemporary newsstands in Japan points to a continuation of this erotic tradition. However, the development was not continuous as after the Meiji restoration of the middle of the Nineteenth century and the opening up of Japan to the wider world, the authorities kept one eye on western expectation as much as Japanese tradition. When it came to more international cultural modes, not least the photographic and then filmic representation of sex, a stricter regime of censorship developed,

one that would not allow pubic hair or genitals to be shown. It was under these paradoxical hybrid conditions that Japanese filmmakers found themselves, encouraged to explore sexual themes while remaining severely restricted in what they could show. Consequently the mechanical penetration shots of western hard core are entirely absent from the genre and more elliptical methods are employed to represent 'desire' as much as to show 'sex'. On the proviso that they guaranteed the studio a regular display of nudity (the 'pinkness' from which the genre gets its name), filmmakers were generally allowed a high degree of artistic freedom and the genre gave a lot of young directors the space to develop their skills. Hence there is almost an 'auteurist' tradition within the pink film, especially in its heyday so these films often employ stylistic innovations as well as develop narratives with surprisingly political and psychological concerns.

It would be simplistic and naively Orientalist, though, to suggest that such constraints and interests lead to the production of a necessarily subtle, soft-core or intelligent 'eastern erotica'. There is nothing fluffy about this pinkness and while the soft-core/hard-core binary cannot be applied to pink film due to the lack of full frontal nudity and 'meat' shots, the often shocking representation of the relationship between sex and power makes these films troubling in other ways. In particular, explicit sadomasochistic themes such as rape, humiliation and torture are

a common place within the tradition. This undoubtedly results in a sexual politics that is both worrying in its penchant to represent crude and cold violence, overwhelmingly directed against women, yet at the same time potentially revelatory with regard to the perversity of contemporary sexual desire.

Tsukamoto Shinya's *Rokugatsu no Hebi/A Snake of June* is a tale of sexual blackmail which includes representations of sexual humiliation, public masturbation, autonomous biomechanical strap-ons and bizarre sadomasochistic fetish clubs, and would seem to fit comfortably within the tradition. However, to confine Tsukamoto's strange love triangle to the genre would be a grave error for two reasons. First, the film ends in mutual recognition and love rather than domination, so in one sense offers a solution to the sadomasochistic structure of so much pink film. The underlying sexual logic of these sadomasochistic themes can be seen to follow a classical 'master-slave' structure. They expose a relationship between notions of pleasure and notions of ownership so to some extent collapse the categories of the sexual, the political and the economic, or at least reveal their mutual articulation. This motif was famously developed by Hegel to describe how the development of human consciousness and our sense of subjectivity emerged from our encounters with others.¹ Hegel (and I believe Tsukamoto's) point however is while human 'being' is a fundamentally intersubjective and dialectical phenomenon such that what may begin as a relationship of struggle and exploitation has an inherent capacity to develop into a system of mutual recognition. Secondly, while undoubtedly influenced by the pink film, Tsukamoto's story and the flesh that is on display is decidedly not pink, but shot as it is in a tinted monochrome, blue. This is not just a pink film, but also, quite literally a blue movie. As shall be discussed later, this blue wash has surprising phenomenological consequence for our understanding of the dialectical sexual relationship between people and even more so to their relationship to this blue city (Figure 1).

Before discussing this unique colouration we need to establish whether the logic of the



• Fig.1: The blue city. *Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June* (2003) Kaijiyu Theatre Productions.

master-slave is an appropriate model to apply to these films or whether these particular sadomasochistic concerns are instead uniquely or even distinctly Japanese? After all, compared to the British sex comedies of the 1970s, films also driven by a desire to make sex films but within a regime of censorship, these films seem disturbingly different. However, when compared to the sexploitation or 'Grindhouse' tradition in the United States, we find many films which share similar sadomasochistic themes. Once we consider the role of sex in violent films rather than the role of violence in sex film, the ubiquity of the theme, whether materialised in the sexual monsters of the horror tradition or the sadistic serial killers of the contemporary thriller, becomes obvious. For this reason, I would suggest that the fundamental relationship between power and desire, between sexual embodiment and social consciousness that pink films examine, clearly has wider cultural resonance. In particular, the sadomasochistic structure has the potential to stress that sexual subjectivity is not simply an identity or a desire, but a struggle, a behaviour that materialises a fundamentally *intersubjective* mode of being. In other words, sadomasochistic narratives are capable of developing a distinctly dialectical model of sexuality, through which subjects only come to be through a contested process in which they both express and deny their bonds with others. Nobody begins as a master or a slave, they come to adopt these subjectivities

via their encounter, and likewise, no one need remain in these positions.

Unlike the frequent idealist interpretation of Hegel's schema as a thought experiment, in these films the struggles for mastery and the experience of slavery are decidedly more visceral. It is power of other bodies as well as other consciousnesses that is sought and the sadomasochistic rendition of the master slave relationship reminds us of the embodied and sensory nature of the struggle, such that subjects do not just *understand* their sense of power or powerlessness, but *feel* pleasure or pain. To claim sexuality as a dialectical phenomenon is not to confine sexuality to consciousness or unconsciousness. As the dialectical and phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described it, to understand sexuality as a dialectical relationship is not to describe it as 'a relationship between contradictory and inseparable thoughts' but as a material and sensuous revelation of 'the tending of an existence towards another existence which denies it, and yet without which it is not sustained'.² Sadomasochism is therefore both a simplified and more intense version of this process which reveals a fundamental, if disturbing, aspect of our sexual embodiment. As Merleau-Ponty states:

Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject, that another can be my master or my slave, so that shame and shamelessness express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousness, and have a metaphysical significance. The same might be said of sexual desire . . . What we try to possess, then, is not just a body, but a body brought to life by consciousness.³

Beyond the anonymous, unthinking and mechanical scopophilic pleasures of western pornography in which all participants are objectified, the sadomasochism of the pink film seems less a quest for visual knowledge of particular sexual acts (object) than a moment of access into the sexual imaginary (subject). This is not to claim that these films necessarily set out to construct a sexual revolutionary position so much as to suggest that one emerges almost despite the sexual exploitation on show. This particular

combination of mastery and slavery and of openness and censorship, produces films in which the entwined relationship between the visceral and the mental, between body and subjectivity is made extremely apparent. Despite the extreme nature of the acts on display, the sexual visuals are not all there is to 'see' here. This seems particularly true of *A Snake of June*, because of the focus on the subjective affects of these acts.

What we do see, what we cannot avoid seeing is not just sexual bodies, but the extraordinary blueness of the film's surface. What does this blueness mean and why does it matter? I would suggest that this blue tint is much more than a simple stylistic flurry or ironic comment on either the film's generic influences or erotic intent. Instead, the monochrome tint offers a unique rendition of surfaces which extends across the entire body of the film such that skin, sky, the city and the incessant rain that falls throughout are all equally blue.

A phenomenological consequence of this surface wash is to make flesh and world merge such that these characters are not simply in the city but of it, creating an entwined complex of the natural and the man made, the flesh-of-the-world. Flesh here is not simply meat, but as in the sense developed by Merleau-Ponty, a term which points to our profound reliance on both each other and our environment to nurture our sense of self. It is the 'stuff' of our human world, both born and built, visceral and cultural, material and relational, from which all figures must emerge. It is meat made subject, the flip side of the objectivising master-slave encounter as it is a revelation of how our encounters with others and with the world therefore equally sustains as well as negates us. The notion of flesh helps us resist the temptation to reduce the dialectic between subjects, as well between subjects and objects, to a binary or antithesis of struggle that forgets the constant interplay or synthesis between these elements of the dialectic. This blue materialises the dynamic totality of the dialectical bonds between city and subjects as the fleshy medium in which they are all suspended. We dwell in the flesh and are forged from it. The flesh is process as much as thing – a historical behaviour not



• Fig. 2: Orgasm in an alleyway. *Rokugatsu no Hebi* – *A Snake of June* (2003) Kaijyu Theatre Productions.

limited to our corporeal boundaries, but a revelation of our partial extension into both world and others as well the reverse process such that we both welcome and resist our penetration by this flesh. It is the mediation of meat by objects, of objects by consciousness and other consciousness by the body. The blueness of this movie is one way to see this flesh while the display of highly mediated sex acts involving bodies augmented by things such as phones, camera and vibrators, is another. The fact that these bodies meet in particular urban spaces such as alleyways, shopping malls and public toilets, places that further articulate and ‘flesh out’ the significance of their encounters, is another still (Figure 2).

Importantly, Tsukamoto’s flesh-of-the-world is not any world or all worlds but a specific one, the city, and we need to ask why is it blue and why this particular shade of blue? As a tint blue was frequently used in silent cinema to suggest night time, particularly in exterior shots. Both inside and outside, daylight and darkness are blue here so the blue seems more spatial than temporal. This particular blue is in one sense the most urban and unnatural of shades, cold, flat metallic, offering a quintessentially noir feel where electric illumination always seems at risk of being plunged into darkness. Against the concrete, glass and steel of the city it reminds one of the dry electric blue light cast by black and white television. The 1:1.33 screen ratio of the

film itself seems to emphasise the televisual aspect of the image, a technique that Tsukamoto explicitly used to suggest his characters isolation in a one person size boxed frame.⁴ This is the blue of modernity itself, part alienation, part mediation, a colour that seems designed to emphasise what Scott Bukatman has described as the ‘terminal identity’ of postmodernity.⁵ This is the colour of a post-human world, one that terminates humanist views of the subject while reinventing them through their mediated relations with electronic screens and terminals. Such terminal identities would seem to call for terminal sexualities and the emphasis on photography and modes of voyeurism in this film further point to this need to mediate flesh with technology. The film continues many of the themes of Tsukamoto’s groundbreaking early work, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1988) and *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992), but without the more obvious and fantastical cyberpunk imagery.

Tsung-Yi Michelle Huang has described these early films precisely in terms of their fusion of human flesh and the metropolis, but it is a fusion that is imposed rather than sought, so the new flesh (to use Cronenberg’s notion from *Videodrome* (1983)), is itself a product of an exploitative relationship. The overwhelming master-slave relationship in these films is not simply between subjects, but more fundamentally between a dominated subject, usually a ubiquitous Japanese salaryman, and the dominating and unyielding space of the city itself. She claims these earlier films narrate

how Tokyoites, attracted to the overwhelming power of the urban landscape composed of concrete and iron, mimic the urban landscape . . . a mysterious fusion of metal and flesh which depersonalises the salaryman, who comes to lose his subjectivity in order to merge with the space.⁶

The city’s spaces are like the dry riverbed that marks the flow of capital and subjects are at the mercy of its frequent and wild floods and droughts. This reading of the city (particularly the megalopolis or global city) in terms of its relation to capital has been commented on by a number of theorists, most notable by Manuel Castells and

Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre has described how the abstract space of the global city mimics and materialises the sadistic operation of global capital, while Castells' notion of the 'dual city' materialises the dynamic spatialised relationship between class and capital and between leisure and work, a relationship that is also fundamentally antagonistic and dialectical.⁷ These city flows, premised on an unequal combination and reversibility between subjects and space, or subject and system, suggests that master-slave relationship between subjects however perverse are nothing compared to the one they experience with the city's mode of production itself. Hence the sadomasochistic themes of Tsukamoto's films can be read in more general/philosophical terms as reflecting not just the underlying sexual logic and gender politics of late modernity, but also its underlying economic logic. Their specific locations and characters, wage labourers living in a global city, confirm their internationalism of the situation. Whatever the local starting conditions and cultures, the new flesh of global capital renders embodied existence similar across the global range of its operation.

Rather than a uniquely Japanese tale we have instead a revelation of the homogenising forces at work in the world of late capital where an overriding sense of unimpeded flow (be it of capital or electrons) dominates the life of all citizens of developed global cities. Films themselves, as commodities, cannot stand outside this operation and simply pass comment on it. As a product of an international 'film industry' they are another expression of the same phenomenon, hence as Adorno insisted, 'no homeland can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and which thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness'.⁸ Not only is it permissible to consider this text from a position outside of an area studies or national cinema perspective, it is necessary. Any focus simply on the 'Japaneseness' of these films separates content from form, failing to recognize that film is an international, industrial medium, far more similar than different across its geographic production and consumption. This is not Japan,

and Japan is not blue, this is a movie whose formal insistence rather than any cultural specificity claims the majority of our attention. Clearly, there are particular local resonances to certain aspects of the film, not least the reality of June's weather and the location shooting.

The notion that the city flows through us as much as we float in it is an analysis of urban life that finds reflection in the term *ukiyo-e*, meaning as it does, the 'floating world'. Yet it is also the case that to secure a foothold in the Western 'World Cinema' market filmmakers from across the globe are quite prepared to self-exoticise and in the era of both multinational funding and international audiences to claim that any film can be wholly indigenous or authentic seems naïve. Tsukamoto is one of the darlings of the festival circuit and therefore consumed in the West as much, if not more so, than in the East, so whatever the content the address is international. Tsukamoto has explicitly claimed a variety of Western influences for the film, not just pink film but the writing of George Batille and nude photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newman, Man Ray and Bruce Weber.⁹

Yet to insist solely on the negation of the subject by the urban forces of capital and technology would itself be a rather idealistic rather than dialectical manoeuvre. While the dead flesh of capital invades the subject and globalises our cultural production it cannot remain entirely immune from the body's influences. Though the relationship is uneven it is not entirely irreversible and capital cannot invade and parasitize our bodies and our sexual desires without itself coming to reflect aspects of life's animation. Besides forces of objectification, a more visceral erotics of nakedness is equally evoked by these photographers, a nakedness that seems to escape or be in excess of the objectifying technologies that record and mediate them. Sexuality can be seen and it can even be co-opted, but it cannot be fully captured and these images gesture towards a sexual body that maintains a wild meaning, one beyond understanding and control. Besides capital, other forms of flow, forces that are both more elemental and primeval are equally at play here.



• Fig. 3: Primordial wet flesh – A snail in June.
Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June (2003) Kaijyu
Theatre Productions.

Capital might well have totalitarian aspirations but its dominance is as yet still less than absolute. It is through these more atavistic potentialities that Tsukamoto's blue seems far less electrical and manufactured and far more fluid and elemental – nature's blue – the deep black blue colour of the sea at dusk.

The static long shot of the city (Figure 1) that is shown several times throughout the film is often accompanied by another, a close up of water pouring down a drain, which emphasises the wetness of this urban flesh and the forces beyond its control that it can only withstand and endure. Of even more interest is another shot that also often accompanies the long shot of the city, a curious close up of a snail crawling across a sodden hydrangea, an image that at first seems outside of the story if not the city itself (Figure 3). It was this image, the epitome of a different form of 'wet flesh', that Tsukamoto has claimed as the original visual concept from which the film developed. It is however only in combination that these two images, snail and city, point to the dialectical paradox of our own urban sexual being and our sexual flesh (Figure 2). On the one hand the concrete city is thought of as a negation of physical sensation and the organic. The city has changed us and nothing is the same. On the other, the new flesh cannot escape more impulsive and elemental forces, not least the overwhelming phenomenology of a rainy

'season', where season is meant in both a sexual and meteorological sense. Neither dry system nor wet urge should be prioritised.

The master-slave relationships on display are not only between subjects and spaces (and the socio-economic forces which produce them), but far more explicitly between sexual body-subjects. This is the paradox of a wet electric blue, a colour that seems both unnatural and instinctual. Tsukamoto is in this regard cyberpunk's 'Angel of History'¹⁰ because he rejects the common depictions of post-humanity, which like Saussure's idealist *langue*, are 'made of sunshine . . . all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of the spectrum'.¹¹ Blue is not just electric, a flow of electrons, but liquid, and Tsukamoto's blue city and his blue characters are *both* cold and mediated *and* hot and wet. This is what produces the snake inside, an inner feeling of both violence and eroticism, a flow of juices, humours, bodily fluids which pulsates and produces a movement, an urge which demands to be met. An image of a snake itself would be too overloaded with symbolism and metaphor to remind us of the visceral nature of these urges, but the hermaphrodite snail, both phallic and feminine is a better reminder that our hybridity is not only with machines but with animality itself.

While the notion of the post-human might mark a critique of the unified singular solitary human of the Enlightenment, any claim that it heralds our freedom from being flesh, is at best naïve and at worst a conceit, as flawed (and idealistically bourgeois) as the model it claims to replace. Just as Tsukamoto's characters and his city cannot escape the sensual torrents of June's rain, like the snail, they cannot escape the embodied materiality of their own drives and desire, either. This is not the shiny dry electric dream of so many visions of our so called post-human future, neither is it a prelapsian claim as to our organic wholeness and naturalness, but an insistent demand that however augmented or mediated our flesh is becoming, our corporeality cannot be escaped.

This linkage between our nature and our culture does not result in a simple homogenisation of these realms. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari's

body without organs, the flesh is not an undifferentiated mass. Subject, objects and city spaces are not simply rendered the same here. Paradoxically, this washing out of colour, this removal of what Steve Neale has referred to as colour's potential to 'pulverise meaning'¹² actually allows a number of subtle differences in the relationship between embodiment and place, particularly the differential mediation of public and private spaces with desire, to emerge. Unlike the general merging with the city of the *Tetsuo* films, or the one dimensional exploitation of a standard sadomasochistic relationship, different places, as well as people, promote a different sexual politics here. The private interior, the public street and the strange hybrid spaces of the shopping mall (private owned public space) and the public toilet (publicly owned private space) promote different sexual encounters. When these spaces are further augmented with technologies of communication and even intimacy (the mobile phone, the camera and the vibrator) the intensity of these encounters is greatly increased. Part of that intensity is of course the *emotional* connotations of blue, the colour of a mood widely understood and experienced in developed cities throughout the world. More specifically it is with the sadness of a woman, a kind-a-blue, that the story if not the film begins.

Besides a short opening sequence (that shall be returned to later) the story starts when we are introduced to Rinko (Kurosawa Asuka), a young elfin like telephone counsellor who works at the county mental health centre. That this story is not simply her story, but an allegorical comment on the gendering of the flesh is underlined by the appearance on screen of the universal symbol for women, ♀. Rinko is unhappily married to her older, bald, hygiene-obsessed husband Shigehiko (Kohtari Yuji). The emphasis on gender is suggested by the use of the male symbol, ♂, for the second section when he becomes the focus of the narrative. That neither of these symbols work or suggest a satisfactory 'natural' concept of sexual difference is highlighted in the third section where a combined symbol appears but with two arrows and one cross. To begin with the marriage is not unfriendly, but passionless and

distant and Shigehiko often rises in the night to sleep alone. Our first interaction of flesh and world, the neat atomised interior of bourgeois respectability is revealed as lacking the intimacy that privacy is meant to engender. The *reducto ad absurdum* logic of private property means they are not just cut off from the outside world, but from each other. When a strange package arrives, curiously addressed as 'your husband's secret' the reality of this privacy is brought into question. When Rinko opens it to find compromising photographs not of Shigehiko but of herself, masturbating, walking around the apartment in the shortest of mini skirts and looking at vibrators on the internet, it is entirely shattered. The bourgeois interior itself is, like Rinko, exposed. It is exposed as a place that despite its claims, offers neither intimacy nor privacy. Subjects experience a level of alienation which at best offers them the transient comforts of an *intrasubjective* masturbatory experience and at worst cuts them off entirely from their own embodiment.

When the inevitable telephone call follows, the photographer, Iguchi (Tsukamoto Shinya), is revealed as a caller to the mental health centre who Rinko had previously dissuaded from suicide. At this stage she does not know why he wished to take his own life, but it is revealed later that he is dying painfully of cancer. This is a major concern for the text as it reiterates how our embodiment is both a source of pleasure and of pain, experiences that cannot be escaped or mediated, but more simply lived. He asks for neither money nor sex in return for the negatives, but merely that Rinko follows through on these desires and for her to do what she really wants to do. As the apartment is a space that seems to stunt such desire, turning it inward, Iguchi insists on a different, more public venue. For Iguchi it is vital that Rinko cannot be so 'self' contained if she is to truly experience her flesh. Giving Rinko instructions via a hands free mobile phone (a technology which enforces rather than offers intimacy), Iguchi instructs her to go out into the city where in a public toilet, a strangely private public space, she must both literally and figuratively 'change'. Now she is instructed to walk through the public spaces of the

underground station and the shopping mall knickerless and in her miniskirt.

The public private space of the toilet is reversed into the public yet private space of the mall, a place where she is both clearly visible, yet an erotic enigma to the men that gaze at her. Only the absent/present Iguchi understands why a woman dressed like this would behave like that. She is seen but not understood. Rinko is then instructed that she has to buy a remote control vibrator and then return to the toilet booth. Now she must insert the vibrator and place the remote control outside the window so as to let Iguchi control it. Iguchi demands that Rinko walk the streets, through spaces she cannot control while being forced to experience her sexual embodiment, which again she cannot control. Her facial expression and laboured gait make it unclear to what extent she is experiencing pain rather than pleasure. After her humiliating ordeal and on her return to the safety of the toilet, the negatives are waiting for her.

It is at this stage that the sexual politics on display become far more complex and a simple analysis of sadomasochistic sex in terms of a fixed pattern heterosexual difference, master men and slave women, no longer works. A dialectic has begun in which subjects cannot remain as either masters or slaves. To start with the voyeur now becomes the carer as Iguchi phones Rinko to tell her that one of his photos shows a tiny hollow in her breast. His knowledge of his own condition is such that he suspects a tumour. Here, as with Benjamin's description of photography in 'The Work of Art' essay, the mechanical mediation of an image can 'bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens'.¹³ Rather than the mediating technologies taking us further from and alienating us from the body, they take us closer. The cancer has been spotted early enough for a mastectomy to be effective, but Shigehiko is horrified at the prospect, so Rinko pretends not to need the operation.

We now enter the second section of the film, but the symbol on screen, ♂ does not mark a sexually voracious or masterful masculinity but a fearful one, a salaryman who is even more

alienated than his wife. It should be remembered that Shigehiko does not or cannot even masturbate or fantasise in the 'privacy' of his own home and his cleaning fetish confirms a deeper state of embodied alienation. He is even further from the flesh and his state of abjection explains the sexlessness of the marriage in terms of Shigehiko's fundamental body horror.

All flesh terrifies Shigehiko. When Rinko lies to him that she does not need an operation the relief is only momentary for he then stumbles across one of the photographs that Iguchi had taken of Rinko, but is unable, or unwilling to confront her with it.

Such is his fear of the visceral realities of embodiment, not just sex but also death, that he even concocts a story that he is unable to leave work so as to avoid being present at his elderly mother's passing. Instead he waits it out in a café, unaware that Iguchi, who blames him for Rinko refusing the operation, is now watching him. As he walks home in the rain he receives a call from Iguchi who mocks him for his fears of embodiment for the fact he takes powders, as once did Iguchi, to stop his shit smelling. He also tells him that he has drugged the water he was drinking and at this moment, alone in an alleyway, an urban site which combines seedy dereliction and destitution, Shigehiko falls face down into a bin full of rubbish. When he awakes he is shackled along with numerous other men who all wake to find themselves in the most bizarre of fetish clubs. To what extent this scene is meant to be a drug induced hallucination is hard to tell, as the symbolic focus of the *mise-en-scène* is undoubtedly on modes of seeing as it is on what is actually seen. As he comes to consciousness Shigehiko finds himself in darkness when suddenly a small circle of light appears between his eyes. It transpires that he, as are all the other men, is wearing a large funnel over his face with only a small aperture at its end (Figure 4).

Several ideas are condensed by this disturbing image. It is as if he has been turned into a pin-hole camera. Rather than his abject masculinity being intrinsically voyeuristic and scopophilic he has to be made and taught how to look. It is also a parody of the exhibition practices of pink film



• Fig. 4: Shigehiko (Second from the left) in the fetish club. *Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June* (2003) Kaijyu Theatre Productions.

itself, and the scene reminds us these men are visual slaves as much as they are visual masters. It is not their sadistic sexual looking that alienates and objectifies both them and their 'other', but their pre-existing state of alienation which denies them any other form of looking. This is the best they can do and in terms of Shigehiko's previous absolute disengagement with others it represents a form of progression, being as it is an (albeit enforced) engagement beyond himself. At first it is hard for Shigehiko to work out exactly what he is seeing but it transpires to be a sadistic scene in which a young couple are forced close together in a sexual embrace.

Vision is denied to the men as the aperture is closed, but it is soon reopened at a wider diameter. Now the men can clearly see that the couple have been placed in a glass tank which suddenly begins to fill with water. Liquid affects flesh and as the terrified young couple fight to hold their breath Shigehiko can look no more and he attempts to stagger out of the club. We see him being dumped in an alleyway and the event/hallucination is at an end. His own master-slave trajectory has begun. Prior to his (forced) engagement with the world and with others, he was neither subject, object, master nor slave, merely the possibilities of these positions and what this sadomasochistic experience reveals to him is his own subjectivity as a moment that binds meat and spirit as intersubjective flesh.

Shigehiko becomes aware that there is something going on in his wife's life of which he is totally ignorant and with a mixture of curiosity and fear he decides to follow Rinko the next time she leaves the apartment. At the same time Iguchi, himself now close to death, phones Rinko and asks her to go into the city and act on her desires one last time. On this occasion a now confident, rather than humiliated Rinko, agrees. Shigehiko secretly follows Rinko as, mini-skirted, knickerless and now controlling the vibrator herself, she wanders rain-drenched streets. At first he has to follow her through the public spaces of the train station, the mall and the streets and the looks she attracts and the way she looks demonstrate how little he knows her. The more he sees the less he knows, yet as a stranger, as someone and something unknown, Rinko does at last begin to arouse him. Her rendezvous with Iguchi occurs in an alleyway and as Iguchi arrives by car, she strips and brings herself to repeated orgasm in front of him. Iguchi never leaves the car but photographs her over and over again, while a bemused but aroused Shigehiko secretly watches and masturbates. He has now been brought to the point of alienated subjectivity that Rinko expressed at the start of the film and in having his desires realised in public, he too has had to suffer the humiliation of his own sexuality. This is where the film takes another turn and makes the most radical suggestion. The alienation and atomisation of contemporary urban life is not ameliorated by a healing organic sexuality but by one that inverts and co-opts the very processes that created this alienation in the first place. What is required is not less mediation, but more. The alienating technologies of modernity and the left over spaces of the global city combine to produce a mutually sustaining and intersubjective sexual encounter that while developed from an initially sadomasochistic master-slave relationship, now goes far beyond it.

It is in another configuration of private public space, the alleyway, which offers the site for the erotic encounter between Iguchi and Rinko. They cannot be totally private in this space so there is room for contact, but neither does it fully absorb

them. The synchronisation of Rinko's vibrator-induced orgasmic spasms with the ejaculatory flashes of light and sound from Iguchi's camera link these subjects in liberating ways, allowing for the most mutually sustaining and reversible of all their encounters. Iguchi serves her rather than posses her. Instead of a consumption-incorporation by either of the other, there is an eroticised mix of autonomy and intimacy, of mediation and closeness, in which humans briefly take over both machines and spaces to augment both themselves and their encounter. It becomes increasingly impossible to say who is exploiting or dominating whom, who has political control, who is sexually productive. Both Rinko and Iguchi are separate from, within and augmented by the other – and by machines and spaces that deny any sense that this act is heteronormative while equally demanding the encounter's intersubjective status.

There is a high degree of reversibility and induction across the three main modes of perception as the scene foregrounds, a dialectical magnification and combination of the visual, the tactile and the aural. Rinko's demand to be seen, dominates the visual as much as Iguchi's desire to look, while his camera's flashes and noises seem to themselves become tactile, touching Rinko. Yet, this reversibility is not a collapse of one sense into another and their mutual interaction is in no way homogenising. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, such sensate and perceptual entwining 'points to an understanding of the senses as distinct contributions of differing strands of meaning which nevertheless form a whole'.¹⁴ The spaces created, explored and lived in, by touch and by sight, cannot simply be transposed onto one another, yet these space are, 'distinguishable only against the background of a common world, and can compete with each other only because they both lay claim to total being'.¹⁵

Rather than isolating a perception, their shared process of mediation conjoins their perceptual, conceptual and embodied experiences into a lived erotic totality. The machine mediations of both bodies and spaces are that which facilitate reversibility within and between Rinko and Iguchi. Iguchi's camera lets

him see and be seen, Rinko's vibrator lets her touch and be touched – and this four way chiasmic mediation between subjects, senses and space, does not only extend these subjects beyond themselves but also into the flesh of the other. Iguchi is allowed access to the touched-unseen and Rinko to the seen-untouched. Rather than experience mediation as an alienation, they erotically employ it such that Rinko becomes touch for Iguchi and he becomes vision for her. Their sensual pleasures as well as their modes of perception and conception are fully intersubjective, an embodied mediation where the visible and the invisible, the perceptual and the conceptual and the meaningful and the material sustain each other. These two people are clearly having sex together despite being several feet apart and because of the reversibility between touch and vision their sex remains normative in terms of object-choices while being transgressive in terms of their behaviours and their forms of pleasure. After letting out the most animalistic cry or primal scream, Rinko sinks to her knees in sexual exhaustion (Figure 2), Shigehiko also climaxes and an equally spent looking Iguchi sinks back into his seat. After a moment's rest he switches to a much smaller camera in order to take face shots of a now triumphant looking Rinko. It is this switch to a smaller camera which makes the meaning of the previously stand-alone opening scene apparent.

The first scene of the film involves a pornographic photo shot of an unnamed young girl. As she strips the voice over of the photographer explains that you need to use a big camera with a flash, or you 'won't make her come'. That is the camera itself is not simply a technology of mediation which captures her sexual being, but a facilitator of it. The camera works for her as much as she works for the camera. It is therefore not mediating technologies in themselves that alienate us but the fact we work for them and not the other way around. It is not the machines of modernity that are the cause of our enslavement but our lack of ownership of these things. Once freed from their role in the creation of capital, they can produce other flows. Likewise urban space in and of itself only alienates

when it is private. When it is shared it instead unlocks new sexual possibilities. This is why as long as Shigehiko lays claim to the ownership of vision and touch, which he does by claiming sensual and intentional mastery through masturbating while spying on Rinko and Iguchi, he cuts himself off from any form of reversible encounter.

Shigehiko must change further if he is to go beyond the experience of flesh as a master-slave relationship. However, there is one more lesson in store for him before he can do so. Iguchi lures Shigehiko to an abandoned factory (a place of dead ownership and dry capital) on the pretence of 'selling' him the pictures which he has already 'given' to Rinko. He beats Shigehiko and makes him strip, and then in a moment reminiscent of *Tetsuo* part strangles him with a biomechanical semi autonomous strap-on that he is wearing. This strange object is the snake of June, modern and primeval, controlled and controlling, a deeply queer device. The scene cuts and Shigehiko finds himself back in the S&M snuff underground, but it is he who now finds himself in the tank struggling for breath and where now he is the object of vision. Somehow he escapes or is released, and after stealing a policeman's gun (and hence now a fugitive rather than home owner), he finds his way back to Rinko.

Meanwhile, we return briefly to Iguchi who is clearly close to death. He is attempting to take one last photograph of himself, using the small camera with which he took his last images of Rinko. Even this is too much for his purpose and so he retrieves an old tin from a draw which is clearly the crudest of home made pinhole cameras. One suspects it was his first and with it he takes his last pictures. As with the strange mask of the fetish club, the sophistication of mediating technologies is irrelevant. It is instead our potential to mediate at all, to mediate ourselves, each other and the environment around us, to change things, which animates the flesh-of-the-world and makes objects alive and subjects objects. The first picture he takes is of him sitting cross-legged on the floor gazing directly out from the photograph. The second is the same space, but minus Iguchi. The pleasures and the pains of mediated flesh meet their limit



• Fig. 5: The embrace of flesh. *Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June* (2003) Kaijyu Theatre Productions.

(as does capital) in death. He has left his mark on the flesh of the world but will soon take no further part in it. Shigehiko on the other hand has never felt so alive. As he stands armed in the doorway unsure whether to blame Rinko for his strange ordeal and take the ultimate revenge or not she smiles at him. He realises that he is doing something he has been unable to do at all during the entire film; he can look at his wife with passion while exposing himself to her gaze. He can see her as both subject and object and can understand her right and his need for her to see him in the same way. They stand together as flesh and as they embrace, as they finally touch flesh against flesh, seer and seen merge. Shigehiko even sees/imagines Rinko both with and without her breast removed and that he is in loving contact with this flesh, not its status, not its value, is the feeling that overwhelms him. They make love, passionately and in reconciliation, they entwine and with no hint of what the future holds, the film ends (Figure 5).

No longer can these subjects be confined to a one person side box. Like the liquid that has dominated this film, they spill over as they move in and out of frame. Frequently multiple images of their embrace fill the screen and finally the sexual dialectic moves beyond the confines of a master-slave relationship and is seen to reach its more hopeful and more nourishing potential of mutual sexual recognition, namely love. Now the sexual dialectic transmutes and reverses rather

than denies our desires to be both masters and slaves and reveals that:

Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another so that I am not in selfish isolation but win my self-consciousness only as the renunciation of my independence, and by knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me.¹⁶

In conclusion, what Tsukamoto's revelation of urban sexuality suggests is that we are of the city as much as we are in the city, both in terms of the dialectical and dialogical possibility of its spaces as well as its technologies. Equally, we are in and of each other, we both literally and figuratively penetrate each other in a profound number of ways. Neither the modern city itself nor the machines that enable us to navigate and engage with both it and each other are simply part of an alien externality, something we can either be in or out of. They are already us and we are already them. Therefore, sexual being is not a quality or attribute of embodiment, it is not simply 'in' us but part of the phenomenological fabric through which as both body-subjects and body-objects we experience and are experienced. We are suspended in both the city and our sexuality, we are born of both.

Finally, nothing human-made can be unnatural, while humanity's collective mediation of our world and our bodies, always extends our ontological and erotic possibilities beyond the biological. We do not simply have sex in the city, but through it, and quite possibly, with it. Our capacity to mediate joins us together as well as keeping us apart. Tsukamoto is too sophisticated a filmmaker to offer us the easy reconciliation and closure of a love conquers all ending. We have no sense of these people's futures and have clearly seen how social reality has acted against love's materialisation throughout most of the film. The scene might be nothing but a fantasy. However, in suddenly ending here at this moment of reconciliation and mutual recognition, a moment which utterly negates the exploitative and proprietary logic of the subjects of the master-slave relationship, he does not deny the possibility. Tsukamoto keeps us hopeful and engaged with our collective being as part of the

flesh-of-the-world. Whether this marks a politically progressive possibility however has little to do simply with sex, or love and everything, as always, to do with ownership.

Notes

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.111–19.
- 2 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London, Routledge, 2000), p. 167.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 4 T. Mes, *Iron Man. The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto* (Godalming, FAB Press, 2005), p. 172.
- 5 S. Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993).
- 6 M. H. Tsung-Yi, *Walking Between Slums and Skyscrapers: Illusions of Open Space in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Shanghai* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. 81.
- 7 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, Blackwells, 1991), & M. Castells, *The Informational City. Information Technology, Economic Restructuring and the Urban Regional Process* (Oxford, Blackwells, 1991)
- 8 T. W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', in by J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. (London, Routledge, 1991), p.103.
- 9 T. Mes, *Iron Man. The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto*, p. 167.
- 10 I am grateful to my colleague Mark Bould for this description. This entire paper has developed from a shared fascination with Tsukamoto's films and I would therefore like to acknowledge his profound and rich contribution to this work.
- 11 D. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, Free Association Books, 1991), p. 153.
- 12 S. Neale, 'Colour and Film Aesthetics', in G. Turner (ed.) *The Film Cultures Reader* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 94.
- 13 W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (London, Fontana Press, 1992), p. 220.
- 14 G. Mazis, 'Touch and Vision', in J. Stewart (ed.) *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1992), p. 146.
- 15 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 225.
- 16 G. W. F. Hegel (1967) *Philosophy of Right*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 261.