

## FOOD AND POLLUTION IN TWO FILMS FROM CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the shifting relationship between food and pollution in two films from contemporary Japan. Gemini (Sôseji [1999]), directed by iconic Japanese director, Tsukamoto Shinya, tells of an eminent young doctor who performed miraculous field surgery procedures during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05). His world disintegrates, however, when an identical twin brother, surreptitiously abandoned as tainted at birth after being born with a disfiguring birthmark, returns to wreak havoc in the life of the favoured sibling. 2009 Best Foreign Film Academy Award winner, Departures (Okuribito [2008]), directed by Takita Yôjirô, is an account of the conflict that threatens the relationship of a husband and wife when the young man, formerly a cellist, loses his orchestral position and takes work with a mortician preparing the dead for their "departures" to the other world. Both films probe the issue of pollution and the response of modern Japan to the socially determined "unclean." Both also use food as a key narrative device in this process. Loosely based on a short story by pre-war detective fiction/horror writer, Edogawa Rampo (1894–1965), the frenzied Gemini depicts the desperate modern attempt to suppress and eradicate the "filth" of the poor and socially dispossessed. Although a gentler film, Departures nonetheless unambiguously confronts the social forces that arbitrarily define, condemn and exclude that which is considered unclean. In many ways, it is director Takita's skilful use of food which suggests that, rather than a pollutant to be feared, death is a necessary part of the nurturing cycle of life.*

**Keywords:** Japanese cinema, food in film, pollution as a social taboo in Japan

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## INTRODUCTION

This article will examine the use of food as a narrative strategy in two films from contemporary Japan that profile the relationship between ritual pollution and social exclusion. 2009 Best Foreign Film Academy Award winner, *Departures* (*Okuribito* [2008]),<sup>2</sup> directed by Takita Yôjirô, is an account of the conflict that threatens the relationship of a young husband and wife. This conflict occurs when the orchestra in which the young man plays the cello is dissolved through a shortage of funds. He then moves back to his home-town and finds work as a mortician preparing the dead to "depart" this life for the other world. *Gemini* (*Sôseji* [1999]),<sup>3</sup> directed by iconic Japanese director, Tsukamoto Shinya, tells of an eminent young doctor who establishes his medical credentials by performing miraculous field surgery procedures during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05).<sup>4</sup> His world disintegrates, however, when an identical twin brother, surreptitiously abandoned as tainted when born with a snake-shaped birthmark on his thigh, returns to wreak havoc in the life of the favoured sibling.

In both texts, food is a key element of the narrative framework. This is in spite of the fact that food is not the principal focus of either work; neither, for example, has any reference to food in its title. Nevertheless, in discussing the films of the great twentieth century director, Mizoguchi Kenji (1898–1956), I have written previously of the subsidiary but critical role played by the director's regular team of acting "extras" and their "seamless contribution" to Mizoguchi's cinemagraphic production.<sup>5</sup> I would suggest that food plays a similar subsidiary but critical role in the setting and artwork of both films discussed here and, therefore, in eliciting overall audience response. While generally nuanced, there are nonetheless scenes in which the impact of food in each text is overtly visceral.

Although the two works featured are superficially very different, they are linked by the fact that each raises contentious issues regarding ritual pollution and the response of modern Japan to the socially determined "unclean." Both also use food, as noted above, as a key although oblique narrative device in this process. Scholars from Japan and the West have

<sup>2</sup> *Okuribito* (*Departures*), dir. Takita, Y., released September 2008 by Shôchiku.

<sup>3</sup> *Sôseiji* (*Gemini*), dir. Tsukamoto, S., released September 1999 by Tôhō.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is never directly stated, references to the activities of the Third Imperial Army in Mukden make it clear that the conflict mentioned is the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05). See, for example, Connaughton, R. M., *The War of the Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: A Military History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–5* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Hartley, B., *Prostitution and Poverty in Post-war Japan*, booklet accompanying Madman edition of Mizoguchi Kenji's *Street of Shame*, 2010, 12.

each pointed out that the most pervasive taboos in Japan relate to death and to the blood and other bodily excretions associated with menstruation and childbirth.<sup>6</sup> Food taboos, their work suggests, are relatively limited and operate at a subsidiary level, such as avoiding certain foods during festival preparation,<sup>7</sup> or abstaining from food of animal origin during the three days of funeral observances.<sup>8</sup> We can conclude, therefore, that there may not be the intimate association between pollution and food in Japanese ritual that Mary Douglas identified in her famous discussion of Leviticus food taboos—taboos that are given "physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, both *Departures* and *Gemini* demonstrate that there is an important link between these.

Although a gentle film, *Departures* unambiguously confronts the social forces that arbitrarily define, condemn and exclude that which is considered unclean. A highlight of this movie is the scene in which the aging senior mortician, played by legendary actor Yamazaki Tsutomu (b. 1936), dines at leisurely pace in the attic residence above his business that is a veritable hothouse of lovingly attended greenery. It is partly director Takita's skilful use of food that primes the audience ultimately to conclude that, rather than a pollutant to be feared, death is a necessary part of the vital and nurturing cycle of life. *Gemini* is a much more frenzied production, loosely based on a short story by pre-war detective fiction/horror writer, Edogawa Rampo (1894–1965).<sup>10</sup> In this depiction of the desperate modern attempt to suppress and eradicate the "filth" of the poor and socially dispossessed, food plays a role in announcing the brutally rigid aristocratic regime of early twentieth century Japan. This is compellingly conveyed in the *mise-en-scene* of the doctor and his beautiful but suspiciously amnesiac wife tensely partaking of a meal in the company of the young man's autocratic parents. Food is also a trope for the perilous instability of any facade of social order in scenes where the abandoned son, having returned to dispose of his parents and steal his brother's identity, rabidly screams abuse after showering the favoured child with rotten kitchen scraps while the latter cowers deep in a backyard well in which his brother has had him

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Miyata, N., *Kegare no minzokushi: sabetsu no bunkateki yôin* (Anthropology of Impurity: Cultural basis of Discrimination) (Tokyo: Jinmon Shoin, 1996) and Norbeck, E., "Pollution and Taboo in Contemporary Japan," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1952): 269–285.

<sup>7</sup> Sonoda, M., "The Traditional Festival in Urban Society," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 2, no. 2–3 (June-September 1975): 103–136.

<sup>8</sup> Norbeck, "Pollution and Taboo in Contemporary Japan," 275.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, M., *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Edogawa's narrative was first published in the journal *Shinseinen* (New Youth) in October 1924.

confined. Before looking more closely at the relationship between food and pollution in each film, I will provide some background to ritual pollution in the Japanese context. I will also refer briefly to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss to comment on the cultural significance of food.

## RITUAL POLLUTION

While many societies have regulations related to ritual pollution, these have been particularly pervasive in Japan. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney profiles eighth century references to pollution in "two of the earliest records of Japanese history."<sup>11</sup> These are the *Norito*, a collection of Shinto liturgy, and the *Kojiki*, a compilation of Japan's mythic "history." Ohnuki-Tierney points out that these works provide "clear evidence that the opposition of purity and impurity provided the basic structure of the ethos of the time."<sup>12</sup> Defining discrimination as the social exclusion that results when "one group imposes extremely disadvantageous conditions on another," Osamu Mihashi argues that acts of discrimination are fundamentally about relationships.<sup>13</sup> In the centuries that have elapsed since the publication of the two texts referred to above, social relationships involving ritual pollution have undergone significant change in conjunction with changing socio-historical contexts. In this context, Ohnuki-Tierney explains that although the word *eta* was initially used in a thirteenth century document to mean "purifier" or "sweeper," by the mid-fifteenth century the word had come to denote "excessive impurity."<sup>14</sup>

The issue of ritual impurity, or *kegare*, is generally accepted to be one element of a triad, *hare* or purity, *ke*, perhaps best thought of as the life-force power, and *kegare*, impurity.<sup>15</sup> Sakurai Tokutarô, also cited by Winston Davis, is one of a number of Japanese scholars to point out that, rather than polluted or defiled, a more accurate meaning of *kegare* is a withering or drying up of the *ke*, life-spirit.<sup>16</sup> This position is confirmed

<sup>11</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, E., *The Monkey as Mirror: Symbolic Transformations in Japanese History and Ritual* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 137.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Miyashi, O., "The Symbolism of Social Discrimination: A Decoding of Discriminatory Language," *Current Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (August–October 1987): S19–S29, S19.

<sup>14</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> For a succinct and accessible account of these notions, see Ian Reader's discussion in his review of Miyake Hitoshi, *Shūkyō minzokugaku* (The Study of Folk Religions) (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1989) in *Journal of Japanese Religious Studies* 17, no. 4: 433–438.

<sup>16</sup> Sakurai, T., "Kesshū no genten: Minzokugaku kara tsuiseki shita shōchi'iki kyōdōtai kōsei no paradaimu," in *Shisō no bōken: Shakai to henka no atarashii paradaimu* (An Adventure in Thought: Towards a New Paradigm of Society and Change), ed. Tsurumi, K. and Ichi'i, S. (Tokyo: Chikuma

more recently by Yamamoto Kôji in his 2009 discussion on *kegare* and *ôharae* (great purification).<sup>17</sup> As Ohnuki-Tierney has demonstrated, the "radical negativity" currently associated with notions of *kegare* is a product of the passage of time. This assignation of "increasing cultural devaluation,"<sup>18</sup> as evidenced by the shift in the meaning of the term *eta* discussed above, predictably saw those whose occupations or life-styles marked them as impure "firmly placed at the margins of society."<sup>19</sup> In *Departures*, the ritually impure are those who prepare corpses for burial; in *Gemini*, these are largely itinerant entertainers who dwell on the river-bank.<sup>20</sup> From one perspective, we can see both groups as scapegoats onto whom "evil" or other disturbance is transferred after which they are "expelled from society."<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding historical trends, pockets of inclusiveness continued to operate, particularly outside the main centres. Hongû Taisha, the Great Shrine of Hongû, for example, is situated in the remote Kumano Mountains in the Ki'i Peninsula in present-day Wakayama Prefecture. This site famously permitted entry to its precincts by lepers, menstruating women and others often regarded as impure. Nevertheless, as prominent scholar, Karatani Kôjin, explains, in spite of modernisation policies attempting to dismantle the social structures that excluded the ritually impure,<sup>22</sup> these groups and individuals paradoxically became even more marginalised as the country entered the modern era. Mihashi Osamu also confirms that while discriminatory practices have existed throughout history, "it is the feeling of many that the degree of discrimination [...] has increased in modern times,"<sup>23</sup> that is, since the modernising reforms that occurred in Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century. From this perspective, Machiko

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Shobô, 1979), esp. 219–230. See also Davis, W., "Pilgrimage and World Renewal: A Study of Religion and Social Values in Tokugawa Japan, Part II," *History of Religions* 23, no. 3 (February 1984): 197–221.

<sup>17</sup> Yamamoto, K., *Kegare to ôharae* (Pollution and Great Purification) (Osaka: Kaihō shuppansha, 2009), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror*. For a full account of this trend, see the chapter "The Special Status People: Historical Transformations and Their Meaning" (Chapter 4), 75–100.

<sup>19</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror*, 92–93.

<sup>20</sup> This term is slightly misleading since the original Japanese term, *kawara*, refers more accurately to the "river-bed," or at least the side areas of the river-bed that are rarely covered by water, except in times of flood or snow-melt.

<sup>21</sup> The term "scapegoat" is borrowed from Sir James George Frazer, *The Illustrated Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 165. This text is the precursor of many discussions on issues relating to the sacred and the profane. Frazer notes that, in some societies, "expulsion" of the scapegoat can even mean death. These notions are more fully developed in the volume of the full collection of *The Golden Bough* entitled, "The Scapegoat."

<sup>22</sup> See Karatani Kôjin's comments in Karatani, K. and Watanabe, N., *Nakagami Kenji to Kumano* (Nakagami Kenji and Kumano) (Tokyo: Ôtashuppan, 2000), 256–257.

<sup>23</sup> Miyashi., "The Symbolism of Social Discrimination," S19.

Ishikawa notes that as recently as 2004, an unemployed Japanese man who believed that people he regarded as ritually impure had "taken his job," engaged in a campaign of systematic discrimination against this group.<sup>24</sup>

## RITUAL POLLUTION AND FOOD

When considering ritual pollution and food, it is useful to draw on the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, particularly *The Raw and the Cooked* (*Le Cru et le Cuit* [1964]), the first book in the four-volume collection entitled in French, *Mythologiques* (A Science of Mythology). In one strand of this fascinating text, Levi-Strauss investigates modes of eating in terms of bodily processes such as continence and incontinence. In a manner that helps structure our understanding of the use of food in both films being discussed, he argues that the former heralds control while the latter is a mark of excess.<sup>25</sup> The inference in Levi-Strauss' discussion is that continence and control are essential elements for social order and the productive systems that arise from this. However, not all incontinence is so excessive as to be socially undesirable. On the contrary, given that it assists us to "communicate with the adversary discreetly,"<sup>26</sup> Levi-Strauss suggests that "[d]uly controlled incontinence" is a necessary attribute for establishing relations with those from a different background. This is even—or especially—with those whom we may initially regard as an "adversary" presenting a threat. As a corollary to this, we might observe that total continence is a marker of rigidly oppressive social conditions in which those holding the reins of hegemonic power impose their intractable wills on other sectors of and groups in society. We will return to these useful points a number of times in the discussion that follows.

In terms of food and pollution, however, the most significant element of *The Raw and the Cooked* involves the two famous triads of, firstly, raw, baked and boiled, and secondly, raw, cooked and rotten. In "The Wedding,"<sup>27</sup> the final chapter of his book, Levi-Strauss discusses the nature/culture binary and the manner in which this relates to food. Concluding that raw food—food in the natural state—can either be cooked

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<sup>24</sup> Ishikawa, M., "Asserting Social Difference: Reading the Later Works of Nakagami Kenji," paper presented at biennial conference of Japanese Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne, Australia, 4–7 July 2011, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Levi-Strauss, C., *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 1*, trans. Weightman, J. and Weightman, D. (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 135.

<sup>26</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 319–342

and thereby drawn into civilised culture, or left to putrefy and rot, he also notes that boiling is a more thorough means of acculturating food than mere baking. Furthermore, Levi-Strauss provides a diagrammatic juxtaposition of the slow process of mouldy food becoming rotten against the fast process of food becoming corrupt or tainted and then burnt.<sup>28</sup> Although the ideas in *The Raw and the Cooked* are more nuanced and complex than can be elaborated upon here, it is clear that food has strong cultural significance. We might also note in Levi-Strauss' work a suggestion of the equally strong significance of physical functions, such as continence and/or incontinence, associated with both the consumption of food and the expulsion of waste from the body. From this perspective, although we have previously noted its subsidiary nature in the operation of ritual taboos in Japan, food remains a useful trope by means of which we can productively probe aspects of the exclusionary practices that mark Japanese society. This includes, as is the case in the films discussed here, the marginalisation of those associated with matters regarded as impure.

## RITUAL POLLUTION AND FOOD IN *DEPARTURES*

The 2008 film, *Departures*, directed by Takita Yôjirô, tells of aspiring cello player, Kobayashi Daigo. When Daigo's orchestra is dissolved, he returns with his wife, Mika, to his hometown in the north-western Honshu prefecture of Yamagata. Filmed against a backdrop of the awe-inspiring scenery of the Yamagata Alps, *Departures* skates perilously close to evoking the nationalistic "rurality as essence" discourse that Millie Creighton identifies in her study of domestic travel advertising campaigns in Japan.<sup>29</sup> As Creighton argues, these highly successful campaigns exhort work-weary, city-dwelling Japanese to travel to the provinces where they can cleanse themselves by discovering the true pre-modern heart of the nation. In *Departures*, however, this disconcerting direction is disrupted when, attracted by a misprint in a newspaper job advertisement, Daigo applies for work at N.K. Agent, which he believes to be a travel business. Instead, he finds himself in the office of a *nôkanshi*—hence the N.K.—a mortician-like occupation which involves preparing dead bodies for casking. Although initially reluctant—could a person who has never seen a corpse, he asks, successfully do such a job—he eventually accepts. Concerned,

<sup>28</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 339.

<sup>29</sup> Creighton, M., "Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry," *Ethnology* 36, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 239–254.

however, that his wife will respond unfavourably to his decision, he conceals the nature of his new-found work.

Daigo's concern relates to his fear that Mika will regard the work as ritually impure. Initially, the oppressive nature of the social exclusion associated with ritual impurity is elided here by humour. There is the misunderstanding resulting from the misprint in the newspaper advertisement, followed by Daigo's second day of paid work requiring him to play the role of a corpse for a training video being made by his boss.<sup>30</sup> Here, he is tableauxed naked except for an incontinence diaper, his arms, neck and face caked in corpse-like make-up, looking timidly back over his shoulder, knees bent awkwardly inwards as he attempts to conceal the vulnerability of his body in a state of undress. In spite of the fact that Daigo is a good-looking young man, these scenes in the early stages of the film mark him as a "clown." In Ohnuki-Tierney's investigation of ritual pollution, which occurs in the context of the cultural significance of the monkey in Japan, the writer notes the social role of the clown. Coupling the clown with the scapegoat—whom we have seen assume the burden of social pollution—Ohnuki-Tierney observes that as a result of the performance of the "clown or trickster," the "world is toppled upside down for the audience." In this sense, she argues, the clown "[jabs] at the basic assumptions of the contemporary Japanese." Accordingly—and notwithstanding the process of scapegoating—"at the end of the play" the audience is left "contemplating, albeit vaguely, the meaning of the structure of their society."<sup>31</sup> We might view Daigo's early comic scenes, like the activities of Ohnuki-Tierney's clown, as working to unsettle the audience and prepare viewers for the more serious events to come that question assumptions about taboos related to death.

Daigo's first real day on the job sees him assist with the removal of the corpse of an elderly woman discovered in her apartment two weeks after her death. Reeling from the stench of decaying flesh, he retches violently as his boss all the while snaps commands such as, "The legs, take the legs." This ordeal concludes with a close-up of Daigo in the N.K. Agent office, pale, dishevelled and dazed. That night, when Mika places a bowl of fresh chicken pieces—complete with head—on the table, Daigo's memory of the harrowing events of the day is rekindled by the sight of the yellowish, fat-laced meat and he races to the kitchen sink for another round of retching.

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<sup>30</sup> In Japan, people are often referred to by their position. The word used throughout the film is *shachô*, literally company head, or person who runs the business. I translate the word here as "the boss." This is also the translation given in the sub-titles.

<sup>31</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *The Monkey as Mirror*, 37–38.

When Mika tries to calm him, he obsessively grasps her firm, living flesh, undoing the zip of her jeans and clutching her pelvis to his cheek.

The film eventually takes a decidedly sober turn and begins to probe overtly the socially excluding nature of ritual pollution. Rumours regarding Daigo's work have apparently circulated through the town. When he meets an old friend in the street, the friend, before hissing at his former school-mate to "get a proper job," refuses to let his wife and child talk to Daigo. When Daigo arrives home several days later, still having failed to explain the real nature of his work to Mika, she meets him stony-faced. A copy of the training video featuring her husband's performance as a corpse has fallen into her hands and she demands an explanation. An argument erupts, as Mika pleads with Daigo to "find a normal job." He shouts her down, however, retorting, "What's a normal job? I'll die, you'll die, we'll all die. Death is normal." When he moves to take hold of Mika, she resists and screams that he is polluted. With Daigo refusing to leave his job, Mika has no option but to depart for the home of her parents.

To this point in the film, while having a relatively low profile, food nevertheless plays a major role as a background filler and/or link between scenes. When Daigo returns home after the dissolution of the orchestra, an inviting bowl of food is on the kitchen bench. There is an encounter with an octopus that turns out to be still alive when Mika begins to prepare the evening meal. The home to which Daigo returns in Yamagata was operated as a coffee shop by his father and then, following his father leaving with a waitress, as a *sunakku*, small bar, by his mother. The first scene of the couple in their new home features them partaking of a meal. When Daigo goes for his interview at the N.K. Agent Office, he is greeted by the secretary who offers him tea served in fine china cups on a tray. The ritualised space of the tray with its delicate tea-set is in marked contrast to the drab and depressing surrounds of the office, with its coffins propped up against the wall. There are successive points in the film when N. K. Agent staff members consume tea from delicate, hand-painted china, providing brief respite from the more traumatic aspects of the business. When given several large value banknotes on his first day of work in return for doing little except consider the job, Daigo returns home to Mika with all the necessary ingredients, including the famous Yonezawa beef,<sup>32</sup> for a feast of sukiyaki. Wavering over whether or not to continue with his new job after his experience with the two-week old corpse, he is pursued by the boss who calls the young man to join him for "*meshi*," a meal. Early in Daigo's time

<sup>32</sup> Yonezawa beef, famously regarded as one of the "best-three" beefs in Japan—the others come from Kobe and Matsusaka—is a product of Yamagata, the area of Japan in which the film is set.

with the company, the pair is late for a casketing appointment and soundly berated by a particularly irate client, a middle-aged farmer who has lost his wife. However, when overcome at seeing the woman prepared for her coffin and looking "the most beautiful she had ever been," the bereaved husband rewards Daigo and his boss with a gift, clumsily wrapped in newsprint, of dried persimmons. As they drive away through the bleak Yamagata countryside, the two men proceed to consume this local delicacy with gusto, baring their teeth to tear large chunks of the dried fruits from the kebab-like sticks onto which they have been threaded. Recalling the consumption of the famed "riper" persimmons that rivalled the food of the Buddhist sutras featured in the 1932 masterpiece, *Yoshinokuzu* (Arrowroot),<sup>33</sup> by Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886–1965), the obvious relish with which Daigo and his boss eat the dried fruits confirms food as a powerful trope in this film that contests the polluting impact of death.

The culinary high point of *Departures*, however, comes when Daigo, having decided to part ways with N.K. Agent in order to win back Mika, is directed by the company secretary to his boss's private quarters on the top floor of their building. As he enters the staircase precinct, Daigo is amazed to discover that, in distinct contrast to the public confines of the office, the stair-well is decorated with a selection of thriving pot-plants. Sliding open the door to the quarters, Daigo finds his boss seated at a small table preparing a meal. The older man's form is framed by masses of luxuriant greenery, some flowering—a huge red bromeliad occupies the off-centre foreground of the shot—that leaves no doubt as to the life-affirming aspects of the mortician's social role.

After greeting his visitor by expressing concern that Daigo may not be eating adequately in his wife's absence and then observing that he is probably the better cook of the two, the older man invites the younger to join him to eat. The table at which the boss sits features a tea-pot and an array of small plates with various foods—the convention in Japanese cuisine is to present individual foods on individual plates. There is a fixed grill in the centre of the table upon which the boss lays the highly prized delicacy of a sac of puffer fish roe. Clearly aware of the dilemma facing Daigo and his wife, the boss obliquely observes of the mass of fish eggs they are about to consume, "Even this is a corpse. [...] The living eat the dead. Unless you want to die you eat." Pausing, he then continues, "And if you eat, eat well."

<sup>33</sup> Tanizaki, J., "Yoshinokuzu" (Arrowroot), in *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi and Arrowroot*, ed. and trans. Chambers, A. H. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

Offering Daigo a plump sac of grilled puffer fish roe liberally sprinkled, in the conventional manner, with salt, the boss gives a satisfied smile when Daigo clearly appreciates the taste of this idiosyncratically flavoured gastronomic delight. Consuming the roe himself by biting through the membrane and sucking out the myriad eggs within, he leans back with pleasure to deliver the film's most famous line, "Komatta hodo, umai." While the subtitle translation reads, "It's so good, I hate myself," a more accurate literal rendering might be, "It's so good, it distresses me," or, "It's so good, I can't bear it." Whatever the specifics of the English translation, the words demonstrate the devotion to food, to pleasure and to the forces of life practiced by Daigo's boss. The exchange clearly makes a significant impact on Daigo, since, in spite of the rupture with Mika this causes, he continues working for N.K. Agent.

Although there are several other peripheral scenes involving food in *Departures*—we see Daigo devour a huge French breadstick topped with tuna *sashimi* flavoured with a basil leaf plucked from a near-by pot-plant, and later snack enthusiastically on *o-nigiri*, seaweed wrapped rice-ball, while apparently rushing between jobs—there is one further important scene that merits attention here. Spending Christmas Eve with his boss and the N.K. Agent secretary, Daigo enthusiastically joins the pair in consuming a bowl of what appears to be soy-sauce flavoured broiled chicken. In an almost orgiastic scene of consumption, the three chomp their way without restraint through the pieces of chicken, ripping the meat from the bone with their teeth and gulping it down ravenously as fat smears their faces and fingers. When we recall Daigo's revulsion upon seeing the dismembered raw chicken on his first day of real work, we realise how far he has progressed in accommodating himself to the task of assisting the departing dead. In the context of Levi-Strauss's raw and cooked paradigm, it is useful to note that director Takita skilfully made the first chicken raw, a metaphor for Daigo's concerns at the time for death as polluted and outside the boundary of culture. In the second scene, however, the chicken is broiled, a marker in the Levi-Strauss schemata of thorough enculturation. It also suggests an understanding of the need for death to be an active part of civilised life rather than marked as unclean. The broiled chicken at Christmas scene further recalls Levi-Strauss's "duly controlled incontinence" on the part of heroes who can communicate with the adversary. This unrestrained act of eating, accompanied by gulping sounds of pleasurable swallowing and a clear comfort with the bodily nature of food consumption, suggests that the three N.K. Agent staff all have the necessary "duly controlled incontinence" to reach out and dispel the social

boundaries created by the more rigid, anally retentive and socially repressive "continent." Mika, too, eventually acknowledges the value of death. The film ends with Daigo preparing the corpse of his estranged father, observed lovingly by his wife who has returned expecting the couple's child. When the undertakers who come to remove the father's body protest his involvement, Mika—who recoiled previously from Daigo as polluted—calmly tells the men, "It's alright. My husband is a professional mortician."

Regarding Daigo's cello playing, Levi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked* is interestingly structured around a musical format. We might recall that, in spite of its title, *The Raw and the Cooked* is fundamentally a discussion of myth. According to Levi-Strauss, both myth and music have the capacity to "overcom[e] the contradiction between historical enacted time and a permanent constant." He further notes that "aesthetic enjoyment is made up of [a] multiplicity of excitements and moments of respite, of expectations disappointed or fulfilled beyond expectation." Citing Mallarmé on Wagner, Levi-Strauss goes on to suggest that the specifics of the response to music, as with the response to myth, "becom[e] actual [...] through and by the listener."<sup>34</sup> If we obliquely refract these comments back through the act of consuming food, we might conclude that the specific response to any given dish or meal must always be "through and by the eater."

## RITUAL POLLUTION AND FOOD IN *GEMINI*

As Mary Douglas notes, "ritual recognises the potency of disorder."<sup>35</sup> Tsukamoto Shunya's *Gemini* concerns the attempts of the elite to suppress the disorder threatened by the socially dispossessed and the tactic of scapegoating these groups by labelling them as ritually impure. The film is set just after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), a conflict that saw Japan as the first "yellow" nation to emerge triumphant against a European power. We might consider, then, the manner in which the authorities at the time appropriated the indigenous religion of Shinto and notions of pollution in the name of the nation state. Originally, while clearly concerned with pollution, Shinto also was a syncretic set of beliefs that operated at the local level where it attributed deity to almost all natural entities and devoted itself to ritual designed to revive the *ke* that had withered away. However, as a culmination of the tendency to "radical negativity" associated with ritual

<sup>34</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 94.

pollution, Shinto was transformed by the authorities of Imperial Japan into a device for, among other things, identifying and expunging the socially "unclean." As Helen Hardacre has explained, this created a brutal regime of containment and repression,<sup>36</sup> including against those regarded as impure. In addition to political dissidents, those so designated were, as mentioned above, generally associated with certain marginalised occupations or lifestyles. In *Gemini*, this group is the *kawara-mono*, river-bank people, who made their living as itinerant entertainers and sex-workers. A principal aim of this text is to investigate the disorder unleashed when the marginalised take over the centre, a possibility made real when the young protagonist doctor, Yukio, has his identity stolen by his twin, Sutekichi, who was abandoned as polluted when born with a snake-shaped birthmark on his thigh.

Visually lush and pulsing with detailed form and extravagant colour, *Gemini* is a frenetic work that opens to the pounding beat of an edgily chanting chorus. This effect is refrained many times throughout the film, sometimes in lingering fragments, sometimes in full and terrifying crescendo. The camera's first shot is a gruesome close-up of maggots squirming over the rotting carcass, especially the head, of a large mammal, an image of Levi-Strauss's "rotten" at its most confronting extreme. The sound of rats screeching triumphantly as they gnaw at the putrid flesh still attached to the bones provides a fitting syncopation for the driving throb of the soundtrack. If the lyrical *Departures* opens with high orchestral culture, *Gemini* immediately plunges the viewer to the depths of a visceral hell. With such different approaches it is not surprising, then, that the use of food in each movie also differs considerably. In *Departures*, food is a discreet thread through the fabric of the text, occasionally embellished—such as in the case of the puffer fish roe scene—but generally unobtrusive. In *Gemini*, however, food features mainly in two crucial scenes that, in effect, give the film direction.

Following the horror of the opening shots, *Gemini* moves to Yukio's consultation rooms. From the awed tones of patients we learn of his astounding surgical feats in field-hospitals during the war. When the first patient treated, an amputee army veteran, questions the doctor about his military service, Yukio confirms that he was decorated for service in the field with the famed Third Army at the Battle of Mukden, troops historically commanded by modern Japan's cult military hero, General Nogi Maresuke (1849–1912). The next patient is the son of a well-to-do family who has

<sup>36</sup> Hardacre, H., *Shinto and the State, 1868–1988* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

received very minor injuries in a quarrel with a child from the ritually "impure" river-bank people. The divide between the pure elites and the polluted "Other" is clearly drawn here at the outset when the doctor warns his young patient that the slum children carry *kowai byōki*, frightening diseases. Thoughts of impurity are dismissed, however, as the scene shifts to the family setting. In an unsettling hyper-sepia light, the mother sits on the glassed-in veranda drinking tea, while Yukio and his disturbingly beautiful wife, Rin, are together at an occasional tea-table in an adjoining room. Speaking intimately to his wife, Yukio first asks if "mother has stopped saying strange things to you" and then wonders if Rin can remember anything from her past—she has somehow lost her memory. From the distraught glances that the mother intermittently throws at the couple, it is clear she is not happy with her son's choice of wife.

And well she might be concerned. After Rin serves each parent tea, incurring the mother's displeasure for not having her kimono correctly tied—a loose kimono tie among the elite in this era in Japan might be likened to a loose corset among the pre-war English elite and a sure sign of lack of moral restraint—she returns to Yukio who assures her of his parent's support but also reminds her that their manner of meeting must remain secret. This is because Yukio first saw Rin standing naked on the river-bank. His arousal at this recollection is evident when, as substitute for a more erotic exchange, he suggestively pops a cube of sugar into his own mouth and then one into Rin's. The pair snigger and huddle together, all the while under the watchful eye of the anxious mother, who, instinctively aware that the pair is up to no good, summons Rin to help with the evening meal.

This family meal is one of the two key food scenes of the movie, confirming the refined consumption of food by the elite as a marker of, recalling Levi-Strauss, the "continence" of this group and its socially repressive structures. As the family gathers around the low Japanese style dinner table, we have an opportunity to observe each in more detail. Yukio's father, also a doctor, is gruff and confident of his entitlement to social privilege, while the immaculately attired and coiffured mother is a refined older woman, a stereotype of high samurai feminine stock. There is also Rin, Yukio's beautiful amnesiac wife, whose face, nevertheless, occasionally flashes both sullen and rebellious. This woman's exaggerated coiffure, we soon realise, is a clear marker of other excess. While the maids, too, have overblown hairstyles, unlike Rin's strangely plate-like horizontal coiffure, the styles of the maids are based on historical fashions of the time. In a display of suitably civilised restraint, the family graciously partakes of the meal. There is none of the relish or delight of the broiled Christmas chicken

feast in *Departures*; rather, the exaggeratedly delicate way in which the women, particularly, consume their meal recalls the maxim of the quality geisha never to sully her lips with her food. The men discuss medical ethics and when Yukio questions his father regarding the advisability of working to help the mortally wounded, the response is stern. The father reminds Yukio that it is "God's prerogative" for a doctor to save lives, at which point Rin drops a bowl, splashing soup across the table and disrupting the order of the meal. Her inability to be "continent" and control her food is a hint of what is already clearly her outsider status. Does she disagree with the doctor? Or is she struck by the contrast between what these doctors say and what they do in terms of their contempt for the river-bank people? The meal ends with Yukio's pondering on a pervasive sense of unease. Telling of a "shadowy fellow" whose eyes he sometimes meets, he notes that "this house has been starting to make my skin crawl." In spite of the family's best attempt to maintain order, food here incrementally moves from a marker of control to a sign of chaos.

Soon, the arrogant confidence of the patriarch and rigidity of the matriarch crumble with the growing presence in the house of the unseen force sensed by Yukio. There is an offensive smell, the source of which cannot be located and which no amount of scrubbing by the maids or Rin can remove. After the father bizarrely dies, a clod of pot-plant earth forced into his mouth, the mother comes face-to-face with the being sensed by her son. It is her other child, dressed zombie-like in rags and covered in filth, returned to wreak his revenge on the parents who discarded him and the son that they chose to keep. When the figure before her reveals the ridged snake-like mark that covers a third of the length of his thigh, the woman suffers a seizure and dies. Following the death of his parents, Yukio's disintegration begins. In a panic at the thought of contagion, he turns away a mother from the slums carrying a plague-stricken infant in order to treat the serious injuries of the local mayor, after which he and Rin quarrel violently over the rights of the slum dwellers to medical care. Not long after the quarrel, as he searches for Rin in the garden, he is set upon by his brother and thrown to the bottom of a well.

A river-bank performer, the intruding brother, Sutekichi, has had the family under surveillance for some time. It is perhaps his performance skills that assisted the abandoned twin to stealthily enter the house and, if not directly murder, then cause the death of his parents. It is his performance skills, too, that enable him to deceive the household into thinking that he is his twin. He closes the practice, citing fear of infection from the child with the plague, tells the maids to think of this as a vacation and proceeds to

settle in. He eventually even manages to conceal the birth-mark that saw him marked as corrupt. We might note that Sutekichi's first scene after assuming his brother's role is the refined drinking of tea with Rin. In a reference to the earlier tea-drinking exchange between Yukio and Rin, Sutekichi ostentatiously pops a cube of sugar into his mouth. This time, however, there is no sharing of cubes, a veiled hint of the sociopathic nature of this twin returned.

What, however, has become of the chosen son, now displaced by his brother? The corner of the spacious family garden has an old covered well. Having been lured to and pushed over the edge, Yukio—in a pose that is the worst nightmare of every elite—now crouches in the well-depths in utter abjection. As he vainly tries to climb the vertical walls that tower above him, the well-cover opens and Sutekichi appears. His first act is to empty a bowl of kitchen scraps on the twin in the well, after which he goads Yukio by noting that he will soon have sexual relations with Rin. Having whipped Yukio into the desired response of frenzied anger, Sutekichi snaps the lid shut and departs. There are a number of other scenes in which, having once again emptied kitchen scraps into the well, Sutekichi makes various threats which include injecting the surgery patients with his own piss.

However, Sutekichi's most confronting announcement comes when, having once more tipped kitchen scraps into the well and contemptuously questioned his brother about the latter's reluctance to eat this "polluted" food, he reveals Rin's background to Yukio. "I'll tell you a tale," Sutekichi taunts. "Want to hear? Don't want to hear?" This use of the ambivalent either/or structure marks a number of the intruder's spoken exchanges with his incarcerated brother. "Rin," Sutekichi triumphantly crows, "is one of those people who you despise most. She's a beggar woman, a woman of the slums." There is more, however. "And," Sutekichi declares menacingly, "she used to be my woman." At this point the camera reprises the opening scenes of rats on the carcass—this was Rin's environment. While back in the house, Rin retrieves her memory—was it ever really lost?—Yukio, in the well, is in darkest despair.

Unlike *Departures*, in which food is often given a minor profile, food in *Gemini* is largely confined to the two key scenes of the family meal in the first half of the text and Yukio in the well in the second. On this second occasion, it is the obsessive repetition of Sutekichi's taunting his brother that brings food to the fore. Eventually, spitting into the bowl of kitchen scraps he carries, Sutekichi tells Yukio that this heap of slop will be his last meal. When the left-over rice and vegetable pieces are emptied into the well, Yukio voraciously stuffs the moulding food in his mouth. In a dire contrast

to the family meal depicted at the opening of the film, we now see Yukio completely debased, a point that is emphasised by a flashback to the family members with all their refinement drinking tea when Yukio's parents were alive.

After revealing to his brother the circumstances of their birth, Sutekichi drops a knife into the well, inviting Yukio to end his suffering with his own hand. However, a shock is in store for Sutekichi—and for the film's viewers. When the imposter returns to make a final check on his incarcerated brother, he is attacked and killed by a creature that might be his brother or might be himself. At that point the twins are collapsed into one. How or when Yukio, his teeth coated in filth, escaped from the well is unclear, although there are hints that Rin, realising the extent of Sutekichi's evil, may have assisted. While it appears that order is now restored, this assumption is disrupted when Rin gives birth to twins, one of whom has a snake-like birthmark and is abandoned on the river-bank. Who fathered the infants? Will the cycle repeat itself? Is Tsukamoto priming his audience for a sequel? Whatever the future, the doctor—be he Yukio or Sutekichi—now includes the river-bank people in his rounds. The movie concludes with Rin asking a maid to prepare a meal, upon which Yukio exits the family property and following a beggar-like boy who is waiting in a lane nearby to apparently show him the way, marches across a hill heading for the community of river-bank dwellers. Will he tend to their ills? Or does he have other intentions in mind? The viewer is left to decide.

## CONCLUSION

Social exclusion as a function of ritual pollution is a historical characteristic of Japanese society that was further entrenched by the country's entry to the modern era. The movies discussed here focus on two distinctly different social groups and demonstrate the differing ways in which exclusionary practices have operated against these groups. In each movie, food is a key element in the narrative strategy adopted by the director in order to probe the social exclusion of those designated as ritually impure. In *Departures*, a film which suggests that discriminatory interpretations of pollution remain current in present-day Japan, director Takita uses a range of strategies, including profiling the joy of eating, to dismantle commonly held assumptions about pollution and death. The notion that both death and eating are levellers, and that both dying and eating are necessary aspects of life, is apparent in the protagonist's comment, "We'll all die," and his boss's

inference that we all must eat or die. While death might merit some attention through ritual, the film unambiguously exposes the misguided nature of the social exclusion of those regarded as "polluted" through contact with death. A more disturbing and ambivalent film, Tsukamoto's *Gemini* nonetheless also draws a strong link between pollution and food. The film initially uses imagery of the refined food consumption practices of the elite to suggest the rigid processes of social control that characterised Imperial Japan. Nevertheless, the shot of the once-privileged protagonist, prostrate in the pit of a well, ravenously shovelling handfuls of kitchen scraps—mixed with the filth of the well-cavity—into his mouth with his hands, also impresses upon audiences the polluting potential of food. While this film, with its visual excess and uncanny soundtrack, undoubtedly disrupts, it is less clear whether or not the text dismantles common assumptions regarding ritual impurity or social inclusion. Nevertheless, given the manner in which both films play with notions of the raw, baked, boiled and rotten, each ensures that audiences understand the great significance of food as a cultural trope, including in the context of pollution taboos.