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Wakao Ayako and Postwar Japanese Studio System:

Celebrity and Performer

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In the 1950s stars stood as the essential embodiment of the artistic and financial excellence that Japanese cinema was experiencing. It was in this decade that Wakao Ayako (1933-) debuted as an actress and soon achieved star status in the film industry. In 2010 she was proclaimed All Time Best Actress by the Japanese film journal *Eiga Hihō* (2010: 88). Wakao has also been reappraised internationally in recent years in programmes dedicated to the ‘Japanese Divas’ in both the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and the Toronto International Film Festival. Even though her star status is undeniable, the use of the concept ‘diva’ applied to the Japanese context is more problematic. Through the analysis of Wakao’s star image, I shall explore the meaning and form of stardom in postwar Japan and critically reflect on the application of the term ‘diva’ in this context. This article looks back into Wakao’s early career and focuses on the evolution of her star persona, from a celebrity as Daiei Studio’s new face, to a performer star from the late 1950s onwards. I will argue, however, that it is not a lineal evolution, but that Wakao has preserved until today a dual star

image intended for different audiences, and fulfilling different functions. In particular, Wakao's vocal performance will be analyzed as a significant feature in her star persona and its duality.

Since her debut in 1952, Wakao Ayako has starred in more than one hundred and fifty films and worked with directors such as Mizoguchi Kenji, Ozu Yasujirō, Masumura Yasuzō and Ichikawa Kon. Whilst one of the most popular film stars of postwar Japanese cinema, there is still little academic work, in Japan and elsewhere, on Wakao Ayako. Most of the existing literature on Wakao in Japan actually dedicates more space to the work of these legendary directors, and hence employs Wakao as a channel through which to approach the imaginary of the filmmakers (e.g. Yomota 2003, Sekigawa 2003). In these texts Wakao's image of strong will and passion is constantly emphasized; I consider, however, that this is only one facet of her star persona. Moreover, Wakao's interviews appear repetitive and over-constructed (Tanabe 2000: 14-24; Yomota 2003: 250-276; *Eiga Hihō* 2010: 89-90). The recurrence of the same anecdotes and comments on filmmakers in the interviews seem to indicate the highly structured manufactured nature of stardom in Japan. In the 1950s each major film studio employed biographers who were in charge of elaborating on the life story of the stars in order to highlight features that supported the specific image the studio had assigned to the actor or actress. This biography was made available to the media and the actor was to adhere to it when giving interviews (Watanabe 1998: 157).

Therefore, it is extremely difficult to access reliable information on Wakao's lifestyle and personality to clarify the extent to which she constructed and managed her own star image. Additionally, academia has mainly focused on Wakao's work in the 1960's with directors such as Masumura Yasuzō and Kawashima Yūzō. Based on the kind of characters she played in their films, academia has often offered a uniformed star image of Wakao as a sexualized and passionate woman. However, Saitō Ayako (2003) has presented a much more complicated and heterogenic view of Wakao's star persona. From a feminist perspective, Saitō has analyzed Wakao's functions as a star and her relationship with female audiences. She argues that Wakao's star image in the early years of her career is, from the point of view of the audiences, inscribed in a 'maternal feminine community', to later evolve into the representation of 'patriarchal heterosexual love'. Thus, according to Saitō, through this transformation Wakao shifted from being a site of identification for women into becoming an object of desire for men (Saitō 2003: 172). Whilst I agree with Saitō's analysis to a great extent, I argue that one image did not replace the other, but rather that Wakao switched back and forward between the two.

1. Early Career: The Charm of a Girl-next-door

Born in Tokyo, at the age of eighteen Wakao Ayako was recruited by the Daiei Studio in 1951 as part of the fifth 'New Face' group of the studio. The next year she debuted in *Escape the Town of Death* (*Shi no machi wo nogarete*, Koishi, 1952) with a secondary role. In that same year 1952 she already appeared in eight other films. In the first years of her career, Wakao was assigned roles of naïve but determined young girl, mostly in *hahamono* (mother films) and teenager films. In 1953 her popularity rose dramatically and Wakao became an idol star (*aidoru*) with her role in *Teenager's Sexual Manual* (*Jūdai no seiten*, Shima, 1953). Despite its title, which attracted many viewers for its erotic arousal and created a scandal around Wakao's star persona, *Teenager's Sexual Manual* had not a single sex scene but it rather resembled a high school sexual health class (Sekigawa 2003: 32).

In many of her early melodramas Wakao's characters seek a better life through hard work. For instance, in Mizoguchi's *A Geisha* (*Gion bayashi*, 1953) Wakao plays a sixteen-year-old girl, called Eiko, who is eager to become a *maiko* in order to escape her poverty-stricken and dysfunctional family. At the beginning of the film we see her learning how to play several traditional Japanese instruments, taking dancing lessons, and then at the *geisha's* house cleaning, cooking and sewing. All through this sequence she has an expression of concentration on her face, but no emotions are revealed. Eiko eagerly works to change her destiny and build a better future for herself. It is important to notice, however, that she does it within such a traditional Japanese cultural

environment. As the story develops Eiko experiences the dark side of the world of *geisha*, but her elder sister sacrifices herself to protect Eiko's innocence. Considering that this film was released soon after the end of the Allied Occupation (1945-1952), Wakao's character can be read as representing the successful modernization of Japan. This process would combine the cultivation and preservation of Japanese traditions and culture, with the assimilation of new democratic values of freedom and individualism; nevertheless, this modernization would also entail hard work and sacrifices from both the old and the new generations.

At the time, Wakao's image was, therefore, that of a common girl. The president of the Daiei Studio, Nagata Masaichi, used to refer to Wakao as *hikune no hana*, which literally means 'short flower' but could be translated as ordinary, or reachable. He was playing with the expression *takane no hana*, which means 'high flower' and is used to refer to something that is beyond your reach (Yomota 2003: 23). In *Eiga Fan*'s July issue in 1953, Wakao too referred to herself as a 'broad bean' (*sora mame*) in the world of film, in contrast to other stars with aristocratic and elegant looks (Watanabe 1998: 120). Therefore, Wakao exhibited no glamorous or exotic looks, but rather she was attractive for her charming sweetness and ordinariness. Moreover the studio as well as film magazines, such as *Eiga Fan*, stressed her appeal to the common people (*shominteki*) who could see in Wakao a girl from their own neighbourhood (Yomota 2003: 23).

Richard Dyer has defined star image as a ‘complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs’ organized ‘around themes of consumption, success and ordinariness’ ([1979] 1998: 34-5). Additionally, Dennison has highlighted the audiovisual nature of stardom, though often research on this subject focuses mainly on visual features (Denison 2008). In my experience talking with Wakao’s fans in Japan and elsewhere, most of them praise her voice as one of her most attractive features; nevertheless, in the existing literature on Wakao Ayako there is no analysis of her vocal performance. As one can perceive in her early films, such as *A Geisha* and *The Blue Sky Maiden* (*Aozora musume*, Masumura, 1957), Wakao had a deep voice for her age and did not use the popular high pitch tone, known as *kiroi koe*, that many girls and women in Japan use because it is considered feminine and attractive. I argue that her tone and elocution reinforced the image of ordinariness in her early career. Wakao’s voice was not pretentious or sweet, but rather plain and even inexpressive instilling an impression of down-to-earth frankness.

The Blue Sky Maiden is the story of Yōko (Wakao Ayako), a country girl who moves to Tokyo to live with her father and her foster mother and siblings where she is treated coldly as a maid. Whilst it is a typical Cinderella-like plot, Wakao has recalled in several interviews that Masumura removed the melodramatic emotionalism of it as ‘no one had done before in Japanese cinema’ (Wakao 2003: 266-7). Yōko is a dynamic and optimistic girl who shows great empathy towards

everyone. Due to her charming personality she enables other characters to create new bonds as well as to restore deteriorated family relations. Once again, it is her endurance through hardship without complaints that leads her to success and self-fulfilment. Wakao's character, therefore, could serve as a site of identification and hope to all those youngsters struggling to set out of dysfunctional families torn apart by war and poverty; as well as to those moving from the country side to the big city experiencing anxiety and loneliness. Yōko's vitality in the film is reinforced by her physical skills. For instance, in one occasion her foster siblings give a party for their wealthy friends where Yōko is serving drinks and cleaning up. However, one of the guests challenges her to play table tennis with him. Yōko plays barefoot and wearing her apron, and though both show great mastery, it is finally Yōko who wins the competition gaining the attention and respect of the guests. It is worth noting that this sporty image was also reinforced outside the films. Magazines, such as *Myojo* and *Eiga Fan*, presented Wakao as an energetic girl and stressed her healthy body by setting her pictures in sport and outdoors related settings; something that did not necessarily happened with other young stars (Figures 1-2; other examples can be found in the covers of *Eiga Fan*, September 1954 and August 1955; *Heibon*, August 1953; *Myojo*, August 1954, among others). Interestingly enough there is a pin-up of Judy Garland dressed up in sports clothes holding a tennis racquet (BFI Collection. Printed on Dyer 1986: 184) that is extremely similar to Wakao Ayako's cover picture of *Eiga Fan* November

1953 (Figure 1). As in the case of Wakao, Judy Garland's star image in her early career was not that of an elegant, beautiful girl, but that of a cheerful and healthy girl-next-door (BBC 1972); and it seems that for this purpose sport-related settings worked excellently for pin-ups in both star systems.

(Figure 1)

(Figure 2)

Fig. 1. *Eiga Fan*, November 1953¹

Fig. 2. *Eiga Fan*, July 1957²

On the other hand, the physical skilfulness that defined Wakao's early star persona can also be connected to the discourses of subjectivity (*shutaisei*) that became popular among Japanese philosophers and artists in the late 1940s. Discussions around subjectivity focused on the essence of the individual as well as the personal conscience and will, and the relation between the individual and society (Raine 2007: 155). Within this context, Tamura Tajirō (1911-1983), as a representative of the 'literature of the flesh' (*nikutai-ha*), for instance, claimed that democracy was intimately connected to the liberated carnal body in opposition to the militarist regime that had constantly repressed corporeal desires (Slaymaker 2004: 4). This line of thought can also be found, though in a more frivolous and hedonistic way, in the popular and controversial films of the Sun tribe (*taiyō*

¹ By courtesy of Kyoto Culture Foundation.

² By courtesy of Kyoto Culture Foundation.

zoku), produced by the Nikkatsu Studio during the summer of 1956. In these films, most of the main male characters play some kind of sport, and the display of the mastery of their physical skills functions as a representation of their strong individuality and determination. As in these narratives, Wakao's characters connect body and sport with subjectivity and individualism. However, in opposition to these radical political expressions of subjectivity through the liberation and mastery of the body, Wakao appeared as a healthy embodiment of individuality, one that was inoffensive for a more conservative reading of the democratic *shutaisei* and hence widely prescribed by different technologies of power, such as education and the media.

Joan Rockwell has argued that fiction legitimates emotions and values, so that if we identify with the actors or with the characters they portray, they may effectively transmit norms and influence our personal behaviour (1974: 80). This is especially relevant for the Japanese context since 'cinema reigned as the most prestigious and highly capitalized branch of mass culture in the late 1950s' (Raine 2000: 209). In this regard, I argue that, in the first five years of her career, Wakao's roles in postwar melodramas and youth films, as well as her image in the media, were intended to project a positive or even ideal image of youth, as hardworking and cheerful. A youth not traumatized by World War II and defeat, but one that provides hope for a bright and successful future for Japan. Her star image functioned to negotiate the anxiety aroused by the drastic transformation of the economic,

socio-political and domestic order, as well as to legitimate the values born under the influence of the Allied Occupation and the beginning of the economic boom.

The new Constitution, which had come into effect on 3 May 1947, guaranteed equality in the family, education, employment, and political representation, and hence brought women into the social, political, and economic domain, with significant consequences for the whole society. The American Occupation put gender at the centre of the political agenda, and the ‘new liberated Japanese woman’ was publicized through cinema and every other media. Some scholars have criticized the fragmentation and superficiality of the Occupation’s gender reforms which, they argued, actually responded to a hidden political agenda seeking to benefit American strategic interests in Japan and Asia (Liddle and Nakajima 2000: 153; Koikari: 2002: 25–6). Nevertheless, the social impact and historical relevance of the postwar gender reforms is undeniable. In this context, Wakao provided a positive model for other Japanese young women because she represented new ideas of social mobility, independence and equality, as well as modern gender roles as promoted through the American Occupation. On the other hand, in spite of their determination and independence, Wakao’s characters are not socially isolated or transgressive, but remain integrated in groups or communities such as family, friends, or co-workers. In the postwar era the abolition of the *ie* system (the feudal family structure) by the new constitution, and the reinforced expansion of

capitalist economies in Japan, motivated the increasing erosion of the extended family structure, as well as the relations of interdependence and reliance among family members. In response to this, Wakao's characters uphold traditional values of community that could provide emotional stability and security in a time of such confusion and anxiety to a nation embedded in rapid socio-political and economic change. Both in *A Geisha* and *Blue Sky Maiden*, for instance, not only does the heroine respect and follow the social conventions of duty and hierarchy, but she also helps creating and restoring lost or dysfunctional relationships among other characters, re-establishing harmony and a sense of community.

Additionally, though Wakao portrayed to some extent the new Japanese woman fostered by General Douglas MacArthur's offices of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), her films focused on communal relationships rather than the popular narrative of heterosexual romance. The Occupation had extensively promoted kiss scenes and sexual expression in Japanese film as the embodiment of individuality and democratic openness as well as a drive for women's liberation (Hirano 1992: 154-61). However, as Isolde Standish has argued, 'the myth of heterosexual romance became one of the narrative vehicles through which dominant constructions of sexuality are defined and the ideals of patriarchal society upheld' (2005: 193). That is, behind the liberating appearance of heterosexual and free romance (in opposition to arranged marriage) laid the

recontainment of women within patriarchy through roles of passivity and sacrifice (Standish 2005: 194). Though romance is present in most of the early films of Wakao, it is never the core of the narrative or the main aspiration of the heroine. Therefore, Wakao's star persona in the 1950s combined traditional Japanese values of community with contemporarily upheld values of individuality and social mobility brought about by democracy; but all without transgressing the economies of the patriarchy in general, and the studio system in particular. For these purposes, Wakao's appearance as an ordinary girl as well as her plain voice and physical dynamism performed excellently.

2. Wakao: Star as Celebrity

In 1953 Wakao had already appeared on the covers of the major fan magazines of the time, such as *Eiga Fan*, *Heibon* and *Myojo*. Her first cover in *Eiga Fan* was in November 1953, and since then she appeared regularly having even two covers within a year in 1957 and 1958. Wakao's pinup also became the last cover of *Eiga Fan* in August 1959, when the magazine ceased publication. Additionally, Wakao was selected by the readers of *Eiga Fan* as their favorite Japanese actress in both 1956 and 1957 (Watanabe 1998: 163, 178), ranking third after Misora Hibari (1937-1989) and

Yamamoto Fujiko (1931-) in 1958 (Watanabe 1998: 213). Based on this, Wakao's popularity is undeniable. However, what did film critics think about her? In 1959, Donald Richie wrote:

Perhaps most representative of those talented young actresses caught in the snares of type-casting is Ayako Wakao...condemned to an endless repetition of the role of the brainless young ingénue. Precisely what her many young fans want. (Anderson and Richie 1982: 410)

Whilst many of her early films can be said to be superficial as well as the characters she played somehow predictable, as I have argued, Wakao exhibited a singular performance style and her *naive* and ordinary star image fulfilled important emotional and social functions for audiences. Nevertheless, it is true that at this stage of her career, film critics did not pay much attention to her work (Yomota 2003: 29) and most did not even recognize the talent Richie saw in her. Wakao, however, was not an exception. Most of the popular young female actresses that were extensively promoted through fan magazines enjoyed the status of stardom but were overlooked by Japanese intellectuals and critics. What did it mean then to be a star in the postwar Japanese studio system?

In an article written for *Kinema Junpō* in 1963, film director Masumura Yasuzō, who was also a prolific film critic, reflected on the conditions to become a female star in postwar Japan. The actress had to be young and beautiful, but also unrefined and uncultivated (*teizoku*). According to

Masumura, ‘the great masters of cinema do not make stars, and there are no stars in masterpieces of cinema’ ([1963] 1999a: 138). Once her performance becomes in fact skilful and sophisticated, the actress is no longer a star ([1963] 1999: 139). This is quite a negative and even confusing definition of stardom, especially coming from someone inside the industry. A star for Masumura is barely an attractive adornment for a mediocre film, and hence the first step in the career of an actress more than a goal to achieve. In her analysis, Saitō too refers to the evolution of Wakao as developing from ‘star’ into ‘actress’ (2003: 157), hence mirroring nowadays this pejorative approach to stardom. Both Masumura and Saitō seem to consider stars as media and advertisement phenomena whose significance lies in their ability to appear in as many texts as possible (cinematic or not) and to attract fans, rather than in their performance skills or social meaning.

In a more positive approach to stardom, Christine Geraghty (2000) identifies three categories of stars: star as celebrity, as professional and as performer. A celebrity is characterized by intertextuality, appearing in numerous media; private life gaining more importance than the quality of the performance; and appealing particularly to young audiences (Geraghty 2000: 188). A professional is defined more by performative skills focused on film texts. The star-as-professional ‘makes sense through the combination of a particular star image with a particular film context’ and thus the star is often identified with a specific genre or role (Geraghty 2000: 189). Finally, the

star-as-performer is evaluated based on the work of acting, on the outstanding ability to impersonate diverse roles. For this the performer is legitimated with cultural value and his or her body attracts attention as a site of performance (Gerahty 2000: 191-3). Based on this classification, in the first stage of her career Wakao can be analyzed as a celebrity, where rather than her professional achievements as an actress, it was her intertextual image and presence which was key to her success. Hence, Saitō's understanding of stardom can be identified with Gerahty's conception of celebrity.

As stated above, Wakao was present in virtually every issue of *Heibon*, *Eiga Fan* and other film magazines. These publications provided an image of luxury and leisure that made stars look exceptional, out of reach for the common people, who could only aspire to fantasize through the pictures of parties, *haute couture* outfits and expensive cars. As Watanabe Yasuko –at the time a member of the editorial team of *Eiga Fan*– has explained, this was nevertheless just an illusion of luxury. Actors were very much aware of their need to appear in these magazines to maintain their star status so they did not charge for photographs and interviews; thus, *Eiga Fan* never paid any fees (Watanabe 1998: 112). The expensive cars had to be provided by the actors, but since many did not own one they would borrow it from a colleague. The clothes as well were borrowed from boutiques in Tokyo, swimming costumes being the most difficult item to obtain (Watanabe 1998: 112-3).

Though Japanese stars were far more humble in their appearance than their Hollywood counterparts, they certainly exhibited themselves as idols of consumption.

As Dyer has explained, however, stars can simultaneously represent contradictory features, i.e. being special or leading an opulent life while appearing ordinary in order to raise the expectation that anyone could become a star ([1979] 1998: 42-3). The image of ordinariness that could motivate an illusion of familiarity and enable identification was achieved through stories about the personal life of the stars. In the case of Wakao Ayako, these glimpses of the ‘real Ayako’ were given great prominence. For instance, many articles mentioned that she had lost her mother and brother at a young age, and how as the youngest of four sisters she used to take care of her father (Sekigawa 2003: 31). Wakao herself wrote a sentimental personal letter to her late mother that was published in *Eiga Fan* in 1954 (Watanabe 1998: 131). In this regard, Saitō has stressed that the attention given to these personal stories was the main cause of Wakao’s popularity, especially among young women (2003: 160). In 1956 the Social Psychology Research Institute (*Shakai shinri kenkyūsho*) conducted research on Wakao’s fan letters, the majority of which were written by young women. According to the analysis, the most recurrent keywords the fans employed to express their fondness for the actress were: adoration (*akogare*), a sense of familiarity (*shinkinkan*) and identification (*dōitsuka*) (*Kinema*

Junpō 1956: 105-6). Therefore, the ordinary facet of Wakao's star image overlapped with that embodied in her early films, i.e. a girl-next-door who faces hardship with a hopeful determination.

3. Acknowledged as a Performer

Wakao Ayako finally received critical acclaim in 1956 when she starred in Mizoguchi Kenji's last film, *Street of Shame* (*Akasen chitai*), which tells the story of five prostitutes working in a brothel in Tokyo's Yoshiwara district at the time the Diet is considering a ban on prostitution. According to Yomota Inuhiko, after her performance in *Street of Shame*, she could not return to the simple maiden roles she had played before (2003: 28). Most scholarship on Wakao agrees on considering this film a turning point in her career and hence marking 1956 as the beginning of what we could identify as a stage of star-as-performer. In this way, I argue, they simplify the evolution of her star persona in order to make it more consistent and accessible for research. However, I find it much more complex and fragmented. The fact is that, after *Street of Shame*, Wakao continue playing the kind of cheerful girl-next-door roles in films such as *The Blue Sky Maiden* (*Aozora musume*, 1957), *The Most Valuable Wife* (*Saikō shukun fujin*, Masumura, 1959) and *Tokyo Onigiri Girl* (*Tōkyō onigiri musume*, Tanaka, 1961), just to give a few examples. Moreover, her image in fan magazines still followed the same stereotype until the late 1950s. Thus, I would argue that rather than a radical change *Street of*

Shame triggered a split of her star persona. In the film, Yasumi (Wakao Ayako) is a cunning and self-conscious woman who, aware of the impossibility of continuing to work as a prostitute, manipulates men in order to pay her debt and set up her own business. Wakao's character is, as in previous films, still integrated in a group, the community of the brothel where she is deeply bonded to its members, though in quite a pragmatic way. She remains within standard social structures and gender roles, while taking advantage of those same 'labels'. Wakao's tone and diction are of course far more sensual and frivolous than in her earlier films. Nevertheless, there has not been a significant change in her vocal performance. For this reasons, I consider *Street of Shame* as an intermediate stage between the cheerful maiden star image and that of a sensual passionate woman.

The transformation of Wakao's vocal performance came later, particularly under the direction of Masumura Yasuzō. After her powerful performance in *A Wife Confesses* (*Tsuma ha kokuhaku suru*, Masumura, 1961), Wakao's voice and diction became one of the distinct trademarks of the second facet of her dual star persona. Trapped in a miserable marriage with a brutish old professor for whom she used to work as a research assistant, young widow Takigawa Ayako (Wakao) goes on trial for the murder of her husband in a mountaineering accident. While we try to discover whether there was actually an intention of murder, interlocking flashbacks reveal a potential affair with a young man named Koda (Kawaguchi Hiroshi, 1936-1987), also involved in the

accident. Ayako's attraction for Koda becomes obsessive beyond that which society would consider rational and morally acceptable. There is no doubt that Wakao's vocal performance played a crucial role in the characterization of the emotionally restless heroine of *A Wife Confesses*. In this psychological thriller her voice is extremely guttural and deep. She drags the words out, and repeatedly makes random pauses within sentences, as if trying to organize her troubled thoughts. It is so breathy that one can hear her inhaling and exhaling through the words. It feels somehow strikingly physiological, as if it were her body and not her psyche that governs her speech, as if every single thought and feeling were materialized in a bodily sensation or reaction that is in turn expressed vocally. Her voice, therefore, becomes a condensed expression of eroticism and anxiety. Masumura tended to be very meticulous and demanding about camera work and *mise-en-scène*, but did not usually give many directions on the actors' performance. It is said that it was Wakao who personally settled on this vocal approach to such a complicate character full of eroticism and desire. Impressed by Wakao's powerful vocal performance, Masumura insisted on polishing and dramatizing it even more in subsequent films they made together (Saitō 2003: 237).

From the late-1950s Wakao continued performing psychologically complex female characters as well as frivolous liberated roles. This second facet of star image, that of an erotic and passionate woman, became prominent especially in collaboration with filmmakers such as Masumura

Yasuzō (e.g. *Seisaku's Wife* [*Seisaku no tsuma*], 1965; *Tattoo* [*Irezumi*], 1966) and Kawashima Yūzō (e.g. *Women are born twice* [*Onna wa nido umareru*], 1961; *Temple of the Wild Geese* [*Gan no tera*], 1962 –Figure 3–). In these films Wakao's body often becomes a central element in the narrative and is exhibited as object of desire. Thus, sexuality and romance become conspicuous; experienced by the heroine as a tool to manipulate others, as a means to reach fulfilment or as an addiction that leads her close to insanity. Compared to the facet of maiden star image, in these films it is not only the innocence and cheerfulness that have disappeared. In general terms, these characters are no longer part of a community. They are isolated women and self-conscious individuals who hold a strong egoistic will that will often lead them to attitudes and choices that defy social standards of morality.

(Figure 3)

Fig. 3. *Temple of the Wild Geese* (*Gan no tera*, Kawashima, 1962)³

Here heterosexual romance is no longer presented as a myth of democracy or a celebration of the individual's right to choose, as it was commonly represented in the 1950s. Despite some exceptions, romance tends to be either self-interested or self-destructive. This turn towards a rather egoistic alienating individualism can be connected to the disenchantment felt by many people more

³ By courtesy of Kadokawa.

than fifteen years after the end of World War II. The promises of equality, social mobility and freedom of choice so extensively publicized by SCAP had not materialized for many. The thriving economy swept along the Japanese people like a raging sea, propelling some to the crest of the wave while others struggled not to drown. As politically active filmmakers of the 1960s such as Ōshima Nagisa (1932-2013) and Yoshida Yoshishige (1933-) expressed in their work, it was also a time of disenchantment with communism and former social movements that promised a revolution. In a similar fashion, women had not reached the equality guaranteed by the Constitution. For instance, the heroine of *A Wife Confesses* finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage that she did not want, unable to get a divorce from her sadistic husband, and denied, as an educated woman, a professional career in order to fulfil her 'wifely duties'. I believe Wakao's characters in Masumura and Kawashima's films often expressed, though in very different ways, the turn to more radical individual subversion against society consistent with this political and social disenchantment.

Returning to Geraghty classification of stardom, it can be said that since her appearance in *Street of Shame*, Wakao became perceived as a star-as-performer. That is, her acting, the interpretation of complicated roles was where her fame rested. As a result, high-browed film journals, such as *Kinema Junpō* and *Eiga Geijutsu*, increasingly covered Wakao's performances. Additionally, in 1962 and 1966 the Kinema Junpō Award and the Blue Ribbon Award –granted by

an association of film critics and journalists— for best actress were both conferred upon her. Wakao became the prototype of Masumura's female heroine (Yomota 2003: 51) that would be replicated by other actresses working with this director in subsequent years. This star image was publicized in film journals of the time and it still is in contemporary retrospectives, which barely mention Wakao's early or later films from the 1970s onwards. Whilst these roles of self-conscious and passionate woman legitimated Wakao as a star-as-performer, she felt Masumura's vision of 'woman' was too fixed and limited and stated that 'women are not only this' (Saitō 2003: 145). Thus this star image is yet another stereotype of femininity, this time that of the erotic and dangerous woman. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that fan magazines of the time show a slightly different image of Wakao. In the cover of *Eiga Fan* August 1959, she appears more provocative than her previous pinups in this publication (printed on Watanabe 1998: 212). Nevertheless, the expression on her face does not exude the *femme fatale*-like eroticism stressed in, for instance, Masumura's works and the more serious film journals. Unfortunately, since this became the last number of *Eiga Fan*, it is not possible to examine her later star image through this magazine, which is the one most closely analyzed here. Yet this last cover hints at the fact that her new star image did not completely replace the previous one but rather developed in parallel.

As stated above, according to Geraghty, the performer's body is emphasized as a site of performance, rather than as a spectacle. Wakao's body, however, was certainly exposed in both cinema and film journals also as an erotic object of visual pleasure. For instance, in the mid-1960s she frequently appeared in *Eiga Geijutsu's* articles on *nikutai eiga ron* (theory of the flesh films), where the trend of films exhibiting the body, and their appeal and possibilities were discussed. What is striking is that while journals praised her performance as well as her body, in reality, the semi-nudes scenes of Wakao inserted in films such as *Tatoo (Irezumi, Masumura, 1966)* were actually performed by anonymous models and not by Wakao herself (Wakao 2000:18-20). That is, we admire this unknown body as that of the star, attributing to it her extraordinary charisma as though in this instant we were enjoying a privileged access to her intimacy. Therefore, while the recurrent representation of Wakao as an object of sexual desire seems to complicate her status within Geraghty's classification, the fact that she did not perform these scenes may have legitimated Wakao as a star-as-performer, differentiating her from other actresses who exposed their bodies in films, and hence would rather be considered as star-as-professional, i.e. a consistent persona connected to a particular genre whose body is emphasized as spectacle.

I have explained that Wakao's star image is by no means as consistent and clear-cut as it may seem. In regard to the way stars signify, Richard Dyer refers to 'structured polysemy' as the

way in which stars can embody contradictory ideals within a text or through different texts presenting ‘multiple but finite meanings’ ([1979] 1998: 70–2). Based on this, I would argue that Wakao Ayako was able to maintain simultaneously both star images: that of a blissful woman integrated and emotionally bonded to a community, as her later role in *Tora-san's Shattered Romance* (*Otoko wa tsurai yo- Junjō hen*, Yamada, 1971) proves; and that of a erotic egoistic woman isolated from society that she continued to portray principally in Masumura’s films. Several factors may have made this duality possible. First of all, the type of roles she was cast for within Daiei and the studio system. More importantly, her ability to enact different performance styles through her voice modulation and diction. For instance, in *Tora-san's Shattered Romance* we perceive again a plain slightly deep voice that transmits frankness and ordinariness; and there is no trace here of the breathy guttural vocal performance filled with eroticism. Thus, the evolution of her vocal performance is not lineal and we cannot set a film or a year as a turning point. The duality within cinematic texts was reinforced by the polysemy we find in film magazines and journals, and both were made feasible partly through the increasing diversification of audiences in cinema and other media related to the industry from the 1960s onwards. Therefore, due to her appeal to distinct audiences that presumably consumed different media products related to cinema, Wakao could personify simultaneously divergent political and gender discourses. In other words, that of a woman

integrated in a community who successfully combines modernization with Japanese traditional culture and values; and that of an erotic individualistic woman who defies society and its morals. Moreover, the duality of her star image can still be perceived nowadays in her appearances in different media.

4. Is there a diva in Wakao Ayako?

Whether as celebrity or as performer, Wakao's star status is undoubted. However, can we refer to Wakao Ayako as a diva? This term was not used at the time in the Japanese context, and as I have explained the term 'star' in Japan is also more problematic than it may seem at first glance. A diva, as a term in cinema is virtually always used in reference to female stars, and is often understood as an image of some essential qualities that extend beyond the human, a divine charisma that captivates in an emotional, physical and intellectual way. Hence, it can be connected to essentialist gender discourses that link the woman to the supernatural, the mysterious, and the unreasonable.

In this regard, Masumura wrote about the highest level an actress could seek to achieve as becoming a *miko*, or priestess of a sanctuary ([1980]1999: 151). In selecting this term, Masumura links the actress' charisma to the spiritual and the supernatural, similar to what the term 'diva' may

suggest in Western discourse. He specifically mentions Wakao in this article as his first example, while in another text he refers to her as shining with the ‘flame of life’ ([1963] 1999b:142). According to Masumura, in order to achieve this priestess’ aura an actress must fulfill four requirements. She should not be too intelligent because an excess of rationality would restrain her ‘from bringing her instinctive inner self out’. She should not have fixed ideas or she will aim to be too close to the ideal standards of a time or a place and hence perish with it. Neither should she be too emotional. Finally, she needs to be a hard worker (Masumura [1980] 1999: 151). A *miko* should be strong of spirit and somewhat stubborn, full of physical and mental energy. When an actress ‘strips herself of common sense and consciousness and directly exposes her inner instincts’, her essence; in that instance she becomes this priestess of cinema ([1980] 1999: 151). I would argue that a diva, or an actress turned into priestess, may serve as a liminal site between the individual and society that provides a unique condensation of fears and desires through the popular imaginery.

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