



Carel, H. H. (2011). In the Grip of Grief: Epistemic Impotence and the Materiality of Mourning in Shinya Tsukamoto's *Vital*. In H. Carel, & G. Tuck (Eds.), *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*. (pp. 240-255). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.. DOI: 10.1057/9780230294851\_15

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1057/9780230294851\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294851_15)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Palgrave Macmillan at [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230294851\\_15](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230294851_15). Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/about/ebr-terms.html>

# **In the Grip of Grief: Epistemic Impotence and the Materiality of Mourning in Shinya Tsukamoto's *Vital***

Havi Carel

“Until you remember you cannot forget” (Greg Tuck)<sup>i</sup>

## **In the grip of grief: synopsis**

When someone close to us dies, we usually say that we are with them ‘in our thoughts’ or that they remain alive in our minds. The film *Vital* (Shinya Tsukamoto, Japan, 2004) challenges this disembodied view of grief by posing the following question: what would grief be like if we could keep the dead with us not only in our memories, but materially? The film provides an intriguing answer to this question, provided through a unique setting, that of a medical school dissection class. Despite the macabre setting, Tsukamoto’s aim is not to shock but to offer an intense meditation on the embodied nature of mourning.<sup>ii</sup>

*Vital* tells the story of a medical student, Hiroshi (Tadanobu Asano), who was involved in a car crash, which caused him memory loss and in which his lover, Ryoko (Nami Tsukamoto), died. The film opens with Hiroshi waking up in the hospital. He cannot recognise his father’s face, or remember the accident. He recovers physically and returns to his parents’ home, but his memory is still inaccessible to him. Once at home, Hiroshi discovers his medical textbooks hidden behind a wood panel and decides to resume his studies, which he has left before the accident.

Hiroshi returns to medical school, but still cannot remember events that took place before the accident, or the accident itself. He excels in his studies, but remains socially isolated and rejects the attention of Ikumi, a beautiful student who was previously involved with one of their lecturers. The class embarks on a four-month dissection course. When he begins his dissection training, Hiroshi becomes obsessed with the cadaver assigned to him. At first, it is unclear why, but it transpires that the cadaver Hiroshi is dissecting is that of his dead lover, Ryoko.

Hiroshi continues dissecting Ryoko’s cadaver, in the hope that he will discover the cause of her death and regain his memory. As Hiroshi progresses in his dissection of Ryoko’s cadaver, his memory gradually returns. But as his memory returns, he comes to view the flashback scenes shown to him and us not as memories, but as *real* encounters with Ryoko, taking place here and now. Hiroshi visits

Ryoko's parents, to tell them about these encounters. Ryoko's father tells him how insistent Ryoko was to donate her body to medical school and that her body would go to the medical school at which Hiroshi was studying. She wanted to be with him after her death and this was her way of guaranteeing it. The film ends with Ryoko's cremation, with Hiroshi clutching at the coffin and being restrained while the coffin enters the incinerator.

The final scene opens with a black screen, with Ryoko's voice asking: "If you could see some part of your life again, years after you die, which part would you choose?" Hiroshi replies with a story that has obsessed him throughout the film, that of "the last images of the last Martian robot. Mankind's final memory". Ryoko gently rebukes him for not truly understanding the nature of her question. She then says: "as for me ...". The scene cuts to Hiroshi and Ryoko standing in the rain laughing. But we see only Hiroshi, blurred in a close-up shot. This is a point of view shot taken through Ryoko's eyes, as it were, looking at Hiroshi. Ryoko says: "it smells wonderful".

### **The materiality of mourning**

*Vital* portrays mourning experienced under unusual conditions. Whereas usually the physical body of the dead person is gone, here it is present. Hiroshi caresses Ryoko's body, cuts it open, explores it. Her body is attended to in almost every scene in the film. Whereas usually we engage with the deceased through memory, here it is absent. To begin with Hiroshi cannot recall anything about the accident, and little about Ryoko. Thus the film presents to us a negation of mourning: instead of a flood of memories and an absent body (its absence marked by a disposal ceremony), here we have no memories and a present body.

How does mourning take place under such conditions? In this chapter I will explore two trajectories of such mourning. The first is the epistemic process Hiroshi undergoes. In order to mourn Ryoko, he must first remember their shared past. His journey from epistemic impotence - complete amnesia - to fully recollecting their shared past and particularly the crash in which she died is also a journey of mourning. In order to mourn, a process of overcoming or forgetting (in some sense), Hiroshi must first remember. The film examines the roles memory and forgetfulness play in mourning.

The second trajectory, uniquely captured in *Vital's* unusual setting, is the haptic nature of Hiroshi's mourning, paralleled by haptic cinematic techniques. Hiroshi's mourning is a tactile engagement with Ryoko's cadaver but also a process of reacquainting himself with the world. Two haptic processes take place in the film: one of closure, the other of opening up. The first process is Hiroshi's

gradual remembrance of Ryoko and their shared past through exploring her cadaver. This remembrance is a prelude to mourning, a process of closure and ending. The second is Hiroshi's reunification with the world, which he must learn to inhabit anew after his accident. This is a process of regeneration, rebirth and reparation. Throughout most of the film Hiroshi is bewildered, puzzled, overwhelmed by the world. Like the film itself, Hiroshi tries to make sense of the world by engaging with its textures, surfaces, images and colours. This hermeneutic process is depicted via a phenomenological study of Hiroshi's movements, touch, hearing and reflexivity.<sup>iii</sup> This phenomenological focus is mirrored in the viewer's reactions to the film. The film moves, touches, disgusts and awes the viewer in a process parallel to Hiroshi's.

Dissecting Ryoko's physical body is not only a search for a cause of her death, but also a search for answers to metaphysical questions Hiroshi pursues throughout the film. Questions about the nature of consciousness, the ontological status of memories, and the relationship between mind and body are all part of his quest. Hiroshi, and other characters in the film, are also preoccupied with another key philosophical question about the nature of death and the transition from life to death. This transition is also a transition from sensual experience to its complete absence, and this is explored in the film in shots of a black screen, and with abrupt cuts and edits.

These two trajectories, the epistemic and the haptic, are not separate. *Vital's* edifying force arises from the inseparability of the intellectual, epistemic process and the haptic, sensual process. Both are tied together in the notion of the human body, in which knowledge is always founded upon the sensual, and in which the haptic is not raw sense data, but meaningful engagement with the world. Moreover, a key condition for being able to meaningfully understand sensual experience arises from having a sense of perspective, a position and a body from which to look. The film contains shots of objects that leave us confused, because we do not know where we are looking from. We do not know if we are gazing through a telescope at an enormous planetary object, or through a microscope at a single cell.

What enables us to understand and assign meaning to what we are looking at is the sense of perspective, distance and size, all of which are anchored in the human body. Thus the body is key to *Vital's* ideas in several respects. It is the focus of study (the dissected body), of recovery (Hiroshi's body after the accident), of love and lust (Ryoko's body, both before and after the accident), and of knowledge (providing a perspective and size to the images). Looking without a body would be impossible, says Tsukamoto, and this lesson applies to the viewer as much as to the characters in the

film. Thus the human body becomes not only the focal point of events in the film, but also a condition of possibility for viewing the film. This idea forcefully culminates in the film's final shot, of Hiroshi seen *as if from Ryoko's eyes* (close-up and blurry).<sup>iv</sup>

This philosophical idea is expressed through a specific medium: cinema. I suggest that cinema is uniquely able to convey the relationship between the epistemic and the haptic, between knowledge and embodiment, through its ability to impart both intellectual knowledge and sensual experience in a way that other media cannot, and moreover to synthesise the two. By showing how the two processes are linked Tsukamoto provides us with a view of the human body as a source of knowledge as well as sensuality, thus synthesising what Merleau-Ponty called the 'intellectualist' and 'empiricist' approaches into a third way (1962, p.98ff). As this chapter will show, the body as the locus of meaning, knowledge and mourning plays a central role in the film, as well as in the experience of viewing it.

### **From epistemic impotence to epistemic mastery (and back)**

The question of knowledge, in its many forms and domains, is central to the film. Tsukamoto is famous for his interest in the aberrant body: the dead body (*Vital*), the body in pain (*A Snake of June* (Japan, 2002)), the hybrid body (*Tetsuo* (Japan, 1989)). I suggest that this interest should be understood within an epistemic context. In *Vital* in particular, but also in *A Snake of June*, the keen focus on the body is intimately linked with a quest for self-knowledge.

*Vital* shows us different kinds of knowledge which interweave throughout the film. First there is the complete absence of knowledge. The opening shot shows us amorphous and overlapping images to dissonant sounds. The images provide no sense of perspective or size. The dark sphere we see slowly rotating can equally be the earth or a tennis ball. Because of a lack of perspective and relationship to the object shown it is difficult to make out what it is that we are seeing and hearing. Although we are given sense data in the form of images and sounds, this is not enough. They have no meaning and no magnitude, because they lack a relationship to a human body. At this stage they are pure sensory input presented to the viewer with no interpretation. The epistemic impotence is not a result of a lack of sensory input, but a lack of meaning. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "Pure sensation would be the experience of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, dot-like impact... An isolated datum of perception is inconceivable" (1962, pp.3 & 4).

This epistemic state of complete lack of knowledge is analogous to Hiroshi's bewilderment, whose face, whirling round and bandaged, appears next. We see Hiroshi lying in a hospital bed, after the car crash. He cannot recognise his own father and does not know where he is or what happened to him. Like the viewer, he, too, is epistemically impotent. This is Hiroshi's starting point, from which he will begin his quest for knowledge and self-understanding. This quest takes us from theoretical to practical knowledge, then on to factual knowledge of one's past, and finally to existential self-knowledge, which coincides with reparation at the end of the film.

The first type of knowledge Hiroshi acquires is theoretical knowledge; textbook knowledge mastered in his medical studies. Next comes practical knowledge – knowledge of medical skills like dissection and cultivating bacteria in a Petri dish – in which Hiroshi excels. These kinds of knowledge are the first to be explored in the film and are *phenomenologised* by Tsukamoto's camera work and lighting.<sup>v</sup> When Hiroshi studies anatomy from a textbook, he does not merely look at the pages, he touches and caresses them. When he practices in the dissection room he does not treat the cadaver as a corpse, a source of emotional distress and stench, but as a locus of creativity. His beautiful anatomical sketches, reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci, bring to life the beauty and complexity of the human body, etched from the stillness of a corpse.<sup>vi</sup> He touches the corpse, engages with it, deft with both pencil and knife. This practical, even artistic, view of dissection connects us to a unique view of the dead body. It is not merely a site for disgust and sorrow, but a source of learning. For Hiroshi, who eventually realises he is dissecting Ryoko, the contact with the cadaver is sensual as well as epistemic.

The connection of embodiment and knowledge brings Hiroshi to the next stage in his journey. Next comes the visceral knowledge of love, intimacy and lust, as experienced by Hiroshi and Ryoko, and also by Hiroshi and Ikumi.<sup>vii</sup> As Hiroshi's medical studies advance and as he recovers his memory we begin to see glimpses of this visceral knowledge. It is not a happy one. It bears the tones of adolescent first love, with all its pain and tempestuousness. But it is at the base of Hiroshi's being and recovering his memories of being with Ryoko enable him, to some extent, to bond with Ikumi. We see Hiroshi lying in bed, less guarded and fragile. This is the first glimpse of his healing, symbolised by a more receptive, less numb Hiroshi.

This visceral knowledge is introduced towards the middle of the film. At this stage, Hiroshi remembers Ryoko and their time together but he does not yet remember the crash. The flashback scenes are filled with references to a dream which Hiroshi cannot remember and talk of a science

fiction story in which mankind has died out but succeeded in downloading its memories to robots. This science fiction story itself seems to function like a kind of downloading device for memories that Hiroshi is struggling to retrieve. This analogy is made clear only in the closing sequence of the film, to which I come later.

The dissection scenes are not unlike a morbid yet sensual undressing of a lover. The more layers come off Ryoko's body, the deeper into her flesh Hiroshi cuts, the more he *knows* her.<sup>viii</sup> But he has still not seen her face. The cadavers' faces are covered in cloth. When the time comes to study the facial muscles, the instructor tells them to remove the cloth. We see Hiroshi slowly uncovering Ryoko's face, and that is when he remembers the accident.

The scene in which he recollects the accident begins with another memory. Hiroshi wakes up from sleep, and tries to remember his dream. This takes place in a complex flashback, which gives us content that is thus thrice removed from reality: Hiroshi is recollecting a moment in which he has woken up from sleep and tries to remember a dream that is itself unreal. Hiroshi's attempt to recollect a recollection of something that is not real is later contrasted with the achingly real scenes of meeting Ryoko. Despite his father's rebuke that these events must be memories, Hiroshi insists that these meetings are real; that he is *spending time with*, not remembering, Ryoko. In this insistence Hiroshi plays out a particular tension in the film, that between the experiential and emotional intensity of these scenes, which are also the most ontologically ambiguous. The film seems to indicate that Hiroshi's time with Ryoko, be it memory, fantasy, or a real encounter, is more vivid and significant than the other scenes, which are more 'real' but in which Hiroshi is emotionally and sensually numb.

Just before this recollection scene begins, we see a close-up shot of a match being struck, briefly lighting the whole screen. When seen in real time, all we see is a flash illuminating our visual field, then disappearing. This is the flash of knowledge, at which Hiroshi finally remembers several things. He remembers the accident; he remembers what Ryoko said in the moments preceding it; and he remembers remembering his dream. Something inside him unravels at this moment. This elusive dream seems to somehow encompass the answer to his barely formulated questions about the nature of memory and its relationship to embodiment.

We see Hiroshi driving a car with Ryoko sitting beside him. Ryoko asks what it would be like to die in a car crash. Hiroshi does not answer. A moment later he says: "I remembered the dream I had", as

he turns to Ryoko. It is *at this moment* that the accident starts, not when they hit the truck. A screeching sound startles us and we see Hiroshi, frozen, and Ryoko, calmly looking at the windscreen, as a truck veers towards them. The terrible noise continues and the screen turns to black and white images. We see Hiroshi on the ground, struggling to get up. We do not see Ryoko.

This pivotal scene immediately cuts to an outdoors scene filmed in natural light. The lush, green, exterior and the bright daylight sharply contrast with the preceding black and white scene, as well as the colour register used previously (which will be examined below). We see Ryoko moving in a graceful slow-motion dance. We then see Hiroshi and Ryoko naked, hugging, the distance between them removed for the first time in the film. Although Hiroshi has several flashbacks of him with Ryoko, this is the first time that they are truly reunited. And the reunion is made possible by Hiroshi becoming able to connect with something inside him that he has been resisting so far: his grief. His ability to remember is also what enables him to mourn.<sup>ix</sup>

This leads us to the final type of knowledge portrayed in the film, existential or self-knowledge. This knowledge is linked to metaphysical knowledge. Hiroshi's quest to understand Ryoko's death is a quest for all three: for emotional knowledge (the ability to mourn), for self-knowledge (knowing whether he is responsible for her death and what he wants) and for metaphysical knowledge (understanding the link between consciousness and embodiment, or remembering his 'dream'). Ryoko's lifeless, broken body is a source of metaphysical insight. Indeed, Tsukamoto's inspiration for the film was a period of illness, which gave rise to a metaphysical question about the mind/ body relationship. He says: "It was a scary experience because it was almost as if my body was dead, while my brain was fully alive and functioning. That was actually the source of inspiration for *Vital*, the idea that consciousness can survive inside a lifeless body" (Mes, 2005, p.185).

In terms of colour and lighting, the film is divided into 'blue', 'red', 'yellow' and 'natural light' scenes. These roughly correlate with the three dimensions of Hiroshi's grief. We see epistemic, blue scenes, in which Hiroshi tries to understand something intellectually. These scenes are both aesthetically pure and emotionally sterile. Blue here is the colour of disembodied intellectual understanding, mediated by computer screens, windows and an ultra-modern urban landscape. There are emotive red scenes, in which Hiroshi makes existential and emotional progress. These scenes show us Hiroshi engaging in acts of self-understanding, or conversing with others in a face-to-face direct way.



There are also many yellow scenes; all located in the dissection room, evoking the formaldehyde-drenched rooms full of cadavers and deprived of natural daylight. Yellow here is the colour of death and decay, of artificial preserving of dead flesh. And finally, there are a handful of scenes shot in natural light and outdoors, in which Hiroshi spends time with Ryoko dancing on the beach, watching the sunset by a river, and sleeping in the sun. While visually 'natural' these scenes are 'existentially' synthetic, in which intellect and emotion, concepts and sensual information, merge. The natural light enables us to see all colours, and vitally the relationship between them; we see shots of red flowers, greenery, blue water, orange sunset, pale sand.

In the same way that the natural light enables us to see the different colours, the synthesis of intellectualism and empiricism enables a new notion of the human being to emerge, perhaps in what Stanley Cavell might call the film's rediscovery of the ordinary. The synthesis is double here. First, the empiricist insistence on the significance of sensory information is unified with the intellectualist emphasis on concepts and reason, to create a much more sophisticated view of perception. Second, mind and body are reunited in these scenes, in which sensuality of vision, touch, eroticism and sound overcomes the prior separation of mind and body. It is the *haptic* nature of these scenes, infused with sensuality and *eros*, which displays the centrality of perception and the unified view of mind and body. We can also think of the scenes' intentional object as erotic – the living body of Ryoko, as opposed to her cadaver.

This use of colour also serves to illustrate the changing relationship between the people in the film and their environment. Greg Tuck has written about the use of monochrome tint in another Tsukamoto film, *A Snake of June*. Tuck writes: "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" (2005, p.51). We see this intimate link between environment and people in *Vital* as well. The blue, red and yellow permeate not just the spaces, furniture and buildings, but also the people shown in these scenes. They become infused by and washed with the colour, which serves both to connect them to their environment and to set them in a certain mood.

What the blue, red and yellow scenes have in common is that they are all scenes of an urban environment and constrained spaces. Hiroshi moves within and touches buildings, walls, concrete, glass and metal. He is constrained by his environment, numbed by it, and his behaviour is careful, restrained. Many of the scenes show him in an enclosed space: his room in his parents' house, his

rented flat, the dissection room, hospital corridors. In the few scenes in which he is outdoors he is angularly framed by modern office buildings, or in a car. When he is walking outside there is a sense of being overwhelmed by the urban environment, the noise, traffic and structures that surround him.

These *mise-en-scènes* contrast strongly with the natural light utopian scenes. These scenes were filmed outdoors, first in an unfinished concrete skeleton of a building, with lush greenery and waterfall as nature invading the man-made building. Later on we see Hiroshi and Ryoko meet in idealised spaces of nature: sitting by a river, dancing on the beach, making love in the sun. The contrast between the constricted urban space, within which movement and emotion are stifled, and the utopian beauty of nature in which one becomes free, is accentuated by the locations chosen by Tsukamoto. The hospital scenes were shot in an abandoned hospital in Yokohama and the sense of dereliction contributes to the cellar-like feel. The utopian scenes were filmed in the subtropical Okinawa archipelago, where Tsukamoto travelled as a youth (Mes, 2005, pp.188-190).

But the scenes are not purely blue, red or yellow. Often they cross over and cut into one another. For example, the scene of the first meeting between Hiroshi and Ryoko's parents is a blue scene. Hiroshi has come to understand how Ryoko's cadaver ended up on his dissection table. They begin by sitting down and speaking quietly to each other. But before long Ryoko's father becomes agitated and stands up. At that point we can see a big red building through the window by which he is standing, introducing an element of emotion to the scene. Seconds later the father explodes in great anger, as the full perversity of the situation sinks in. Thus the different types of scenes also offer a typology of grief – anger (red), numbness (blue), obsession (yellow).

Did she really love me? Did I treat her well? Was it my fault? These are the kinds of questions that emerge in mourning. Within the sea of grief there is always also a kernel of doubt that arouses complex, ambivalent emotion (cf. Carel 2007). The dialogue with the dead person continues (indeed, sometimes begins) after their death and often takes precedence over external reality and everyday needs. This dialogue and its movement towards closure are portrayed in the natural light scenes, which are all rehearsals of a final goodbye. In each of these scenes one of the two lovers leaves. First we see Ryoko disappearing and Hiroshi waking up and looking for her. Later we see Hiroshi telling Ryoko he must go. Despite her begging, he walks away from her. These scenes are melancholy, but also infused with vitality and tenderness absent from the rest of the film. Despite being accentuated in emotional tone (emphasised by guitar music), colour and lighting, their ambiguous ontological

status remains unresolved. Are these scenes real? Are they memories or fantasies? Hiroshi insists that the scenes are real; his father says they are simply his memories coming back to him. There is a real tension between the ambiguous status of these scenes and their intense nature. Their completeness and harmony stand in stark contrast to the rest of the film, in which the action and events are of a partial nature (only epistemic, only emotional).

The final scene shows Hiroshi standing in the rain laughing. Uniquely, in it we see Hiroshi from Ryoko's point of view. He is standing so close that his image is slightly blurred and the rain pounds unnaturally loud. The shot cuts to darkness and we hear Ryoko saying: "it smells wonderful". The end of Hiroshi's epistemic journey is one of reparation. Hiroshi is now able to let go, to allow the natural light scenes to end. They do not end in sorrow, but in a happy image of intimacy. And, significantly, it ends with an evocation of the senses: the wetness of rain, the sound of raindrops and voices, the serene daylight, and the wonderful smell of rain.

The film ends in reparation, but interestingly, reparation takes place via Ryoko, the dead, not Hiroshi, the living. The question remains: reparation for whom? Is the scene 'for' Hiroshi, a 'downloaded' memory of her embodied memory which he can treasure, a sense of peace he has made with her absence and memory? Or is the scene for us – a conclusion, or closure? And why does Ryoko talk about the *smell* of rain, a sense modality that is absent in film? We can think of smell as haptic as well; a more ambient sense of touch, which brings into contact tissue surface and molecules of the substance being smelled. In smell the two come into contact, even if less obviously than in touch. The use of smell seems to deliberately evoke something that cannot be experienced cinematically in the way vision can. We can now return to the gloves and masks the medical students are required to wear in the dissection class. They wear masks when handling the cadavers so as to restrict the sense of smell, just as the gloves restrict the sense of touch, leaving them with the more cerebral sense of sight. The gloves and mask and Hiroshi's refusal to wear them as a way of retaining a haptic openness to the world lead us to Tsukamoto's haptic cinema.

### **The sense of the world: haptic cinema**

The film focuses on the haptic qualities of relationships, both between the protagonist and his dead lover, between bodies and other bodies, bodies and their environment and between the viewer and the film. As such, it is a film about touch and somatic sensing. About touching textures and surfaces, touching other people, touching bodies that are dead or alive, and ultimately touching death. It is also a film about bodily spatiality and the sense of locatedness and perspective it provides.

Spatiality, place and distance play an important role in the visual spaces so prominent in the film. As I discussed earlier, most of the film is shot indoors, in restricted urban spaces. Hiroshi repeatedly touches the boundaries of his space – he touches the ceiling, the wall, the wood panel, he lies and sits on the floor, as if examining and internalising the spatial limits of his situation.

The previous section examined the epistemic trajectory of Hiroshi's mourning. But what is unique to Tsukamoto's perspective is the *sensuality* of knowledge. No medium can enact this sensuality better than cinema. Through medium-specific techniques the film shows the various sensual acts of knowledge Hiroshi performs: he touches and cuts the cadaver of Ryoko in order to discover the cause of her death; he smells the cadaver; he looks at and touches buildings, textures and surfaces; he feels the coldness and wetness of water (rain, drainpipe water, sea water, river water); he experiences strangulation in his love-games; he looks at himself in the mirror; he reads books; he sketches and draws. All of these sensual acts stand at the basis of his quest for embodied knowledge, as well as at the basis of our relationship to the flesh of the film.

In many shots the camera zooms in on a surface, as if touching, or trying to touch, it. In an early red scene we see Hiroshi looking at a red wood panel. He looks at it, the camera looks at it, the camera closes in on the red panel, swirls of colour come closer and closer. The shot cuts to Hiroshi getting up and walking towards the panel and physically touching it, moving it. Behind it is a folder marked with an 'X'. The folder contains his medical textbooks. The process of investigating by zooming in continues: Hiroshi opens the book and the camera zooms in on the pages, as if trying to touch them. Hiroshi mirrors the camera movement by running his hand down a sketch of a human head, laterally cut, to show the structure of an ear. In this scene we experience looking, touching and hearing as they come together in haptic synthesis. We see Hiroshi opening himself up to embodiment, getting back in touch with his body, his habits, the sensuality of life. He is recovering his memory of self and his self narrative through bodily touch.

Hapticity is not limited to touch. It is more accurate to see it as a system of internally felt sensations that are distinct from the culturally sedimented model of five discrete senses (Paterson 2009, p.768). Some current researchers prefer the collective term 'somatic senses', a term which acknowledges the multiplicity and interaction between internally felt and outwardly oriented senses (ibid.). Thus we see Hiroshi employing different bodily modalities in a variety of contexts, each presenting to the viewed (and listener) a different mode of sensual exploration of the world. For example, the scene that immediately succeeds the wood panel scene is set in the medical school admissions centre. We

hear the bustle of the centre, but when Hiroshi goes into a bathroom and shuts the door, silence returns. He looks at himself in the mirror, unsure about what he is seeing, and says to himself quietly: 'huh, huh', as if to check the effect and resonance of his speech and hearing.<sup>x</sup>

The most iconoclastic form of touching is also the one that is featured in the most detail: touching a dead body. Lengthy scenes in the dissection room portray the many ways in which a dead body can be touched. We see dead bodies being cut, bones sawed, fat scraped, skin peeled, eyeballs emptied. There are two types of touching here: objective (or medical) and subjective. The two types of touching are distinguished by the use of disposable gloves. Most of the students use the gloves throughout. Hiroshi and Ikumi resist the gloves, for different reasons.

Initially Hiroshi uses the gloves. He confidently, almost violently takes the scalpel and is the first to cut into the cadaver laid out in front of him. But later on, once he realises whose cadaver he is dissecting, he removes the gloves and changes his touch. In an earlier scene we saw him cutting open a tattooed arm. Now he gently touches the tattooed arm, trying to seal the cut he has made in the flesh. A sense of reparation pervades the scene, created both by the removal of the gloves and by the attempt to close the wound. Hiroshi takes his gloves off to touch Ryoko in a different way, more like a lover than a scientist.

We can add to this the intense sketching scenes we see later in the film. Hiroshi has wanted to be an artist before going to medical school and in one flashback scene we see Ryoko looking at his drawings. Hiroshi says "I thought I would get something out of painting, but I didn't". Ryoko replies: "they look real. As for me, I'm not sure if I am real. It's like I'm sleeping and dreaming". This scene poignantly poses the question of Ryoko's being for Hiroshi: she is dead, but also very much alive. She appears in fantasies, dreams, hallucinations, but these hallucinations feel more real than the rest of Hiroshi's life, which he lives out in a numb and desensitised state. But in order for Hiroshi to *touch* Ryoko, he must touch her corpse. He cannot touch the living woman who is no longer there to be touched.

The same structure of representation thrice removed from reality is echoed here: Ryoko doubts her own existence in a flashback scene, presented in a film. Add to this Hiroshi's frequent failure to remember, especially being unable to remember his dream, the frequent melding together of waking and dreaming, 'reel' life and fantasy, and we find that the same epistemic impotence with which we began engulfs the entire film. This is emphasised in a scene where we see Hiroshi

dissecting again, obsessively, while all the other students have finished their work and gone. Hiroshi's sketches dissolve into a shot of rain against window pane, but the rain looks like black ink dripping down the walls. We then get a short sequence repeating the opening shots, of Hiroshi's face and something moving – is it tissue? Cells? The epistemic impotence with which the film opens is reasserted at this point, mirroring Hiroshi's impotence with respect to Ryoko's death. All the scientific dissection work will not bring her back to life.

Ikumi's stance, as a participant in a love triangle involving a corpse, also forces her to move beyond the medical touch. Initially, Ikumi is the top student in the class. She delivers a confident speech, which we do not hear (we only see her speaking, but the sound is covered by non-diegetic music), reported by students as being about the body as an antenna. But when the class begins the dissection training, Ikumi is unable to perform the required actions. She is seen several times leaving the dissection room, running to the bathroom feeling sick, looking pale and unwell. Ikumi is unable to engage with the touching of bodies in a medical, objective touch. The other students mock her, and eventually Ikumi dons a mask and visor. The gloves represent a form of engagement that is one of objective distance. Despite the closeness, the actual touching implied by the use of the gloves, is distant, uninvolved. This is the nature of medical touching: proximity is great but dissector and cadaver are not close. The glove is also a figure for the distance separating Ikumi from Hiroshi and his quest to 'touch' the departed presence of Ryoko. Hiroshi wants to touch the dead Ryoko without gloves but is unable to touch Ikumi with his bare hands, at least in the way she would like him to touch her.

### **Conclusion: the vital body**

The materiality of mourning, or the relationship of Hiroshi and Ryoko that extends beyond her death while her physical body is still present, demonstrate the ineptitude of the mind/body split through which we usually think about mourning. We normally think about mourning as being a purely psychological process. But the thought experiment presented in the film confronts us with an alternative possibility – of mourning done in the material presence of the deceased.<sup>xi</sup> The mind/body split has been the focus of extensive critique by the phenomenological tradition, especially by Merleau-Ponty. On this view, splitting the human being into a mind and a body, as two separate substances, mis-describes what it is to be human and the holistic and embodied features of human existence, which is neither purely physical nor purely mental, but always a synthesis of the two. It also suggest that such a split necessarily distorts that which it purports to explain. Thus Merleau-Ponty does not merely propose a synthesis of mind and body but a synthesis that rejects the

existence of mind and body in the first place, and instead prioritises being as a third type of thing. The film provides a scenario in which this split is questioned and the importance of this synthesis is enacted in the natural light scenes.

Over the period depicted in the film we see two processes: Hiroshi recovers his memory and goes through a process of mourning and (partial) recovery. The two seemingly opposed processes – trying to remember what he has forgotten and being urged to forget what he can finally remember – are tied together in Ryoko's corpse, which is seen initially as an enigma, a lifeless reminder of trauma, but as the film progresses, comes alive in myriad ways. This transition from corpse to lived experience is the phenomenological movement from the physical, and in this case lifeless, body, to the body as lived. Significantly, in the natural light scenes Ryoko is depicted as a dancer, something she was not in her life. The scenes in which she is dancing reiterate and emphasise that Hiroshi remembers her as an intentional, vital body.

Thus we can see that the two trajectories explored above – the epistemic and the haptic – are not separate strands in *Vital*. They ultimately come together in the lived body, the one which gives rise to perception and understanding. The body also gives rise to the sense of perspective, which is so essential to making sense of perception. If we return to the name of the film – *Vital* – this encapsulates the view of the body that Tsukamoto is ultimately pointing us towards. Not disembodied knowledge, nor merely a physical body, the vital body is one that combines both facets and moreover enlivens us to movement and touch.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Greg Tuck, Mark Bould, Robert Sinnerbrink and Andrew McGettigan for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

## References:

Carel H. (2007). Mourning Terminable and Interminable. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 88(4):1071-1082.

Merleau-Ponty M. (1962 [1945]). *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York and London: Routledge.

Mes T. (2005). *Iron Man: The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto*. Godalming: FAB Press.

Paterson M. (2009). Haptic Geographies: Ethnography, Haptic Knowledges and Sensuous Dispositions. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(6):766-788.

Tuck G. (2007). Sex with the City: Urban Spaces, Sexual Encounters and Erotic Spectacle in Tsukamoto Shinya's *Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June* (2003). *Film Studies* 11:49-60.

## Filmography:

*All about My Mother* (Pedro Almodovar, Spain/France, 1999)

*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Julian Schnabel, France, 2007)

*Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, US, 1960)

*A Snake of June* (Shinya Tsukamoto, Japan, 2002)

*Tetsuo* (Shinya Tsukamoto, Japan, 1989)

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, US, 1974)

*Tokyo Fist* (Shinya Tsukamoto, Japan, 1989)

*Vital* (Shinya Tsukamoto, Japan, 2004)

---

<sup>i</sup> I am grateful to Greg Tuck for introducing me to Tsukamoto's work and for spending many hours discussing *Vital*, phenomenology and film with me.

<sup>ii</sup> As Andrew McGettigan suggests (private communication) there is a similar trope in some horror films. It is clear in those contexts that keeping the body or parts of the bodies is a marker for perversity (most famously, the mummified mother in *Psycho* or the wearing of others' skin in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). As I hope will become clear, *Vital's* aesthetic and emotive attunement manages this issue in a very different manner.

<sup>iii</sup> This trajectory of *Vital* may remind us of another phenomenologically and emotionally rich exploration of grief, Pedro Almodovar's *Todo sobre mi Madre*, in which the figure of organ transplantation enacts a kind of material gift or transmigration that fosters mourning and reconciliation between characters, pasts, and worlds. I am grateful to Robert Sinnerbrink for making this connection.

<sup>iv</sup> This same phenomenological technique is also used in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* to express the perspective (lying down) the proximity of others (too close) and the absence of motility of the main character, Jean-Dominique Bauby, who becomes completely paralysed after a stroke.

<sup>v</sup> Tsukamoto was director of photography and editor of *Vital*.

<sup>vi</sup> Tsukamoto was inspired by da Vinci's sketches in the making of *Vital* and had the words 'Leonardo da Vinci' written on his copy of the shooting script (Mes, p.186).

<sup>vii</sup> Tsukamoto's taste for love triangles, which play a central role in *Snake of June* and *Tokyo Fist*, is apparent here too.

<sup>viii</sup> Tsukamoto comments on this when he discusses selecting an actress for the role of Ryoko. He says it was not easy to find someone who would agree to have a full body cast made and then used throughout the film (Mes, p.188).



---

<sup>ix</sup> In an earlier scene we see Hiroshi going to visit Ryoko's parents. Her father says to him: "if you want to mourn her, do it when you truly remember her".

<sup>x</sup> This action is repeated after Hiroshi first sees Ryoko's cadaver in the dissection room.

<sup>xi</sup> Some mourning practices, like the Catholic open casket ceremony and the Irish wake echo this idea.