The Uncanny Intertextuality: Discomfort toward Technology Development in Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya and Kurosawa’s Yume

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Abstract: This paper is about the uncanny of the intertextuality between Natsume Soseki’s series of short stories Yume Juu Ya (1908) and Akira Kurosawa’s film, Yume (1990). Freud (1919) explained uncanny as a class of the terrifying which leads back to something very familiar yet it was become alienated from the mind through the process of repression, so when it comes to light it gives a strange terrifying feeling. The method of this research is textual analysis on Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya and Kurosawa’s Yume. The research result shows the reasons why the intertextuality could be perceived as uncanny are the repetition, the concept of dream, and the sublimation of repressed discomfort toward the development of technology in Japanese society. The fact that both artworks internalized the discomfort toward the issue, means that the issue of technology development continued from its beginning in Meiji era in 1900s all the way to the contemporary period in 1990s.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan had been trying to make themselves equal to the Western countries in many aspects, such as military, economical strength, and technology. This enthusiasm of Western modeled modernization in Meiji Era may be summarized by two slogans: Datsua Nyuuuo (leave Asia, join Europe), encouraging Japanese society to leave the old traditional Asia and pursuing the way of the more modern Western, and Bunmei Kaika (era of civilization and enlightenment), acceptance of Western civilization and modernization in all aspects (Kitahara, 1986). This was the beginning of Japanese famous industrialization and technology development. The industrialization of Japan prior to World War II happened very quickly (Minami, 1977) and massive postwar industrial technology development made Japan’s growth in productivity the most rapid since 1960 compared to the country with the same industry (Hart, 1992). On the surface the notion of modernization and technology development seemed to be a good idea and welcomed by both society and government. However, if we look deep into the Japanese society, we can see that there are different voices regarding the modernization and technology development in Japan, which can also be traced down on the art works, such as literature and cinematic works.

Natsume Soseki (1867-1916), one of the most famous modern literature writers of Meiji era, wrote in his 1902 diary that “Japan has tried to absorb Western culture in a hurry and as a result has not had time to digest it” (Fukuchi, 1993). His criticism on modernization can also be traced in his writings, such as series of short stories Yume Juu Ya (Ten Nights of Dreams, 1908) and Kokoro (1914). Response toward modernization did not stop in Meiji Era. In the history of Japanese cinema, Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998), regarded as one of the most important and influential directors and screen-writer of all time, directed Yume (Dreams, 1990) in response to atomic bomb and Japan’s “incompetent nuclear power industry” (Shapiro, 2001).

Both Soseki and Kurosawa were actively responding to what happened in Japan during their times using the form of art; Soseki with literature, and Kurosawa with cinema. The connection between literature and film may also be found in the form of intertextuality. Kristeva said that each text is an intersection of texts so at least one other text can be read (Alfaro, 1996.) The similarity between Kurosawa’s Yume and Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya, which in fact share the same opening sentence “konna yume
wo mita” (“I saw a dream like this”), is what to be called as an intertextuality.

One of the responses emerging from intertextuality is the feeling of uncanny (Levin, 2011). Freud explained uncanny as a class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar (Svenaeus, 1999); it is something familiar and old-established in the mind yet it was become alienated from the mind only through the process of repression, so when it comes to light it gives a strange terrifying feeling; for example the theme about death and pain are both familiar, yet it is repressed and gives terrifying feeling when mentioned. Intertextuality can produce some kind of uncanny effect by repetition and rendering up something that was familiar into something strangely kind of uncanny effect by repetition and rendering up when mentioned. Intertextuality can produce some kind of uncanny effect by repetition and rendering up something that was familiar into something strangely foreign (Levin, 2011). This paper will focus on how the intertextuality of Yume Juu Ya in Kurosawa’s Yume gives uncanny effect.

Napier wrote that Yume Juu Ya posses an “effective development of a surreal otherness” (Napier, 1996), which is also a key element to creating the uncanny effect by choosing a setting which differ from the real world. The closest study about intertextuality between Yume Juu Ya and Yume is an article by Notani talks about the similarity between Yume Juu Ya and Yume, especially in the sixth dream of the short stories and the fifth dream of the film; but this article did not talk about the uncanny effect in both art works (野谷, 1990).

Both Kurosawa and Soseki are part of the Japanese society, and both of them experienced the rapid development of technology in order to speed up the modernization and advance industrialization. It is reasonable to say that these issues could be sublimated into the artworks of Kurosawa and Soseki through their individual unconsciousness, yet since it’s in fact a collective familiarity, the depiction of it brings the sense of uncanny. Through text analysis method, this paper will focus upon why the intertextuality between Kurosawa’s Yume and Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya could be perceived as uncanny by the Japanese audience.

2 FINDING AND DISCUSSION

We strongly encourage authors to use this document for the preparation of the camera-ready. Please follow the instructions closely in order to make the volume look as uniform as possible (Moore and Lopes, 1999).

2.1 Reality in a Dream

Yume (1990) consists of eight separated episodes, containing various dreams which are based on the dreams Kurosawa had had since his childhood (Serper, 2001). Each dreams started with an opening sentence, “konna yume wo mita” (“I saw a dream like this”). The structure of Kurosawa’s Yume is pretty much similar to Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya. Yume Juu Ya is a series of ten short stories consisting of ten unconnected dreams, just like Kurosawa’s Yume. The dreams are narrated by an “I”, but unlike Kurosawa’s Yume, the “I” here is not perceived as Soseki because the dreams are not based on his own dreams. This series of short stories also use the same opening sentence as above, konna yume wo mita, which, a bit different from Kurosawa’s Yume, is only used in the beginning of four of the dreams: first dream, second dream, third dream, and fifth dream. This is an example of what is to be called as intertextuality.

Regarding intertextuality, Alfaro explained that to understand the concept of intertextuality we need to “understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures” (Alfaro, 1996, and one factor which shaped Yume was of course the repetition and transformation of Yume Juu Ya such as the presence of the same opening sentence and similar narrative structure.

Other than the same opening sentence, the “I”s in both narratives are relatively passive. In Kurosawa’s Yume, the main character presenting the main plot of the dream is not “I”, but the characters he encountered, while in Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya, the dreamer is somewhat ghostlike in many ways, a shadowy figure forced to take parts in situations which he does not understand (Napier, 1996).

The key concept to both art works is that they are the embodiment of narrated dreams, which is something already familiar to humanity. The whole process of dreaming itself could be considered as uncanny. Freud said that the uncanny effect is often and easily produced by blurring the distinction between imagination and reality, and those who dream often not realizing the fact that they are in a dream. To Japanese society, to be specific, dream is perceived as important in aesthetics and literature where dreamlike motives are systematically employed in order to explore states of reality and feeling (Botz-Bornstein, 2007). Takeuchi says that the dependent origination, the law of causality in Buddhism, is like a dream: “When we dream, we live in correlatedness with the world of the dream and
though the phenomenal identity of dreamer and
dream, keep the dream alive; but as soon as we 
become aware of its correlatedness, we have already 
awakened” (Botz-Bornstein, 2004). This implies that a 
dream is not a result of reality, but reality is a result of 
dream.

Uncanny, as we have seen, is similarly a product 
of strange repetition, an eerie recurrence whereby that 
which was once familiar is rendered strangely foreign 
so intertextuality will add to this strange repetition 
and eerie recurrence (Levin, 2011). For the audience 
who were familiar with Soseki’s works, watching 
Kurosawa’s Yume will evoke an eerie feeling: a 
feeling like something is being repeated, yet it is not 
the same thing: the uncanny effect. What also makes 
Kurosawa’s Yume uncanny is because it represents 
the notion of a dream which brought up repressed 
wishes as well as traumatic experience. Moreover, it 
brings up traces of Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya, evoking a 
sense of repetition. Since a dream is supposed to be a 
road to the unconsciousness, a road to the repressed 
wishes and traumatic experiences, it is safe to say that 
the dreams in Yume and Yume Juu Ya also depict the 
unconsciousness of someone, or something. Napier 
 wrote that “most of the anxieties and challenges he 
[Soseki] chronicles in Yume Juu Ya are universally 
experienced by modern human beings” (Natsume, 
2015). Thus it is arguable that the dreams in 
Kurosawa’s Yume also represent the 
unconsciousness, not only of Kurosawa as an 
individual, but even of the broader collective 
unconsciousness of Japanese society in Kurosawa’s 
era.

2.2 Depiction of Technology

Soseki lived through the Meiji period (1868-1912), 
when the initial massive industrial and technology 
development took place. Although in the surface, this 
development seemed to be well received, but the depiction 
of it in Yume Juu Ya tells otherwise. The dreams in Yume Juu Ya talks about the anxiety and 
challenges, also the feeling of alienated in modern 
society (Natsume, 2015). “The Seventh Night” also 
depicts that anxiety and alienated feeling by using a 
depiction of Meiji modern technology in the form of 
steamship, where “I” found himself standing on it. He 
said: “I found myself abroad a great ship. Day and 
night the ship cut its way through the waves, belching 
endless black smoke as it went. The noise was 
horrific” (Natsume, 2015).

The first sight of steam-powered ship for the 
Japanese society was the sight of Kurofune or the 
Black Ship, the vassal of United States Commodore 
Matthew Perry entering Japan in 1853, which then 
symbolizes the end of Tokugawa period as well as the 
isolation policy (Nishiyama, 2016). Black Ship 
demonstrated the power of technology development 
which brought Japan into realization that the only 
defense against the West was to adopt its superior 
technology.

In the dream, the ship was headed somewhere “I” 
didn’t know, in a never-ending voyage, yet always 
seemed to be chasing the sun described like a “red-
hot fire iron.” The ship was crowded with foreigners, 
with faces of all kinds. “I” was feeling too much 
discomfort toward the ship and the foreigners that he 
decided to end his own life. Unfortunately, just after 
he leapt out of the ship he found his will to live and 
being on the ship was the only option to live. To the 
end of the dream, “I” kept on falling and falling 
without even touching the water surface; he’s in the 
state of never-ending fall. Treyvaud wrote that “the 
seventh dream has long been viewed as a metaphor 
for Japan in the Meiji Era” which “had lost its way in 
its attempts to modernize” yet there’s no way of 
stopping it (Natsume, 2015). Just like the Black Ship 
symbolizes the superiority of the West, the steam-
powered ship full of foreigners symbolizes the 
modernization of Japan bringing with it foreign 
cultures, it is unstoppable and no way to escape from.

The appearance of a specifically steam-powered 
ship puffing black cloud to the sky in the series clearly 
shows that the notion of Black Ship was still going 
around even 50 years after its entrance, in 1908 when 
Yume Juu Ya released. The feeling of discomfort 
toward foreign things has to be repressed in order to 
keep up with the rest of the world, referring back to the 
bunmei kaika motto, that acceptance of Western 
modeled modernization was needed and critic toward 
it was frowned upon because Western was the one who 
started Japan civilization and helping Japan to move 
forward. Since it was narrated as a dream, it stands on 
the bridge between reality and imagination. The 
readers realized that it was supposed to be just a 
dream, but the familiar feeling of discomfort toward 
technology development and foreign origin things 
and people was real, resulting in the uncanny.

Kurosawa’s Yume also depicts technology in the 
film despite that technology had been far developed 
during Kurosawa’s period. Japan even managed to 
gain some energy independence by building nuclear 
power plants. However, the depiction of modern 
technology in Kurosawa’s Yume, similar to the 
depiction of technology in Yume Juu Ya, does not 
speak about the wonders of the technology 
development.
Rather than the technology itself, the dreams in Kurosawa’s Yume depict more of the side effects of technology. The dream in the episode of “Mount Fuji in Red” for example is a dream about Mount Fuji that was dyed in red color as the result of the explosions of six nuclear reactors surrounding it.

During the catastrophe, a female character met by the “I” enraged and said that the government promised nuclear was safe, and if anything is dangerous it would be the human: “But, they said that the nuclear plants were safe! What’s dangerous is the miscalculation, but the nuclear plant itself is harmless. They said they will not do any miscalculation so there will be no problem. I will never forgive those people” (Baishō, & Harada, 1990). Shapiro described that in this sequence “Japan’s scandalously incompetent nuclear power industry causes a catastrophic meltdown” (Baishō, & Harada, 1990).

Mizumoto in Thomas (2015) argued that Japan has four faces regarding nuclear issue: face of an atomic victim, of a US ally under a nuclear umbrella, of an active promoter of peaceful nuclear energy, and of a peaceful nation promoting nuclear abolution. Japanese can neither securitize nor de-securitize the discomfort toward technology remains in the 1990s; the development of high-risk technology.

2.3 The Gods of the Past

Tibesar (1937) argued that Japan possessed a “deeply religious nature”. The ancient religion’s belief and value had been a part of the society for so long that it could not be separated and defined as a “religion”. Yet, the root of the beliefs and value could be traced back to Shinto and Buddhism.

In Yume Jiu Ya’s “The Sixth Night”, “I” was watching Unkei, an influential Japanese Buddhist sculptor, carves Niou (Two Benevolent Kings, the guardian gods of the Buddhism) out of a wooden log at the gate of the Gokokuji Temple. What’s interesting is that Unkei was a real influential sculptor from the 13th century Kamakura period, while Gokokuji Temple was not built until 1681, and “I” himself is depicted as someone from Meiji era. “I” was fascinated with the way Unkei carved without hesitation when a young man near him said: “Those exact eyebrows and noses are buried in the wood, and he just uses the hammer and chisel to dig them out. It’s just like digging a rock out of the ground – there’s no way to get it wrong” (Natsume, 2015). Thinking he could do it too, the narrator heads home to carve gods out of wooden logs in his garden; it was unsuccessful. Niou, the Two Benevolent Gods, were only accessible to Unkei and his Kamakura period log; it was nowhere to be found in the wooden logs of Meiji. Napier explained that “The Sixth Night” suffused with nostalgia for a purer, richer past, an increasingly inaccessible past for the modernizing Japan of the Meiji period (Napier, 1996). Since Buddhism and Shinto is more like a way of living than of a way of praising the gods and deities, the inexistence of gods in Meiji’s wooden log could also be interpreted as the failure of some ancient ways of living to prevail in the “modernized” Meiji era.

In the second dream of Yume, “The Peach Orchard”, “I” encountered the personification of the peach tree’s spirits who appear in the form of hina dolls. The spirits told the young narrator that they shall not come to his house again because his family chopped the whole field of peach trees. During modernization and industrialization, nature has long
been the victim of the process. If a family cutting an orchard of peach trees resulting in the gods’ desertion of the house, what will happen to a whole nation sacrificing the nature for the sake of capital advantages? Is there still any kami (gods) in modern Japan? The question probably could be answered by looking back at Soseki’s “The Sixth Night”; the inexistence of gods, the lost of ancient ways of living.

The second appearance of the depiction of god or kami in Yume is in the episode of “Mount Fuji in Red”. Mountains in Japan have been regarded as holy places of ancestral spirits and gods, and Mount Fuji is worshipped as the sacred place of various kami. The threatening blazing red Mount Fuji depicted in the episode contrasts the usual benevolent image of Mount Fuji. Regarding the red Mount Fuji, Serper explained: “The angered god of the mountain, who was badly treated, causes natural disaster as a contemporary polluter” (Serper, 2001). As the result of technology development disaster, the benevolent ancient traditional god changed into the threatening polluting god. The image of red threatening Mount Fuji has become an uncanny image to the eyes of Japanese society that worship the great gentle Mount Fuji.

Dream does not only bring back the traumatic experiences, but also the repressed wishes. Soseki’s “The Sixth Night” and Kurosawa’s “The Peach Orchard” can be read as a representation of repressed wishes of Japanese society toward modernity and technology, wishes of going back to the past, to the traditional beliefs and norms that were silenced by the force to catch up with modernity and technology. In the last dream, “The Watermill Village”, Kurosawa shares a hope that somewhere there’s a place where human being can live without modern technology and one with nature, where the gods are benevolent, and where everybody is happy with their life that they want to live long.

This last dream of Kurosawa’s Yume probably could also answer the question why the discomfort towards development of technology and modernization lasts even during the contemporary era. When “I” encountered an old man in the Watermill Village, the old man said something like this: “What’s worse, most people see those stupid inventions as a miracle and worship them. They don’t realize how nature is destroyed by it and that they are going to perish with it” (Baishō & Harada, 1990).

The discomfort toward the development of technology is not without reason. The existence of atomic power reactor means there will be radioactive wastes that must be managed correctly. Even if the waste is dumped somewhere safe, far from civilization, it will still going to be a pollutant decades after it was dumped.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Through text analysis applied on the two art works above, it can be concluded that there are three reasons why the intertextuality between Kurosawa’s Yume and Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya could be perceived as uncanny by the Japanese audience: because of (1) the repetition, (2) the concept of dream, and (3) the repressed “familiar something” sublimated in the art works.

Intertextuality between Kurosawa’s Yume and Soseki’s Yume Juu Ya allows repetition to happen and to the Japanese audience who had already familiar with Soseki’s works, especially Yume Juu Ya, the similar structure and opening sentence of Kurosawa’s Yume will trigger the strange feeling of having already visualized the work, yet it still felt different; thus the uncanny. Yume Juu Ya allows the reader to fit into the place of the anchor character by the usage of first speaker point of view, while Yume allows the audience to be attached to the anchor character by using the same actor along all along the series of dream. As the result, although they are technically the dreams of the anchor characters, the uncanny experience of a dream could be transferred from the fictional world to the readers or the audiences.

The repressed “familiar something” which internalized in both artworks is the issue of discomfort toward modernization and technology development. This feeling of discomfort continued from its initiation in Meiji era, even to the contemporary 1990s when Yume was released as the result of the war trauma, and the development of high-risk technology.

REFERENCES


