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## ENTER THE METAPHYSICAL COSMOS. THE VISUALIZATIONS OF THE UNIVERSE IN JAPANESE EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

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Of old, Heaven and Earth were not yet separated, and In and Yo not yet divided. They formed a chaotic mass like an egg which was of obscurely defined limits and contained germs. The purer and clearer part was thinly drawn out, and formed Heaven, while the heavier and grosser element settled down and became Earth<sup>1</sup>.

The vision of the Universe, perceived as chaotic matter that cannot be measured by human mind, appears in the foundation myths of almost all cultures. In the mythologies and cosmologies the transformation process of the whirling atoms into the Earth, the Sacred Space (Heaven) and other celestial bodies is performed by the deities or non-defined, unnamed powers. The Japanese *Nihongi*<sup>2</sup>, the collection of myths and chronicles describing the beginnings of the Japanese Islands, follows the second pattern mentioned above. The reader finds out that the formation process, which led to the division of two kinds of matter, started without the help of the external factors<sup>3</sup>. The whole pantheon of Japanese deities came into existence right after the boundary between the sacred and “contaminated” lands had successfully been settled, thus the origin myths only complement the cosmogonic myth. The division of two spheres is irreversible and this state was fully accepted by the sacred beings<sup>4</sup>. The similar description is also provided by the other significant Japanese record of ancient tradition, history and mythology – *Kojiki*<sup>5</sup>. However, the *Nihongi* offers more detailed and complex approach to the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, ed. W. G. Aston, Cosimo Inc., New York 2008, pp. 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, transl. Jan Wierusz-Kowalski, Warszawa 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters*, transl. B. Hall Chamberlain, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Tokyo 1993.

In the vision presented in the *Nihongi*, as well as in the *Kojiki*, the cosmos is older and more powerful than the deities. The complexity of the narration established by the oldest Japanese scriptures inspired Japanese experimental cinema directors, encouraging them to search for the artistic ways of presentation of the mystical, unknown energy of the void. Among the others, Takahiko Iimura (born 1937), Takashi Ito (born 1956) and Takashi Makino (born 1978) are the representatives of three epochs of the Japanese experimental cinema movement, whose approach to the topic is undoubtedly worth describing. According to the information provided above, this essay will concern the visions of the cosmos presented in the chosen Japanese experimental films, analyzed from the perspectives of the cultural influences on their works.

Not only the vision of the cosmos related to Shinto religion inspired experimental artists. In their pictures an observant viewer can also find the references to Buddhism (coexisting with Shinto on the Japanese land) and western mysticism. However, it should be indicated that *Nihongi* and *Kojiki* were mentioned at the beginning of this paper to introduce the main way of perceiving the cosmos in Japan, as Shinto religion is still the basis of the Japanese culture<sup>6</sup>. Every one of the presented artists has his own motivation, beliefs and sources of inspirations, but the traditional Japanese vision of the Universe is the concept, which they all embraced while growing up in Japan. Even though the inspiration taken from the traditional Japanese beliefs are not often clearly visible, it is assumed that the vision of the void provided by Shinto is intangibly connected with the formation of the consciousness of the Japanese artist.

It has to be mentioned that research on the newest achievements of the experimental cinema directors cannot be completed without using internet resources. The new generation of the artists perceives the web as an important way of communication, as well as the place suitable for their artistic purposes. The filmmakers publish their works on the web pages by themselves (in full access or in the excerpts), using the benefits offered by new media, as well as developing auto-promotion techniques. Moreover, there are very few publications on mentioned directors, as their art mainly exists outside the academic discourse. Japanese experimental cinema is mainly described by the organizers of the festivals and their comments are available on the festivals web pages. A lot of information can also be collected by analyzing the interviews, conducted by the fans and researchers, which are published in the internet journals.

## REFLECTED COSMOS

Takahiko Iimura entered the world of experimental art in 1960s. In his early movies the author focused mostly on the studies of the human body. He was also interested in contemplation of the contemporary Japanese art. His most distinguishing works from this period are *Ai (Love, 1962)*<sup>7</sup> and *Onan (1963)*<sup>8</sup>. In 1970, when he gained

<sup>6</sup> W. Kotański, *W kręgu Shintoizmu*, Warszawa 1995, pp. 39–49.

<sup>7</sup> T. Iimura, *Ai*, Japan 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *Onan*, Japan 1963.

popularity and achieved his first international successes, Iimura became more interested in film structure than explorations of human sexuality<sup>9</sup>. From that moment, he started searching for new forms of expression, what resulted in establishing his own understanding of the term “reflected picture.” He wrote:

“Reflected picture” emphasizes a state – not a motion – a state where a picture is reflected through light – not a picture which moves. In such a state, motion could be involved since it covers all situations including motion and non-motion: still<sup>10</sup>.

Pursuing his new artistic goal, Iimura directed five movies, which were re-shot from the screen<sup>11</sup>. Among them was *Cosmic Buddha* (1971), known also as *Buddha Again*<sup>12</sup>. According to the “reflected picture” theory that he established, in this film the author presents not only the manipulation of the footage, but also the manipulation of time. The picture concerns the philosophical and religious aspects of Japanese culture, as the main object visible on the screen is a Buddha figure.

When preparing his film, the director was completely focused on expanding the possibilities of the medium. To create this piece of work Iimura photographed a relief of Buddha, which belongs to the temple in Katmandu. He used 8mm camera, so the picture was blurred from the beginning – what affected the final version of the film. Later on, the artist rephotographed off a screen by using a variable speed projector. The result visible in the movie was attained by speeding up and slowing down the projection speed<sup>13</sup>.

In *Cosmic Buddha* Iimura rejects the time and space concepts. The viewer should focus “on the moment”. According to the author, “the moment” happens when the figure of Buddha and the chaotic movement of matter around the object are being observed<sup>14</sup>. The main point of the movie is the way, how the filmmaker presents abstraction on the screen. The viewer is conscious that he is looking at the figure of Buddha, but he is not always able to distinct the figure from the cosmic surroundings. What is visible on the first glimpse, are the texture and shadows that revolve around and infiltrate through the Buddha representation<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. W. W. Dixon, *The Exploding Eye: A Re-Visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema*, SUNY Press, Albany 1997, pp. 83–84.

<sup>10</sup> T. Iimura, *The Collected Writings of Takahiko Iimura*, Wildside Press LLC, London, New York 2007, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ibidem, p.42.

<sup>12</sup> T. Iimura, *Cosmic Buddha/ Buddha Again*, Japan 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. S. MacDonald, *An Interview with Taka Iimura*, “Journal of the University Film Association” 1981, vol. 33, no. 4, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. Ross, *Projection as Performance: Intermediality in Japan's Expanded Cinema* [in:] *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*, ed. Nagib L., Jerslev A., I. B. Tauris, London, New York 2013, p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. S. MacDonald, op. cit, p. 29.

In the interview conducted by Scott MacDonald<sup>16</sup> Iimura indicates, that when it comes to the metaphorical meaning, he always tries to make films as simple as it is possible. Although, the Japanese director isn't against using more developed technology, he wants to "open" in front of the viewer and let him focus on ideas, not only on the representation<sup>17</sup>. That is why, after the première of *Cosmic Buddha*, Iimura changed the title of his movie into *Buddha Again*. The director felt that he used too many technical tricks and the picture of Buddha is not clear enough for the audience to be seen<sup>18</sup>.

In *Cosmic Buddha Buddha Again* Iimura explores the details of the Buddha figure and forces the viewer to focus his attention on the object, because the changes on the screen are very subtle. The whole picture flickers and if the viewer does not know that he should "look for" the Buddha image, the set seems to present only the cosmos with its sparkling stars. The metaphor used by the author is quite obvious, as he tries to present the meditation process, where the person involved (thus the one who contemplates the Buddha figure) leaves his material body and gains the ability to look into the cosmic sphere. Iimura's vision of the universe, as religious and mythological space, is tightly connected with the sacred object (Buddha figure). Through the mediation process one can be allowed to enter the passage that leads to an understanding of the meaning of life. According to this fact, the cosmos in the author's experimental movie appears to be a metaphorical figure, rather than space in a scientific way.

## COSMOS AS A VORTEX OF ILLUSION

The second director mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Takashi Ito, is the representative of the generation of avant-garde artists born in the middle of 1950s. He started transferring his visions into the screen in the late 1970s, releasing his first movie *Jiku* (*Timespace*, 1977)<sup>19</sup>. Ito's film art is intangibly connected with his early inspirations, among which he mentions Osamu Tezuka's *mangas*, experimental cinema of Toshio Matsumoto (who was also his mentor during the University studies) and works of Shuji Terayama<sup>20</sup>. Takashi Ito is also extremely interested in creating the illusion of movement by using animation techniques to display the sequences of changing images. He mixes the animation with life shoots, as he did in his most famous film *Spacy* (1980)<sup>21</sup>.

In the comments on his works Ito indicates that he wants to create "films like fascinating nightmares" and his main aim is to bring the viewer to the edge

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> T. Ito, *Jiku*, Japan 1977.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. idem, *Biographical Essay* [on-line:] <http://www.imageforum.co.jp/ito/profile.html> [10.12.2015].

<sup>21</sup> Cf. C. M. Hotes, *Takashi Ito's Film Works*, "Midnight Eye" 2010 [on-line:] <http://www.midnight-eye.com/reviews/takashi-itos-film-works/> [13.12.2015].

of anxiety<sup>22</sup>. For sure, he accomplished his goal releasing *The Moon* (1994)<sup>23</sup>. On the website set by Image Forum (Japanese organization connecting avant-garde and experimental artists) Ito described his picture:

A long time ago, I would often dream of the uncanny and mystical landscape that appears in moonlight. Irrational landscapes and spaces filled with unspeakable pleasures like a black object that revolves slowly while flying over the scattered clouds that float in the night sky, their lumps illuminated by the light of the moon<sup>24</sup>.

Focusing mainly on the city landscape and the inhabitants of the presented areas, the artist wants to show what is happening, when the mysterious force interferes with the world. The unnamed, upsetting power is represented by the moon that appears suddenly on the sky. The picture of the Earth's satellite, "looking" at the city and changing the flow of events, is certainly inspired by Toshio Matsumoto's film *Phantom* (1975)<sup>25</sup>. In this movie a huge, paranormal eye-like object appears over the city. The moon, as well as the eye in Matsumoto's film, is the figure that brings the sense of unease to the people who notice it<sup>26</sup>. As Sylvia Schedelbauer indicates in her essay, Ito uses four film techniques, thanks to which he is able to create the illusion of antagonistic temporal simultaneities. Firstly, he combines stillness with slow motion. A good example can be set by the scene showing a smiling boy (Ito's son). The viewer observes the happy child standing in front of the camera. In the background there is a calm street surrounded by the vividly green trees. But, what seems to be a picture of everyday life in the suburbs of Tokyo suddenly changes, like the setting in a strange dream. The face of the child starts "waving" when the door appears behind the boy. The door is open, framing the projection of the plants, which change to the rhythm of buzzing cicadas. In this case, the stillness is visible in the background and the face of the boy moves in a slow motion. Moreover, the director uses time-lapse and a rapid succession of single slides to increase the presented effects<sup>27</sup>.

The moon in Ito's film appears in many situations, almost every time suddenly and unexpectedly. Most often the viewer can observe it through the opened door. The satellite is always projected on the same place, where in the first scene were the plants. The moon also appears behind the boy, as a symbol of changes and a cause of the child's image disturbance. The conclusion of the analysis concerning *The Moon* may be that the author perceives the celestial body as a transmitter of a cosmic energy. Considering the influence of the moon on the people and observing its ability of

<sup>22</sup> Cf. ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> T. Ito, *The Moon*, Japan 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Takashi Ito, Image Forum [on-line:] [http://www.imageforum.co.jp/ito/filmography\\_e.html](http://www.imageforum.co.jp/ito/filmography_e.html) [13.12.2015].

<sup>25</sup> T. Matsumoto, *Phantom*, Japan 1975.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. S.Schedelbauer, *Poetics of an Urban Darkness: Takashi Ito's Spectral Cinema*, "OtherZine" 2011, no. 20 [on-line:] [http://othercinema.com/otherzine/archives/index.php?issueid=25&article\\_id=121](http://othercinema.com/otherzine/archives/index.php?issueid=25&article_id=121) [17.12.2015].

<sup>27</sup> Cf. ibidem.

causing dreamlike situations, it can be found that the author perceives the satellite similarly to the Japanese mythology. In traditional Shinto beliefs the moon deity, Tsukiyomi, is portrayed as a furious warrior, who cannot stand any insults, thus he destroys the stated order. He is also connected with the night, as the moon and the sun are the oppositions in the Japanese mythology. In this way, the moon in Japanese traditional beliefs is perceived as an unstable source of the energy, with the potential to transform the surrounding<sup>28</sup>.

## NOISY SUPERNOVA

Takashi Makino is the representative of a new generation of Japanese experimental cinema directors. His debut had place in 2004, when he completed his first film *EVE* (2004)<sup>29</sup>. Later on, Makino and his fellow students set up an artistic collective (called Collective [+]) and published their manifesto<sup>30</sup>. They stated that screenings are the community events and the role of the artist is to change the viewers' perception of what should be perceived as art. Moreover, Collective [+] stood against "the boring perfection of the cinema"<sup>31</sup>. Currently, they are striving to bring Japanese avant-garde and experimental cinema movement back to life. They also wish to add a new quality to the Japanese visual art<sup>32</sup>.

Searching for the best vision of the cosmos to be shown is Takashi Makino's major concern. He constantly tries to develop his technical knowledge to create, as he calls it, "the perfect film". The author is deeply interested in the relationship between the audience and the artist, so that he seems to test the limits of the viewers' abilities to understand the experimental cinema. He also researches on the reactions of the audience, while he takes them "on the journey to the center of the noisy supernova". Why does he perceive the vision of the whirling celestial bodies as the best way to accomplish his goals? He explains his choice of the topic:

None of the creatures that exist in the world are born of their own volition; when they first achieve awareness, they find themselves adrift in chaos. It is only by creating cosmos that they are able to overcome the fundamental meaningless and fear of existence<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. D. C. Holtom, *The National Faith of Japan: A Study of Modern Shinto*, Routledge, London, New York, 1938, pp. 144–146.

<sup>29</sup> T. Makino, *EVE*, Japan 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Plus Documents 2009-2013*, ed. T. Makino, Engine Books, Tokyo 2014.

<sup>31</sup> *Against the boring perfection of the cinema* is a title of the essay written by Rei Hayama. The essay can be found in *Plus Documents 2009-2013*.

<sup>32</sup> The members of Collective [+] explained their concerns in details during the festival *Mostra de Cinema Periferico*, in A Coruna, Spain. The presentation of the Collective is available on Youtube – cf. *Presentación Colectivo [+] Tokyo. Takashi Makino, Rei Hayama e Shinkan Tamaki*, s8cinema, 6.06.2014, Youtube.com [on-line:] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-UWJRVu77c>. [15.12.2015].

<sup>33</sup> T. Makino, *Still in Cosmos*, Light Cone [on-line:] <http://lightcone.org/en/film-7445-still-in-cosmos> [15.12.2015].

According to Makino's statement, it can be seen that his choice is connected with the importance of the concept. To him, the cosmos is the most omnipotent power the human can imagine or think about. What is more, for the author the cosmos is a figure that helps the people to regulate their understanding of the world. It is significant to notice that in Makino's art there is no intentional reference to any codified system of beliefs. In this way, the cosmos plays the role of the great power determining human live.

The artist's first movie, regarding the topic of the cosmos, was released in 2004. Although, later on Makino created longer and more sophisticated pictures, *The Intimate Stars* (2004)<sup>34</sup> remains one of his most complex works. It is exceptional among other positions in the artist's rich filmography. For the first time the film was screened at Rotterdam Film Festival in 2008. During that event Wouter van Veldhoven performed live music show, accompanying the picture. *The Intimate Stars* is prepared to be shown in double projection technique<sup>35</sup>, what creates unique visualization effects. Makino indicates that the movie shows the images of light, which the people see when they close their eyes. For the author, what can be seen under the closed eyelids is similar to the stars and whirling supernovas. The pictures of unconsciousness inside the human's body, as the director names the mentioned images, can only be compared with the unconsciousness outside the body, experienced in the cosmos<sup>36</sup>. In this way, the title of his film gains a new meaning; the stars observed under the closed eyes can form different constellations, depending on the observant, therefore the vision can be called "intimate".

The director shares his own "intimate stars" with his audience during the screenings, thus the film is an invitation to the artist's mind and it perfectly corresponds with Makino's philosophy. What does he see in his vision? In *The Intimate Stars* the picture of the "falling" points and dots (displayed from the first projector) is imposed on the panorama of the city (displayed from the second projector). Thanks to the usage of two streams, the author succeeded in creating the illusion of the meteorites falling down on the motionless city. The whole scenery resembles the picture of the biblical doomsday, or rather, what can be closer to the Japanese national experience and Makino's point of view, the bombs falling down on the city. Bearing in mind, that what the audience observes on the screen is the "intimate" vision shared by the author, it can be indicated that the Japanese history of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing had a great influence on the artist, although he wasn't a witness of those events.

The other interesting fact, connected with the film, is that the music doesn't correspond with the presented image, as the sounds seem to be rather tranquil and calm, while the picture is extremely dynamic. The next scene, after the rain of the meteorites, displays the woman, but it is difficult to agree, what are her actions. She

<sup>34</sup> T. Makino, *The Intimate Stars*, Japan 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Double projection technique means, that two projectors are showing different pictures in the same time. The pictures are imposed one on another.

<sup>36</sup> T. Makino, *Still...*

wears a ballet dress, but her strange dance steps resemble the act of dying rather than dancing. In the next parts of the film, there are more scenes connected with the “end of the days” topos. The meteorites fall into the waving water and in the next scene the waves change into the dark clouds. The audience also witnesses the eclipse. Furthermore, when the surrounding is dark and the tension is almost palpable, the film ends with the effect of the snow on the TV screen. What is the complete message of this 30-minute film? The director leaves us no further clues, but analyzing his filmography we may think, that in his movie the cosmos is only a metaphor of the danger. Makino tells the viewer, that when he closes his eyes, he sees the dark past of his country.

In his later works, the author changes his attitude towards space and celestial bodies. There is no longer a danger (metaphorical or real) coming from the outer space. For example, in *Still in Cosmos* (2009) Makino demonstrates the human's ability to change chaos into cosmos. The eighteen minute picture presents the birth of the stars, the cycle of life and, at the end, the death of the supernova<sup>37</sup>. As usual, the author is interested in the viewers' perception of his film:

When watching a film, the viewers all sit in the same darkness and receive the same light and sound but each of them sees a different dream. I believe that this symbolizes a reversion to their initial state, that when they look at total chaos through newborn eyes, they give birth to a new cosmos<sup>38</sup>.

The Cosmos in Makino's film is a metaphor of creativity, and the conclusion is that, the picture of the universe, everybody has in his mind, differs one from another. Furthermore, the vision of space created by the Japanese director has its purpose; it is to bring the audience to the deeper reflection on the meaning of life.

Other Makino's works, in which he presents the vision of the universe, are also worth mentioning. In 2011 he turned his artistic practice into a new direction and become interested in 3D animation<sup>39</sup>. The result of his searching for a fresh means of expression was visible in films *2012* (2011)<sup>40</sup> and *Phantom Nebula* (2014). It also should be indicated that Makino mastered his musical skills and recently he has composed the great amount of the music used in his films. Moreover, he very often works with other artists, what results in arranging them to perform during the projections. Undoubtedly, Takashi Makino is one of the most prolific filmmakers of the Japanese experimental cinema today.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. T. Makino, *Still in Cosmos*, Light Cone [on-line:] <http://lightcone.org/en/film-7445-still-in-cosmos> [15.12.2015].

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. J. Ross, *Interview: Takashi Makino*, “Filmcomment” 2014 [on-line:] <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-takashi-makino/> [08.12.2015].

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ibidem.

## CONCLUSION

The visualizations of the universe in Japanese experimental cinema are connected with metaphysical thinking. In the pictures presented in this essay the representations of the celestial bodies and the vision of space are used as the symbols transferring more complex meaning. For the authors the context is more important than the picture itself, and the interpretation lies on the side of the viewer. The rising interest in the avant-garde cinema in Japan and the ongoing trend for searching for new means of expression by the young artists, promises many perspectives for further studies, also in the subject of the visualizations of the universe in experimental films.

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## SUMMARY

ENTER THE METAPHYSICAL COSMOS.

THE VISUALIZATIONS OF THE UNIVERSE IN JAPANESE EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

The visualizations of the cosmos in Japanese culture are connected with the vision presented in Nihongi, the chronicle of Japan. The universe described in the foundation myth was the source of inspiration for Japanese artists through ages. The unique collection of myths also had an influence on the avant-garde directors, among whom the author of this article chose Takahiko Iimura, Takashi Ito and Takashi Makino. The mentioned artists represent three generations of filmmakers, who used the vision of space to transfer metaphysical meaning. Using experimental techniques, they search for new interpretations of the mythical stories and show to their viewers the unusual depths of the abstract, whirling supernovas.