

“A Page of Madness”
by George Crosthwait

Kurutta Ippēji [*A Page of Madness*] emerged as a product of the late *Taishō*-era (1912-1926), a semi-democratic period of relatively liberal values which led to an increase in experimental art in Japan. A concurrent, if not wholly artistically equivalent, period of time to the modernist movement in the West. Aaron Gerow describes the cultural atmosphere of 1920s *Taishō* Japan as being defined by “*ero guro nansensu*”: eroticism, the grotesque, and nonsense. Within this fertile environment, Riichi Yokomitsu and Nobel prize winner Yasunari Kawabata’s group, *Shinkankakuha* [new impressions / perceptions] acted as an umbrella outfit for a variety of avant-garde practices like futurism, Dadaism, and cubism. Although a dominant ideology of *Shinkankakuha* was never decided upon, like the Bloomsbury Set in London (Clive Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Virginia Woolf et al.) the movement could generally be defined by the principle “art-for-art’s-sake”. They were, however, positioned firmly counter to the naturalism of *shishōsetsu* (I-Novel), and instead sought to challenge the notion of an objective truth that could be comprehended by an individual perspective. Interested in the experimental film practices and theoretical writings emanating from Europe, *Shinkankakuha* considered the relatively new popular art form of cinema as capable of providing new forms of perception and sensation.

Teinosuke Kinugasa made his name as an actor and director associated with *shinpa* [contemporary melodrama], and whose critical reputation previous to *A Page of Madness* was that of an unambitious workmanlike filmmaker churning out lowbrow films in order to placate undemanding audiences and satisfy the accounting departments of mainstream studios. Kinugasa was, however, struck by the European films that were filtering into liberal *Taishō* Japan. In particular, he was captivated by the work of German expressionists Robert Wiene (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*) and F. W. Murnau (*Nosferatu* and *The Last Laugh*), French impressionists like Abel Gance (*La Roue*), and the writings of Soviet formalist directors Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov.

Using a cast and crew of regular collaborators, and by exploiting his industry connections in order to secure equipment and studio space, Kinugasa was able to shoot *A Page of Madness* quickly and cheaply. He worked from a story outline that was improvised upon, embellished, and re-written on a daily basis. Kawabata was originally charged with writing the screenplay, but it seems that he was only able to partially complete it. It is likely that very little of Kawabata’s script is reflected onscreen and ultimately, that his involvement served mainly for advertising purposes. Particularly inspired by the “floating camera” innovations of Murnau’s *The Last Laugh*, and Gance’s revolutionary editing techniques in *La Roue*, Kinugasa strained to fill each scene in *A Page of Madness* with formal pyrotechnics (super-impositions, jump-cuts, double-exposure, rhythmic intercutting, flashbacks, and potent symbolism). In stark contrast to such stylistic bravura, the narrative is relatively straightforward. A man works as a janitor at the psychiatric hospital where his wife is interred, and through a series of flashbacks, the reason for her committal is revealed to be a physical assault on their daughter’s fiancée - of whom she disapproved.

As was custom at the time, *A Page of Madness* would have been exhibited with *benshi* narration. A *benshi* gives a theatrical performance which includes describing and commenting

upon the onscreen action, as well as providing the voices of the cast. At the height of the silent-era in Japan, popular *benshi* were often the main attraction for cinema-goers. Given its abstract appearance and eschewing of intertitles, *A Page of Madness* provides a large scope for *benshi* interpretation. That the film can be comprehended and presented significantly differently with each showing, and taking into account the variety of screenplays from which the final result is probably a composite, as well as the different versions of the film, it is understandable that Aaron Gerow describes *A Page of Madness* as “not one, but many texts”.