

## Transculturally Visualizing Tanizaki: *Manji* in Liliana Cavani's *Interno Berlinese*

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### Abstract

*Manji* (1928–30) is probably one of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's best known works. The novel is structured as the confessional monologue of Sonoko, a married upper-class young woman who, at some point in her heterosexual life, falls in love with Mitsuko, a seductive fellow student. Their sapphic relationship is complicated by the intrusion of the ambiguous, impotent Watanuki, Mitsuko's ex-fiancé, and Kotarō, Sonoko's anhedonic husband. In an attempt to put an end to his wife's momentary bewilderment, even Kotarō will find himself entrapped in Mitsuko's web of voluptuousness and deception. As many of other Tanizaki's stories, *Manji* has been adapted to film several times. This article focuses on one of the most controversial of these adaptations, namely the 1985 film *Interno berlinese* (*The Berlin Affair*). Directed by the Italian auteur Liliana Cavani, the film has, among others, the peculiarity of transplanting the original Ōsaka four-way love affair into Nazi Germany. This and other unusual adaptation choices will be discussed, in an attempt to grasp Cavani's understanding of the story and, more broadly, of Tanizaki's poetics.

### Introduction

*Manji* (literally "swastika, Buddhist cross") can be considered one of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's (1886–1965) best known and more intriguing works. Initially serialized for the general magazine *Kaizō* ("Reconstruction") between 1928 and 1930, the novel takes the form of the confessional monologue of Sonoko, an Ōsaka upper-class young woman stuck in a marriage with lawyer Kakiuchi Kotarō, a union only happy on the outside. At some point in this somewhat unsatisfying, heterosexual life, Sonoko finds herself irremediably attracted to the mesmerizing Tokumitsu Mitsuko, a beautiful fellow student in the drawing class she is attending at a local art school. Their fiery, lesbian liaison, however, is complicated by the presence of Watanuki Eijirō, an impotent dandy to whom Mitsuko is bound by an ambiguous relationship, and by Sonoko's husband. In an attempt to divert his wife from what seems to be a momentary bewilderment, Kotarō will find himself falling under Mitsuko's enchantment as well.

As with many other Tanizaki's stories, *Manji* has been adapted to film several times, mostly by Japanese filmmakers. Masumura Yasuzō's 1964 version of the same title, screenwritten by Shindō Kaneto and starring Wakao Ayako and Kishida Kyōko, is probably among the most fortunate of these adaptations. The focus of this paper, however, is *Interno berlinese* (literally "Berlin interior", translated in English as *The Berlin Affair*), a film directed by Italian auteur Liliana Cavani in 1985 that stands out for its transnational nature. An Italo-German production, the film has indeed, among others, the peculiarity of transplanting the original Ōsaka four-way love affair into nothing less than the 1938 Germany, at the eve of World War II. Thus, the film does not only mark the institutional encounter of two different artistic forms, but also an intimate one between two fascinating yet controversial personalities. On one side we have Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, one of the greatest writers of twentieth-century Japan, a master of literary eroticism, well known for his capability in amusing the reader with "such varied activities as fetishism, orgy, sadomasochism, voyeurism, scatology and other perversions".<sup>1</sup> On the other side there is the universe of Liliana Cavani, one of the few prominent women in the Italian film industry, and in film historian Gian Piero Brunetta's words, "one of the most troubled, both stylistically and thematically, and erudite authors of her generation".<sup>2</sup> Cavani is probably best remembered worldwide for her 1974 film *The Night Porter* (*Il portiere di notte*), on the scandalous relationship between Lucia (Charlotte Rampling), a former concentration camp victim, and Max (Dirk Bogarde), the former Nazi officer with whom she had a relationship of abuse and sadomasochism while imprisoned. Accidentally, the two meet fifteen years later and choose to revive that relationship even after many years from the end of the war. In fact, Cavani's work spans from documentaries for television to fiction, and counts a number of literary adaptations as well. *The Night Porter* is only the first chapter of the director's so-called "German Trilogy", a series of three movies directed over eleven years and all set in Germany, of which the last episode is *The Berlin Affair*.<sup>3</sup>

Although both *Manji* and *Interno berlinese* have been singularly discussed from perspectives as various as literary studies, film studies, Japanese studies, Italian studies and gender studies, there is not, to date, a discussion in English that examines them from a comparative viewpoint, focusing on the transculturalizing processes that Cavani actualized in rendering into a European cultural framework the Japaneseness within

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<sup>1</sup> GANGLOFF 1976: 217.

<sup>2</sup> BRUNETTA 2003: 280. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are those of the author.

<sup>3</sup> The second chapter of the trilogy, released in 1977, is *Beyond Good and Evil* (*Al di là del bene e del male*). Starring Dominique Sanda, Erland Josephson and Robert Powell, the drama film follows the controversial relationship between Friedrich Nietzsche, Lou Andreas-Salomé and Paul Rée at the end of the 19th century.

Tanizaki's story.<sup>4</sup> A closer focus on both works from a comparative perspective reveals that they both engage, although each in its own way, in an interesting relationship with issues of exoticism and orientalism. It is particularly this aspect what this analysis will emphasize.

### ***Manji*: intrigues, deceits, and the seduction power of Western Japan**

*Manji* appeared for the first time in the March 1928 issue of *Kaizō*, a general-interest magazine that focused mainly on labor and social problems, but that hosted literary works from popular writers such as Shiga Naoya and Yokomitsu Riichi as well. The novel was serialized until the April 1930 issue of the magazine, and then published as a single volume (*tankōbon*) in April 1931. *Manji* is also one of the last Tanizaki's major works to have appeared in English. Howard Hibbett translated it only in 1994, under the title *Quicksand*. The *manji* of the title, however, is the Buddhist symbol of prosperity that can be seen at the entrance of Japanese temples and as such, another reference to the sacred imagery by which the novel is infused. A signifier of complexity and twines for its shape, the swastika has been read as a metaphor of the singular and multifaceted relationships that intertwine the main four characters of the novel.<sup>5</sup>

The story is narrated in first-person as the spoken confession by Sonoko, the daughter of a rich merchant family, to an indistinct figure she refers to as Sensei, a writer who seems to have acted as her confidant before, when she had an affair with a young man. Sensei presumably records and rearranges her story in the way we read it. The narrative style suggests that Sonoko is conversing with Sensei, although his replies are not recorded. Some passages in the text, however, reveal Sonoko's narrative as

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<sup>4</sup> The only discussions written from this perspective are in Italian, PELUSO 1999, and in Spanish, ARRIETA DOMÍNGUEZ 2014, the latter, however, only briefly discussing Cavani's work among four more film adaptations of the novel. Even Gaetana MARRONE's award-winning monograph, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth*, the most complete and well-researched book in English on Liliana Cavani, contains a chapter on *Interno berlinese*. Despite providing an undoubtedly fascinating reading of the movie, however, Marrone confuses Tanizaki's third wife's name, Matsuko, with that of Mitsuko, one of the main characters in the novel, and also attributes the authorship of Ishikawa Kon's 1959 film *Kagi* ("The Key", *Odd Obsession*) to the writer Mishima Yukio. Such inaccuracies seem to remind us how confusing Japan can be for those not familiar with its linguistic and cultural expressions, and highlight the importance of looking at such a transcultural adaption from a Japanologist perspective.

<sup>5</sup> See ITO 1991: 280. The recent Spanish translation *Arenas movedizas* by Carlos Manzano (2010) literally follows Hibbett's rendering. Other translations include the Italian *La croce buddista* ("The Buddhist cross") by Lydia Origlia (1982), the French *Svastika* ("Swastika") by René de Ceccatty and Ryōji Nakamura (1985), and the Portuguese translation *Voragem* ("Whirlpool") by Leiko Gotoda (2001).

dialogic rather than purely monologic.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes she jumps ahead in the narration, giving hints of the tragic epilogue of the adventure; sometimes she makes use of flashbacks to reflect on a previous episode in the light of some fresh insight. Sonoko's monologue is continuously interspersed with comments or documents written by Sensei and labelled as "Author's notes" (*sakushachū*).

Sonoko's confession starts with her first encounter with Mitsuko at a local school they both attend. Sonoko is drawing a picture of a model posing in gauzy white robe as the Willow Kannon (Yōryū Kannon). The portrait, however, as the school director points out, does not look at all like the posing model; it rather resembles Tokumitsu Mitsuko, a fellow student in the same course. The episode generates rumors about a possible sapphic liaison between the two, although according to Sonoko's confession they did not even know each other yet. It is only when Mitsuko approached her later to reveal that the speculations about their relationship were being prompted by her enemies, that the two women talked for the first time. In her words, Mitsuko had received a marriage proposal from a young man belonging to one of the wealthiest families in Ōsaka. For such proposal, she had become the target of a councilman who aimed at giving his own daughter as a spouse to the rich man. With all her allure, Mitsuko was a formidable rival, so the councilman had tried to discredit her in many ways, even bribing the director of the school to have his help. However, heedless of the increasing gossip, Sonoko's and Mitsuko's encounter soon evolves into an intimate friendship. They start to see each other regularly, go to Nara together for a trip, and soon after Sonoko invites Mitsuko to her bedroom with the clear intent of drawing a picture of her naked body. Once there, things become carnal, and the two women have their first physical contact. Right after, Sonoko's husband, Kotarō, returns home and meets Mitsuko for the first time. This encounter, however, does not seem to hinder the two women's relationship. Their love grows up in an alternation of affection and jealousy, as proved by some letters exchanged between them and shown to Sensei by Sonoko. Their idyllic relationship, however, cannot last too long. The telephone calls Mitsuko makes to Sonoko in the middle of the night and the feeling that their friendship is evolving into something different make Kotarō jealous to the extent that in a quarrel with his wife, he accuses Mitsuko of intruding into their bedroom, with the intent of breaking their union. Sonoko reacts violently, accusing him back of being a coward who married her only so that her rich family could support his studies.

When the lesbian relationship between Sonoko and Mitsuko seems to solidify enough to compromise the heterosexual one between Sonoko and Kotarō, Tanizaki pushes into the scene Watanuki Eijirō, an ambiguous man bound to Mitsuko by an unclear relationship. He seems to be very in love with her, to the extent of being ready to do anything to steal her

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<sup>6</sup> SAKAKI 1999: 194.

from Sonoko. His presence anguishes Sonoko, who starts to doubt about Mitsuko's feelings. Mitsuko, however, reveals that the mysterious dandy suffers from an erectile dysfunction, which makes it impossible for him to have normal relationships with women. Despite an escalation of intrigues including hysterical pregnancies, phantom abortions and blood pacts, Sonoko and Watanuki realize that they are probably both victims of Mitsuko's seduction games and lies, but at the same time, they recognize the impossibility to cut their ties with her. Even the anhedonic Kotarō, incapable of dissuading his wife, will rather soon end himself entrapped into Mitsuko's vicious circle.

In the meantime, Watanuki threatens the three that he will disclose their sordid affair to the press, but Kotarō manages to buy his silence with some money. Nevertheless, in the end, the turbid liaison is unexpectedly disclosed by Mitsuko's maid O-ume, in a rush of revenge for being unfairly fired by the girl's family. The feelings of shame deriving from this act bring then Mitsuko to finally resolve the situation with a conjunct suicide of all the parties. However, after drinking the lethal potion that Mitsuko herself prepared for the three of them, only she and Kotarō will die, leaving Sonoko shut in the eternal mourning of their deaths. Mitsuko probably deliberately decided to die with Kotarō, leaving Sonoko apart. With a considerable amount of ambiguity, Tanizaki leaves to the reader the decision of determining if this was an act of love, or just another layer of lies in Mitsuko's cruel seduction project.

*Manji* is then, above all, a tale of human frailty with regard to relationships, sex, and corruption. With *Manji*, Tanizaki returns on one of his most recurrent fantasies; the conflict, in Howard Hibbett's words, between "the venerated and the debased woman"<sup>7</sup>, or to say it with a more provocative synthesis, between "the mother and the whore"<sup>8</sup>.

Set mainly in Ōsaka, *Manji* represents also an additional statement of the infatuation with Kansai that Tanizaki started to develop after moving with his family to the region in 1923, as a consequence of the Great Kantō earthquake. This fascination is testified in a number of other essays (*zuihitsu*) that the writer penned in those years, such as *Toshi jōkei* ("Cityscape", 1926), *Okamoto nite* ("At Okamoto", 1929), and above all *Watakushi no mita Ōsaka oyobi Ōsakajin* ("Ōsaka and Its People seen by myself", 1932) and *Tōkyō o omou* ("My thoughts on Tōkyō", 1934), where he crystallizes all his nostalgia for the gradually disappearing Tōkyō *shitamachi* (low town) in which he was born and bred, his repudiation of what the city was progressively becoming, and, at the same time, all his enthusiasm for the vitality and authenticity of Western Japan, of Kansai in particular, his new homeland.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously enough, Tanizaki's take on Kansai and its people was far from being neutral, and clearly marked by a conspicuous dose of exoticism. In the above-mentioned

<sup>7</sup> HIBBETT 1973: 160.

<sup>8</sup> GANGLOFF 1974: 217.

<sup>9</sup> TANIZAKI 1981, vol 20: 167–79; 347–397; vol. 21: 1–76; vol. 22: 182–86.

“Watakushi no mita Ōsaka oyobi Ōsakajin”, for instance, he goes as far as to compare the voice of Tōkyō women to the mandolin, and that of Ōsaka women to the sound of a guitar, much more seductive and fascinating.<sup>10</sup> These pages appear strongly infused by the charm of the unfamiliar, that fascination for a cultural and physical otherness not found in the inner self that outlines, by definition, exoticism.

This exotic haze pervades *Manji* in its wholeness, but it peremptorily resurfaces in specific sections of the novel. In describing a picture of the two main female characters, for example, the author notes that:

The “matching kimonos” in the photograph were of the gaudy, colorful sort that is so much to the Osaka taste. Mrs. Kakiuchi wore her hair pulled back in a chignon; Mitsuko’s was done up in a traditional Shimada, but her eyes were rich, liquid, extraordinarily passionate for a young city-bred girl of Osaka.<sup>11</sup>

Here and there, Kansai inhabitants are often recognized as having a taste for the gaudy and the colorful. In other parts of the novel, this preference is more clearly counterposed with Tōkyō’s sober, but somehow less authentic taste. The letters exchanged between Sonoko and Mitsuko, described in the “Author’s notes” as follows, provide a good example of this dichotomy:

The letters that the widow Kakiuchi called “just a few” from their correspondence filled a silk-crepe parcel about ten inches square almost to bursting; the four corners of the cloth had been knotted together with difficulty. Her fingertips crimsoned as she pinched the hard little knot to undo it. What finally came pouring out was a flood of figured paper: all those letters were in envelopes adorned with coquettish, brilliantly colored woodblock designs. The envelopes were small, only big enough to hold a sheet of women’s letter paper folded in four, and they were decorated with evening primroses, lilies of the valley, tulips, portraits of beauties in the manner of Takehisa Yumeji, printed in four or five colors. I was somewhat taken aback at the sight. Doubtless no Tokyo woman would choose such garish envelopes. Even for a love letter, she would prefer something plainer. If you showed her such things, you may be certain she would disdain them as hopelessly vulgar. And a man who received a love letter in an envelope like that, supposing he was a Tokyo man, would surely take an instant dislike to the sender. In any case, the taste for that sort of gaudy excess is indeed typical of Osaka women.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> TANIZAKI 1981, vol. 20: 364.

<sup>11</sup> TANIZAKI 1994: 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 37.

It would be difficult not recognizing in the Tōkyō man of the passage above the *shitamachi*-born Tanizaki himself. The writer appears seduced and, at the same time, puzzled by an abundance of garishness that includes, among other amenities, references to the colorful art of Okayama-born painter Takehisa Yumeji (1884–1934).

In addition, another important device used to highlight the exotic allure of Kansai and its inhabitants is the language adopted. Much has been written about *Manji*'s language and peculiar writing style. In the preface of the first *tankōbon* edition, Tanizaki himself asserts that the novel was the result of his fascination with the “Kansai speech spilling from the crimson lips of the women of the region”, as well as the desire to write “a story where both dialogues and narrative were rendered in the Ōsaka dialect”.<sup>13</sup> Whilst his voice, barely readable through the “Author’s notes”, comes in the form of standard Japanese, the voice of the other characters, expressed in Sonoko’s monologue, comes in Ōsaka dialect. Several studies revealed that when *Manji* was first serialized in *Kaizō*, the early chapters were completely written in standard Japanese, dialogues included. Regional speech started to appear in the third chapter, while the ninth chapter was entirely told in Ōsaka dialect. Only later did Tanizaki unify the narrative by adapting the early chapters to this regional vernacular.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, as Ken Ito points out, Tanizaki’s gradual insertion of dialect into the serialized version of *Manji* increased alongside with the novel’s lesbian affair. The more the story grows sexual explicit, the more the Ōsaka vernacular is used. Thus, as Ito remarks, this linguistic choice has a specific function: *Manji*'s exotic style “developed as a means of linguistically constructing a world of exotic erotic possibilities”.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, the effect of exotic displacement achieved through the use of dialect in the narration did not entirely survive in translation. A closer focus on the first translation of the novel, 1982 Lydia Origlia’s Italian one, that served as a source for Cavani’s adaptation, reveals that all the Japanese local linguistic varieties found in the original text were rendered by standard Italian. Language standardization was also the preferred approach in Howard Hibbett’s 1994 English translation, but an important question then arises: if geo-linguistic variations, as we have seen, are one of the most prominent feature through which Tanizaki reaches that exotic dimension that characterizes the novel, how does Liliana Cavani deal with such an issue? In other words, how does Cavani transform into images a feature of the novel that is not identifiable in the translation that was the basis for her personal film retelling?

<sup>13</sup> See TANIZAKI 1981, vol. 23: 137. For a detailed account in English on *Manji*'s peculiar writing style see ITO 1991 and SAKAKI 1999. In Japanese, particularly informative readings are KŌNO 1976, CHIBA 1994 and MAEDA 1998.

<sup>14</sup> See KŌNO 1976: 188; ITO 1991: 118.

<sup>15</sup> ITO 1991: 120.

### Transculturalising Tanizaki's world: A Japanese Idol in Italo-German interiors

Adaptation, as we know, inevitably brings with itself a number of changes to the original story. These variations can be induced by several factors, such as the new expressive form, the ideology of the adapter, and the particular audience to which the work is addressed. To say it with Linda Hutcheon's words, adaptation takes to a "repetition with difference", or "repetition without replication"<sup>16</sup>. If film adaptation can be undoubtedly defined as a complicated process, a transcultural film adaptation that, like in this case, intertwines two so different cultural worlds, it is at the very least a challenging one.

However, it must be remembered that Cavani's film is not the first transcultural film adaptation of a Tanizaki work. Only two years before the release of *Interno berlinese* indeed, another Italian author had taken on the challenge of bringing to the big screen Tanizaki's literature: Tinto Brass with *La chiave (The key)*, an adaptation of the same-name novel *Kagi* (1956). An erotic production that aroused scandal because of many explicit shots of nudity and sex scenes involving the popular Italian actress Stefania Sandrelli, the film relocated the original story into Fascist Venice. Thus, despite the obvious differences in Cavani and Brass styles, the two movies share an important feature: they both transplant a Tanizaki novel in the context of a European regime.

Nevertheless, Cavani hastened to add that it was not Brass' work that inspired her to adapt a Tanizaki novel. A fervent reader of the Japanese writer, she had been fascinated by his writings since publisher Bombiani had started to publish the Italian translations of some of his works in the 1960s. Of particular appeal to the film director was the universality of Tanizaki's stories, that apart from some exceptions, she noted, do not have national connotations, but rather concern the whole of humanity for the complexity and psychological depth of the characters.<sup>17</sup> She refined the concept in an interview released in August 1985 for *Tuttolibri*, the cultural supplement of the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, a few months before the première of the film:

I have always read everything of what has been translated of Tanizaki. He is a classic like Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Mann or Balzac, namely a writer who bases his narrative on archetypal ideas of the human experience. It is true that Tanizaki read some European classics and maybe let them influence him, but it is also possible that many mythologems are common to both cultures. This is the reason why, although in different contexts, the core of his narrative captivates me and its differences fascinate me. It must be said that in the eleventh century court world of the great Murasaki there was already something of the atmosphere and costume (albeit at a more subtle and

<sup>16</sup> HUTCHEON 2006: 143.

<sup>17</sup> ROBYONI 1985: 20.

refined level) present then in European courtly literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Experts will perhaps be able to say whether the myths have a path of which you can find traces or whether, after all, they are spontaneous and existing in different cultures with different masks. Ultimately, Tanizaki and Japanese culture are less distant from us on a deeper level than they are at the level of history. In my film, a real Japanese artist who does not know any European language, Tsujimura Jusaburō, has collaborated as a costume designer. We spoke through an interpreter, but in fact we talked through the language of images and imagination (which is precisely the language of myths) and we felt very similar.<sup>18</sup>

Among the many translated works of Tanizaki, the filmmaker was particularly enchanted by *Manji*, one of the last of his works to be translated in Italian by 1985:

I always read all of Tanizaki, but this *The Buddhist Cross*, which is the latest of his works in Italian, struck me particularly: it is a very symbolic book, religious in a sense... The title refers to the Buddhist cross with four arms, because it is a story about four characters involved by the same complicity and passion: the story of an idol and his three devotees, of the girl Mitsuko and two men and a woman that she is able to involve in the private worship of herself.<sup>19</sup>

It appears clear that Cavani was charmed by the conniving passion interweaving *Manji's* characters, a feeling in which the filmmaker perceives a certain religiosity and mysticism that she identifies as part of her historical present as well: "In an era such as ours, a total passion is always mystically charged, and in order to nourish itself can only refer to faith in the transcendental", she added in the same interview. A faith reaching metaphysical and moral values, that the filmmaker recognizes not purely as a reality of the 1930s, the period in which the two works are set, but also of the 1980s, when the film was released.<sup>20</sup>

If this sentiment is not a prerogative of the 1930s, however, one might ask why Cavani chose to postpone Tanizaki's story by only a few years. Setting a film in a more recent historical period well recognizable by spectators might be certainly read as a trend typical

<sup>18</sup> CAVANI 1985: 3.

<sup>19</sup> MORI 1985: 19. In this interview, released to Anna Maria Mori for the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* in April 1985, Cavani herself erroneously defines the book as Tanizaki's latest production in Italian. In fact, Lydia Origlia's Italian translation of *Manji*, published by Guanda in 1982, was succeeded in those years by a number of other works, including the collection *Pianto di sirena e altri racconti* ("The mermaid's lament and other stories"), edited by Adriana Boscaro (Feltrinelli, 1985), that contains inedited translations of short stories such as *Ningyo no nageki* ("The mermaid's lament", 1917) and reprints of other stories such as *Shisei* ("The Tattoo", 1910).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

of adaptations in not being “back-dated but rather updated to shorten the gap between works created earlier and contemporary audience”<sup>21</sup>. This is particularly true as the chosen time was the eve of that Second World War with which virtually everybody has, through direct experience or hearsay, some degree of tragic familiarity. Furthermore, Cavani explained that Nazism was the perfect counterpart for emphasizing the religious-like boundaries between the characters of the story:

Dictatorship is in my opinion the most irreligious moment in history, because the leader and hierarchies in power take the place of a divinity and become its caricature, making, consequently, outrageous and impossible fantasy; and religion itself, which is nourished by fantasy... In the background of this reality, which, however, you will not see at all in the film – no swastikas and brown shirts, as *Interno Berlinese* will take place entirely, in fact, in interiors – my characters, with their religious passion that has nothing to do with dictatorship, are not anti-Nazi, but definitely “other” than Nazism, to which they end up being counterposed, even without this being explicitly stated.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, not only the austerity of a regime provides an ideal background for the passionate, religious nature of *Manji*'s intrigues, but Europe, and Germany in particular, represents an ideal middle-earth closer to Cavani's own cultural background, and at the same time, is able to provide a credible connection to a more remote cultural and geographical context such as Japan:

I could not and I did not want to do a Japanese film because I belong to another culture. But then I realised that around 1935 was the first real encounter between Japan and Europe, which ended up tragically, as we know. The Berlin of those years could provide me with an atmosphere that would serve as a gloomy and moralistically intolerant background for this story, an intrigue of private passions, and for this encounter.<sup>23</sup>

Deprived of the original geographical landscape and historical setting, Tanizaki's story relives in the film following basically its own narrative structure. In the Berlin at the eve of the institution of the Rome–Berlin–Tōkyō Axis, according to which Italy, Germany and Japan agreed to fight the Allied Powers in World War II, four characters live out their convoluted passion pervaded with intrigues and deception. The spoiled Sonoko, the daughter of a rich Ōsaka merchant, turned into Louise von Hollendorf (Gudrun Landgrebe), a noblewoman who is married to Heinz (Kevin McNally), a German senior diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Teutonic couple's routine is interrupted, more than

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<sup>21</sup> HUTCHEON 2006: 146.

<sup>22</sup> MORI 1985: 19.

<sup>23</sup> PISU 1985: 25.

by the historical events, by the encounter with Matsugae Mitsuko (Takaki Mio), the young and alluring daughter of the Japanese Ambassador in Germany. Needless to say, Mitsuko is another, if not the most, important link to the original Tanizaki novel: “I wanted to keep something of the original, the soul, a certain depth”<sup>24</sup>, admitted Cavani for justifying her presence.

While Louise's role was immediately given to Gudrun Landgrebe, better known at that time for starring in Robert van Ackeren's *A Woman in Flames* (*Die flambierte Frau*, 1983) and Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* original series (1984), the role of Heinz was given to Kevin McNally, a then less-known British actor coming from the theatre world. Mitsuko's casting required much more effort. Chronicles of the time, some of which are pervaded by a sort of orientalist curiosity, recount Cavani flying all the way to Tōkyō for the selection of an “exotic face” for the protagonist of her new film.<sup>25</sup> The encounter with local girls and the fashion of Tōkyō of the early 80s proved not to be completely rewarding for the filmmaker, interested as she was in a type of beauty that would remind one of early Shōwa (1926–1989) canons. She found an exception in Takaki Mio, a young actress at an early stage of her career:

Today's Japanese beauty is a girl who resembles Westerners, with short hair, the Asian features little or not marked at all, an overall American or Americanized style... I was looking for a 1930's-style Japanese beauty: one that resembled the mothers or grandmothers of today's Japanese girls, and that would be convincing in the role of the idol. I found her in a young, almost debuting actress.<sup>26</sup>

A native of the Fukuoka prefecture grown up in Yokohama, Takaki Mio debuted in the film industry in 1981 after a brief, not very fortunate experience as a bank employee for the Dai-ichi Kangyo Ginkō, now part of the Mizuho Financial Group. Cinema, initially, was for her a mere hobby:

I had just started my first job in a bank when I was taken by a passion for cinema. I used to spend almost all my free time at the movie theatre and would never miss a major film, be it Japanese, American or European. I used to watch some of them, the most interesting, several times in the retrospectives. For example, I went to see *Death in Venice* seven times.<sup>27</sup>

Noted by a Japanese model agency, she started modelling and shortly afterwards obtained a role as protagonist in the film *Mōningu mūn wa sozatsu ni* (*Morning moon*,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous 1985: 21.

<sup>26</sup> MORI 1985: 19.

<sup>27</sup> ANTONELLI 1985: 7.

roughly), becoming a teen idol. At the very same time, she started a parallel career as a pop-star, releasing several singles and albums, including the 1982 hit *Dansu wa umaku odorenai* (“I can’t dance very well”), that topped the Japanese hit parade and sold about eight hundred thousand copies.

Takaki has a pivotal role in the film. With her somehow reassuring, teen idol-like figure reshaped, according to Cavani’s aesthetics, into a priestess exuding austerity and seduction, she provides the deepest bond to Tanizaki’s universe. The other important connection with the Japanese novel is the basic narrative structure, preserved almost entirely.

Similarly to the novel, *Interno berlinese* opens with a spoken confession: that of Louise to her former literature professor, a writer of novels banned by the Nazi regime for their audacious contents. In a studio that reminds one of the American professor in Luchino Visconti’s 1974 film *Conversation piece (Gruppo di famiglia in un interno)*, which is an important reference for the film even in the title, the very first scene seems to set the real leitmotif of this adaptation: the contrast between interiors and exteriors, and particularly the exploration of the interiors as metaphors of the inner side of the characters. A Schopenhauer’s quote that the man is typing at a typewriter seems to underline this dichotomy: “It is not, as the philosophy of professors would foolishly claim, in universal history that we find plan and unity, rather in the life of individual.” A concept further stressed in another scene, where Mitsuko is studying in her studio under the guide of her private Japanese tutor: “You have to take serious things lightly, and small ones very seriously”, he utters in Japanese just before being interrupted by Louise’s visit.

Nevertheless, historical circumstances, albeit in a marginal way, condition events in the lives of the characters. It is because of the regime suspending her literature professor from his position at university, that Louise loses interest in the academia and starts instead taking a drawing course at the German Institute of Fine Arts. And it is there that she meets Mitsuko and, captivated by her exotic beauty, starts sketching her instead of the Arian model provided by the institute. Her attentions do not pass unobserved by their half-Italian drawing instructor Joseph Benno. Played by Italian actor Andrea Prodan, Benno subsumes two of the most treacherous characters of the novel: the school director and Watanuki, since he is, as it will emerge only later in the movie, in an ambiguous relationship with Mitsuko.

As in the novel, the two women prove to be careless of rumors about them being romantically engaged, and have their romantic encounters first at Louise’s house and later at the Japanese embassy in Berlin where Mitsuko lives.<sup>28</sup> Even here, the husband grows suspicious of the women’s relationship and confronts Louise, who minimizes her

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, the location chosen for the few outdoor shootings was Wien, the European city that, to Cavani’s eyes, best recalled Berlin’s prewar architecture. See ROBYONI 1985: 20.

involvement even in the face of clear evidence. Not only is Heinz jealous, but also worried that his wife's indiscretions might damage his position and political ambitions. Nevertheless, this does not seem to dissuade Louise, completely absorbed in the worship of the captivating Japanese idol.

Even in the film, however, a call made by Mitsuko in the middle of the night, reveals to Louise's eyes a disconcerting reality. In the shabbiness of the Hotel Leipzig interiors where she was requested to go, Benno confesses to Louise that Mitsuko has had an affair with him and that, since the two of them were planning to marry, they had spread the lesbian rumors to distract from their own relationship, unacceptable for differences in their race and social extraction. Repelled and disillusioned, Louise repents and returns in her husband's arms, searching for consolation.

Unlike in Tanizaki's novel, the political dimension bursts into the film narration with the intent of emphasizing the displacement of the characters. The regime of moral rigor implemented by Nazism in which a sordid private affair is taking place, manifests itself in an episode that cannot be found in the novel. Wolf von Hollendorf, Heinz's cousin and a high-ranking Gestapo officer, invites Louise and Heinz to participate in a ploy to expose General Werner von Heiden's homosexuality. Without Louise completely realizing what was happening, General von Heiden and his lover, a young pianist, are invited to von Hollendorf's house; once there, Wolf discloses the homosexual relationship between the two men, destroying the general's career.

A month later, while Louise is trying to cope with the pain of Mitsuko's absence, Mitsuko reappears, faking illness and pregnancy. Although Louise seems to understand that it is only a farce, she rekindles her affair with the Japanese girl even with greater intensity. Subsequently, even Benno re-emerges, with a written agreement in which he promises to not interfere with the relationship between the two women if Louise helps him to marry Mitsuko. Louise, albeit reluctantly, agrees, and put her blood on the agreement as a signature mark. Benno then hazards blackmailing Heinz with that document, but he ends up being deported to Italy by Wolf's men.

Heinz is then determined to separate his wife from Mitsuko, but the two women simulate an attempted suicide in order to scare him and convince him to accept their relationship. However, Mitsuko wakes up earlier and seduces Heinz, who ends up having intercourse with her while Louise witnesses the scene in a state between sleep and wakefulness.

At this point, even Heinz is seduced and a self-destructive *ménage à trois* begins to take regularly place, with every component member growing more and more jealous of each other. Mitsuko is the real leader, the goddess who rules the couple's daily routine, drugging them with sleeping pills to prevent them from having sex when she is not around. In the end, Benno manages to publish, through a friend, an article unequivocally titled *Blutpakt und sapphische Liebe in den höchsten diplomatischen Kreisen* ("Blood

pact and sapphic love in the highest diplomatic circles”), exposing the threesome to the Nazi regime. Heinz is then asked to resign and leaves Berlin, but when Louise and Mitsuko disappear together, their passports are withdrawn. Escape gradually becomes a mirage, so the Japanese idol decides what *grand finale* to give to the story: all three of them will kill themselves by drinking poison in a macabre, farewell ceremonial rite. In the end, however, only Louise will survive, discovering that both Heinz and Mitsuko are dead.

The *mise en scene* returns to the professor’s studio, the slightly dark interior where the whole confession takes place. As Sonoko in the novel, Louise reveals that only the doubt that she was intentionally left behind by Mitsuko and betrayed by both her lovers prevented her from committing suicide. Nevertheless, hate is not the sentiment harbored in her soul; instead, she feels nostalgic. Cavani adds then a conclusive scene not found in the novel. The professor encourages Louise to publish her story and gives her the manuscript of his last novel, asking her to save it somehow. He is then arrested and taken away by the Gestapo, again another inexorable, feral incursion of history in the characters’ private, interior space.

Despite some unavoidable variations, Cavani’s film succeeds in respectfully preserving the main themes of Tanizaki’s story: the supremacy of the female heroine, the fragility of human beings and the impossibility for them to win over a passion bordering on religiosity. The most important loss regards the ambiguous, exotic gaze towards Kansai linguistic and cultural aspects characterizing the original novel.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, despite having been lost in the Italian translation that inspired the film, the exotic dimension provided by the Ōsaka vernacular seems to be substituted here by an orientalist imagery that somehow fulfills a similar function. Costumes, lights, music, intertextual incursions into other Tanizaki’s works and the incorporation of elements quintessential to Japan’s theatrical and cinematic cultures seem to purposely work in this direction.

In this sense, the use Cavani makes of traditional Japanese garments such as kimonos is particularly noteworthy. Designed by Tsujimura Jusaburō, an artist well known in Japan not only as an art and costume designer, but especially as a puppet maker and puppeteer, kimonos are used strategically throughout the film, contributing to a visualization of the female main characters’ emotions and an accentuation of the erotic tension between them. Tsujimura himself underlined how kimonos were carefully selected in an array of colors that would express the evolution of characters’ feelings, from temptation to innocence, ambiguity and seduction, until the inexorable kimono

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<sup>29</sup> Several elements suggest that the dichotomy Kantō/Kansai was not a priority of Cavani’s adaptation. In an interview for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Cavani goes as far as erroneously stating that the novel’s story takes place in Tōkyō. Although this could be a mere lapse or a mistake of the reporter, there is also a possibility that this peculiar aspect of the novel was not grasped at all by the filmmaker. See PORRO 1985: 23.

of death.<sup>30</sup> The scene depicting the first physical contact between Mitsuko and Louise is an example of this aesthetic choice. Whilst in *Manji* Sonoko invites Mitsuko to her room for sketching a nude picture of her, and particular emphasis is given to the sensuality of her naked white body, initially barely covered by a white sheet, in *Interno berlinese* Mitsuko remains shielded by her kimono while posing for the sketch. Kimonos are indeed an essential part of Mitsuko's seduction ritual. It is by giving a kimono as a present to Louise and helping her wear it that Mitsuko has an excuse to approach her physically. From her side, by renouncing the elegant formality of her Western clothes in exchange for the dark-green kimono she just received, Louise visually extricates herself from the impositions of her daily routine and officially accepts becoming a proselyte of a new lascivious creed. Similarly, in the following scenes depicting lesbian intercourse, the two women are always in kimono, albeit of different colors and patterns that change accordingly to the evolving state of their feelings.

Extremely codified, the scene also wisely incorporates ritualized gestures and body movements echoing kabuki theatre, that confer a highly theatrical tension. After helping Louise to wear her kimono, Mitsuko embraces her from the back and grasps Louise's *obi*, loosening it. Initially perplexed, Louise falls for her provocation, and grabs Mitsuko's *obi* in return, untying it. The Japanese girl swivels around and steps back, in order to grasp the other extremity of her own *obi* and pull it on her side. Then, she genuflects, while continuing to pull the *obi* towards herself so that Louise can come closer to her. In kabuki, the *obi-hiki* (pulling off the *obi*) preludes sexual intercourse. A voluntary loosening of the *obi* indicates a consensual acceptance of a lover's advances. On the contrary, the forced unwinding of a woman's *obi* symbolizes sexual violence. Usually, a conventionalized struggle with the lady follows, with the villain ending with striking a triumphant pose while grasping the end of the *obi*, sometimes between his teeth.<sup>31</sup> The pull of the *obi* between the two women precedes intercourse even in the film, something which is additionally sublimated by the oriental touch of Pino Donaggio's background music. Cavani rummages through the entire kabuki repertoire and appropriates its most exotic essence, transforming the two Tanizaki women into theatrical objects that somehow typify two cultural opposites: an exotic, seducing Japan and a seduced, mesmerized Germany, or more broadly, Europe.

In a following scene preceding another case of sapphic intercourse, Louise and Mitsuko are in a tatami room at the Japanese girl's residence. Mitsuko lies asleep on the tatami, wearing a white *hadajuban*, an undergarment usually worn under a kimono. Taken by a growing desire, Louise, who sits at her side, unties Mitsuko's undergarment, exposing her naked back. On Mitsuko's lower back there is a tattooed flower: a red peony, a symbol of

<sup>30</sup> CERVONE 1985: 23.

<sup>31</sup> See HALFORD 1956: 448.

romance, but also of honor and respect.<sup>32</sup> Captivated by the flower, Louise starts to kiss it, only to realize that it was not tattooed, but painted, probably very recently. Disturbed, Louise asks Mitsuko who painted her back, but the Japanese girl silences her, telling her that she made it by herself. The seducing beauty of a tattooed back seems a reference to another classic of Tanizaki's repertoire: *Shisei*, the short story published in 1910 that first brought the writer's name to fame. In the story, a tattoo artist incises a giant black spider on the white, luminous back of a naïve, beautiful girl. The adornment on her skin radically changes the young woman, making her demonically aware of her incommensurable appeal and seductive power. As with *Manji*, this fulgurating story was also adapted into film by Masumura Yasuzō and, once again, screenwritten by Shindō Kaneto. In *Irezumi* (1966), the human-faced spider tattoo empowers Otsuya, the young woman, with a vengeful spirit for having been kidnapped and forced to prostitution. Once turned into the most seductive and cruel of all geisha, Masumura's heroine does not hesitate to kill her men at the end of her services. Interestingly, both the roles of Mitsuko in *Manji* and Otsuya in *Irezumi* were played by the same actress, Wakao Ayako, a visual continuum that somehow relives in Takaki Mio's acting performance. Later, in one of the most beautifully shot scenes of *Interno berlinese*, Takaki appears dressed up as a geisha, her face covered in a mask of white make-up and her teeth blackened, performing a sort of religious ritual. She sits on several cushions at the center of the tatami room, while Louise sits on her knees in front of her, in a slightly lower position. Mitsuko's static movements and austere pose confer on her a Kannon-like aura, although the nudeness of her nape emphasizes her intent to seduce. Charmed and ravished, Louise sits in her classic shoulder pads shirt, in a pose of devotion. Mitsuko, in her words, is a geisha from Shimabara, one of the best-known courtesans' (*yūkaku*) and geisha (*hanamachi*) districts in Kyōto. While she is trying to seduce her with barely uttered words, some Nazi officers irrupt in the residence for a control, guided by their dogs. Only their shadows are visible, projected through the translucent paper of the *shōji* encircling the room. The sound of their steps becomes stronger and more invasive, to the extent of almost matching the background music accompanying Mitsuko's ritual. "Are you afraid?", Mitsuko asks to Louise. The German woman firmly denies so, ensconcing herself into her Japanese idol's arms. Again, a West/East dichotomy is set. On one side, we have the feral incursion of the Nazi regime, trying to invade the intimate, interior sphere of the two protagonists. Despite belonging to the same cultural sphere, Louise does not hesitate to choose the East: the exoticized Japan represented by Mitsuko provides her an ideal shelter, an imaginative space where she can escape from the oppressiveness of her daily routines and find her true self.

<sup>32</sup> The red peony tattoo might be also read as a cinematic reference to the popular *Hibotan Bakuto* series (*Red Peony Gambler*, 1968–1972), a saga of eight films produced by Toei studios and starring superstar Fuji Junko.

## Conclusion

Despite providing a strictly codified and slightly stereotyped image of Japan, *Interno berinese* does not specifically mark itself as an orientalist film. Cavani's Orient, indeed, seems to distance itself from Edward Said's definition of the Orient as a "stage on which the whole East is confined in order to make the Eastern world less fearsome to the West".<sup>33</sup> Even the visualization of Mitsuko as an evil, tantalizing Asian heroine is not to be connected to what Joanne Sharpe identifies as a tendency of some orientalist films in portraying "the lead heroic characters as being from the Western world, while the villains come from the East".<sup>34</sup> Cavani's gaze is rather marked by an exotic fascination with Japan's most prestigious artistic traditions, a desire to internalize them into her aesthetic poetics with the punctiliousness that characterizes her style. This attention to details and the elegance of her filming style have not gone unnoticed, and are the elements of Cavani's work that critics have acclaimed with more enthusiasm, drawing her name up alongside with that of Luchino Visconti, her friend and master.<sup>35</sup> The idea of resetting a Japanese affair in the Nazi Germany, instead, was generally criticized, particularly at the 1986 Berlin Film Festival where the film, in competition, was welcomed with "laughs, whistles and inconsiderate squalls".<sup>36</sup> One doubt remains: what would the unsatisfiable Tanizaki himself have thought of Cavani's adaptation? Unfortunately, the Japanese writer passed away exactly twenty years before the film's release, and Cavani's work was never distributed in Japanese theatres. However, if it is true that, as Donald Richie remembers, few authors can have been as disappointed and displeased with film adaptations of their work as Tanizaki was<sup>37</sup>, it must be recognized that Cavani's Japan is not that different from Kansai in Tanizaki's novel. The gazes of both authors appeared deeply marked by a fascination for a cultural and physical otherness not belonging to the self that emblemizes exoticism, and this is probably the most important feature that their works undoubtedly share.

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<sup>33</sup> SAID 1979: 363.

<sup>34</sup> SHARP 2009: 25.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Maurizio Porro's article for *Corriere della Sera*, unequivocally titled: "La Cavani: Più pignola di Visconti" ("Cavani: more meticulous than Visconti"; PORRO 1985: 23).

<sup>36</sup> AUTERA 1986: 21. See also TORNABUONI 1986: 7.

<sup>37</sup> RICHIE 1998: 163.

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