**Evaluating and Analyzing Visual Design in *Death by Hanging***

Prior to Japan’s defeat during World War II, Korea was annexed by Japan facing alien discrimination, confiscation of traditions and forceful abolition of their homeland language, which has tainted the relationship amongst Koreans and Japanese thereupon. In *Death by Hanging* recreating the murder case of 1958, where two Japanese schoolgirls are murdered by a man of Korean nationality, it follows the protagonist R, a Korean ethnic who has committed identical crimes and is sentenced to death by hanging, revisiting the wounds of old guilt and consciousness, race and discrimination. Due to R’s body rejecting and losing consciousness while undergoing the execution of death by hanging, the officers attempt to recreate his crimes through a distancing or Brechtian effect, a technique that makes the audience a critical observer. Through the incorporation of the details on décor and setting taking place in a jail cell specifically designed for execution, high-contrast, monochromatic lighting and color, juxtaposing performance between R and the authorities, and handwritten title design throughout the film, the director, Nagisa Oshima, underscores the accusations and tensions of both governmental punishment and the treatment of Korean immigrants that still lingers in Japan.

In the beginning of the film, the director vividly presents details portraying a decrepit prison specifically designed for execution. The opening aerial shots along with a narrative portraying and describing the prison “reinforced with concrete” with “roof[s] of sheet zinc (typical of cheap postwar houses)” and “dark yellow curtains” suggest the sort of unkempt environment where R and other criminals must stay. The destitute state of the environment and the cheap materials reveals that the Japanese government neglects and fails to maintain proper regulations on capital punishment despite having death by hanging legal. Furthermore, the contrasting “westernized” and “cheery” interior for the public prosecutor and officials – waiting rooms with sofas, built-in tables, lacey, white coverings, and salmon pink walls – highlights Japanese imperialism. The superior environment provided by the government illustrates that the government favors its officials over the general population and extends influence through military force by limiting the resources given to the society. The quality-segregated environment of the condemned and the officials illustrate that Japan exerts its power through military force by showing no compassion towards those who betray their nation such as committing murder as it taints their reputation as a rising global power. The confined cell that is “25 feet by 35 feet” with “light cream color” along with abandoned cells illustrates that those who commit murders are not tolerated by the government. Rather, they are treated with minimal humanity (simple meal and a cigarette) and are typically hanged rapidly to death. The light cream yet pale walls draw attention towards the black uniforms of the officials and the gray cement floors. By playing down the setting, Oshima obliges us to concentrate on the characters wearing black colored uniforms. The overall washed-out and monochromatic environment provided for the condemned not only illustrate the minimal funding towards them but also hint at their pale complexions and toxic environment. Additionally, throughout the film, Oshima presents the flag of Japan such as in the prison cell, hanging on doors and even restaurants to highlight the strong sense of nationalism that Japan holds.

Throughout the film, Oshima utilizes high-contrast, monochromatic lighting and color. While R is preparing for execution, the Japanese authorities who are commanding from behind is glorified with natural backlight from the window behind them. The combination of the fill light on the right side of their faces with the natural backlight outlines their profiles while revealing their sharp features. The hard lighting creates clearly defined shadows and sharp edges, giving the authorities a haggard and worn appearance. Because the background is lighter (cream walls and backlight), the dark uniforms and military hats cast a shadow on several authorities, deepening the shadows and contrasts, ultimately creating a mysterious, powerful aura. Due to the monochromatic nature of this film, darker areas noticeably recede whereas brightly illuminating areas vividly stand out. For example, inside the gloomy, concrete prison cell, the spectator concentrates on R’s face rather than the darkness surrounding it through the incorporation of soft lighting that blurs the textures and contours of his face. Initially, the harsh, single-sourced, top lighting of the prison cell accentuates the inscrutable eyes of R. However, as he enters the room with the authorities, his full face is revealed and sculpted by softer illumination and gentler shading. While the lighting on the front of his face eliminate shadows and presents a two-dimensional image, the soft, frontal lighting dramatizes R’s change in appearance and character by diffusing the previous shadows evenly throughout his face. Rather, the softer and flat features reflect his amnesia state, unresponsive and stoic. Furthermore, the top light also symbolizes as a sign of hope from above and his soul not fully leaving his body as his body refuses to be executed. Additionally, the lack of a color pallet adds to the militaristic, desolate environment for the condemned. The black and white color sets a bleak and sordid atmosphere fitting for the prison setting, and the lack of color directly correlates with the emotions and state of R, blank and in amnesia. By setting the film in full black and white, it creates an unrealistic representation of the real-world by removing its original colors. Rather, the absence of colors illustrates R’s imaginary world. For example, in R’s imagination, he has a sister who serves as a representation of his Korean identity. By touching her smooth Korean skin, he reopens the long painful history of race that is etched into the skin as her hand symbolizes the sadness felt by Korean women due to their scars and forceful labors by Japan on their once scarless skin. Furthermore, R’s imagination and sister reveals the deep-rooted tension between Korea and Japan as the sister believes Japan has taken R’s original nationality and conformed him to Japanese imperialism. While his sister and imagination hope for reunification, R ultimately believes that the skepticism and unbending mindset of Japanese authority will remain unchanged, giving him no hope for the future.

Throughout the film, the contrasting acting, and performance of the Japanese authorities and R reveal the relationship between Korea and Japan. After the failed attempt of R’s death by hanging, the Education Chief acts rashly with exaggerated motions and acting from enlarged pupils indicating uncertainty and shock to high-pitched arguing. By presenting a foolish and unworthy official, Oshima mocks that the Japanese government is irresponsible towards their mistakes such as their past annexations of Korea. Likewise, the Japanese officials fail to properly execute R on the first try and are imprudent towards the whole situation. It ultimately reveals that the Japanese government at the time of the film did not have qualified officials nor proper regulations in case of a failed execution. Other officials also acted child-like and comedically by pouting their lips, jumping, yelling and reenacting R’s crimes. In contrast, in the beginning of the film, R noticeably shook with fear, reflecting how Koreans felt when being forced to adapt to the Japanese culture. Also, R emotionless eyes and amnesic state illustrates how Koreans today attempt to turn a blind-eye and forget the painful past. Through fluctuality frontality of the authorities conversing with R, Oshima highlights each of the authorities mocking Koreans. For example, while Education Chief turns his back towards the camera, one of his subordinates faces directly at the camera while mimicking the Korean wails of R’s deaf mother. By deliberately making this scene comedic, Oshima reveals how the authorities are not truly sincere to Koreans and are still mocking them on their weaknesses (in this case disabilities). Furthermore, R’s action of pretending to eat a roundworm illustrate the fact that parasitic roundworms was common in Korea. Because of this disease, R’s action of eating the roundworms indicate that Koreans then were feeding the roundworms rather themselves due to the fact it being a serious issue, especially in North Korea.

The handwritten title design represents the core ideas of the film. Whenever a new problem or scene emerges, Oshima adds a handwritten title, presented on a single sheet of graph paper, describing to the audience what is occurring next. Towards the end of the film, the handwritten title design represents the last message that “R is R”. This illustrates that R accepts both of his racial identities - Korea and Japan, but he feels wronged as the authorities fail to recognize both of his nationalities. Because R committed his crimes in Japan while having a Korean nationality, he feels conflicted towards whether or not he truly deserves to be executed. The handwritten title design ultimately adds to the heartfelt touch and message that Oshima wants to present – the reunification and peace between Japan and Korea.

In quintessence, Oshima presents R as an identity sharing both Korea and Japan. Due to R’s unorthodox belief of his double racial identity, the Japanese officials were determined to execute him. Through the incorporation of a setting portraying the desolate execution facilities for the condemned, varied lighting and usage of a monochromatic scheme, distinct acting between R and the officials, and handwritten title design, he ultimately reveals the contrasting beliefs and tensions still lingering between Korea and Japan today.

(1539 word count)