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## Aging bodies, minds and selves: Representations of senile dementia in Japanese film

Edward R. Drott

Sophia University, 7-1 Kioi-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-8554, Japan



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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines depictions of senility and related forms of age-related decline in Japanese film, literature, and other media, relative to their popular representation in North America. While medicalized concepts of senile dementia, especially Alzheimer's disease (*Arutsuhaimā shō*), are well known in Japan, symptoms of deterioration among the elderly are still commonly framed as "*boke*"—a folk-medical category associated more with a loss of social graces than with cognitive decline. Whereas senile dementia has most often been depicted in North America as a condition entailing a horrifying "loss of self," or even a loss of humanity, responses in Japan point to a different range of concerns. Japanese discourse on senility has commonly expressed anxieties over the difficulties faced by caregivers or the potential for senile elders to engage in socially disruptive behavior, but representations of senility that call into question the selfhood or humanity of the elder are exceedingly rare. I argue that social and cultural factors can help explain why people in Japan might be less inclined to interpret the kinds of changes wrought by dementing diseases in terms of a diminishment of self.

### Introduction

It should come as no surprise that senile dementia is a source of significant concern in Japan. As Japan's elderly population continues to grow, so to do its cases of senility.<sup>1</sup> Commuters regularly encounter advertisements for books touting the latest scientific or pseudo-scientific breakthrough promising to prevent or reverse symptoms of senility. Meanwhile, newspaper and magazine headlines warn of the difficulties Japan will face as the numbers of demented elders swell relative to other age cohorts.<sup>2</sup> In addition to a deluge of news reports, white papers, and self-help books, various works of fiction and film have sought to grapple with the impact of the condition on the afflicted and their

loved ones.<sup>3</sup>

Fear of dementia is not, of course, unique to Japan. While not facing the kind of demographic predicament confronting Japan, North America has produced discourses on senility that are no less ominous.<sup>4</sup> Starting in the 1970s, both the Japanese and American public were exposed to the notion that certain age-related forms of decline, especially memory loss, were not to be understood as natural parts of the aging process, but as symptoms of disease, be it vascular dementia, multi-infarct dementia, or, more recently, Alzheimer's disease. In both Japan and the U.S. the medicalization of senility has resulted in heightened levels of public concern.<sup>5</sup> And in both countries, the framing of senility as a pathological condition coincided with—and likely

E-mail address: [e-drott-5mc@sophia.ac.jp](mailto:e-drott-5mc@sophia.ac.jp).

<sup>1</sup> This is due both to the rising number of elderly in Japan and the increased incidence of dementia among the elderly. See Iwamoto (2011). See also Asai, Sato and Fukuyama (2009).

<sup>2</sup> These headlines point to a bleak future in which a significant portion of the population is suffering from dementia: "One out of every five people with dementia: Prepare for what will be a reality ten years from now!" ("Gonin ni hitori ga ninchishō" Jūnengo no genjitsu ni kō sonaeyo!") *Shūkan bunshun* 1/22/2015 <http://shukan.bunshun.jp/articles/-/4731> (Accessed 05/29/2018). Readers are instructed to ready themselves for the approaching "era of 7,000,000 dementia sufferers" (*ninchishō kanja nanahyaku man'nin jidai*). See, for instance: "A recommendation for 'adult guardianship': Preparing for the era of 7,000,000 dementia sufferers." ("Seinen kōken" no susume: Ninchishō nanahyaku man'nin jidai ni sonaeru.") *Wedge* 3/2017. <http://wedge.ismedia.jp/articles/-/8939> (Accessed 05/29/2018). Japan's English-language press is, if anything, even more alarmist, warning of Japan's impending "dementia time bomb." <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/06/national/social-issues/aging-japan-faces-dementia-time-bomb/> (Accessed 05/29/2018).

<sup>3</sup> Sako and Falcus claim that popular representations of dementia "penetrate more deeply into everyday life in Japan than in other countries, through a wide range of channels" (2015: 90).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the portrayals of senile dementia in the United States, see Kontos (2006: 195). See also Gravage (2013: 131–2).

<sup>5</sup> See: Shorter (1991); Herskovits (1995); Cohen (1998: 6 and 26); Traphagan, 2000 and 2002). Ballenger (2006: 106) has also noted that the medicalization of senility, while intended in part to reduce the stigma associated with these conditions, has often resulted in even more stigmatization.

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provided the impetus for—dementia's emergence as a subject of literary and cinematic interest.

In the context of globalized biomedicine, senile dementia is understood to be reducible to biology, as a property of diseased bodies, which are presumed to share more or less universal traits. And yet, despite the convergence of scientific consensus about its underlying biological causes, reactions to dementia in Japan and the U.S. continue to reveal contrasting assumptions about the condition and its significance. Illnesses of all sorts cause ruptures in everyday practices and can divulge values, ideals, and mental habits that would have otherwise remained implicit and unrecognized. Representations of senile dementia provide a particularly useful aperture through which to examine assumptions about the aging process. But the way we think and talk about senile dementia can also lay bare some of our most fundamental notions about what it means to be human.<sup>6</sup> Because dementia is commonly framed not just as a threat to some part of the anatomy, but to a patient's mind, their autonomy, or even their humanity, discourse on senility can reveal deeply-held, if seldom articulated theories about the nature of self, and the relation of body and mind, which in turn have consequences for how we assess the very humanity of the elderly.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I will introduce depictions of senility in Japanese film, literature, and other media, and consider the ways in which they reflect broader sets of cultural attitudes. Although some of the texts under examination feature examples of so-called “early-onset Alzheimer's,” or related diseases in which individuals in the prime of life suffer cognitive impairment, the anxieties they describe are clearly of a piece with those provoked by senile dementia. For our purposes these cases are relevant, for they also disclose implicit beliefs about the nature of the self.<sup>8</sup>

Film provides a particularly valuable lens through which to examine these issues. As a visual and aural medium, it allows filmmakers to attempt to reproduce the subjective experience of both caregivers and those afflicted with dementia through point-of-view shots and other methods. Memories can be represented in flashbacks using a variety of techniques that signal to the audience that we are witnessing moments from a character's past. Disorientation can be evoked through the use of music cues, jump cutting, or adjusting the depth of field to force images in the foreground out of focus. Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), for instance, provides an example of how editing can be used to simulate the experience of living without the ability to form new memories.<sup>9</sup> In addition to being a particularly rich medium for exploring speculation about the nature of the deeply forgetful self, film is a particularly important source of data on attitudes toward the elderly, for, as Pamela Gravage has argued, it not only reflects, but also plays a crucial role in forming images of old age.<sup>10</sup>

What I have found particularly fascinating about Japanese

representations of dementia is their tendency to eschew the tropes of obliteration and erasure that figure so prominently in North American narratives. Importantly, Japanese representations resist the tendency to reduce self to mind and memory—demonstrating holistic theories of self and person that are remarkably attuned to the role that somatic memory, as opposed to cognitive memory, plays in making us who we are.<sup>11</sup>

Naturally there are counterexamples. Film can be a powerful tool for disrupting normative visions of aging and dementia.<sup>12</sup> In this study I will be particularly attentive to the instances in which filmmakers seek to challenge stereotypes about senility. This is most often seen through the use cinematic techniques that serve to undercut the assertions that characters make about themselves and others. Notions of senile dementia in Japan and the west are neither fixed nor stable, and present moving targets for researchers. Moreover, as I will show, there is evidence of shifting attitudes in both North America and Japan. As neoliberal ideals of autonomy gain traction in Japan, perhaps encouraged by education policies intended to cultivate individuality, it is possible that we will find more examples of Japanese sources using the language of erasure to describe those no longer capable of remembering important facts about themselves.<sup>13</sup> And in North America, as philosophers and anthropologists continue to inveigh against the naïve assumptions latent in most western discourse on forgetfulness, their impact is sure to be felt.<sup>14</sup> What I have presented, therefore, amounts to a snapshot of attitudes spanning the late twentieth through early twenty-first century.

I have organized my analysis into three sections. First, in order to provide points of contrast with Japanese sources, I will briefly comment on representations of senility in North American cinema and the implicit theories of selfhood that they reveal. In my second section, I provide some background on medical and folk concepts of senility in Japan. Section three examines how these concepts of senile dementia operate in examples from Japanese film and literature. A good deal of my analysis will deal with Hirokazu Kore-eda's thought-provoking 1998 film *Wandafuru raifu* [“Wonderful Life”], released overseas as *After Life*. Although it features only one character who could be described as senile, it has much to say about the ostensible connection between memory and self. I conclude this article with reflections on the possibility that attitudes toward senility are beginning to converge in Japan and the U.S., and more general observations about what depictions of the mentally impaired can tell us about Japanese notions of self and person.

## Dementia as loss of self in North-American Cinema

In recent decades, portrayals of dementia in North American film and literature have generally followed the generic conventions of tragedy or melodrama.<sup>15</sup> These are narratives of loss—loss that extends

<sup>6</sup> Traphagan (2000).

<sup>7</sup> Intuitions about the relationship of memory and self, mind and body tend to operate at the level of *doxa*, an unquestioned structuring framework that organizes thought and action in a given culture (Bourdieu, 1977: 164–9; Traphagan, 2002: 254). In this paper, I am not working from or promoting any particular model of self. Rather I am interested in how selfhood is defined and determined in different contexts.

<sup>8</sup> Although the categories are by no means used consistently in my sources, for the sake of clarity, I will distinguish between senility or *boke* (terms used by laypeople to describe a suite of symptoms that accompany old age), dementia (a term to describe loss of cognitive ability that can occur at any age), and Alzheimer's disease (a medically diagnosed condition). On the “porosity” of the boundaries between senility, senile dementia, and Alzheimer's in North America, see Gravage (2013: 138).

<sup>9</sup> Half the scenes of the film proceed in reverse chronological order, such that from moment to moment the viewer has no more insight than the lead character into how he arrived at a particular juncture, or the motivations of other characters. Discussed in Basting (2009: 54–5).

<sup>10</sup> Gravage (2013: esp. 4 and 133).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the varieties of forms of remembering, see Basting (2009: 13–24). Although this study seeks to use perspectives on senile dementia to elucidate localized theories of body, mind and self, there is of course a diversity of views in both cultural contexts. Recent pseudo-scientific literature on *boke* at times utilizes the trope of the disappearing self. See for example, Shinoura (2013: 89–91), who points to the exact areas of the brain that he claims account for the self (*jiga*). Nonetheless, when taken on the whole, I am in agreement with Stephen Post in his assessment of North American attitudes: “we live in a culture that is, at least in large segments, dominated by heightened expectations of rationalism and economic productivity, so clarity of mind and productivity inevitably influence our sense of the worth of a human life” (Post, 2000b: 5).

<sup>12</sup> Discussed in Swinnen (2012).

<sup>13</sup> On recent policies promoting individualism in Japanese education, see Cave (2007: 16–30).

<sup>14</sup> Certainly *Still Alice* shows more nuance than earlier films like *Iris* regarding the potential for selfhood even in the midst of severe mental impairment.

<sup>15</sup> Basting (2009: 44).

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