



THE STRAIN OF LIFE AFTER PRISON: A REVIEW OF *THE EEL**

by

Todd Schoepflin
Niagara University

The Eel

Directed by Shohei Imamura
Japanese with English subtitles
Photography: Shigeru Komatsubara
Released: (1997) VHS, Color, 117 minutes.
Rating: NR.

ABSTRACT

The Eel, a Japanese film directed by Shohei Imamura, is the story of an ex-convict's attempt to integrate into a foreign community. Corporate employee Takuro Yamashita (actor Koji Yakusho) serves eight years for murdering his unfaithful wife. Paroled, Yamashita utilizes his prison training when he becomes the town barber. Though he quickly fits into the community, two individuals eventually disrupt his new life. Thus we view the difficulty of maintaining a conventional lifestyle after prison. Several theoretical analyses are offered to analyze Yamashita's struggles: Dubois' notion of double-consciousness; Hirschi's control theory; and Merton's strain theory.

THE STRAIN OF LIFE AFTER PRISON

What are the challenges of life after prison? How much control does an ex-convict have over his circumstances? Will his attempt to integrate into a foreign community be successful? These are just a few of the questions explored in *The Eel*, a Japanese film directed by Shohei Imamura. The film opens in summer 1988, in Wakaba, with Takuro Yamashita, a suit-clad corporate employee, heading home on the subway. As he does, he pulls a letter from his jacket pocket, learning from an anonymous informant that his wife is an adulteress. He's told that a man visits his wife when he goes on all-night fishing trips. That night, Yamashita (actor Koji Yakusho) changes and leaves for his latest fishing trip, but returns home after an abbreviated outing. His worst suspicion is confirmed when he sees his wife in bed with a man. Using a butcher knife, he murders her while they are still in the act. After a placid bicycle ride to the police station, Yamashita turns himself in.

The next scene takes place eight years later, when he is paroled. The warden advises him: "Even if you see trouble occurring around you, don't let yourself be drawn into it." He leaves prison with his prized possession in tow: A pet eel, enclosed in a plastic bag. When his parole officer asks, "But why an eel?" he responds, "He listens to what I say." [End Page 167]

Taken to a sleepy town called Sawara, he refurbishes a dilapidated barbershop, where he intends to utilize the training he has received in prison. He adds a tank to house his beloved eel, the recipient for most of his conversation. The locals take notice of the newcomer, but they are merely confused: Why would Yamashita operate a barbershop that seems doomed to fail?

Indeed, business is sparse until he hires Keiko, a woman he discovers unconscious after her botched suicide attempt. The words "don't let yourself be drawn into trouble" ring in his ears. She is eager to show her thankfulness for the opportunity as she cleans, washes towels, cooks, brings fresh flowers; viewers will be struck by the synchronicity of two people working side-by-side, living on second chances. Business improves by virtue of her presence, but his good fortune turns sour when he is crossed by Takasaki, a garbage man. We learn that Takasaki spent time in the same prison as Yamashita, also for murder. Takasaki, a natural foil, informs Keiko of Yamashita's past. He confronts Yamashita: "You aren't reflecting on your conduct and that's bad. You haven't even visited your wife's grave. Every day I sit before the altar, copying sutras." Hence he suggests that, unlike Yamashita, he is paying real penance for his crime. He soon quits the garbage company and is rumored to have left town.

Yamashita, alone, reflects: "I'm no different to what I was in prison. I'm a murderer. I tried to forget, but these hands can't." Although most of the locals remain unaware of his former transgression, "convict" invades his psyche as an ugly master status. The schism of his past and present life envelops him like a two-ness, a hellish double-consciousness; he is free, yet imprisoned by his murderous action. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, **W.E.B. DuBois** (1903) described double-consciousness as a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. He wrote that the Black American forever feels his two-ness – Black, American, two souls, two thoughts – an unresolved battle to escape white contempt and merge a double self into a single, truer self. Yamashita's mind is divided, making it clear that ex-convicts suffer from a different brand of double-consciousness. Unable to eliminate their crimes and forever labeled by society, ex-convicts can pose the same question presented by DuBois: *How does it feel to be a problem?*

Meanwhile, Takasaki returns, finding Keiko amidst early morning sickness (she's four months pregnant), and assumes that Yamashita is the father. Jealous and enraged, he attacks her. She escapes, and doubly furiously, Takasaki posts sutras on Yamashita's storefront, along with the message: "Don't be so smug, you filthy wife killer." Later, we are clued as to why Takasaki is obsessed with derailing Yamashita's integration. Showing up drunk at Yamashita's, he says in reference to the job he departed: "People don't like ex-cons." After he informs Yamashita that Keiko is pregnant, he cries: "I've been on parole for three years, I've had no luck!" Takasaki is a true antagonist, even aware that Yamashita's wife had committed adultery.

A fight ensues. Though he torments Yamashita psychologically, Takasaki is not a serious physical foe. The situation worsens when a jaded ex-lover of Keiko's, Dojima, **[End Page 168]** comes into the barbershop. The stronger Dojima, arriving with three toughs and a lawyer, is a real threat. Keiko arrives in the middle of a brawl and, police presence notwithstanding, is struck by Dojima. Dojima struggles with Yamashita who, after injuring Dojima, faces a parole violation hearing. Yamashita, left alone with his precious eel, asks: "Those who are born should be cared for, right?" Losing the hearing, Yamashita loses his freedom, courtesy of pitfalls brought to him by Dojima and Takasaki.

As the film ends, a key question must immediately be debated: How much agency did Yamashita possess? Faced with negative social forces, could he possibly maintain a conventional lifestyle? With two people actively interfering with his efforts, could he manage to skirt the opposition and keep his position in the community? Should we assign blame to him for his latest loss of freedom, or should we direct the cause to societal agents?

A more challenging thought to consider: What separates Takasaki from Yamashita? Why does Yamashita fit into Sawara, and why can't Takasaki integrate? **Travis Hirschi's** (1969) control theory might help. Appearing in his book *Causes of Delinquency*, this theory states that deviant acts occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. The theory proposes that behavior is controlled by the connections the person has to the conventional social order. Yamashita has social bonds based on commitments – he has an occupational role in the community, he's fashioned a comfortable living space, he's even befriended by a local fisherman and a UFO enthusiast. Comparatively, Takasaki's control systems are weak – he has no significant attachments, personal or professional, and his beliefs about following society's norms are shaken. Hirschi recognized that dismantled bonds do not *cause* deviant behavior, but they do foster unscrupulous activity. And Takasaki, a disgruntled ex-convict with no job, no friends, and to his chagrin, no ladylove, becomes a prime candidate for reckless behavior.

One of **Robert Merton's** (1949) modes of adaptation, described in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, also applies: Yamashita serves as a unique example of a ritualist. He has scaled down his goals and does not seek upward mobility, yet he abides by institutional norms – that is, until the arrival of Dojima. We can speculate that Yamashita would have been content to live a quiet existence as a struggling barber, if no one disturbed him. Conversely, Takasaki is unable to find an acceptable place in the social hierarchy. He seems to have loftier goals and higher ambition, yet he's in no social or economic position to achieve these goals. He is unable to adjust to the strain of life after prison; and quite simply, he wants to share his misery with Yamashita. These men do have something in common: Prison has left an indelible mark, exerting a strong influence on how they see the world. They both face an internal struggle to fashion a healthy sense of self. Yamashita is better prepared for the task, but ultimately both men lose their battles.

The Eel will interest scholars of corrections and deviance, particularly those with a bent towards social psychology. It should appeal to life course theorists (i.e., how a [End Page 169] series of major events has impacted Yamashita's life). This film can be shown to students as a supplement to instruction on strain and control theory. In addition, there are nuances that will be exciting for students to discuss – for instance, how the hot-blooded murderer Yamashita is depicted as essentially benign. Are certain criminals, in essence, good? Was Yamashita justified in exacting punishment on his wife for infidelity? On a lighter note, the differences in cultural practices are instructive: Tea instead of coffee, chopsticks rather than silverware, bows instead of handshakes, the recital of sutras. There's even a quick lesson on the monetary system (Yamashita's customers pay a mere 2,000 yen for a haircut). Due to periodic graphic content, this film should be reserved for mature audiences – such as graduate students or undergraduates in a senior seminar course.

ENDNOTE

* Direct correspondence to Professor Todd Schoepflin, Niagara University, Department of Sociology, Timon Hall, Niagara University, NY 14109 (Email: tas@niagara.edu).

REFERENCES

DuBois, W.E.B. (1903). The souls of black folk. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co.

Hirschi, T. (1969). Causes of delinquency. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Merton, R. (1949). Social Theory and Social Structure. New York: Free Press. [End Page 170]