THE PORTRAYAL OF DIGNIFIED DEATH, EUTHANASIA, AND OTHER RITUALS OF PASSAGE IN JAPANESE CINEMA. END-OF-LIFE PRACTICES AND BEREAVEMENT IN „THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA" (1983)

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1. INTRODUCTION. PAYING HOMAGE TO THE GOD OF NARAYAMA

"It's your family's turn to make a coffin. And make one for my mother." **(min. 11)**

The present essay seeks to explore the Japanese cinematic representations of "euthanasia," "dignified death," "mercy killing," and other rituals of passage, with a focus on a classical film sample, *The Ballad of Narayama* (楢山節考, 1983), a masterpiece directed by Imamura Shōhei (今村 昌平).

While the movie reflects on various Japanese cultural and ritualistic practices associated with death, it also plays a significant role in connecting its audience's historical consciousness to the narratives of "dying with dignity" and to Japanese contextual expressions of bereavement. As the first scenes of the film unfold, this masterful cinematic endeavor which aims to influence the audience both emotionally and cognitively, thus enhancing and deepening our moral imagination, reveals the dark yet strikingly realistic scenery of a remote and primitive village where food scarcity and hunger call for the desperate and ultimate measure of human sacrifice. In this alternative spatiotemporal universe seemingly indifferent to moral values, regardless of one's excellent health condition, every villager who has reached their seventieth year of life must be carried by one family member to Narayama Mountain and abandoned there to die of starvation.

Whereas in contemporary Japan, the concept of suicide is justified and intimately related to a centuries-old culturally-rooted education of living without representing the slightest menace to others and dying while conserving one's dignity[1], *The Ballad of Narayama* explores the transience of life and the eternally controversial and notoriously nebulous concepts of "euthanasia" and "mercy killing" through the lenses of the ancient practice of *obasute* (姥捨て, literally translated as "abandoning an old hag").[2] On a similar note, Jason Danely notes how the narrative of *obasute* "addresses the moral questions surrounding the fear of abandonment in old age, its multiple

artistic interpretations also provide older adults with different, and sometimes contradictory cultural models to understand and cope with this fear."[3] Moreover, it is important to state that this ritual of *obasute* is related to the already historically documented custom of "*kirou*," (棄老[4], a legendary Japanese tradition of abandoning old people, usually one's elder parents, in the mountains) as a method of preventing rapid population growth. Thus, late age was mainly associated with one's uselessness, and *obasute* emphasizes this particular idea by "painting a clear picture of elderly women as useless and costly members of traditional Japanese society."[5]A solid cultural explanation localizes the cinematic and literary narratives of *obasute* in the context of modern Japan:[6]

Variations on the obasuteyama legend have since appeared for centuries in Japanese literature and more recently film, each one focusing on a different aspect of the basic ethical problems posed by old age in a society where adult dependence is considered shameful and where succession by younger generations is both valued and yet emotionally difficult.[7]

Fig. 1: The official posters' imagery encapsulates the narrative expressiveness and heartbreaking visual aesthetics of the "*obasute*" custom.

As a 70-year-old widow, Orin, brilliantly interpreted by Kinuyo Tanaka, accepts her fate with resilience, detachment, and unglorified dignity, embarking on a spiritual journey serving as one's final rite of passage. Putting aside for now any aspects related to the historical veracity[8] of the long-disputed tradition of "*obasute*," the central character of Orin seems to escape any form of mortality anxiety by embracing the traditional Japanese cultural narrative to meet her death with dignity willingly. Of equal importance in exhibiting a lower-than-expected level of death anxiety is the character's adherence to Shinto, Buddhist, animism, and folk ideologies, all converging to support the belief of "hereafter." By possessing the qualities of a mother goddess,

Orin inspires compassion through at least three fundamental elements originating from the Buddhit ideology and doctrine: egolessness, emptiness, and communication. [9]

Particular attention will be given to the contextual analysis of *several narrative modes* (birth, abortion, dying, death, bereavement, and memorialization), analyzed from the perspectives of the *village*, *Orin*, and, finally, *Tatsuhei*, her first-born while highlighting how various Japanese cultural and socio-philosophical concepts interweave into the movie's rich and intricate thanatological semiotics. Moreover, to conduct the present film analysis, we have referred strictly to the original script, adding the English translation only to enhance the essay's readability. We aim to overpass the limits of translation and capture linguistic and semantic fundamental aspects concerning both the narratives and the characters' development.

Therefore, this particular approach of paying attention to the linguistic aspect also brings novelty to the present film analysis, given that the previously published studies on the topic tended to ignore the nuances provided by the language spoken by the characters. Albeit the original sound and image remain unaltered by the presence of the English subtitles, we must take into account the peculiar traits of the Japanese language, features which might otherwise have escaped our reading and remain nevertheless lost in translation: the dialect diversity, the usage of specific particles to emphasize emotions, the levels of politeness and the Japanese honorific system, all revealing the social status, age, gender, hierarchies or ongoing interpersonal conflicts. Finally, another contribution of this study is that it relies not only on English-language academic resources but also draws on relevant untranslated Japanese-language research papers, thus balancing the Western-centric approach prevailing in academia nowadays.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC DISCOURSE ON IMAMURA SHŌHEI AND "THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA"

The film, which was awarded the Palme D'Or in 1983, represents an adaptation of the short novel *The Ballad of Narayama* written by Shichirō Fukazawa (深沢七郎) in 1956. The literary work served as the basis for two other cinematic productions as well: *The Ballad of Narayama* (1958), directed by Keisuke Kinoshita (木下惠介), and *Goryeojang* (1963), under the supervision of the Korean director Kim Ki-Young. Likewise, a modern and dystopian approach to the narrative "dying with dignity" is illustrated by the film "Plan 75" (2022), directed by Japanese filmmaker Chie Hayakawa (早川千絵). In the context of contemporary Japan, marked by the "highest level of aging at an unprecedented rate,"[10] this latest production invites an imaginary experiment where the Japanese government would encourage elderly citizens over the age of 75 to be voluntarily

euthanized to remedy the severe aging problem of the population.[11] Needless to say, this is one of the similarities between the narrative lines of *The Ballad of Narayama* and *Plan 75*.

Before diving into the film analysis, it is important to examine the cinematic style of Imamura Shōhei. Usually associated with the Japanese New Wave, he is considered "one of the most internationally renowned directors of his generation, with two Palme d'Or Awards at Cannes Film Festival,"[12] one for the present film. As the director himself stated:

> In my work . . . I want to enter a character's heart. I want to capture the smallest action, the finest nuance, the most intimate psychological expression because filmmakers must concern themselves with much more than facades.[13]

This pattern of thinking is accurately reflected by *The Ballad of Narayama* as well, which can be considered "one of the masterpieces of traditional cinema,"[14] depicting a universe where "animals, nature, and humans are closely interconnected."[15] Many of his characters struggle with extreme poverty, and the way Orin, the protagonist, is depicted, mirrors not only his overall perception regarding Japanese women but also his feminist legacy as it is reflected by the filming process:[16] "My heroines are true to life-just look around you at Japanese women. They are strong, and they outlive men."[17]

Among the already existing comprehensive scholarship on Imamura's film practices and themes, several auteurist approaches stand apart. One belongs to Alain Cassebier, who employs a series of oppositions to characterize Imamura's cinematic style, and notices the existence of "a certain unique Japaneseness rooted in *irrationality*, through which the Japanese should live:[18]

While Imamura's exploration of the irrational has a specific meaning for his Japanese audiences, it nevertheless has significance for Westerners as well. Raised as we are to value the rational above all other qualities, we have come to equate, all too willingly and somewhat naively, rationality with reality. Imamura challenges this comfortable notion. In so doing, he is really addressing one single audience, Japanese and Western alike.[19]

In this regard, David Desser develops Cassebier's earlier analysis exploring the theme of "irrationality" among other "series of oppositions" and highlights the interweaving of documentary with Imamura's cinema:

> Casebier has isolated a series of oppositions which characterize Imamura's work: irrational vs. rational; primitive vs. civilized; spontaneous vs. conventional; the lower classes vs. the upper classes; authentic vs. contrived. To these we might add documentary vs. fiction.[20]

We can assume thus that one of Imamura's most striking and distinctive features, easily noticeable in this case study as well, is his "almost documentary style of filming, typically focused on the lower orders of Japanese society, with a strong emphasis on women," focused on the "vibrant and instinctive, premodern traditions of Japan."[21] The cinematic style is similar to an extended anthropological and ethnographical analysis of Japanese society and culture, a fact also stated by other researchers:

Imamura's conception of filmmaking resembles an anthropological study of Japanese society. Most of his films deal with a particular culture or subculture that is often both embedded in and hidden by Japanese society. For this reason, even though it is based on a novel, the movie reflects to Imamura's own vision.[22]

Comanducci points out another merit of Imamura:

By refusing to take an essential and idealised notion of humanity as the universal ground of equality and social institutions, Imamura compels us to acknowledge the contingency and indeterminacy of the human and the inhuman, and the hegemonic struggles that characterize their very distinction.[23]

For this particular reason, *The Ballad of Narayama* "provides an example of this fundamental and irresoluble ambiguity of humanity and inhumanity, as it presents a prototypical rural community in nineteenth-century Japan in which the boundaries between the human and the animal, social aggregation and isolation, compassion and cruelty, death and plenty, are hard to draw."[24]

Another remarkable theoretical contribution relevant to the present literature review belongs to Lee Wood Hung who introduces the concept of "natural culturalism," which represents "the natural characteristics of the Japanese culture, as portrayed by Imamura." Hung asserts, "Imamura uses a broad brush to paint his vision of Japanese culture, using points of symbolic detail to clearly demonstrate structural features of Japanese culture."[25] For these reasons, his films, thus *The Ballad of Narayama* as well, can be interpreted as an attempt "to recover what is essential to being originally Japanese,"[26] and to reflect "the real" and authentic Japan.

A final relevant issue we should highlight before concluding the theoretical section is the culturally dissimilar nuances and consistent differences encompassed by the concept of "euthanasia," in Western versus Japanese society.

On one hand, in Western societies, this particular concept is more likely to be associated with distinguished contexts (diseases, terminal illness), entities (doctors and patients) and the notion of assistance/assisted death. Furthermore, as Patel and Rushefsky have pointed out:

Most Western cultures tend to be very individualistic and thus place considerable emphasis on individual rights. As a result, debate over euthanasia in Western societies has tended to focus on individual rights, personal autonomy, and state or public interest.[27]

On the other hand, Japanese culture places emphasis on the importance of social connections and thus has a different approach regarding "the right to die":

The influence of Buddhist tradition helps explain the Japanese approach to death. One of the central tenets of Buddhism is centered on the word "mujou" (無常), which mean impermeance, and as such death is simply one of many endings in the cosmic scheme of things. Thus, the Japanese attitude elevates "songenshi" (尊厳死)or beautiful death with dignity.[28]

Therefore, it would be "difficult for the Japanese to apply the Western concept of "autonomy" in an issue such as euthanasia, without sharing the Western sense of individuality."[29]

Moreover, as Komatsu and Tateiwa have pointed out, the Japanese culture adopts a different perspective regarding basic ideas revolving around the Western concept of "self" and the building of social relations.[30] Otherwise said, the concept of "personal autonomy" is perceived differently. Based on these theoretical considerations, in the present analysis, we will make use of "euthanasia" according to the basic meaning encompassed by Japanese society, the one closest to "dying with dignity."

3. BIRTH AND INFANTICIDE IN THE VILLAGE. THE RITUALISED PRACTICE OF "MABIKI." A DEAD BABY ON THE RICE FIELD

"Did you abandon your dead child on my field?" (min. 13)

The plot unfolds in an unnamed village, which we assume to be located somewhere in the Chūbu area of the Yamanashi Prefecture. Although it is not explicitly mentioned and with no geographical references being provided whatsoever, the characters speak in the Kōshū dialect[31], a linguistic aspect hinting thus this specific location. The usage of this dialect represents a pregnant linguistic feature noticeable in Fukazawa's short novel as well, confirmed by the author himself:

My humble work is based on the legend of obasute, the reason why one might think the location is the Obasute Mountain, in Shinano but the settings and the characters of the novel are related to Yamano prefecture. Of course, it is not a nowadays custom, but the novel was inspired by the pure and candid humanity of this place (Yamano, n.t). Therefore, in *The Ballad of Narayama*, the dialect to be used is Kōshū, and not Shinshū.[32]

While evoking the hustle and bustle of everyday life in this mysterious village, the opening sequences show an elder woman weaving, men singing traditional folk songs, hunting rabbits, and fixing the yarn, all panoramic images of the traditional Japanese community that would have otherwise fulfilled the expectations of the audience. Nevertheless, the raw violence of the language seems to predict that within a short time, the enchantment of this idyllic foray into the life of the village will reveal a strikingly different and dark reality: a dead baby abandoned on the rice field.

This scene where one of the characters discovers the dead body of an infant effectively displays the film's constructed narratives around several interweaved questionable and taboo subjects such as abortion, infanticide, and child abandonment, all representing an accurate description of this profoundly alienating and picturesque world where violence has been naturalized. In this grotesque universe rendering the dystopic image of traditional Japaneseness –

landscape, the architecture of the houses, specific cuisine, all the characters have relinquished their humanity, perhaps except for Orin.

"- You're going too far, abandoning a dead child in our paddy field.
- Dead child?
- Your wife was pregnant not long ago, right?
- No, on the contrary. I arranged for a grave to be dug and buried my in-law's dead child.
- When?
- Ten days ago, I saw to it personally.
- Risuke, that dead child, maybe it's from the Nakayas' place.(Min. 11)
- Did you abandon your dead child on my field?
- That's right! You stink so much, it'll rot faster on your field. That's why I brought it here. You should thank me! (…) If it's a boy again, I 'll throw it...on your stinking field again!"[33] (min. 12-14)

Fig. 2: Screenshot from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Disposed body of an infant. The *mabiki* practice.

Striking about this dialogue is that the origin of the conflict lies in where the remains of the dead baby were disposed of, while aborting in one's last months of pregnancy, abandoning, or killing one's child are narrative motives visually depicted in lurid and fascinating detail, naturalized and integrated without no complaint whatsoever in the realm of normality. Furthermore, the usage of low-key lighting and the subdued colors discloses the malformed sense of morality incubated in the villagers' minds. What the audience witnesses here is the ritualized practice of "*mabiki*" (間引き) often encountered in Japan's feudal Edo era[34] (which unsurprisingly overlaps with the film's temporal setting), in translation meaning "thinning out."

Fig. 3: Rare depiction of *mabiki* on a wooden tablet. Mother suffocating her newborn. Tokuman Temple, Tonemachi, Japan.

With a long-established history of more than 1000 years, the killing of one's babies functioned in Japan[35] as means of birth control[36], where farmers used to kill their second or third sons immediately after birth by strangling them while sparing the daughters for selling them as servants, prostitutes, entertainers or geisha apprentices, in case the family was facing financial difficulties[37].

Fig. 4: Another wooden tablet portraying *mabiki*. Seirenji Temple, Osaka, Japan.

It is estimated that "in northern Japan alone, between 60,000 and 70,000 cases of *mabiki* were recorded each year."[38] On a side note, we should not ignore or overlook how the film narrative dwells on the troubling practice of "*kosute*" (子捨て), a distinctive cultural custom confined to pre-war Japan, which can be defined as the abandoning or selling of one's child if the family was in a dire situation[39].

- You were expecting a baby girl but you got a boy!
- You idiot!
- You were left abandoned in the valley as a baby.
- Weren't you too? Who wasn't in this village?
- You stink! If it's a boy again, I'll throw it...on your stinking field again![40] (min 12)

Trading one's child for some salt (as Orin had done many years before with her daughter) or abandoning one's newborn baby in the forests appear normative in this particular societal setting and not something to feel guilt over or frown upon. However, Orin's expression of regret toward her past actions and her vivid remorse are capable of eliciting sympathy and invite to further ethical reflection, targeting not only the character's behavior and decisions but also the repressive socio-historical background and the implacable norms of her world.

"You were 15, and Risuke was five then. It was a bad harvest that year. We sold our newborn daughter to the salt merchant. Also, your dad's mother had reached 69, my age now. She had to go to Narayama. Because of the continuous hardship and Rihei's weakened spirit, he refused to let his mother go up the mountain. But the law is the law. In life, we can't rely solely on our emotions. But he couldn't accept the law, so he ran away."[41] (Orin, min 18)

This barbaric custom perceived as serving the family's interests reveals, nonetheless, the following central theme that is interconnected to the critical analysis of the village: the social status of the pregnant and unmarried women in the community. The breathtaking cruelty on display takes the audience to the next significant scene, which one cannot watch with mindless ease: the killing of the Ameyan family, including heavily pregnant Matsu, the prospective spouse of Kesakichi, Orin's grandchild.

The joyful carnival of death offers villagers great pleasure in burying alive every member of the Ameyan and becomes a legitimate societal vengeance, providing a shared feeling of fulfilling justice and protecting the integrity of the existing norms. The crime of food theft must be punished accordingly, and no member shall be exempted, under no circumstances whatsoever, as one of the punishers adds: "If we decide to kill the Ameyan family, we cannot exclude Matsu." Not even Kesakichi manages to save his lover and their unborn child: "Wait, you bastards! Matsuyan's carrying my baby!"[42] 1h 6min

The execution scene of the Ameyan family for stealing a sack of beans endows the audience with a challenging ethical experience that outside the cinematic context might otherwise be problematic to comprehend or even difficult to imagine.

The viewers are instantly plunged into a dark and brutal world of raw violence and then jerked abruptly into Orin's meditative and disturbingly silent mind. Therefore, the violence of the execution scene is punctuated by short periods of stasis and monotony to allow interludes for the development of the main character. The grotesqueness of the villagers' actions conjoined with the highly graphic and lengthy depiction of the victims' death reveals a highly disturbing existentialist

acknowledgment of a universe where humanity has been utterly destroyed[43], a statement reconfirmed by the next section of this essay.

4. EUTHANASIA, DIGNIFIED DEATH AND MERCY KILLING: ORIN MEETS THE GOD OF NARAYAMA

“I 'm going up to the mountain this winter. My own mother went up the mountain, as did my mother-in-law. And I too must go up.”
(Orin, 1h:10 min)

On a first account, it is worth briefly noticing the existing balance between the unfolding of the human tragedy on the bridge of moral collapse and the images of nature remaining seemingly indifferent to man's destiny yet capable of functioning as an independent semantic element in the film.

However, the role attributed to nature should be read contextually and interconnected to the universal order's Japanese philosophical and religious perspective. As spirits of the nature, the mountain, the river, and the rice field, imbued with godlike traits, are everlasting, life-giving, yet at the same time, life-threatening, determining the length of the human life and the precise moment of death, whereas the elders have no power of decision whatsoever. Among these, the mountain imagined as the home of “Kami,” “the God of Narayama,” functions as a locus nurturing the symbiosis between death, Japanese cultural customs, and human identity. The sacredness and ambivalence attributed to nature, in particular to this mountain which has become a central and indisputable object of worship, has its origins in Shinto, also recognized as the Japanese traditional religion, otherwise firmly rooted in animism and ancestor worship[44].

From the theological perspective, the cult of the God of Narayama can be at least partially connected to “Sangaku Shinko” (山岳信仰), one of Japan’s oldest cults, according to which mountains, in particular, are highly respected and believed to be “the residence of spirits, principally spirits of the dead who watched over and assisted the living. Mountains themselves were often considered to be kami and were accorded special reverence.”[45]

Therefore, the elders’ journey can be interpreted as a religious act of purification and realigns their identity according to the dynamics of Japanese asceticism, given that “the essential role of mountains in Shinto in particular, and in Japanese religion in general, also has lent a distinctive character to the style of Japanese asceticism.”[46] To some extent, their death place becomes the sinister imagining of the classical Shinto and Buddhist temples mainly located on the peaks of mountains.

The presence of the mountain, the sea, the plants, the animals, and the birds mark the interweaving of animism as the next central religious theme in the narrative tapestry of the film.

Imamura dwells in astonishing detail on trees, nesting birds, and flowers, all vibrant with life, making nature the epitome of the supreme beauty and the only one not to conspire in the abominable law of "*obasute*." As a culturally specific detail, wholeness with nature has been, for many centuries, part of the Japanese culture and religion (animism), the reason why the ever-changing seasons can stand as a metaphor for the frailty of human destiny. Under the influence of Shintoism ideology, every natural element – stones, water, leaves – are inhabited by gods, which indicates nature's connections with the mystical realm, and sacred dimension. This mysticism derived from the connection with the nature is shared by the protagonist as well.

Having begun by briefly outlining the nature-related visual setting with its theological and philosophical implications intimately related to exploring Orin's philosophical quest about meeting the God of Narayama, it is essential to emphasize the sacred dimension of the lead character's name: Orin Neko. In translation, "neko" (猫) means "cat," which would be an extraordinary atypical Japanese family name, regardless of the period. For this reason, we will connect the heroine's name to Japan's rich symbolism of the cat, an animal whose presence becomes overly abundant in art, national literature, folk tales or legends, and in a large variety of Buddhist anecdotes, also known as "setsuwa" (説話)[47]. Particularly in the Edo era, which corresponds to the film's setting, the cat was a symbol of death.[48]

This village (村), home of the matriarch Orin, is portrayed as a ruthless place of strict social codes of behavior, viciously raw and primitive masculinity, in contrast with her continuously exhibited self-sacrifice. Only embracing and respecting the rigid codes of the village guarantees the long-term survival not only of one's honor and legacy, acknowledged according to this particular context as the Japanese cultural concept of „taimen"(体面), but also the image and reputation of one's family in the community's social memory. Thus the ultimate purpose shared by everyone is to protect the harmony of the village, interpreted here as wa" (和). If one does not obey the autocratic code of this rural universe, one's life becomes shameful and no longer worth living, for continuing living becomes nothing else but a social failure and source of disgrace, supposedly unmasking a form of selfishness toward the younger members of the community.

Furthermore, not only the role of nature but also euthanasia and dignified death should be considered within the context of Japanese society and culture. Albeit both topics remain taboo until nowadays and death in any form is typically referred to in Japanese language conversations with the use of euphemisms to deflect the sensitivity of the acts[49], we should distance ourselves from the Christian (and not only) perspective, which tends to frame euthanasia and also suicide as unforgivable sins[50].

Nonetheless, this is not necessarily the case with the Japanese religion(s), accurately described by H. Byron as a "variegated tapestry created by the interweaving of at least five major strands: Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religion."[51] Consequently, an

amalgam of intricately interwoven religious symbolism blends into the film's narrative. As Roy W. Perrett[52] has exquisitely pointed out, "there are Buddhist traditions sympathetic to both voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia, under certain conditions," and in particular Japanese Buddhist attitudes regarding assisted suicide[53], abortion, and euthanasia have always been more tolerant[54] than Christian ones.

From this perspective, the production plays with the dichotomous relations: humanity and non-humanity, natural and supernatural, which become further complex given that Japanese culture seems to reject the distinction between "nature" and "culture." This intertwinement is perceived through a rather anthropological camera that frames the copulation between animals and then the sexual intercourse between human beings. Therefore, the human characters are included in the same net connecting every being in nature. The village and its members follow the same course as every other living entity in nature thus, facing the inevitable death in nature/ through nature/for nature. The protagonist, Orin, does not escape the mysticism and Shinto's substantial influences and connection with mystical laws, a fact also reflected by her dual dimension: "oni" and "neko."

By smashing her front teeth against the river stone without hesitation, Orin does not refrain from inscribing self-harm on her body as a vivid analogy for the shame incurred by having surprisingly healthy teeth. Fittingly, then, upon seeing Orin bleeding, the other characters, mostly enthusiastic drunks, continue their dancing festival, singing and hurling invectives at her, some among the following lines which incite the viewers' sympathetic responses:

"You'll be eaten by the Demon Hag! The demon has 33 teeth (…)."[55] (min. 37)

On this particular occasion, it is revealed that Orin Neko was perceived as an "oni" (鬼, monster, demon) by the children, especially for having good teeth despite her old age. Thus, this uncommon situation hints that the character Orin might not be a human character, but a supernatural being, a fact also conveyed by showing no death anxiety.

From self-harm to purposely starving herself, she takes every possible measure to hasten her journey up to the mountain to die in order to save her beloved ones from misery, and subservience, in a shell, from the fate of being ostracized by their neighbours, for losing one's honor means a fate worse than death. All her actions are, thus, justified in this absurd socio-cultural setting.

Orin and every other elder reaching his 70th year of life must be carried to the Narayama Mountain and left to die there, otherwise euphemistically expressed as meeting the God of Narayama. The journey, which occasionally might even be carried out against the elder's wishes, can be interpreted as a form of passive euthanasia, given that it implies the deliberate and premeditated hastening of death by withholding food and water. The elder's family usually calculates the time of this ritual of passing, which is sometimes accepted by both parties, although, in most cases, there are no signs of bodily suffering and physical decay.

Through every action and word, Orin constantly expresses her wish to go and meet the God of Narayama. Nevertheless, it is a journey she cannot embark on alone and needs her firstborn's assistance in accomplishing the final purpose. Albeit words such as "dying" or "death" (as in their Japanese equivalent) are not explicitly mentioned in the film, the euphemistic expression "encountering the god of the mountain" serves as a conceptual metaphor in reference to death, and it is used not only by Orin but by every villager as well.

Exercising her right of autonomy and self-determination is not contested by anyone but Tatsuhei, who is greatly distressed by his mother's decision not to postpone the traveling day and half- heartedly agrees to carry her there. As the narrative clarifies, the heroine is by no means suffering from a terminal illness or in extreme physical pain. However, she feels that prolonging her life would only represent a significant burden on her family. In this film context, death is indubitably presented as what the protagonist should choose, as obeying the custom and committing a voluntary martyrdom by sacrificing herself for the sake of her family.

However, the central question is whether Orin's evolution as the main character is to be read as a story of passive euthanasia through autonomous choice or as one of self-sacrifice, thus disguised as a form of a dignified death[56]. The basic narrative of euthanasia can be extrapolated to the instance of "dignified death," considering that Orin refuses to continue her life in order to serve a much "higher" and honorable purpose: to protect her son, her family, and the artificiality of their peaceful future in the village. Nevertheless, it should be noticed here the constraining impact of the linguistic aspect over the philosophical approach of "dying with dignity": in the Japanese language, unlike English and many other languages, there is only one specific word to express this idea, and serves as an independent concept, that being "songenshi," (尊厳死). Accordingly, particularly in the Japanese literature, with a focus on the literary periods Meiji, Taisho, and Showa, writers and poets have frequently employed "songenshi" or even adopted it as a fascinating and overarching human theme[57].

Especially in the second part of the film, the narrative line traces Orin's preparation for the ritual journey she will soon undertake, accompanied by Tatsuhei, whose help and assistance are needed to ensure the successful outcome of this final rite of passage. The character's attitude of inner peace and detachment can be noticed when she and her son, Tatsuhei, are instructed by the council members regarding the ritual of preparing before one is leaving to meet the God of Narayama.

"You must abide by the rules when going up the mountain. Firstly, you may utter no words while ascending. You must leave your home unnoticed by any other person. The route up to Narayama starts at the foothills behind here. Pass beneath the trees and ascend the third mountain to a pond. Circle the pond three times, then climb the steps. Passing over one mountain, you'll come to a deep valley. Go around the mountain for two and a half leagues, along a winding path called the Seven Valleys. Through the Seven Valleys to the Horse's Back. From there, you will find the path to Narayama. The path up Narayama is not a clear path, simply climb upwards and

upwards, to where the god awaits you. When coming down from Narayama, you must never look back."[58] (1h:27 min)

In fact, this narrative approach accurately reflects Imamura's words and vision of the village:

No one puts up a fight against the harsh code (of the village). One and all must live out their lives in obedience to and harmony with the unforgiving world of nature, patient and unresisting in the face of adversity.[59]

Close-ups are abundantly used to study the raw emotions of the characters, with a focus on the members of the Neko family. This unsophisticated, legible device adds emotional power to the narrative, for example, in the sequence where Orin teaches her daughter-in-law how to catch fish with her bare hands, symbolically suggesting the passing of knowledge to the next generation. In this rural universe imbued in depravity, sharing food is the only element yielding the feeling of togetherness, compassion, and intimacy.

Not only the death but also the reincarnation process, as it is depicted here and perceived by the leading character, is pervaded by the Japanese Buddhist doctrine of the afterlife, "innen" (因縁), which incorporates not only the fate, destiny, karma but also the predestination, transmigration, reincarnation[60]. According to the philosophy embedded in this concept, "suffering and hardship must be accepted with resignation"[61], which is precisely what Orin does regarding the fatalism of her destiny.

"It'll be hard having another great-grandchild, but I sense it could be my own reincarnation."[62] (Orin, min 52)

Furthermore, the picturesque diversity of aesthetic elements and cinematic devices contributes to enhancing the audience's moral imagination and emotional connection with the lead character's tragic destiny. For instance, the ritualistic scene of Orin cooking rice stands apart: the food becomes a metaphor for life and living, and sharing a meal represents the only occasion to nurture solidarity and kinship with her family.

5. TATSUHEI: BEREAVEMENT, GRIEF AND MOURNING.

"After killing my father, now I 'm killing my mother."
(Orin's son, Tatsuhei, 1h:52min)

Putting aside, for now, the film's cultural complexities and ethical controversies, which pervade social and theological discussions about the concepts of "mabiki," "euthanasia," or "mercy killing," one thing is quite sure: the nonconventional narrative line strives and succeeds to achieve a creative expression of the decadent humanity. Nevertheless, we dive into a world where sons

like Tatsuhei kill their aging parents by taking them to the summit of Narayama Mountain and then wait for their sons to do the same.

On their way up on the mountain, in a melodramatic moment of moral retribution and remorse, Tatsuhei confesses to his mother that he murdered his father many years ago. The father-son conflict escalated then from arguing about the rightfulness of the "*obasute*" tradition. The confession scene of murdering his father is emotionally overwhelming and serves as a cathartic experience, revealing how Tatsuhei must simultaneously face the constricting and absurd social order and his contradictory emotional state of mind.

"- When I was 15, I went hunting bears with father. On the return journey, I killed him here. I'd told father...to bring grandmother up to the mountain. He suddenly got angry and shouted at me, "What do you know?" We started to fight. I fired my gun at him...and I buried him there.

- Tatsuhei... I loved Rihei a lot, but he's the laughing stock of the village. It wasn't you who killed him, it was the god of the mountain. Don't breathe a word about this, you hear me?"[63] (1h:22min)

Hence, Tatsuhei's internal conflict is construed around an alternative interpretation of the cultural conflict between "giri" (儀理) and "ninjou" (人情)[64] - one's duty versus one's emotions. In contrast, his social obligation of taking his elderly mother to the Narayama Mountain is being repressed or concealed from him. In this morally-charged dramatic dilemma, the internal tension and the incredibly dense emotional struggle the character exhibits in the last scenes where he abandons Orin in the mountains reveal an ambiguity that discourages the viewing public from interpreting the cinematic narrative merely as a cruel and inhuman treatment toward his elder mother. Caught between the immutable norms of the village and his conflicting filial emotions, Tatsuhei undergoes an existential crisis: he cannot act, yet must act, as the epitome of human cruelty by consciously committing matricide.

Fig. 5: Screenshots from *The Ballad of Narayama*.
Tatsuhei carrying his mother to meet the God of Narayama.

Along their journey, the peak of Narayama Mountain is depicted as a frightful space where the borders of death and nature map over each other.

Indeed, one of the most striking and emotionally turbulent aspects is how the winter, candidly depicted in the opening and closing scenes, connects death's aesthetic manifestation to the grotesque imagery of the rotting corpses, and unburied human bones, and skulls scattered all over the path.

Fig. 6: Screenshots from *The Ballad of Narayama*. The truth behind the "*obasute*" custom.

The vivid rendering of viscerally shocking and disturbingly graphic images instantiates the fear of one's dissolution and awareness of near death.

Fig. 7: Screenshot from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Human bones scattered on the ground.

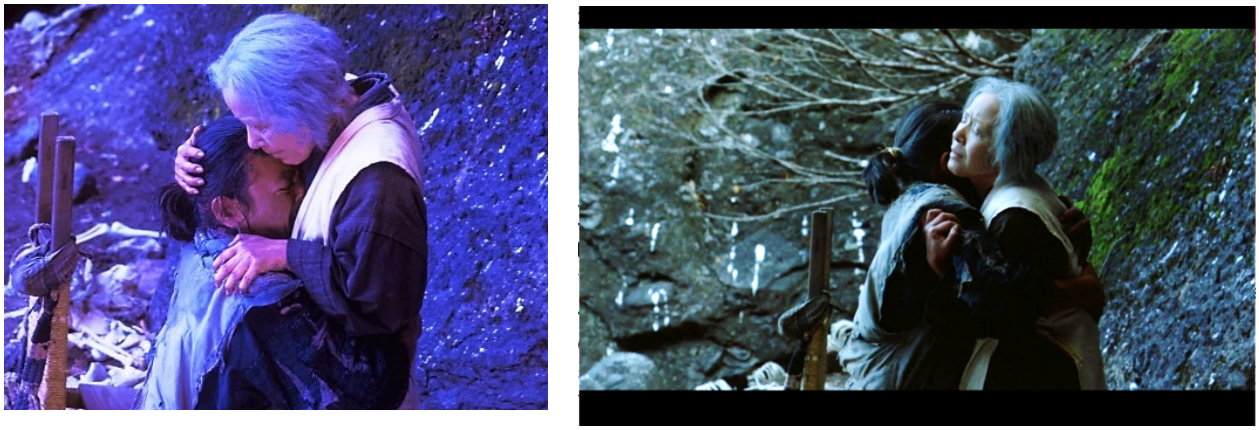

Fig. 8: Screenshots from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Mother and son hugging before departing forever.

The long-take shot frames mother and son embracing for the last time and weeping in silence before saying the final goodbye. The iconic final scene, in which Orin silently waits for her death, exemplifies the calm, self-detachment, and poise of the typical cinematic Japanese characters who resign themselves to fate. Orin's impending death is depicted as a solitary affair: she breaks free not only from the shame and fear of failing to fulfill the immutable codes of the village but also from the misery of her existence. It is all the more significant that her death arrives by starvation, in the utmost solitude and acquiescing silence, freezing, surrounded by impatient vultures, yet sinisterly awaiting with dignity for the final departure. Especially in this context, the shots of nature are more likely to express the character's emotional and psychological state of mind than to provide a picturesque landscape of the winter in rural Japan.

Fig. 9: Screenshot from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Orin's final prayer, awaiting for her death.

The final lines of the film are imbued with disenfranchised grief. To some extent, the following reflection of Tatsuhei can be decoded as an attempt to fundamentally question from a religious and spiritual perspective the existence of the God of Narayama, as more likely to doubt it and less related to one's identity belonging to one's family and the village.

"I heard the god of the mountain waits at the top. Is that true? If there is really a god, it should snow like the song says." (1h:50min)

Finally, As Tatsuhei recollects, in this dazzling monologue designed with the explicit intention of diving into the character's psychological realm:

"For many hundred years, our ancestors have passed this path. Many hundreds of them.., thousands of them. Maybe more. After 25 years, I'll be here too, Kesakichi carrying me. And 25 years after that… Kesakichi's turn. No other way."[65] (1h:50min)

Furthermore, Orin's passing remains unseen and unassisted, just like every other elder's. Dying becomes an act that one must pursue alone, with no close relatives gathering for the final ceremony, while the bereavement is a relatively simple one, carried out in solitude by her son on his way back home, with no words of consolation or possibility to indulge in loud lamentation.

"Ma... you must be very cold. Ma, you're lucky it's snowing on the day you came up the mountain. Ma... The snow falls on her way up Narayama... You must be frozen. It snowed just perfect. That's good. You must be hungry. What happened to you? Granny's so blessed. It snowed just like in the song. (…) No matter how cold it is, you cannot wear padded clothes. It's not allowed, when ascending Narayama, no matter how hard life is here on Narayama… When the snow begins to fall, she'll be released from pain..."[66] (2h:05min)

6. CONCLUSION

The Ballad of Narayama offers thus an exhaustive account of the morally decaying human condition and painstakingly illustrates the tragic vision of humanity as a quintessence of immoral cruelty and depravation while juxtaposing Japanese culturally resonant leitmotivs and historical specifics against a particular philosophical and religious background. The film seems to harness the theme of "honorable death," ensuring that sickness, heroic self-sacrifice, resilience, and numerous other themes, including child abandonment, humility through poverty, and suicide, always interpenetrate the central conceit of dignity.

By employing a significant number of wordless scenes, Imamura's film seeks to highlight the existence of a new sense of morality, different from the typical Western media construction of Japan's history and reality. Therefore, it ultimately aspires to depict an alternative yet unflattering representation of the Japanese traditional culture and customs.

Whereas the moral and existential drama reveals the dignity of the lead character undergoing a spiritual endeavor in awaiting death, the film narrative nonetheless cultivates in the audience a significant emotional response, together with delivering a powerful ethical experiment.

Despite all its controversial staple themes, the film stands out as a remarkable case study, considering that it forces us to adventure into an intercultural conversation and makes us reflect on how we should reconsider concepts such as euthanasia perceived as mercy killing, and dignified death from the perspective of Japanese cinema in the light of ethical debate.

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[11] Idem.

[12] Jasper Sharp, *Historical Dictionary Of Japanese Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 93.

[13] Stephane Erviel and Mark Cousins, "My Approach to Filmmaking - Imamura, Shohei ," in *Shohei Imamura* (Toronto, Canada: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1999), pp. 125-128.

[14] Rıza Sam, "Requiem for the Ones Experiencing the Tragedy of Farewells: The Ballad of Narayama," *Kaygı. Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Felsefe Dergisi*, no. 27 (2016): pp. 1-1, https://doi.org/10.20981/kaygi.283273.

[15] Yann Lardeau, "The Ballad of Narayama: Ascent to the Beyond," in *Shohei Imamura (*Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1997), pp. 157-158.

[16] Rayna Denison, "Promotional Discourses and the Meanings of The Ballad of Narayama," in *Killers, Clients and Kindred Spirits: The Taboo Cinema of Shohei Imamura*, ed. Lindsay Coleman and David Desser (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 257.

[17]Audie Bock, in *Japanese Film Directors* (Tokyo: Kodansha Internat., 1978).

[18] Allan Casebier, " Images of Irrationality in Modern Japan: The Films Of Shohei Imamura," in *Shohei Imamura* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1997), p. 89.

[19] Ibidem, p.90.

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[23] Carlo Comanducci, "The Human and the Inhuman in Shohei Imamura's The Ballad of Narayama," in *Monstrous Reflection* (Brill, 2014), pp. 101-108.

[24] Ibidem.

[25] Lee Wood Hung, "Natural Culturalism in 'The Ballad of Narayama': A Study of Shohei Imamura's Thematic Concerns," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 1 (January 2003): pp. 146-166, https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.14.1.146_1.

[26] Allan Casebier, "Images of Irrationality In Modern Japan: The Films of Shohei Imamura," *Film Criticism - Japanese Cinema* 8, no. 1 (1983): pp. 42-49.

[27] Kant Patel and Mark E. Rushefsky, *Health Care Policy in an Age of New Technologies* (Armonk (NY): Sharpe, 2003).

[28] Ibidem.

[29] *Civil Sphere in East Asia* (S.l.: Cambridge Univ Press, 2020), p. 231.

[30] Ibidem, p. 232.

[31] Kutou Shigeru, "The Genealogy Of Obasute In Modern Literature. The Ballad Of Narayama, By Fukuzawa Shichirou. (Original Title "現代文学における姨捨の系譜．深沢七郎「楢山節考」")," *Bulletin Of Beppu University, The Faculty Of Japanese Literature And National Language* 32 (1990): 6.

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[33] Shōhei Imamura, *The Ballad Of Narayama (平城山節考)*, film (Japan: Imamura Production, 1983).

[34] Yoshie Itō, "The Lives Of Children And The Conditions Of Abortion And Infanticide In The Late Edo Period." (Original Title: "江戸時代後期の堕胎・間引きについての実状と子ども観(生命観)")," *The Bulletin Of Ryotokuji University* 10 (2016): 81, https://ryotokuji-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=284&item_no=1&attribute_id=22&file_no=1.

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[36] "The practice of mabiki can be traced back in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki, published in Nara period (710-794)," and it is intimately connected to the Japanese mythology and historical legends. Probably the first instance of mabiki is mentioned in the legend of the creation of Japan, in the Kojiki. Hiruko, the first baby of Izanagi and Izanami, the creator gods of the land of Japan, was abandoned immediately after the birth and left to die, as he was born with a severe deformity."

[37] Fabian Franz Drixler, *Mabiki Infanticide And Population Growth In Eastern Japan, 1660-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[38]The New York Times, "Infanticide In Japan: Sign Of The Times?", 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/08/archives/infanticide-in-japan-sign-of-the-times-daughters-spared.html.

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[40] Imamura, 1983.

[41] Imamura, 1983.

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[43] We would underline that explicitly displaying instances of sexual and moral perversity emphasize the immorality of the characters (please see the representations of zoophilia in the character's development of Risuke, the second son of Orin.)

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[46] Picken, *Essentials Of Shinto*, 198.

[47] The Monk Keikai, Toshiaki Harada and Mitsugu Takahashi, *Nihon Ryōiki (*Original title: "*日本霊異記*") (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2000).

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https://www.academia.edu/5495089/_Feline_shadows_in_the_Rising_Sun_cultural_values_of_cat_in_pre_modern_Japan.

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[51] H. Byron Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity And Diversity* (Victoria, Australia: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004), 2.

[52] R W Perrett, "Buddhism, Euthanasia And The Sanctity Of Life," *Journal Of Medical Ethics* 22, no. 5 (1996): 309-313, doi:10.1136/jme.22.5.309.

[53] We will mention as a relevant example the ritual suicide of "seppuku" or "harakiri," considered an honourable practice under certain circumstances, and the role of "kaishakunin," a person assisting the one committing suicide to perform completed decapitation, in order to spare him of the excruciating pain following the ritual disembowelment. Usually, the kaishakunin was appointed by the warrior himself to shorten one's agony of dying. Please see: Jack Seward, *Hara-Kiri: Japanese Ritual Suicide* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1968); Fumio Kakubayashi, "An Historical Study Of Harakiri," *Australian Journal Of Politics & History* 39, no. 2 (1993): 217-225, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8497.1993.tb00059.x; Maurice Pinguet and Rosemary Morris, *Voluntary Death In Japan* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

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[55] Imamura, 1983.

[56] Jiyudai Junjou, "The Ballad Of Narayama: A Story Of Death With Dignity. (Original Title "尊厳死の物語として読む「楢山節考」")," *Waseda Review Of Socio-Science* 25 (2019): 3, https://waseda.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=46359&item_no=1&attribute_id=162&file_no=1.

[57] The most relevant examples of Japanese literary works that have tackled instances of euthanasia and mercy killing are "Takasebune" ("The Boat on the Takase River") by Mori Ogai, and the portrayal of "death with dignity" can be found in "Patriotism" by Yukio Mishima. Please see as references: Junsei Judai, "Euthanasia As "Resignation": The View Of Euthanasia By Ogai Mori. (Original Title: "「諦め」としての安楽死 ー森鷗外の安楽死観 ー")," *Waseda Journal Of Human Sciences* 26, no. 1 (2016), https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jabedit/26/1/26_15/_pdf; Hiroya Yanagisawa, "A Hidden Story Of "TAKASE-BUNE": Did The Brother Really Speak With His Broken Vocal Code? (Original Title: "『高瀬舟』の真相 ー小説史上，最も読者を欺いた殺人犯")," *Bulletin Of The Department Of Teaching Japanese As A Second Language, Hiroshima University*, no. 20 (2010), https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/files/public/3/33784/20141016195055760747/HiroshimaUniv-NihongoKyoikuKenkyu_20_9.pdf.

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[66] Imamura, 1983.