
*Dissolving Patterns:
The Wasteland Films of Abe, Teshigahara and Takemitsu*

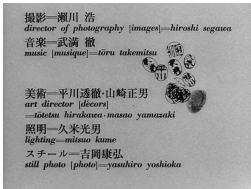
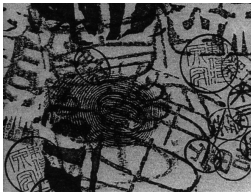
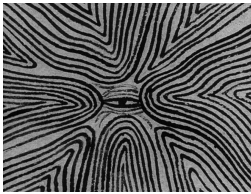
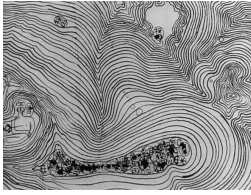
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Woman in the Dunes begins with the sound of the hustle and bustle of a city and a train passing. A map illustration emerges, which is composed of patterns similar to level lines, and name stamps [*banko*] function as a face (Figures 1-6). We can hear the mixture of different train announcers, and then a distorted strike of percussion. The credits of the cast and staff are composed of their name stamps and some fingerprints. A close-up of the picture of an eye surrounded by level lines appears with a frightening squeak. Large calligraphy of the title “*Suna no onna*” [*Woman in the Dunes*] crosses the screen, accompanying the Noh-like wooden sound at artificially edited intervals. Finally, the stamps of the staff and the fingerprints are superimposed, while the sound of the wind evokes the sensation of a wasteland.

The title sequence of *Woman in the Dunes* itself, designed by Awazu Kiyoshi (image) and Takemitsu Tōru (sound), intensively constructs a map of problems: the dispersed traces of social identity such as stamps and fingerprints; the correlation of face and landscape that composes an abstract map; and the contrast between loud city and quiet wasteland. The close-up on the stamps and fingerprints becomes an overlapping pattern upon desert-like paper textures.

This paper considers two films by Teshigahara Hiroshi that are located in a wasteland, such as an abandoned coal mine and a house buried in the desert. Such situations in the wasteland have long been interpreted as an existential allegory. However, such readings fail to consider the complex and elusive interrelation between human beings and landscape. In Teshigahara’s films, nonhuman landscapes appear as the correlate of



Figures 1-6. *Woman in the Dunes*
(Sogetsu Foundation, 1964).

the face and body, and I will analyze such correlations as the interference of patterns.

The Song of the Sands

The avant-garde filmmaker Teshigahara Hiroshi and the novelist Abe Kōbō made six films from 1962 to 1970.¹ The famous composer Takemitsu Tōru also participated in the production of five films with them. Deeply influenced by André Cayatte's *Œil pour œil* (1957),² which explored the severe landscape of an immense desert, the first two films of their collaboration *Pitfall* (1962) and *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) were both situated in a deserted environment. The location of *Pitfall* is the ghost town of an abandoned coalmine in the Chikuho district, and its story is about the murder of a runaway miner. *Woman in the Dunes* is well known for its strange situation in a hut at the bottom of a sand dune. An amateur entomologist working as a teacher is imprisoned in the house with a local woman and tries to escape from the sand dune in various ways.

The wasteland was a lifelong motif in Abe's work. In 1961, he wrote an essay titled "Hanagiri" (which means "Floraphobia") for a magazine devoted to Japanese flower arrangement.

1. The films of the Abe-Teshigahara collaboration include: *Pitfall* (1962), *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), *Ako* (1965), *The Face of Another* (1966), *The Ruined Map* (1968), and *240 Hours in One Day* (1970).

2. Abe Kōbō, "Sabaku no Shisō" (1958), in *Sabaku no Shisō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994), 329-342.

It was a sort of manifesto of Abe's preference for the wasteland over flowers. In this essay, he declares that he has never felt that a flower is beautiful, rather, he feels uncomfortable beyond indifference. In his sensibility and passions, Abe completely substituted the wasteland for the flower, and emphasized the fluttering fascination of the abstract and the artificial. He explicates the inverted law of the story generated by the wasteland. In a rich land, it is usual to associate the vegetal with life and the mineral with death. However, this law will be inverted in the wasteland, such that the vital symbolizes death and the dead world symbolizes sustaining life. He characterizes such a worldview as one in which "the song of the stones, clay and sands will be sung, instead of the flowers."³

In the beginning of the essay, Abe cites William James's classic hypothesis "we feel sorry because we cry"⁴ as the inversion of the order of sequence. We tend to think that a shocking event like the death of a close relative causes a sad feeling, and this feeling generates tears as a physiological response. However, James inverted this order: a shocking event provokes tears, and then it generates the sad feeling afterward. He emphasized the antecedence of physiological response as emotion.⁵ Although this idea (known as the James-Lange theory) is considered to be too simple in the present discourse on the psychology of emotion,⁶ this immoderate theory supports the exploration of physical emotion in Teshigahara's films.

What happens when these two inversions are combined? The primacy of physical response is radically expanded beyond our body to deserted environments such as the prison-like dune in *Woman in the Dunes*. Abe and Teshigahara try to create a world in which the material and irresistible power of the wasteland directly affects our sensibility, independent of our inner world of sentiment, evaluation and expectation.

3. Abe Kōbō, "Hana-girai" (1961), in *Abe Kōbō Zenshū* 16 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1998), 219-220.

4. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1890), 450.

5. Abe Kōbō, "Gendai Kyōhū Monogatari" (1965), in *Abe Kōbō Zenshū* 19 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1999), 269-270.

6. For example, Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 129-131.



Basically, the wasteland serves as an environment for inhumanity, for acts such as murder, conspiracy and bestiality. It becomes the world of criminals, insects, animals and even ghosts. However, Abe and Teshigahara did not stop at describing such inhumanity. They attempted to direct human perception and affect to the more material and minute dimension in the environment of the wasteland.⁷

This problem is prominent in the depiction of Niki, the entomologist in *Woman in the Dunes*. Soon after he recognizes that he has been trapped, he becomes angry and attempts to escape from the sand dune in various ways. After these vain efforts to escape, such emotions gradually disperse and he finds value in seeking to help the sand dwellers by creating a device for collecting water through capillary action. Rather than romanticizing the landscape of the wasteland, the problem is how to create an unintentional and non-empathic correspondence between man and nature.

Before entering into more concrete observation, I will analyze a sequence from *Pitfall* (Figures 7-15). This sequence is the walk of the runaway miner and his children around the coal piles of an abandoned mine. A close-up of the drooping miner fades out, accompanying a sound like the bang of a piano lid. Following

the reverberation, a panning shot of the wasteland consisting of spread out coal piles, striking the dry sound of piano in skipping rhythms. This sound uses the “prepared piano” which places various objects

7. Furuhashi Yuriko analyzed the problem of micro-scale in *Woman in the Dunes* from the concept of “minute perceptions” from Leibniz and Deleuze. Furuhashi Yuriko, *Refiguring Actuality: Japan's Film Theory and Avant-Garde Documentary Movement, 1950s-1960s*, PhD dissertation (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 2009).

like coins and erasers between the strings. The composer and pianist Ichianagi Toshi imported this technique from John Cage, and Takemitsu Tōru soon adopted it. In *Pitfall*, the tone is manipulated at the high end, to exaggerate its metallic and tactile character. There is an apparent discordance between the uneasy materiality of sound and the joy of the miner and his children.

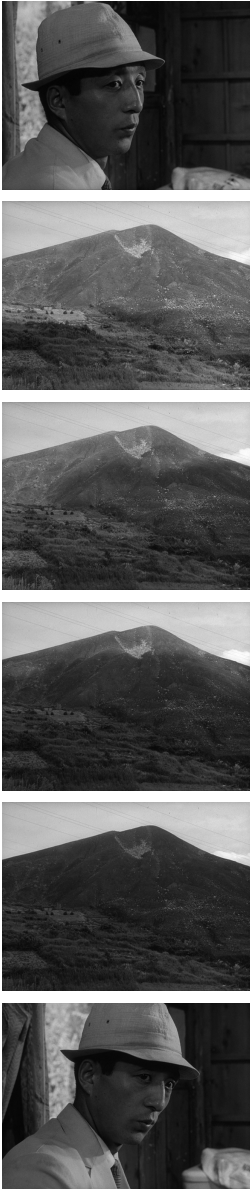
This sequence consists of some visual and audible rhythmic patterns such as the conical shape and volumes of the coal piles, the material tone of prepared piano and the skips of the miner and his son. It is insufficient to analyze this sequence as merely as a “stylish,” modernist clear-cut representation of ruin that predicts the advent of music video. There are almost no melodies or harmonies, but some correspondences with material patterns. The music does not reflect the inner sentiment of the characters, however, their visible movement of skipping and the abstract form of their surrounding environment are emphasized through the sound patterns. This does not mean that the music is purely materialistic and devoid of feeling. Rather, this music externalizes the human sensibility to a more physical yet abstract dimension.

Along with the banks, the concrete ruin that looks like an ancient monument may be the base for a large winch in the coal mine. An unnaturally repeated perspective of the row houses is the ruin of the miners’ residences. Although the ghost town of such buildings is regularly repeated, it tends to lose its identical marker and creates a labyrinthine perspective.

The expression of wasteland space in Teshigahara can be considered with respect to the concept of “smooth space” as it is articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Smooth space is “occupied by inten-



Figures 7-15. *Pitfall*
(Sogetsu Foundation, 1962).



Figures 16-21. *Pitfall*.

sities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities, as in the desert, steppe, or ice. The creaking of ice and the song of the sands.”⁸ Abe and Deleuze-Guattari used the same metaphor as “the song of the sands,”⁹ showing the dimension in which the material quality itself directly plays music in the uneven terrain of a coal pile of accumulated waste.

This “walking in the ruins” sequence shows the painstaking exploration of sound-image correlation, and that the relation between human and environment is thoroughly material and abstract, devoid of empathy. Such a relation will also emerge in the correlation of face and landscape.

Face and Landscape

First, let us take the scene from *Pitfall* in which an assassin dressed in white tells the witness of his murder to lie about it (Figures 16-21). The close-up of the man’s face suddenly cuts to a huge coal-pile mountain. As the clouds change, the black mountain gradually becomes blacker, with rattling sounds and the breathing of the witness. After his dialogue, the shot of the mountain cuts back to the close-up of the face again.

In terms of the plot, this sequence express-

8. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 479-480.

9. Abe Kōbō, *Woman in the Dunes*, trans. E. Dale Saunders (London: Vintage Books, 1991), 183.

es a visual metaphor of darkness in the conspired murder. The effect of the assassin's voice off screen is that the mountain itself seems to speak. There is a precursor to this effect. Slightly preceding this shot, he speaks off screen while the image is just the close-up of a mask. The assassin uses the mountain as his "mask," and the darkening mountain becomes the correlate of abysmal conspiracy.

However, beyond the metaphorical dimension, this sequence can also be seen as the one of Teshigahara's radical experiments to relate face and landscape. Seen from the viewpoint of alienation, the shot of the mountain appears as a sudden shift, as if it is indifferent to this monologue. Nonetheless, the mountain seems to have a sort of facial expression according to its shade. After the insert of the mountain, the face of the assassin acquires a landscape-like character. Moreover, the man's eyebrow area was not shaded by the peak at first. However, after the mountain shot, the man leans slightly and his eyebrows become shaded. This corresponds to the overshadowing of the mountain.

In the tradition of Chinese face reading, it is familiar that the human face has the character of a landscape, and facial elements such as the nose and eyes are considered to be mountains and rivers. In the title sequence of *Face of Another* (1966), the designer Awazu used the diagram of physiognomy (Figure 22). In the film, the problem of physiognomy in Teshigahara's previous films is absorbed in the physical alteration of the face.

Teshigahara developed the effect of the close-up to the point that human face loses its ordinary measure. Deleuze and Guattari thought that the close-up in film treats the face primarily as a landscape.¹⁰ In Teshigahara's film, even the coal-pile mountain has facial expressions in accordance with the close-up of the face.

Such a correlation of face and mountain is developed in another very short but striking sequence (Figures 23-25). A shot of the boy, alone in the grass and looking at the sky, cuts to the radiant, lens-flared mountain



Figure 22. *The Face of Another*
(Sogetsu Foundation, 1966).

10. Deleuze and Guattari, 72.



Figures 23-25. *Pitfall*.



accompanied by a crystal-like tone. The percussive sound emphasizes the boy's line of vision and the sunshine. This scene breaks the distinction between the animate and the inanimate. The order of sequence from the boy's eyes to the radiant mountain tends to be understood as "the boy sees the mountain." However, his perception is in fact not directed to the mountain but toward the sky. The sunshine becomes the correlate of the line of vision that evokes the inanimate perception by the mountain. This scene creates the nonhuman perception that "the mountain sees."¹¹ The close-up of the face gives landscape the character of sentience, even the coal-pile mountain.

In *Woman in the Dunes*, Teshigahara extends the technique of the close-up to such an extent that the human face becomes a mere inhuman surface, like landscape. The inhumanity of the face was the main motif of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking on faciality.

The face, what a horror. It is naturally a lunar landscape, with its pores, planes, mats, bright colors, whiteness, and holes: there is no need for a close-up to make it inhuman; it is naturally a close-up, and naturally inhuman, a monstrous hood.¹²

In Teshigahara's expression of *face-landscape*, there is the montage between the animate

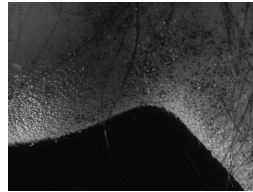
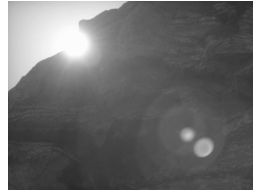
11. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 169.

12. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 190.

aspect of landscape and the abstract aspect of the face. The sequence begins with a shot of the guard watching with binoculars from a fire lookout tower, as the large wall of a sand hill collapses and flows like water (Figures 26-32). It evokes the power and terror of the sand with distorted sounds. The water-like character of the sand is contrasted with the woman who suffers strong thirst like a beast. The face of the woman, with its pores, shades, hairs and grains becomes the nonhuman surface that has the character of a beast and a landscape at the same time.

Teshigahara himself was very conscious of the problem of the relation between landscape and body.

For me, the body and landscape must be considered as objects and must especially not be regarded as something aesthetic. This idea of the aesthetic must be abandoned in favor of the functional idea of the object, so as to give a certain reality to the human body or the natural landscape. [...] It is less the close-up itself than the relationship between the establishing shot and the medium shot that gives this reality its value.¹³

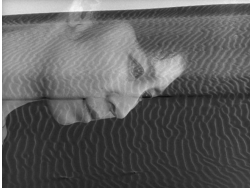


Figures 26-32. *Woman in the Dunes*.

He has a flat attitude toward human beings and landscape. He has said that in *Pitfall* he tried to express landscape with the same weight as human beings, even a muddy sag pond.¹⁴ However, if his search for

13. Max Tessier, "Entretien avec Hiroshi Teshigahara," in *Le cinéma japonais au présent, 1959-1984* (Paris: Lherminier, 1984), 120. The English translation was published in *Three Films by Teshigahara* [DVD Box] (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2007), 51 (translation modified).

14. *Purodakushon Nôto: Teshigahara Hiroshi, Eiga Kotohajime*, (Tokyo: Studio 246, 2007), 139.



Figures 33-36. *Woman in the Dunes*.

objective reality is extended to the relation between different shots in the flow of sequence, the focus of the problem totally changes. Strictly speaking, the body and landscape in his film are not treated as stable *objects*. Rather, he treats them as *patterns* that overlap each other. We should analyze such a dimension of overlap, which dissolves clearly-focused objects into the interferences of patterns.

Face and Body as Moiré Pattern of Grains

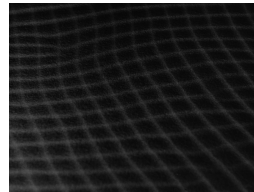
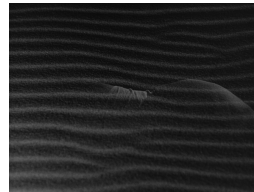
Finally, I will examine the effects of the *moiré*, ring modulation and film grain in connection with the expression of the body as a dissolving pattern. In *Woman in the Dunes*, the human face and body sometimes appears as the correlate of temporal sand patterns. As the conflation of body and landscape, such appearances can be called *body-landscape*. However, Teshigahara's *body-landscape* not only shows the visual similarity of the human body and a nonhuman landscape, but also expresses the body and landscape as a pattern of particles.

The earliest appearance of such a pattern is the sequence that begins with the protagonist's monologue, concerning the vanity and endlessness of the "certifications" that we use to make certain of each other in a love relationship (Figures 33-36). Lying on a half-buried boat, the man is touching and handling the sand. Suddenly, the transparent face of a woman (supposedly his wife) appears, superimposed upon the background of complex patterns of a sand hill. He wakes up, and the woman's steps before the sand hill appear as the flickering interference of patterns according to their common angles. Her appearance has the character of a *moiré* phenomenon. When two patterns are combined, a third interference pattern is generated as a *moiré*.¹⁵ The contour and sur-

face of the woman's face appears as the correlate of the temporal pattern. It is natural to think that her image is the man's memory, because her costume is too urbane, in contrast with the local people. Her ghostlike image is not only the interference pattern of face and landscape, but also of the man's memory and his perception, that is, a *moiré* phenomenon between past and present, absence and presence.

A *moiré* effect also appears in another dream-like sequence. Teshigahara did not treat the *moiré* pattern as a pure perceptual phenomenon; rather, he used the effect to express the vertiginous disorientation of perception containing temporal gaps. The sequence in question shows the first night he visited a hut in the sand, and it consists of dissolves between the shots (Figure 37-41). After showing a close-up of the watch that reads 8:15 — and it is not clear whether it is AM or PM — a close-up of the man's face gradually dissolves to his back, and then it dissolves to the sand pattern. Two sand patterns create a *moiré* effect, and finally a naked woman covered with sand appears. The watch shows 11:20, and it is uncertain whether the man slept three or fifteen hours. During this sequence, the music adds multiple layers of a string ensemble that ascends and descends in pitch.

Not only the visual effects, but the sound effects of this film also express the *moiré*-like character of interference. In this film, an electronic sound effect called “ring modulation” is used



Figures 37-41. *Woman in the Dunes*.

15. On the moiré phenomena, see: Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1979/2002), 74-75. Hirakura Kei, *Godard-teki-Hōhō* [*Godard's Method(s)*] (Tokyo: Inscript, 2009).

to acquire a granular and distorted quality that expresses the sensation of sand. Ring modulation is a method to extract an interference sound without the original frequency, and is known from the works of Karlheinz Stockhausen. If, for example, the input to the ring modulator consists of two frequencies (e.g. $A = 500$ and $B = 100$), the output is their sum ($A + B = 600$) and also their difference ($A - B = 400$), at the same time, the original frequencies of A and B are removed from the output. Typically, two original sounds and their modulated sounds are mixed to create ghost-like interferences between them. The ring modulation effect is used in many scenes, but it is especially remarkable in the sequence (i.e., beginning with the shot of the guard). Although ring modulation is used to emphasize a granular or metallic texture, it also expresses the differential character in sound.

Finally, I would like to focus on the effect of the film medium itself. "Film grain" is a random optical texture consisting of small particles. Of course, all films have this noise effect in every frame. However, in *Woman in the Dunes*, this granular noise itself interferes with the depiction of the desert consisting of small particles, as if the film itself becomes a sort of sandstorm. Although film grain is too random for our perception to create a *moiré* pattern between the desert and the film, we cannot see the film without interference. Not only the human and nonhuman bodies in this film, the body of the film medium itself can be perceived as a temporal pattern of small particles. Even the micro-scale noise of the medium becomes expressive to some extent.

Through these effects, the aim of *Woman in the Dunes* becomes clear. Although Teshigahara himself considered body and landscape as objects, such objects are nothing more than a phase of interference patterns in continuous dissolution. Accordingly, Niki's social identity and subjectivity disperse into his role in relation to the environment of sand. The dispersal of subject and object in turn creates a more collective and differential dimension, as the interference of patterns consisting of waves of particles, which lack distinction between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, although there are speeds, directions and frequencies.

The collaboration between Abe, Teshigahara and Takemitsu itself can be considered as a multi-modal interference between narrative, image

and sound, and it should not be reduced to a creation by a single artist. Their thinking of the deserted environment in postwar Japan made a dimension wherein human beings and landscape play an equal role, and our sensitivity is directed toward the interference between them.