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Gothic Politics: Oshii, War, and Life without Death

Even before the recent Gulf wars brought on talk of a new kind of war without end, war has been a common, even ubiquitous theme in anime and manga. With this perhaps in mind, an interviewer asked an artist involved with the 2005 “Gundam: Generating Futures” exhibition at Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum in Ueno Park how the “Gundam generation” could talk about war with “no actual experience of war.” The reply was that, simply, “each of us has ‘experienced’ virtual war in a variety of ways.”¹

It could be interesting to pursue the importance of virtual war (as opposed to “actual” war) in social life, or perhaps of the experience of war within video games (a question, at least in part, of technology). Certainly Oshii Mamoru, the anime director, filmmaker, artist, and novelist, works with each of these themes at different points in his own, typically war-centered, oeuvre. This article, however, takes up a far more generalized statement on how to think about war. In Oshii’s novel *Blood: The Last Vampire; Night of the Beasts* (2000, *Kemonotachi no yoru*), war as it now is configured is presented as part of a foundational logic of contemporary political and social life.²

This is not to say that “war” is merely figurative (or fictional) for Oshii. *Blood: The Last Vampire; Night of the Beasts* is centered in part on the Vietnam

War—a real war with real practical effects in Japan. But the earlier, anime version is less interested in war itself and more focused on the effects of digital technologies on social life and the structure of history; as elsewhere in

ODDLY, THE RECENT CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC CULTURE, AS WELL AS THE OSHII STORY, IS THE GENERAL REMOVAL OF DEATH FROM OUR LIVES.

Oshii's work, the anime version plays with a layering of style and narrative to indicate basic changes in conceptions of life. The novel, on the other hand, is almost tritely traditional in its narrative form; if Oshii continues to be interested in the transformation of social life, at least in this case it would seem

that technology and narrative form are not the only ways to think through these changes. And it is a consideration of changing bases of social form that Oshii gives us. The novel can therefore be read as a kind of anthropology, or an anthropological sociology: it is a discursis on the forms and orderings of life now, in Japan but also in the post-Vietnam era world in general.

In this case, Oshii tells the story in terms and relations that are gothic, or a breed of vampire goth. I will add some definition to this below, but some first points to draw from this are simply that it specifies a particular form of life (which includes a particular mode of reproduction); it involves a particular relation *to* life (and death), and a specific mode of articulating the lines of life and death; and in this very relation to life, there is a politics—the articulation of life and death is never neutral. In Oshii's novel, the stakes involve what might be called a gothic politics.

By 2005, gothic style (especially in its connection to “Lolita” fashion) in Japan had reached a level of mainstream culture generic enough to have spawned widely varying and dissimilar subgenres (gothlooli, elegant gothic Lolita, aristocratic gothic Lolita, vampire Lolita, sweet Lolita, punk Lolita, black Lolita, Victorian Lolita, etc.). All of these have only vague association with the qualities typically attached to the European gothic era, but there are a few central characteristics of a more classic gothic attitude that I think are relevant to current gothic culture and especially to Oshii's story.

First, gothic style is organic. This organicism might be expressed in stone, or it can be a machinic organicism, or even technological—as in the view of life seen in the “gothic organic” style of Web design³—but in each case the emphasis is on (differing) images of organic life. The gothic is also a creative rather than imitative attitude, though it is not always thought of as such. It is therefore an open view of life. Stylistically, there is less in the way of simple symmetry, and more irregular, evolving, and potentially endless forms; in

many ways, it is not really a style at all but a set of open traits that are played with differently in different locales (The emphasis on creativity has in literal ways continued to be part of goth culture in Japan. Goth culture is celebrated in art magazines, and popular magazines devoted to goth culture regularly include patterns to help fans create their own dresses. More generally, there is a general do-it-yourself attitude in goth culture, as celebrated in the definitive movie *Kamikaze Girls*.⁴)

Not only creative and open, the gothic (as the name for a life form) is based on a particular relation to an origin: its origin is typically dark and perhaps dreamlike, and while the relation to this origin may be romantic, it is otherwise uncertain. As a relation to an origin, it is in effect also a mode of history. As a history (especially as it develops in the nineteenth century, and still true now), its origins are commonly located in part in religion and the church, but the popular history that traces back to this churchly origin is for the most part typically secular. So this is a secular relation to a religious, spiritual origin. The gothic world thus has a complex relation to its own past—this is not exactly a mimetic relation to its own origin, and for this reason, too, it implies an open and creative structure of identity and history.⁵

Its origin may also in fact be deathly, or death itself—death, in other words, might serve as the origin of this lifeworld. While creative and open, therefore, it is nonetheless also about real fear, terror, and death. It also includes practical politics (the supposedly first gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, begins with a personal crisis that is also a political crisis⁶), and these politics often work more through affect and emotion than rational argument. But the most important point to emphasize here is that the gothic includes both open creativity and death; these are not opposed.

Oddly, the recent context for contemporary gothic culture, as well as the Oshii story, is the general removal of death from our lives. In the United States, governmental attempts to outlaw images of death from war are a well-known and obvious example of this (death has therefore even become criminalized), but the trend is not confined to the government or to the United States. Given this wish to deny death, it makes the efflorescence of gothic culture, and gothic culture's dependency on death, all the more interesting, if not problematic.

In fact for Oshii, in *Blood: The Last Vampire; Night of the Beasts*, death is itself a way of reading history: "human history is the history of the struggle to cope with the dead."⁷ "Coping" with death here means getting rid of it. And death does not go away easily; we are given a nearly chapter-long chronicle of how corpses and body parts and bones can keep reappearing to

confront those who would efface death, and the various methods devised by human society to first control and then get rid of this evidence of the dead. So, in Oshii's story, human history is defined by the progressive removal of death from the sphere of life and history. In the past, we are told, society had a place for death, including in terms of a logic of causality—death had a place in life, as a causal force. But we have removed death, first as a causal force (death being present only as an effect) and then removing death even as an effect; in Oshii's account, the desire seems to be to have all evidence of death expelled entirely.

The novel is still a detective story of sorts, and these themes enter at the level of plot, too. The possibility of death returning is part of the premise of Oshii's story. Death seems to have caused a situation. As a strange, vague, and random set of murders, and bodies that may or may not have been there, death is an anomalous event that erupts almost incomprehensibly into the protagonist's life; much of the book then has to do with figuring out what this was—not just who (or what) did it, but what if anything happened, and what precisely the real “crime” was. Ultimately, the implicit suggestion is that the mere existence of death itself, as an influential force on life, is the true “crime” to be dealt with (thus paralleling our own criminalizing of death during the Iraq war).⁸

But why go to all this trouble? Why get rid of even the sign of death? The story's detective, Gotouda, goes through a long list of obvious motives, from superstition to the practical concerns of hygiene, but none of these reasons seem to be sufficient on their own to explain this desperation to get death out of the picture.⁹ To anticipate a fuller argument below, there are more complicated and more contemporary concerns of power and social order at stake. Reminiscent of Agamben's “bare life” though not quite the same thing, the trajectory is toward a politics and a social order based, at least as one possible starting point, on a specific relation to and control over the lines of life and death.

A quick review of some key points about the storyline will help. The book begins with practical politics—the organization of anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in 1969. These demonstrations are formed by small “cells” of protestors, and while there is already a hint of organic form in all of this, for the most part this is simply a context of practical politics. In the midst of this, the protagonist Rei, a student activist, suddenly encounters an unexplainable murder scene in which the criminal is a sword-bearing vampiric being. So there are two quite dissimilar contexts juxtaposed at the outset, and it is unclear what the story itself is about—a historical fiction of 1960s student

protests, or a vampire story of death? There seems to be some possibility that these two worlds are brought into contact, insofar as the vampires may be attacking antiestablishment protestors in particular, but for the most part the two groups of incidents seem unrelated, and the reader is left wondering if they are part of the same story.

The novel is a detective story of sorts, and there is a real detective helping in the attempt to explain the murders. But the murders, even by themselves, are complicated events. The detective Gotouda, for example, is a fairly low-level member of the city police, investigating the murders as a local incident. But he is also, it turns out, an inquisitor for the Pope, and somehow there is something at stake in the incident for the Vatican. So here, too, is a blurring of a situation that appears to be at once small and quotidian (a murder) while also tied to a larger situation, and a larger order of social law (religious law, and the religious attempt at social control).

Further, in discussing the murders with the student activists, the detective for some reason feels compelled to give us not only a lengthy history of death but also full histories of the relation between human and animal, of evolution and theories of evolution, and of the globalization of capital. This is presented in the midst of a dinner scene of massive consumption and described within the context of international state politics (two principal characters may be members of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad). Somehow, all this is meant to be relevant to the crime witnessed by Rei.

As for the vampires, as in all the versions of Oshii's *Blood* series, there are really two types. One, a pure vampire, is a more radically and simply destructive type, and the other is the girl Saya—she is a hybrid, but at the same time the “true original”; she is, in other words, a singular form, neither really human or vampire.

There is an overall plot to the story, and time proceeds—the last chapter takes place thirty years after the late-sixties protests—but it is unclear whether anything actually happens or whether anything truly changes. In a way, the book is just a history of the protagonist Rei, and in the end his life is not much changed by any of these events (either the political events or the vampire murders). By some accounts, it is therefore really just a boring book.

A few initial points can be drawn from this story. First, 1969 is presented as a moment of radically active politics, a moment that therefore is in stark contrast to our own era. This contrast is enhanced by the story's own final chapter, set roughly in our own time (around the year 2000), when the former activist Rei has fallen into the very pedestrian and routine life of a married, subway-riding worker with a slight middle-aged paunch. By this time,

he thinks back to the sixties nostalgically, as a time of real vitality.¹⁰ The vampiric death, too, works as a radical eruption of something violently different, even in relation to the 1960s demonstrations. The story thus holds out possibilities of real difference, within a generalized time of war, even if it is unclear what kind of difference the sixties could pose to our time, or really pose to a world largely defined by the everyday politics of war.

Whether or not one thinks of the desire for the sixties, or the gothic death of slashing vampires, as a malignant desire, the book presents these as *our* desires. We want not only the sixties, it seems, but the gothic death of vampires. Or we at least partly want this; it holds something, or some possibility, for us. At the same time, the story gives us a world that assumes a kind of globalization or universalization of life. It would therefore be logical to have some nostalgia or desire for difference, but insofar as it is a universal life, difference could only arise from within.

A universalized life and politics could be conceived in a variety of ways. Oshii's story mentions global war and global capital but focuses then on evolution and a somewhat idiosyncratic image of evolution in particular. Oshii sets up Darwinian evolutionary theory as a kind of straw man that could easily be criticized, but with the implication that this fits our current popular worldview. As described by the detective, human evolution has a clear teleology, a clear direction that all humans have followed and that forecloses human nature into a preordained and universal thing. According to the "hunting hypothesis," mankind may have its origins in brutality and animality, but because of a "major adaptive disparity"¹¹ between humans and even other anthropoids, humans were destined to be distinct from and superior to all other animals. Thus, "anthropologists acknowledged the universality and equality of all men, [but] they also had to acknowledge a clear separation between men and animals."¹²

So through evolution, in this view, humans gain control over animals and over nature. Our identity is therefore complete, and our opposition to nature and animals provides this completion. This is the *law* of evolution: we *must* be universal but distinct from other animal life, and it is that distinction in turn that gives us our universal identity. Furthermore, these natural laws come to be embodied in our lives as social beings. The laws of evolution also determined that we would become social creatures, developing a collective will that would come to be known as "society," which eventually becomes autonomous and reified so that *it* governs *us*—society becomes the cause, a priori to us, and we are controlled by society (the detective cites Hobbes's *Leviathan* as a step in this direction).

This does not yet tell us anything about the exclusion of death. But it does provide a view of universal life and how universal life for humans (as a species) is guaranteed by the laws of exclusion (from animality).¹³ Not only does humanity evolve into a being that is universally distinct from animals, but in effect we always were distinct—we were destined to be different from the start, and so were really already human, already different, from the start. Here, too, any hope for difference in human life would have to come from within.

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To the extent that there actually is some desire still for difference and change in human life, Oshii's book gives us at least two alternative views of how this might happen. In one, the assumption is that life (both social life and life in general) is cellular—it is made up of smaller units, almost singularities, which can act up in the same way that antibodies do. The antiwar demonstrations occurring at the start of the book are an example of this. As Oshii portrays it, demonstrations and collective protest can only emerge through vastly differing political and sometimes apolitical “cells,” which come together at only provisional moments. Out of this, things just happen. Organic collective sociopolitical movement may occur, but it does not start out as united by anything in particular; theoretically, though, this could open the possibility of large-scale change, both structural and symbolic. This would not be an example of evolutionary change, for the most part, but it could lead to even radical change in its own way.

But in conjunction with this cellular view of life and politics, Oshii constantly raises the specter of what might be called “security” (my term, drawing loosely on Foucault, and not Oshii). Rather than a simple overpowering system of control, as I am using the term, “security” implies an almost cellular kind of intervention and regulation of events and society. In the novel, very different representatives of “law”—from the detective/religious inquisitor Gotouda, to the state spies from Mossada, to the hybrid vampire Saya—for varied reasons come together to control the events in just this way. To the extent that they are successful, nothing seems to have happened, and the story can return to a world of unchanging universal human life. The cellular qualities of life therefore do not seem to offer much hope for the emergence of any real change or difference in human social life.

The second view of things focuses on a larger, even structural conception of subjectivity. In part, this is a matter of mimesis and the assumption that

we gain our identity through reflection. This includes a mimetic relation to our own origins. We may have evolved and developed, but, as described by the detective, humans had an adaptive superiority to other animals from the very start, and so our superior origins only reflect and insure our position as distinct from the rest of nature. This originary separation of human superiority over and against animal nature also helps to underscore what we are not;

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animal nature, because it is excluded from human nature, helps reflect what we are by showing what we are not.

This mimetic order is also, though, an order of power and of law, in a way that helps to explain all the attention given in Oshii's novel to the exclusion of death. Here, the model invoked is reminiscent of

Giorgio Agamben (via Walter Benjamin's critique of Carl Schmitt) and the politics of "bare" life.¹⁴ In Agambenian terms, "nature" and the natural life of animals as described by the detective—nature as distinct from humanity—is something like bare life. That is to say, nature might seem to be a relatively neutral kind of biological materiality and the stuff of which humanity might make something or use to make their own lives better (even simply as food). Nature, though, is consequently a distinct realm separated from the socio-political world of humanity and human control—it is excluded from that world. And yet that very image of nature, as excluded from the social and political world of humans, is precisely what constructs the position of humans as sovereign over nature (and of nature as merely the materiality that humans have control over). Further, that image of nature comes from the human world; it may appear to be neutral of any human social or political concerns, but it is defined from within humanity's laws of nature. The relation of natural life to humans is, therefore, an inclusive exclusion. Humanity has come to exclude nature, but in the form of bare life—a materiality of "life" excluded from the world of human sovereignty, even while it gained this position of excluded neutrality from within human sovereignty (one could also say that humanity thus partakes of natural life and the laws of nature but occupies an exceptional position over and above the laws of nature).

This gives humanity the image of sovereign control over life (the basis for the many commentaries on biopolitics). It also creates an image of nature on its own as free of politics, and humanity as the sole and autonomous realm of politics. Politics, therefore, is founded on that which is excluded from politics. This is key to Oshii's novel.

The same general principles apply to the historical exclusion of death from human social life, as given in Oshii's story. Death, in the detective's history, might still be visible as an effect, but the primary motivation in expelling death from human life was to expel death as an inexplicably causal force. Death should not return to life—that would exert an uncontrollable influence over life—so death is excluded from social life. Death might reflect back, in some general way, the boundaries of life as we know it, but it should not and cannot come back to actually influence and trouble our conceptions of life itself, or change them (that would be showing the *real* limits of our image of life, and productively pointing to other potential conceptions). Death, as the excluded other to life, therefore only helps to firm up the image of life as we know it. In a sense, death abandons any claim to effective meaningful causation in life—to making us see different possibilities in life—and in doing so, abandons itself to the sovereignty of a sort of pure life (life that fully controls the image of death and therefore the limits of life). And lastly, paralleling the relationship between humanity and nature, death is placed in a position ostensibly free of politics, while politics is confined to the realm of life alone. In the story, for example, one could think of the opening juxtaposition of the vampiric murders to the obviously political conflicts of the antiwar demonstration; though concurrent, they apparently had no relation (and if there were politics behind the vampire murders, it is precisely that connection that the various characters want to keep hidden). In our own world, one could think again of the policy of criminalizing images of deceased soldiers, as if those very images of death might come back, as political, and influence daily life. In these ways too, death is the excluded exception to life, apparently free of politics and power, even while this excluded position itself is given by political law and helps to firm up the sovereign control of political law over death (and therefore over the lines of life and death).

This helps explain the complicated significance of the murders that appear in the midst of the antiwar demonstrations, and the apparent disjuncture between the two sets of events (random vampiric murder versus student demonstrations). Insofar as the initial murder seems to be random and quotidian, having nothing to do with the demonstrations, it reinforces the opposition of war (as political) and death (as quotidian and apolitical); an everyday death has no relevance to the larger political situation, and the lines between everyday life and war are kept neat and clear.¹⁵ One could even say the same about the two sets of events as genres or story types that seem to be incompatible (a vampire fantasy versus a historical fiction of the 1960s student demonstrations in Japan): a vampire story, as only a fantasy, should

not have any real influence over a real historical fiction, or beyond that, over real historical political conditions. There is nothing political about a vampire story by these terms. And yet it is this very exclusion of vampire-as-fantasy as defined by our vision of the “real” politics of history that helps affirm that there can be only one real approach to understanding of the politics of the Vietnam War, or of war in general—a practical politics, unconcerned with larger abstract notions of life, or the relation between conceptions of life and social structures of power.

The first and more obvious effect of this is that it hence brings life itself, and the dividing lines of life versus death and humanity versus nature, into play as an element of politics and power. It makes human life seem naturally distinct from nature, and the lines between politics and death clear and permanent. Death is now subsumed under the sovereignty of life and politics, and it affirms the sovereignty of life and politics. But more importantly, it makes politics into a separate realm. Why should a murder, or a vampire story, have anything to do with the Vietnam War? Why should those opposed to the Vietnam War care in any way about vampires, or the history of death, or evolution? Politics, therefore, has nothing to do with mediation, and in particular it has nothing to do with the mediations upon which social order is apparently built. Politics, then, is divorced from the more general mediations and logics that underpin the social order as it is.

There is, in other words, a lot riding on that separation of politics from murder and death that the book gives us at the outset. That would seem to be where the laws of evolution have led us: a world in which humans have power not only over animals but over natural life, and death and politics have nothing to do with that division. In effect, this implies that the very laws of evolution are potentially at stake in the process of keeping the vampire murders from intruding into the political scene of the antiwar protests. It is a matter of police law, of course, but also the laws of life. Nor is that the only thing at stake in the strange events of the vampire murders, although Oshii’s characters are much less clear on this.

As the principal characters continue to discuss the murders and who committed them, the conversation shifts from the history of life and death to a history of the Rothschild family, portrayed as a unique and uniquely powerful economic power (“Apparently, the conversation was shifting from anthropology to economics”).¹⁶ This family too, somehow, was part of the criminal context of the murders and tied in with the vampirism—they are connected to the vampire Saya in particular (I return to this connection below). There are several distinguishing features of the family. For one, they

were founders of a multinational corporation, but they were in fact deeply involved in manipulating the internal politics of nation-states. For this reason, parallel to the risk of death intruding into the realm of politics, there is the risk of politics intruding into the ostensibly sovereign realm of corporate finance. Also, because this was not only a multinational corporation but a truly transnational family, there was the apparent risk of unbounded family and finance ties intruding into the sovereign political power of nations. This would explain why the two men from the Israeli secret police, Mossad, were hunting the vampires. Further, although the Rothschilds were Catholics, they worked with Jews; the risk here is that the sovereignty of Catholic law would be breached if the exclusion of Jews were not maintained. This would explain the interest of the detective Gotouda—who is really a Vatican inquisitor—in hunting the vampires (and ultimately it is the sovereignty of religious law in general that he is there to protect; the inquisitors, we are told, embarked on a violent campaign precisely to protect religious truth over freedom and to maintain the exclusion even of the state from religion in order to protect the sovereignty of religious law as truth).

What is really at stake in the vampire murders, in other words, is not only sovereignty but a whole set of realms of sociopolitical sovereignty and the connections between these: the sovereign political power over life and the limits of life, given to society by evolutionary law (which also, as science, provides for the sovereign identity of humans over animal nature); the sovereignty of truth over freedom, as given by religion; the sovereignty of politics over and against corporate finance, as given by history; the sovereignty of nations over transnational formations, as also given by history; and the sovereignty of each of these realms (life, science, religion, finance, and nationalism) not only from each other but in particular from any real politics of death. Somehow, all of these interests are condensed in the murders and in the vampires. It is that condensation, or bringing together of things—and the revelation that they *are* connected—that may be the biggest or most monstrous threat of all. Thus, although none of the characters involved with the murders have any other interest in common, and although each remains independent, all of them conspire together, as “law,” to fight the vampires.

These workings might be made clearer by looking at the vampires themselves. Vampires are, first of all, very much like humans in this story. They have common evolutionary origins with humans, and they look just like us. They thus do have a mimetic relationship with us and could reflect precisely what we are (Rei, therefore, is initially horrified that the vampires are all “pursuing and destroying man’s mirror image”).¹⁷ But they are also unlike

us—they branched off into a parallel evolutionary branch; they are animalistic and are out to destroy us. They are therefore figures of death, and can and should be destroyed as such. If there is a mimetic relation, it is really one of inversion or opposition: they are more like basic natural animals, who in turn reflect the “humanity” in us; they are uncertain in their boundaries (they are human in form but can morph their bodies into beings with wings) in ways that reflect the certainty of our own species; and they are therefore a threat to the clarity of life itself in ways that we supposedly are not. They are accordingly that element of humankind that is excluded from humanity, and through this exclusion they confirm the identity of the human species (as above mere animalism and so on) and the sovereignty of humans and of human law in all the forms just described. Like Agamben’s reading of the Roman *homo sacer*, they are the portion of humanity that law stipulates must be expelled as criminal and that can be killed but not sacrificed—that is, they can be killed, but not in ways that might be significant to the given form of human society. They only confirm the given law of society, which governs their own exclusion.¹⁸

To the extent that this explains Oshii’s vampires, then vampires (and vampiric death) function for the secure law of power and sovereignty. They reflexively secure the boundaries between life and death, human and animal, and so on, and, as figures of the controlled criminalization of death, they embody the giving over of their own substance (natural life and so on) to the sovereignty of society. More simply put, the relation between humans and vampires creates an image of life that is controlled and fixed. Life and existence as potentiality is foreclosed. Consequently, there is not much possibility for anything other than the status quo—no alternative visions or opening of life, truth, or politics. The exclusion of death from daily life that one sees in our times would seem to be an ultimate carry-through of this logic: because the normalcy and stability of the status quo, and of the current organization of power, is still somehow dependent on that excluded element (death or vampires), that element of exclusion remains somewhat threatening. The (impossible) ideal would therefore be to somehow truly excise it altogether, leaving an order that is naturalized, and so unquestionably correct. The desire to excise the image of death thus is an outcome of a tendency toward a kind of totalitarianism.

This in many ways sounds like the pessimistic readings one sees of Foucault and Agamben, in which subjectivity is described as only an effect of power, and not much place is given for agency or critique. But within the mimetic relations of vampire and human, there is perhaps some possibility

yet. This includes a possibility within mimesis that does not figure in Agamben's analyses.

As Oshii's novel shows, vampires may be excluded from the realm of humanity, but the mimetic relationship does not entirely go away. They may have branched off from the genealogical line of humanity, but they retain a "parallel" genealogy to us. Thus, their origins are our origins, and they continue to parallel us—they continue, in part, to look like us, so the mimetic relationship holds. At the same time, they are not like us, as we have seen. They are animal-like, they can push their bodies into other forms, and they do not die in the same way (they live in a different time frame, for example) that humans do. Therefore, as one character puts it, "the mirror-image of man is a hideous monster."¹⁹ To the extent that vampires are like us, in other words, they destabilize the mimetic relations of sameness and opposition. They reflect us, but in doing so they might also reflect an instability within us. It is a complicated mimesis.

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This double agency is evident in the vampires themselves. On the one hand, although they are like us, regular vampires are also of a clearly separate species (and can be killed), and so even if they somehow present a threat to the stable laws of humankind, they can be both excluded and dispensed with in untroubling ways. They therefore are the perfect "criminal" to the laws of humanity. But, on the other hand, the most important vampire, Saya, is less easily placed. She is a hybrid of sorts, with mixed vampire and human blood. She is very unlike humans in some ways (she never seems to change or age, for example, and she too can sprout vampire wings), and yet she looks just like humans. She is also, as noted earlier, the "original" vampire. She therefore embodies mixture and uncertainty, and so, as the true original, this uncertainty and this singularity would appear to be the true essence of vampirism. Further, she is a product of the Rothschild family described above (a criminal family that, like the vampires in general, is described as "parallel" to normal human society), and it is the Rothschild family that is involved in all the overlapping interests described above (of cross-religious powers, transnational business, corporate meddling in politics, and so on). Saya may be a vampire, but her appearance will thus start to complicate all the lines of division and exclusion that sovereignty is based on, including the separation of animal from human, and of nature and death from politics. A murder scene

in which Saya is involved thus raises all kinds of complicated questions and cannot be dismissed as “just” a death, unrelated to antiwar demonstrations or other sociopolitical concerns.

Saya is, therefore, a far greater threat to society than other vampires. She threatens to reflect back an uncertainty in all the boundaries that sovereign social law depends on, as well as the codependency and conspiratorial character of all these laws (evolutionary, political, etc.). It is in her being that one can see how death might have political consequences, how humans might be also animalistic (a kind of ongoing openness), how international business might be working for or against national political sovereignty, how religious truth could be tied up with political suppression, and how all of these lines and laws of society are co-implicated with each other. Saya is hence the greatest threat of all—not a threat that is controllable but a threat to the larger bases of sovereign power. To the extent that her appearance in the murder scenes threatens to reveal all these connections, the murder events *are* far more than simple crime scenes. It is perhaps for this reason that one of the principal characters involved with chasing the vampires says that the goal is not just to kill vampires but, more importantly, to conceal their very existence, and not just to get rid of the bodies but to get rid of all evidence that any such event (or any such being) ever existed.²⁰ The mere existence of vampires and death, even as elements that appear as that which is excluded from humanity and politics, is just too dangerous. Mimesis itself thus can be dangerous, and can provide the opening to potentiality and difference.²¹

The ultimate trajectory of all this is consequently a desire for a world free of the threats of mimesis, and therefore a world free of the threats of death—a desire, that is, for an impossible world of pure or universal life. Although Oshii’s story attempts to hint at the varieties of social law that are co-implicated in this logic of power, it is therefore death and its separation from politics that gets the most focus. Death is also the primary basis for Saya’s own uncertainty of being. As a hybrid, she brings death, but she also saves life. She can be killed, but she seems to live forever. She even looks deathly, and yet she is erotically beautiful; she is a true goth. Rei, the story’s male protagonist and human parallel of Saya, is at times clearly in love (or lust) with her.

The necrophilia of Saya, then, is equivalent to the possibility that death itself might return to show the limits of a supposedly universal life, of pure life and empty politics. Death and vampires might reflect back to us the violence of a system that continues—like a world with war that continues—supposedly without meaningful death, and in which politics is supposedly

without ties to death, science, religion, or transnational corporate finance. A world that logically can and would continue as is, indefinitely, precisely because it is the basis of pure universal life.

In thinking through the practical implications of this, Oshii would seem to be coming dangerously close to calling for the kind of actual terrorism of suicide bombers that we now see in the midst of war—a real death that we cannot easily answer and that therefore is potent. And within the story, Oshii does have Rei say, early on, that he must accept the idea of being violent and of doing violence to another person. That, says Rei, is the only way to do something that is truly irrevocable, creating an irrevocable change.

But it is also more than just Rei's relationship to Saya that seems to hold a similar possibility. For Rei, Saya is the only figure of real change, and real desire, and therefore real life. He is in effect possessed by her, in what is a kind of gothic possession, perhaps with death. This is evident already in their first meeting, when he is "pulled in and held captive" by her eyes, even while these eyes are "piercing him with an acutely homicidal glare."²² There is something potentially productive or open about this. Possession, after all, entails a willingness to give oneself over to another, and so to otherness, as Saya surely is for Rei. Rei's commitment to irrevocable change emphasizes this: a desire for irrevocable change, after all, implies not just a tolerance of change and difference but a wish for and a responsibility to it.

Is this, then, where the *Blood: The Last Vampire* novel leaves us? With a new, more critically and creatively open vision of life and politics? Not necessarily. It is not that easy or that simple. The story certainly does not lead to much that is new and different for Rei. In the final chapter of the book, Rei has simply ended up caught in the same routine structures of everyday life that have characterized much of postwar Japan. The sixties protests, and the vampires too, have accordingly become nothing more than the originary past of the same old world. Each of Rei's compatriots, also, end up in that same everyday world with its hackneyed, trite problems.

Saya herself, having returned after thirty years, is "completely unchanged." We are told that "the only thing . . . different was the image of Rei that must have been reflected in her eyes," and although he has been "completely altered," what is different about him is simply that he has given up on all the rage and indignation he had as a student activist, and given in to the harsh realities of life.²³ He has given in to the law of life as unchangeable.²⁴

Both the vampires and the sixties politics, therefore, reflect back nothing but the everyday *as* banal, and as unchanging—a pure life, perhaps. War may have continued through much of this time, but as one sees with television,

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antiwar protest and vampires and the gothic in general end up merely as spectacles of death and change. By these terms, it may be that a true gothic politics is not possible.

This is not therefore a cheerfully optimistic story; it is at best cautionary, and perhaps not even that. But still,

Saya does not just go away. And although she is described as unchanged, what is unchanging about her is precisely her status as a singularity, as open and uncertain, and as an embodiment of all the mediations between death and politics and everyday life that seem to have been overcome. Furthermore, at the end of the story Rei is still possessed by Saya—he is still bewitched by her eyes.²⁵ He sees, reflected in Saya’s eyes, what he has lost, and the politics and possibilities that have not been realized. But those “precious days [do] come rushing back to Rei” when he looks at her; that mimesis is still alive. In his ongoing desire to see himself reflected in her eyes, those “monster” eyes continue to return to him all the openness and mediating connections to politics that he seemed to have lost. She is a return to mediation between all those links that appear to have been severed, including between life and death, human and animal, identity and possibility. As a return to mediation, she is a return to politics.

Life can never be completely subsumed by law. Life will never be entirely a self-same proposition (Oshii tells us that over and over in his various works), and so the idea of a pure or universal life is an impossibility. Death can never be made to go away from society or be wholly separated from obvious social and political concerns and implications. Sovereignty over life, therefore, can never be complete. Reflecting on life itself seems to reveal this, in the same way that a fictional story of a vampiric murder can serve as a critical reflection on contemporary politics.

Notes

1. *Art It* 3, no. 3 (Summer/Fall 2005): 62. The artist referred to is Odani Motohiko. For more on the “Gundam: Generating Futures” exhibition, see Takayuki Tatsumi, “Gundam and the Future of Japanoid Art,” and Christopher Bolton’s response, *Mechademia* 3 (2008): 191–98.

2. Oshii Mamoru, *Blood: The Last Vampire; Night of the Beasts*, trans. Camellia Nieh (Milwaukie, Ore.: Dark Horse Press, 2000). For a more direct and clearer discussion of the story itself, see Timothy Perper and Martha Cornog’s review in *Mechademia 2: Networks of*

Desire (2007): 295–98. I would like to have taken that (and related articles in *Mechademia*) up more fully, but this paper remains primarily as first formulated for the Bloodlines conference at McGill University in winter 2007.

3. This is a style developed by Aurelia Harvey, among others. As a technique and an image of life, it would seem to involve characteristics now typically associated with new digital media: it uses analog imagery of life, but only as “building blocks” that can be digitally combined in various ways. In this view, life is irregular, multilayered, imperfect, and open (and therefore at times mysterious) but also decadent and deathly.

4. *Shimotsuma monogatari*, dir. Nakashima Tetsuya; translated as *Kamikaze Girls*, subtitled DVD (VIZ Media, 2004). The film is based on the novel by the same name; for an English language translation (by Akemi Wegmuller), see Takemoto Novala, *Kamikaze Girls* (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2008).

5. In practical history, there are in fact at least three relatively distinct, even unrelated sets of origins to the gothic. These include reference to the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, Germanic peoples who harried and eventually overthrew portions of the Roman Empire in the third through sixth centuries. A second reference is the style of architecture, largely religious (cathedrals, churches, and abbeys) but including some universities, in the European Middle Ages. And a third would be the romantic literature begun in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and still referred to today. Not only are gothic culture’s origins complicated, therefore, they are also multiple and open in that sense. Furthermore, one of the characteristics of the term “gothic” that does seem to carry through these different eras is the idea of the gothic as barbarian and, at least initially, violent. That is, there is a common idea of the “gothic” as an attitude that opposes the status quo, perhaps violently, but especially in more recent times, more creatively (even medieval churches were considered barbarically creative in their wildly ornate forms) and openly.

6. In this sense, as genres, the gothic might be thought of as opposed to melodrama. See Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (London: Penguin, 2001), originally written in 1764.

7. Oshii, *Blood*, 115.

8. Going over the possible ways of dealing with dead bodies, the detective Gotouda explains that, while bodies might be dispensed with either to hide just the body itself as evidence or to use the body so that it might be discovered in a controlled way, the truest motive for hiding a body is to “conceal the incidents themselves”—to make it seem as if none exists (144). That is the case with the incidents in this story. There is no certainty that they actually did exist and that there was therefore any death at all.

9. The detective’s name would be “Gotōda” in the romanization system used elsewhere in this volume, but here I have kept the alternate spelling “Gotouda” used in Nieh’s translation.

10. At the story’s end, as Rei thinks he has caught a glimpse of someone who could have been Saya, “the memory of those long-gone, ridiculously precious days came rushing back to Rei, accompanied by a deep ache of regret” (298).

11. *Ibid.*, 277.

12. *Ibid.*, 246.

13. In the detective’s vision, animality displaces race. As he describes it, prior to World War II science attempted to explain human identity as hierarchical, using race as the

basis of that hierarchy. This became impossible after the Nazis, and this political impossibility was itself a step toward the postwar universalizing of “human” equality, and the discursive opposition of humanity and animality. See 232 and 245–47.

14. I will not try to fully summarize Agamben’s writings on bare life here—this article is not meant to be wholly in dialog with Agamben’s framework—but there are a few salient points that are key to the argument I am trying to make and that may be worth some detail. Agamben is perhaps less interested in social form and more interested in an analysis of the general nature of sovereign power. Sovereignty, as Agamben describes it, is first of all dependent on a relation to law, but in such a way that law is in part excluded from sovereignty. At one end of social life, Agamben points to the early Roman role of the *homo sacer*, a person legally defined as a criminal who can be ostracized from everyday life. He is therefore placed outside of the law, and though placed in that position by law, he is no longer protected by social law; others can therefore kill him. The *homo sacer* is accordingly beyond the juridical order, and yet his position of exclusion also reaffirms the legitimacy of the juridical order; and although he is not protected by law, he is therefore also considered somehow “sacred.” At the opposite end of the social order, the ruler is in an inverse but similar position. The ruler’s place as legitimate ruler comes from the legal order, and yet the ruler’s ultimate expression of power is the power *over* the law, the power to suspend the law and create exceptions to the law. The law gives the ruler the right to do this (to stand above the law); sovereignty, therefore, depends on the law, and yet in its ultimate form it is beyond the law. Sovereignty thus is premised on the presence of a legal order and the appearance of legal order, but it is in fact also outside of this order and based on a state of extralegal exception and exclusion.

Second, life and the definition of life are incorporated as part of this connection between law and sovereignty. In some ways, life is encompassed as the most important aspect of this juridical relation. Although biological life at its most basic and generic level might seem to be prior to any legal definition and therefore neutral, Agamben shows this basic level of life to be defined and circumscribed by law, and so derived from law. This is “bare” life—life that social law defines as prior to or outside social law. It is life that can and should be made into good social and political form, but that is nonetheless excluded from society and politics. The implication is that social and political form, and therefore social and political sovereignty, depend on the ability to control and define life, including the very distinction between “bare” life and the well-formed life given by the social and political order. Sovereignty for Agamben thus has always involved not only the state of exception but also the control over life at its most basic levels; these are part of the essential nature of sovereignty rather than a new social and historical development. My own view is closer to Foucault’s emphasis on a historical shift toward an increasing control over life, and my reading of Oshii’s novel assumes a historically specific set of convergences.

Lastly (but most relevant to this article), because “bare” life is defined within a framework that excludes it from the everyday sociopolitical order of things, life appears to be naturally excluded from politics—even though life is a critical grounds for politics and sovereignty.

See in particular Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), and *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

15. But if one pushes this logic just a little bit, there is one crucial shift that this reveals: while war might be the exception to everyday life, it is here put in the realm of politics and sovereignty, while everyday life would seem to be excluded from real politics and action. War, in other words, is shown to rule over everyday life rather than the other way around.

16. Oshii, *Blood*, 258.

17. *Ibid.*, 252.

18. The obvious example in contemporary life would again be the American soldiers in the Iraq war. They are allowed to be killed, but their deaths are not thought of as “sacrifices”—their deaths should not come back to meaningfully intrude on, or haunt, society’s perception of the war or society’s perception of current life during war. (In fact, as has been frequently noted in the U.S. media, sacrifice seems to be a concept that is part of this war’s exclusion.)

19. Oshii, *Blood*, 252.

20. *Ibid.*

21. It may be for this reason that the detective Gotouda says of vampires, “their only real threat is the ethical crisis they present to human beings” (*ibid.*, 254). Rather than some strange animal that just wants to kill or eat us, they are challenges to our basic laws of society and the ways in which these laws ground the appearance of certainty, clarity, and sovereign control over identity.

22. *Ibid.*, 26.

23. *Ibid.*, 297.

24. The implication is that not only life but change and the possibility of change have come under the sovereign control of society as it is constituted.

25. Saya, dressed like a high school girl, is at this endpoint of the story placed in opposition to normal high school girls. Rei has come to hate normal high schools—their heavily made-up faces make them look “like ageless monsters.” In other words, they have come to mirror the kind of unchanging life that is so meaningless to Rei. Saya, on the other hand, still holds real interest for real life and real change, even while she is still so deathly. Oshii, *Blood*, 296–97.