Directed by Nagisa Oshima
Written by Nagisa Oshima and Paul Mayersberg
Based on the novel by Laurens Van der Post
Produced by Jeremy Thomas
Cinematography by Toihiro Narushima
Edited by Tomoyo Oshima
Production Design by Shigemasa Toda
Art Direction by Andrew Sanders
Music Composed by Ryuichi Sakamoto

David Bowie...Maj. Jack 'Strafer' Celliers
Tom Conti...Col. John Lawrence
Ryûichi Sakamoto...Capt. Yonoi
Takeshi Kitano...Sgt. Gengo Hara (as Takeshi)
Jack Thompson...Group Capt. Hicksley
Johnny Okura...Kanemoto (as Johnny Ohkura)
Alistair Browning...De Jong


**RYUICHI SAKAMOTO...Capt. Yonoi** is, as noted above, one of Japan’s top rock musicians and the composer and primary performer of this film’s haunting score. He has acted in four films: 2004 *“Neo the Office Chuckler”*, 1998 *New Rose Hotel*, 1987 *The Last Emperor*, 1983 *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*


**Nagisa Oshima by Nelson Kim, Senses of Cinema**

b. March 31, 1932, Kyoto, Japan

filmography bibliography articles in *Senses* web resources

**Introduction**

Nagisa Oshima’s interest in politics began at a young age. His father, a government official (reportedly of samurai lineage)* who died when Oshima was six, left behind an extensive library of Socialist and Communist texts, which the young man read through as he came to maturity. He attended Kyoto University, studying law while dabbling in theatre and becoming deeply involved in student activism. The years of his youth were turbulent ones for Japan, as the nation rebuilt itself after its defeat in World War Two. Food
shortages and depressed wages sparked a surge in labour-union activity. The threat of labour unrest, and the dawning of the Cold War mentality, led to crackdowns and “Red purges” of suspected radicals. Slowly, the American occupiers were transforming Japan into a stable capitalist democracy, and as the Cold War got underway, the U.S. came to see its new client state as an essential ally in the region. In 1951, the American occupation officially ended. That same year, the signing of the U.S.-Japan mutual security pact established a permanent U.S. military presence in Japan. Japanese leftists, fearing a return to authoritarianism and militarism, stepped up their demands for greater freedom. At the time of the security pact signing, Oshima was an officer in Kyoto University’s left-wing student association, and led the student body in a series of protests. (In one famous incident that occurred while Oshima was a student leader, the Emperor’s visit to Kyoto University was disrupted by a mass demonstration.)

By the time Oshima graduated in the mid-1950s, he had lost interest in practicing law. Steady employment was hard to find in the post-war, pre-boom years, particularly for a young man with a record of leftist activism, so when a friend notified him of an opening at Shochiku Ofuna studios’ assistant-director training program, he applied, though he was not a passionate cinephile. He was admitted, and began to work his way up the ranks as a screenwriter and assistant director.

In 1959, as the renewal of the U.S.-Japan security pact (stipulated to occur every ten years) approached, student activists joined forces with the Socialist and Communist parties, intellectuals and labour unions. Strikes, boycotts, rallies and occupations of official buildings erupted nationwide. Revolution seemed a real possibility. Amid the disorder, the Japan Communist Party shifted its stance and denounced the student groups as danger. Politically and formally radical, they are remarkable documents of their era and constitute a major contribution to the various “new waves” that swept through world cinema during the ’60s. As a director, Oshima never settled into an identity, however, is always changing. Thus, the filmmaker who is able to grasp it immediately ceases being a filmmaker and of their critical spirit and powers of expression in a persistent struggle that strongly and effectively pits the content of their works against the premodern elements of Japanese society.

There are several things to note here. First, the condemnation of the “premodern” Japanese mentality: feudalistic, xenophobic, undemocratic, hostile to personal liberty, mired in dead traditions. Second, the importance granted to cinema: the belief that Japanese cinema can profoundly influence the direction of the Japanese nation. (For the better, and for the worse: Oshima has always disdained the great humanist tradition of Japanese film, seeing it as the artistic embodiment of those “premodern elements of Japanese society” he opposes). Third, the warning against “degeneration” and “surrender”: the fear that bold, innovative young filmmakers might lose their nerve and become “mediocre technical artists” (this from a man still in his twenties, whose first feature would not appear until the following year). Finally, the notion of persistent struggle: the awareness that in the war against a reactionary and repressive society, no true and lasting victory can be won. One must be forever vigilant, must will oneself constantly forward, or be dragged down into corruption and waste.

Through the 1960s and into the early ’70s, Oshima put his youthful theories into practice with a series of films that retain their power to provoke and surprise. Politically and formally radical, they are remarkable documents of their era and constitute a major contribution to the various “new waves” that swept through world cinema during the ’60s. As a director, Oshima never settled into an identifiable aesthetic, a particular mode of address; the films range from neorealist naturalism to pseudo-documentary to avant-garde modernism to surrealist farce. There is no such thing as a “typical” Oshima shot or scene. As a result, his detractors have accused him of lacking a style or voice of his own. But form, for Oshima, serves as a vessel for content. His subject matter was new: post-war alienation among Japanese youth, the failures of left-wing political movements, the rise of capitalism, the hangover from the imperial past. These new stories could not be told in the old ways; new content demanded new forms. Traditional forms — the classical style of conventional studio filmmaking — reflected the political and cultural status quo. To critique and reform a corrupt society, to change the way people think and act, would require a change in how they see and hear. The lack of a signature style, the search for new forms, is part and parcel of the never-ending struggle to see contemporary Japan with fresh eyes. Restlessness equals development and growth; repetition leads to self-satisfaction and the weakening of the will. From a 1961 essay:

This accumulation of new images [discovered during shooting] becomes a work and thereby gives the filmmaker a new consciousness of reality. When he is preparing for the next work, it shapes his total dynamic vision of the inner person and outer circumstances. The filmmaker goes on to discover new images as he works on each production, testing and negating his vision....

Reality, however, is always changing. Thus, the filmmaker who is unable to grasp it immediately ceases being a filmmaker and
Constant self-negation and transformation are necessary if one is to avoid that debilitation and continue to confront circumstances as a filmmaker. Naturally, that means preparing a new methodology. Moreover, those transformations and that methodology must not themselves be made into goals of the ego, but, as weapons used to change reality, must always follow through with their objective of revolutionizing consciousness. With this in place, the law of self-negating movement is not merely a law of production or of the filmmaker, but a law of human growth and of the development of the human race—a law of the movement of all things.

The filmmaker must uphold that law. “Reality” in this passage stands for the thing to be resisted, struggled against, overcome. Reality is the way things are, the received wisdom of the social order. The artist pursues a personal vision that will lead to a new consciousness of reality, but once that vision has expressed itself in a particular work, an act of self-negation must occur, to clear the way for new visions. The creation of an oeuvre, the ego-gratifications of artistic success: these are mere by-products of the true quest, to change reality, and to revolutionize consciousness. However: the radical filmmaker seeks these goals, but knows that ultimately, they can never be achieved. It is not a question of reforming a certain law, or bringing a particular issue to light. There is no victory over the horizon, only the persistent struggle, the movement of all things.

This was how the young Oshima defined his mission. But, as we shall see, even in his earliest films, theory did not always walk hand in hand with practice. The films display tremendous anger at social and political corruption, but also great scepticism about the possibility of effecting positive change. The aspiring revolutionary becomes a brilliant anatomist of failed revolutions; the rebel youth who set out to reform society ends up making film after film exploring the twisted, murky psychology of the rebel.

Early Films

Oshima got the chance to direct his first feature after a series of box-office failures led Shochiku’s management to promote some of its more promising assistant directors. A Town of Love and Hope (1959) sounded acceptably conventional in outline: a social-realist drama about a poor teenage boy who sells a homing pigeon to gullible buyers as a pet, only to later recall the pigeon and sell it again. A close friendship with a rich girl ends when the girl discovers the boy’s scam, and orders the pigeon shot. But, Japanese critic Tadao Sato reports:

[i]In the original script another scene followed in which the teenagers agree not to let their friendship end on such a sour note, and there was the brave, heartwarming message that together they would build a more genuine society. However, Oshima’s film ended with the slain pigeon falling—an image which pierced the viewer to the core. It was a compelling ending because the viewer, who had been an objective, detached observer, was suddenly and forcefully confronted with the question: Where do you stand? According to Sato, Shochiku disliked Oshima’s harsher ending, with the studio head scolding the director, “This film is saying that the rich and poor can never join hands!” The company promptly buried the film, releasing it in only a few small theatres.

The success of his next feature, Cruel Story of Youth (1960), put Oshima back in his employers’ good graces. Cruel Story is often compared to Rebel Without A Cause (Nicholas Ray, 1955): a juvenile delinquent and a “good” girl fall in love and manoeuvre their way among disapproving adults and dangerous youth gangs. But Oshima’s film is set in a meaner milieu, and he lacks Ray’s romantic idealism. The couple in Cruel Story operate a scam in which the girl lures middle-aged lechers into driving her home, then, once the marks make their moves on her, the boy appears and shakes them down. These are not Rebel’s wounded innocents, but tainted people in a dirty world, predators as well as prey. Where the film does resemble Rebel is in its supercharged, hot-blooded style: bold colours, intense close-ups, a mood of coiled tension that periodically explodes in sex and violence. Cruel Story is Oshima’s splashiest, most pop-besotted work, a grim tale that’s great fun to watch.

Social commentary shares the foreground with the tale of the two lovers. The boy’s close friend is a student protestor taking part in the anti-security-treaty demonstrations, real footage of which appears in the film. And the girl’s older sister is a former activist of Oshima’s generation; watching her younger sister’s heedless flouting of convention reminds her of her own vanished youth. She reconnects with her former lover, now a doctor, but their meeting ends in disillusionment and a sad recognition of compromised ideals: she settled down with an older man for security, while he supplements his meagre income performing back-alley abortions. The doctor is arrested (after giving the heroine an abortion) and the young lovers meet separate, bloody ends.

Oshima’s next film presented an even harsher view of lowlife Japan. The Sun’s Burial (1960) depicts the struggle between two criminal gangs in an Osaka slum. Prostitution, black-marketeering, identity theft, rape and robbery are the going concerns in this ensemble piece. Oshima repeatedly ends scenes with cityscapes of the sun setting over the decrepit slum. The Sun’s Burial, with its corrupt, conniving characters, its squalor and cruelty, is the director’s disgusted mockery of the nation’s self-image as the “land of the rising sun”.

These first three pictures showed Oshima working largely within the boundaries of conventional genre storytelling: A Town of Love and Hope was an urban melodrama, and Cruel Story of Youth and The Sun’s Burial were approved and marketed by Shochiku as part of the then-popular Taiyo-zoku (or “Sun Tribe”) films about rebellious contemporary youth. Oshima’s fourth feature, and (astonishingly) his third to appear in 1960, marked a significant breakthrough—an audacious and original work, conceptually rigorous, blisteringly political.

Night and Fog in Japan begins at the wedding of a thirtyish journalist and a younger activist, who met a few months earlier at the bloody height of the security treaty protests. The groom’s
friends are from Oshima’s generation, those who took to the streets in the early 1950s. Some have left the movement, some have consolidated their power within it, some hang on at its margins. The bride’s friends are from the younger generation, the students freshly wounded in the recent protests. (The contrast between the two generations recalls the older and younger pairs of lovers in Cruel Story of Youth.) The wedding’s formalised serenity is very quickly broken, as guests invited and uninvited begin to speak of their shared pasts. Night and Fog in Japan takes place during three separate time frames: the present of the wedding, the recent past of the 1960 demonstrations, and the more distant past of the older generation’s activism during the early 1950s. As the guests’ tongues loosen and memories take hold, recriminations and accusations are flung about, and old jealousies and resentments come to light.

With Night and Fog, Oshima (and his co-screenwriter Toshiro Oshido, also a former student activist) comments on the immediate moment of the 1959–60 protests while simultaneously crafting a memory-piece about his own political coming-of-age in the early ’50s. The film can be read as Oshima’s indictment of the Old Left’s leadership: how they betrayed one another when young, and how they sold out their successors several years later. The constant flashbacks begin to exert a relentless, vertiginous pull, as if history is grabbing the characters by their necks and dragging them out of the present. One character’s j’accuse leads to a flashback furnishing the evidence for the indictment, but then the accused gets a chance to speak and the viewer is plunged into an alternative version of the past events, and then on to the next argument and counter-argument. The quest for truth, for meaning, for a final settling of accounts, circles back on itself in a spiral of confusion, and the film ends on an ambiguous note. The fugitive of the group is arrested, the guests stand in pensive disarray, and the group’s leader, by now revealed as an unprincipled Stalinist control freak, reasserts order with a speech (surely inspired by the Marquis’ words at the close of Renoir’s La Règle du Jeu [1939]) about the need for unity. The camera drifts past the characters, through the enveloping fog, and into the night.

Stylistically, the film departs from the naturalism of Oshima’s first three features. During the wedding scenes, the actors, spread out along the wide Cinemascope screen in neat rows, stand motionless while the camera pans and tracks across their faces, registering their expressions as they take in what’s happening and think back on the past. The stiff, still tableau of the wedding, traversed by the restless camera, correlates to the state of the characters’ lives, frozen in the present as their history swells and swirls around them. Many scenes are filmed in a heavily theatricalised shorthand – call it minimalist expressionism: a massive protest march is rendered as the sound of crowds chanting, glimpses of waving flags and flashing lights, and a lone protestor stumbling through shadows.

Night and Fog in Japan is a demanding viewing experience, but a rewarding one. We don’t sink comfortably into the flow of the story but instead are constantly thrown out of it, forced to shift our conception of what has happened to these people as more facets of their past are revealed. Oshima doesn’t want us to “like” his characters, but to understand them, and to see how contemporary social history plays itself out through their lives. Though some first-time viewers might be put off by Oshima’s obsessively detailed recreation of decades-old Japanese political infighting, ultimately the film works as a portrait of any movement of true believers that falls apart when truth and belief prove hard to hold onto (the critic Paul Coates calls Night and Fog a “prescient post-mortem of 1968 before the fact”).

A few days after the film was released, Shochiku withdrew it from circulation, claiming concerns about social stability following the assassination of Inejiro Asanuma, chairman of the Japan Socialist Party. Oshima was furious, denouncing the studio in the press for its cowardice, and even (like a character in his film) making a grandstanding anti-Shochiku speech to the guests at his own wedding to actress Akiko Toyama. He left Shochiku to form his own independent production company, Sozoshia (Creation). Thus ended his career as a studio filmmaker, to the relief of both studio and filmmaker.

The 1960s and Early 1970s
The next few years saw Oshima collaborating with novelist Kenzaburo Oe on a film about a Japanese village holding an American POW during the war (The Catch, 1961), making a biopic about an eighteenth-century revolutionary (Amakusa Shiro Tokisada, 1962) and travelling extensively in Korea and Vietnam. His Asian travels led to a series of documentaries for Japanese television. Then, in 1965, he returned to features with Pleasures of the Flesh, about a criminal who pursues a life of dissolve sensualism. Pleasures of the Flesh signalled the beginning of a remarkably fertile period: over the next eight years, Oshima would turn out a dozen features.

Many of these films are difficult to find today. But at least half of them made their mark on international contemporary cinema; they form the better part of Oshima’s filmmaking legacy. The first of these was Violence at Noon (1966). The story was inspired by a real-life serial rapist and killer who terrorised the nation in the late 1950s. Oshima and his screenwriter Tsutomu Tamura (working from a novel by Taijun Takeda) make their criminal, Eisuke (Kei Sato), a fugitive from a collective farm that has failed a year before, adding a social and political backdrop to this noir tale of private perversions.

Oshima was by now reinventing his style for each new work. No two films from this prolific period look alike: the director was living up to his credo of “constant self-negation and transformation.” Violence at Noon, in stark contrast to the long sequence shots of Night and Fog in Japan, consists of some 2,000 shots. Scenes seem to break apart and re-form before our eyes, as Oshima jump-cuts from angle to angle with unsettling speed, fracturing space like a cubist. The fragmented style brings us into the criminal’s consciousness, a jumble of fetishised memories and uncontrollable urges. By the end, Eisuke has reached in importance next to the two women whose lives he has haunted: his schoolteacher wife and his first rape victim. Eisuke is brought to justice, but the women find no comfort, no escape, no happy ending (significantly, Eisuke’s capture and execution are never shown but reported from offscreen, denying us any sense of relief).
Oshima’s obsession with crime and criminals runs deep, from the boy with the homing-pigeon scam to the killers who populate his later work. (Audie Bock: “[I]n every Oshima film at least one murder, rape, theft or blackmail incident can be found, and often the whole of the film is constructed around the chronic repetition of such a crime”). In his writings and interviews, Oshima sometimes equates the outlaw with the artist: both live lives of risk and uncertainty, closer to the edge than those who conform to social norms. This is not an original or profound observation, and Oshima can sound naïve, vain, or foolish when expounding on the theme in print:

In the first place, to make films is a criminal act in this world.

Doesn’t this also explain why it is difficult to establish a movement in the film world? It is easy for one person to commit a crime, but it is really difficult to commit a crime in a group. People who try to commit a crime in a group are inevitably shot down.

And:

Rather than being our own, the labors of our days are merely a series of things we are made to do by those outside ourselves. We live lives that are even more evanescent than the bubbles floating along the stream – and even more meaningless.

The reason we show an abnormal interest in crime and scandal is that a life, which usually drifts by, thereby appears caught up by a pole in the river’s flow. A drowning man grasps at straws. For we find, in crime and scandal, a tiny trace that reminds us of human dignity. .

The path to human dignity lies through the act of one who, having been previously involved in a crime or scandal, chooses that option for himself once again, in the very midst of the flow.

But in his films, Oshima’s identification with the outlaw becomes considerably more interesting than these passages might indicate. One complicating factor is how Oshima’s empathy with the criminal colors his identity as a political activist. Like the outlaw and the artist, the would-be reformer takes a rebel stance against normative behaviour. In almost every film, Oshima’s main character or characters, whether artist, criminal or activist, makes the conscious choice to live in defiance of the law. Bock reports that the director had recurring nightmares of sexual fantasy.

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Oppressed minority. Finally, R accepts that he is R, and submits to hanging a second time. A voice-over thanks us for watching. Character and narrative continuity, spatial and temporal logic: all are systematically undermined in *Death by Hanging* as Oshima scrambles together political polemic, Brechtian alienation effects, Kafkaesque parable and a surrealist assault on perception worthy of Buñuel. (And as in much Buñuel, the comedy is magnified by the solemnity with which the characters go about their business, seeming all the crazier for their attempts to behave “rationally” in a mad world.)

Oshima continued this extraordinary creative streak with his next four films: *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1968), *Boy* (1969), *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1970) and *The Ceremony* (1971). *Shinjuku Thief* juxtaposes the story of a sexually frustrated young couple (aggressive female; passive/masochistic male who can only find sexual release by stealing and being caught) with the account of an avant-garde theatre production and documentary footage of student riots: the links between crime, art and political protest are made explicit, as the couple seeks personal liberation in acts of social rebellion. The acclaimed *Boy* was, like *Violence at Noon* and *Death by Hanging*, inspired by a true story. A man and a woman travelled around Japan with their young son, whom they had trained to run in front of moving cars and pretend to be struck and badly injured. The parents would then demand money from the frightened drivers. Oshima returns to a more straightforward narrative style with *Boy*; the film, one of his most affecting due to its sympathetic depiction of the title character, is a savage vision of Japanese family values (patriarchy, filial obedience) grown poisonous at the root.

By 1970, the U.S.-Japan security pact was once again up for renewal, and a younger generation of student activists (further energised by their opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam) took to the streets in protest. But history repeated itself: despite massive demonstrations, several of which ended in violence, the treaty was renewed. There was, however, one thing that made the youth protests of ’69–70 different from those of ’59–60: cinema. The international New Wave had happened. Godard and Oshima, et al., had happened. It was the period of *cinema vérité*, the *camera stylo*, and “truth 24 times a second,” of a new generation that saw filmmaking as a weapon in the battle for social change. *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* focuses on one such group of young men and women. In the opening scene, Motoki (Kazuo Goto) is seen through the lens of a camera carried by one of his friends. The cameraman runs away – we see only a rushed blur of street movement – with Motoki in pursuit. Motoki’s friend commits suicide by jumping off a roof. Motoki grabs the camera from the police, but they catch him and take custody of the dead man’s footage.

Motoki and his peers, a collective of young Marxist filmmakers, recover the footage and screen it. The dead man was supposed to be filming political demonstrations, but his camera captured only dull street scenes: uninflected, unexciting quotidian reality. In a bravura sequence, Oshima shows us the footage as we hear voice-over debates among the spectators about what they’re watching: “But what was he thinking when he shot this?” “Watching this is a waste of time. He was bankrupt, politically and artistically.” “Maybe he figured that by linking meaningless shots he could make meaning by paradox.” In our heads we join Motoki and his friends in the debate, searching for meaning and coherence in the seemingly random footage. Soon Motoki grows obsessed with the dead man, initiating a romance with Yasuko (Emiko Iwasaki), the deceased’s girlfriend, and eventually restaging and reshooting the scenes we watched earlier. As in *Death by Hanging*, identity is a fluid process and not a fixed fact: we, and Motoki himself, aren’t sure if Motoki is on the trail of a mystery with a plausible solution, or if he’s losing his mind in attempting to take the dead man’s place. In the end, Motoki becomes the victim of his obsession: he takes a camera up onto the same roof seen at the start of the film, and jumps to his death. A hand reaches into the frame and steals Motoki’s camera, just as Motoki himself had earlier grabbed the camera from the cops. The end. We realise: *Motoki himself was the dead man*, and the story we just watched has formed a Möbius loop of repetition compulsion. Motoki’s despair at his own ineffectiveness as a filmmaker-revolutionary, evident in scene after scene, is shown to be the same despair that led his “friend” to take his own life in the beginning. Noël Burch writes that *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* ties together a number of Oshima’s concerns:

...the contradictions within the radical movement, Japan’s multiply divided self, and the dilemma of Oshima himself, unable to establish a dialectical relationship between his art and his politics…. [An ambitious attempt to develop a dialectical narrative form [that considers] the mechanisms of the unconscious in relation to the contradictions of political filmmaking.

Next came *The Ceremony*, a multigenerational family saga in the mode of *The Godfather* 1 and 2 (Francis Coppola, 1972/74) and *City of Sadness* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989). Like Coppola and Hou’s films, Oshima’s covers several decades, but while theirs are sprawling, expansive (if elegiac) epics, his traces another claustrophobic closed circle of failure and frustration. The central character is Masuo (Kenzo Kawarazaki), a high-school baseball coach in his late youth. As the film begins Masuo is on the way to visit one of his three cousins. The cousins belong to the Sakurada clan, a well-to-do family presided over by Masuo’s grandfather Kazuomi (Kei Sato, the killer in *Violence at Noon*). A series of flashbacks spanning the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s show the family members gathering at various ceremonies: weddings, anniversaries, funerals.

*The Ceremony* pulls together themes and devices from several of Oshima’s previous films into a masterful summation. As in *Night and Fog in Japan*, the flashbacks qualify and condition our understanding of the present: the family, for all its outward prosperity, is rotting from the inside out, and from the top down. Kazuomi is a fearsome patriarch whose cruelty and love of power have stunted the succeeding generations. Also like the earlier film, the traditional rituals of Japanese society (the wedding in *Night and Fog*, and nearly every flashback scene here) are shown to be shams, empty ceremonies masking broken spirits and wasted lives. Though much of the story is presented in a relatively (for Oshima) conventional way, there are frequent detours into the Brechtian anti-realism of *Death by Hanging*: in one extraordinary scene, Masuo’s arranged marriage to a woman he’s never met is about to be cancelled once the bride-to-be sends word that she will not be arriving, but Kazuomi insists the ceremony continue as planned. Bride or no bride, the forms of tradition must be obeyed, so the gathered guests watch as the humiliated Masuo stands at the altar alone, “marrying” nothing but air. And, as in so many Oshima films, the path to personal freedom is blocked by crippling psychic compulsions: *The Ceremony* ends with Masuo reliving a childhood memory, taking part in an imaginary baseball game with his absent cousins. Masuo’s escape into childish fantasy seems poor compensation for his ineffectiveness in the real world. The film suggests that modern Japan, like the Sakurada clan, is trapped between past and present. The older generation, authoritarian,
patriarchal, supporters of the nation’s imperialist and militarist traditions, continues to hold power over Masuo and his contemporaries, who have no new ideals or beliefs with which to resist the old order.

**The International Years**

After making one more film, the little-seen *Dear Summer Sister* (1972), Oshima’s career took a new turn. Though sex plays an important part in almost all his films, he had for years wanted to make a picture that took sexuality as its central concern. But he held back:

> I had resolved not to make that kind of film if there were no possibility of complete sexual expression. Sexual expression carried to its logical conclusion would result in the direct filming of sexual intercourse.

Now, censorship restrictions had been lifted in many countries, and French producer Anatole Dauman (a nouvelle vague veteran who produced films for Resnais, Godard and Marker) offered to back him in making an erotic — or pornographic — film. Oshima dissolved Sozosha, his production company, and set to work on a script inspired by the case of Sada Abe, a madwoman who in 1936 was found walking the streets of Tokyo holding the severed penis of her dead lover. *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) was financed with French and Japanese money, and shot in Japan with a Japanese cast and crew, then (to circumvent Japanese laws) the footage was sent to France to be processed and edited. Oshima followed up on Bertolucci’s earlier provocation *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), but went further: Realm caused an international sensation with its explicit depictions of fellatio, penetration and S&M. (Oshima’s film was banned in Japan for many years.) The two films also share a theme: the desire to shut one’s social being entirely out of one’s sexual life, to shed one’s everyday self in the sex act — to fuck your way to freedom. And both portray uninhibited eroticism as a road ending in death.

In *Realm*, Sada (Eiko Matsuda) is a former prostitute now working as a maid at an inn. The master of the house, Kichi (Tatsuya Fuji), exercises his privileges and takes her to bed. A great passion sparks in both of them. Kichi leaves home with Sada, and they travel the countryside staying in different inns, spending all their time in bed. In its early scenes, the film seems like a portrait of many a new love affair: the endless fascination of the other; lots of sex, sex talk, testing of sexual boundaries. But Sada and Kichi go further, leaving their “regular” lives behind. Apart from Sada’s two visits to an old sugar daddy to raise money for their food and lodging, she and Kichi keep to themselves, giving their entire existences over to sex. Their rooms grow increasingly filthy (and, humorously, even the geishas are scandalised by their nonstop sucking and rutting). Sada is insatiable: she demands ever greater pleasure, endless pleasure. Soon they escalate to S&M games, hitting and choking each other. She can’t stop, but Kichi begins to suffer. The bold, energetic seducer of the earlier scenes seems dried up, emptied; he lives only to fulfill Sada’s desires. In the end, with his blessing, she strangles him to death in a sex ritual and lovingly cuts his penis off his body.

Some accused Oshima of opportunism and commercialism in making *In the Realm of the Senses*, but in hindsight it looks like a necessary move from an artistic point of view as well. The utopian ideals of the ’60s had collapsed. Social revolution seemed an impossibility and Oshima no longer felt at home making films within the Japanese system. Where could the Oshima protagonist go, then, except turn inward? In *Realm*, the characters’ search for freedom has no political or social dimension; it is a purely selfish act. No rebellion against society is possible or desirable, only a shutting-out of society and an obsessive focus on one’s own pleasure (and pain). At one point, while Kichi is awaiting Sada’s return from a rendezvous with her sugar daddy, he wanders outside, where a regiment of the imperial Japanese army is marching off to war. A crowd of citizens stands by the road cheering them on. This is the film’s only acknowledgment of the world outside the lovers’ bedroom, the world where history is being made, armies are massing, nations falling and rising, great causes being lost and won… Kichi, uncaring, walks past the crowd and retreats to his room.

In 1978, Dauman and Oshima reunited for *Empire of Passion*. Like *Realm*, *Empire of Passion* starred Tatsuya Fuji, had a period setting (this time the 1890s), and centered on a doomed love affair. It was even titled *In the Realm of Passion* in some English-language releases. But the transgressive intensity of the earlier film was replaced by a sombre study of guilt and remorse. Toyoji (Fuji), a labourer in a provincial village, falls in love with Seki (Kazuko Yoshiyuki), the wife of a rickshaw driver, Gisaburo (Takahiyo Tamura). Toyoji and Seki kill her husband to prevent him from discovering their affair, but when Gisaburo’s ghost begins to haunt Seki, the lovers slowly fall apart. Despite some steamy sex (far less explicit than *In the Realm of the Senses*) and horror-shocks, the storytelling is mostly restrained, the mood mournful and tender. Oshima blends film noir (the early scenes in particular have the heat and tension of a James M. Cain thriller), ghost-story, and period-piece tropes to make this one of his most accessible and entertaining works. Overshadowed at the time of its release by its more sensationalistic predecessor, the film is due for rediscovery.

The two collaborations with Dauman inaugurate a shift — the central dividing line, in fact — in Oshima’s body of work. He becomes an international filmmaker, dependent on international co-production deals for financing, and (for his next two films after *Empire of Passion*) working with international casts and crews, in foreign languages. He seeks a larger, more global audience. In an essay titled “Perspectives on the Japanese Film,” Oshima explained the reasons for this change. With the internationalisation of the Japanese economy, foreign films — in mass terms, that meant largely American films — ate away at the domestic box-office share of Japanese films. Raising money became more difficult, with more filmmakers competing for fewer production and distribution opportunities.

**Films conceived in the multiracial United States can become global films just as they are. Their expansive investments in production are possible because of a firm belief in this fact.**

> I don’t work under these conditions.

**However, even if I can’t attract large audiences everywhere in**
the world, I can make films that are sure to attract audiences everywhere, even if they are small. Although the numbers in each country will be small, they will add up to a certain total worldwide. That is probably what makes it possible for me to make my next film. This is how I would like to make international films...

Oshima’s dilemma, and his proposed solution to it, are shared by filmmakers worldwide; he has “confirmed this in conversations with Wim Wenders, Bernardo Bertolucci, Paolo Taviani, Theo Angelopoulos, Jim Jarmusch, Mrinal Sen… Chen Kaige and Lee Jang ho” and others:

But why is this trend global? It is because the film worlds of their own countries are ghettos for these film people…. Not one country has been able to find a breakthrough point – which is to say that industrially the size of film audiences only decreases, while practically no films are made that broaden the artistic possibilities of the form.

Due to difficulties raising money, and a debilitating stroke in the 1990s, Oshima was far less prolific during this second, internationalist half of his career: eighteen features between 1959 and 1973, only five since 1976. (In the ’90s, he also completed two documentaries: Kyoto, My Mother’s Place [1991] for the BBC, and the Japanese episode of the British Film Institute’s The Century of Cinema series [1995].) Inevitably, this diminishment in productivity has given the later films the impression of an artist in search of a subject. Nevertheless, the five features from this period are impressive works. The radical formal experimentation of the ’60s and early ’70s mindfuck films is replaced by a more classical, easy-to-read style; the social inquiry and psychological complexity remain, but head into new territory.

Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence (1983) was adapted by Oshima and Paul Mayersberg from the novel The Seed and the Sower by Laurens Van der Post. (It was produced by Jeremy Thomas, who also worked with Roeg, Bertolucci, and Cronenberg; he later produced Oshima’s Taboo [1999].) Mr. Lawrence is set in a Japanese POW camp in Java during World War Two. The repressed, aristocratic Captain Yonoi (pop star Ryuichi Sakamoto, who also composed the score) runs the camp with the assistance of the earthy, rough-and-tumble Sergeant Hara (television comedian and future auteur Takeshi Kitano in his first dramatic role). POW John Lawrence (Tom Conti) is a British officer who has lived in Japan and is comfortable with the language and culture of his captors. The camp is thrown into chaos with the arrival of another British officer, the Afrikaner Jack Celliers (David Bowie). Celliers exerts a strong homoerotic pull on Yonoi, whose frustrated urges begin to eat away at his psyche. Yonoi’s men think Celliers is a devil sent to kill their captain’s spirit. In the name of maintaining order, the devil must be destroyed.

Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence is based on an English-language novel, and co-written by an Englishman. English actors get more screen time than the Japanese, and though the film is bilingual there’s more English than Japanese spoken on the soundtrack. We learn much about Lawrence and Celliers’ pasts, less about Yonoi and Hara’s. And yet the film is Oshima’s most thorough fictional treatment of the Japanese during World War Two, teetering between the high noon of their imperial ambitions and their imminent, ignominious defeat. Lawrence explains to Celliers: “They were an anxious people. They could do nothing individually. So they went mad en masse.” Oshima is working on an international scale for a global audience, but he uses the “foreign” point of view to take a fresh look at his own nation’s history.

His next film was in essence an entirely European venture, filmed in French and English. Max, Mon Amour (1986) was produced by Serge Silberman, co-written by Jean-Claude Carrière, and made in France with a French crew led by cinematographer Raoul Coutard. Silberman and Carrière were Buñuel’s partners during his late flourishing in France in the ’60s and ’70s, and much about Max resembles Buñuel’s work. An English couple residing in Paris, Margaret and Peter Jones (Charlotte Rampling and Anthony Higgins), have their lives thrown into disarray when Margaret falls in love and carries on an affair. The film is a light domestic farce satirising bourgeois manners – with the added twist that Margaret’s lover Max is a chimpanzee. The social satire fuses with the kinky-surrealist monkey business and yields some comic gems, as when Max joins a dinner party but ignores the food and drink to stroke, nibble, and kiss Margaret in full view of the guests (who are too polite to object), or when Peter grows crazed with jealousy wondering just what it is Max and Margaret actually do in bed. Along with the Buñuelian elements of the story, Oshima and Coutard also seem to have borrowed Buñuel’s late style: simple camera setups, unobtrusive editing, no flash and dazzle; the bizarre events onscreen are made more real to us by the director’s lack of interest in hyping them up with jazzy angles and cutting. Max, Mon Amour is minor Oshima – in so many ways it hardly seems like “an Oshima film” – but it’s a fun joke, enjoyably sustained over the film’s running time.

Oshima spent a few years trying and failing to raise money for Hollywood Zen, a biopic about the Japanese American movie star Sessue Hayakawa. He returned to Japan to make Taboo instead, but a stroke in 1996 derailed those plans. He recovered sufficient strength to direct the film a few years later, albeit from a wheelchair. Taboo, based on a novel by Ryotaro Shiba, is set in 1865, when the shogunate had taken control of the nation from the emperor. The Shinsengumi, a samurai militia serving the shogunate, is recruiting new members from the peasant class. One of the new inductees is Kano (Ryuhei Matsuda). Kano, a young man of feminine delicacy and mysterious motives, becomes the locus of homoerotic and homosexual desire among several members of the
militia. The group’s leaders, Commander Kondo (Yoichi Sai) and Captain Hijiketa (Takeshi Kitano), try to maintain order but the lust Kano inspires in the men leads to jealousy, dissension and betrayal.

Taboo seems, on the surface, to be Oshima’s least original film. It’s full of generic hand-me-downs: cherry blossoms, swordplay, dialogues about samurai honour and duty. It has the feeling of something we’ve seen before – except that at its heart it’s a study of gay desire. The samurai film is a venerable Japanese genre, and Oshima obeys its codes only to inject this unfamiliar element into its bloodstream – to blow up the tradition from within its gates. But the director is not interested in scoring easy points off the social prejudices of an earlier era (as Todd Haynes was in the accomplished but smug Far from Heaven [2002]): the warriors accept man-on-man love as a natural occurrence in military life. What links Taboo to Oshima’s earlier work is its depiction of the social order shaken by unstoppable human urges. (Taboo most obviously resembles Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence: a rigid military hierarchy crumbles into chaos with the arrival of a beautiful stranger.) Tellingly, it’s the lower-ranking men who openly express their desires. Kondo and Hijiketa, the leaders, smother their own passions in the name of duty. We absorb much of the story through Hijiketa’s eyes, and we hear some of his thoughts in voice-over, but Kitano might as well be acting with a mask on: he gives nothing away, until his banked emotions flare up in a sudden, startling release in the final scene. The mood of the film fits its meaning: the tone is stately, restrained, but the presence of Kano charges each scene with tension.

Oshima suffered a second, more serious stroke after completing Taboo; there may be no new films forthcoming. Though the social and political upheavals that inspired much of his work have now passed from the headlines to the history books, and his international reputation has declined since its peak in the 1970s, his best films remain a potent testament to radical cinema’s capacity to “revolutionise consciousness” – one viewer at a time.

*Oshima’s great contemporary Shohei Imamura once remarked, “I’m a country farmer; Nagisa Oshima is a samurai.”* The usual interpretation of this oft-quoted remark is that Imamura was humbly praising Oshima for his warrior spirit; Audie Bock reads Imamura’s statement as alluding specifically to the “moral rectitude” of the samurai class Oshima represents. But Maureen Turim argues that Imamura was one-upping Oshima: though both filmmakers are social critics who speak out in protest against the structures of power, Oshima the aristocrat speaks as a privileged insider, while Imamura (in fact, the middle-class son of a physician) speaks as a true man of the people, a peasant or “outcast (han),” inherently critical of Japanese official culture.” See Audie Bock, Japanese Film Directors (revised paperback edition), Tokyo and New York, Kodansha International Ltd., 1985, p. 329; Maureen Turim, The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1998, p. 7.

from http://www.leninimports.com/nagisa_oshima.html

Nagisa Oshima has been called the least inscrutable of Japanese directors. But as the leader and chief theoretician of the ‘New Wave’ movement, which started in Japan at the same time it did in France, he has also been thought both difficult and inaccessible. He is, however, a remarkable film-maker. Known widely in the West mainly through Ai No Corrida (1976, Empire of the Senses), a treatise on physical sex, made for a French producer, that rivaled Bernardo Bertolucci’s Ultimo Tango a Parigi (1972, Last tango in Paris) for notoriety. To some, it was a strange movie for so radical and socially conscious a director, but to him, Sada and her lover are not crazed libertines; they are drop-outs from society at a time (in the Thirties) when Japanese imperialism was imposing a puritanical ethos upon the nation. ‘Make love, not war’ was at least a subsidiary text in the film.

Cruel story of youth

Oshima was born on March 31, 1932 in Kyoto. His father, the descendant of a samurai, was an accomplished amateur painter and poet who died when the boy was six, leaving a library which included a large number of Marxist and socialist texts. These Oshima read in the solitude of a lonely childhood. And by the time he left high-school he was ready to become a fully-fledged student activist as well as embryo writer and dramatist. Studying law at Kyoto University, he led a student group that got into trouble with the authorities: when the Emperor visited the campus, the group held aloft placards imploring him not to allow himself to be deified because so many had died during the war in the name of his divinity.

When he graduated, he joined the Shochiku Film Company in 1954 as an assistant director, despite his reputation as a ‘red student’ and the fact that there were over 2,000 applicants for only five jobs. Five rather desultory years later, he was entrusted with his first films as director: Ai To Kibo No Machi (1959, A Town of Love and Hope) and Seishun Zankoku Monogatori (1960, Naked Youth), two of the teenage yakusa (gangster) genre then popular. In 1960 he also made Taiyo No Hakaba (The Sun’s Burial), a violent story about slum life in which a community of tramps, junkies and the unemployed sell their blood for food and clothing.

Each of these films contained obvious social comment as well as the kind of excitement required of a commercial director, but his fourth film, also made that year, lost him his job. Nihon No Yoru To Kiri (1960, Night and Fog in Japan) was an attack on both the traditional Left and the muddled activists of the student movement, calling for real action from a new radicalism. When a socialist leader was assassinated a few days after the films release, it was hastily withdrawn from circulation.

Oshima reacted by setting up his own production company and making Shiku (1961, The Catch), in which a black American airman is imprisoned and eventually killed by villagers who are unaware that World War II has finally ended. It was an angry rejection of traditional moral values, suggesting that Japan’s fierce nationalism and hatred of foreigners was responsible for the war. Only the village children are seen as a hopeful portent—in the last sequence a young boy moves away from the communal fire and
family of parasites, Oshima constructs an almost classical film as a pathetic yet boy can claim compensation. Eventually they are cornered, but the run in front of passing cars and pretend to be injured so that they couple who wander across narrative, a moving story, again based on actual events, about a course, as if Oshima was trying to find some way of appealing to a general worthlessness of his own life.

In Muri Shinju: Nikhon No Natsu (1967, Japanese Summer: Double Suicide) he again left realism behind with a story about a man who wants someone to kill him and a woman who wants a lover. The two meet, get involved, are mixed up in gang warfare and ultimately kill each other before the police can get them. Oshima’s pessimism at this time seemed to know no bounds.

His first film to be shown extensively in the West was Koshikei (1968, Death by Hanging), based on a true story of a young Korean in Japan who raped and killed two girls and was hanged years later after he had confessed reformed. In the film, the hanging fails and the hypocritical and mindless authorities force the Korean to go through a re-enactment of the crime before killing him. By now, Oshima’s films had become frankly revolutionary in both form and content, and were influenced as much by Jean-Luc Godard as those of many other radical directors of the day all over the world. And again, the West was to be startled by Shinjuku Dorobo Nikki (1969, Diary of a Shinjuku Thief), a fractured story full of life and vitality about the sex problems of a young student who steals books in Tokyo’s version of Soho.

Tokyo Senso Sengo Hiwa (1970, The Man who Left His Will on Film) developed from this anarchic superstructure, its protagonist being a young man who photographs student demonstrations in Tokyo, and tries to find within all his footage how a friend has disappeared. What he discovers, in fact, is that he himself has almost disappeared in the general worthlessness of his own life.

Empire of disillusion

But between these two films came a remarkable change of course, as if Oshima was trying to find some way of appealing to a wider audience. Shonen (1969, By) was a much more direct narrative, a moving story, again based on actual events, about a couple who wander across Japan, having trained their small son to run in front of passing cars and pretend to be injured so that they can claim compensation. Eventually they are cornered, but the boy—loyal to the last—cannot be made to confess. Using the child as a pathetic yet amazingly dignified emotional shuttlecock within a family of parasites, Oshima constructs an almost classical film which does not so much accuse the parents as blame a society that has produced such a perversion of the norm.

Gishiki (The Ceremony), made in 1971, was less obviously universal in appeal but perhaps Oshima’s finest demonstration of the film-making art. The chronicle of a wealthy provincial family from the end of World War II to the present, it is punctuated by the marriages and funerals at which the family is drawn together. Dominated by an authoritarian grandfather, the older members show themselves to be both militaristic and feudal in their outlook, much to the disillusion of the younger elements. The film, formal in structure and stunning to look at, yields riches even to western eyes trying to decipher its many layers of meaning. By contrast, Natsu No Imoto (1972, Dear summer Sister) is virtually impenetrable without knowing that Okinawa—where it is set—was once part of the Japanese empire and also Japan’s Ulster. Even then, the story of a Tokyo girl looking round the island for her long-lost brother and finding he is the tourist guide with whom she has had an affair, seems an allegory without a centre.

It scarcely prepared the world for Ai No Corrida, based on an incident during the Thirties when a Tokyo woman was found wandering the streets with her lover’s severed penis in her hand. He had literally died of love, allowing himself to be strangled and mutilated in a final ecstasy of pleasure. It is all superbly filmed—an illustration of French writer George Bataille’s thesis that equates the orgasm with la petite mort. But is the west was amazed and sometimes scandalized, in Japan the film was regarded as a blow for sexual equality, since, in their sexual encounters, the maidservants and the owner of the geisha house are shown as having become absolute equals, giving and taking what each one wants. The woman on whom the film was based, incidentally, has long been a heroine of the woman’s movement in Japan, and Oshima underlined why.

After passion

In 1978, Oshima made another film in France for the same producer, and the fact that it was called Ai No Borei (Empire of Passion) suggested to some that he was trying to repeat that box-office triumph. In fact, the film was a ghostly thriller in which an adulterer is hounded by the police after plotting with a woman to kill her husband. There were social but hardly political implications, suggesting that Oshima, the ‘activist samurai’, might be beginning to lose his way. Yet, over all, he is undoubtedly as significant and skilful a director as most of the great Japanese film-makers of the generation before him. If he only occasionally evinces the universality of a Kurosawa or Ichikawa, his concerns are different and less reliant on commercial appeal.
Oshima clearly sees Japan developing blindly, its old values corrupted and its new ones worthless. Once a politicized director he now says: “No matter what political system we live under, people at the bottom stay there.”

It is those people with whom he is most concerned, who await a revolution that never seems to come. In particular, the plight of the Japanese woman interests him greatly—for some time in the mid-Seventies he hosted a programme especially for them on Japanese television, with huge success.

Similar success greeted Oshima’s first truly international piece Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence (1983) a Japanese POW story, from a Laurens Van Der Post novella. The casting of pop giant David Bowie as one of the put-upon inmates may have helped. But there is no denying his directional skill in presenting the erotica of the androgynous—as well as his concern, not for one nation only, but for all races. With this viewpoint, Oshima’s subsequent films, Max mon amour (1988), Kyoto, My Mother’s Place (1991) and Gohatto (1999) have all been fine films.

**JUST THREE MORE IN THE SPRING 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXII:**

Apr 12 Stephen Frears **THE GRIFTERS** 1990
Apr 19 Jafar Panahi **DAYEREH/THE CIRCLE** 2000
Apr 26 Ridley Scott **BLADE RUNNER** 1982

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