

Rebel Within the System: Subversive Style in Four Films by Nagisa Oshima

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Nagisa Oshima is a rare figure in film history because he was able to maintain a high level of autonomy in his filmmaking even though he was making highly political, wildly iconoclastic, and technically daring films, all while still managing to make money for his studio. The most remarkable thing about Oshima's style is its fluidity throughout his career—it changed dramatically from film to film. As Japanese film scholar Donald Richie puts it “Each film looks rather different...critics who write about him have their job cut out for them. It's a problem.” This is exactly the problem I am confronting in this paper by looking at both the narrative content and cinematic style in four widely varied Oshima films, *Cruel Story of Youth*, *Burial of the Sun*, *Violence in the Afternoon*, and *Realm of the Senses*, breaking down their stylistic idiosyncrasies while also examining the inter-relationship of form and content in each. My argument is that Oshima was never, as has been frequently claimed, merely a sensational filmmaker who maintained his popularity through exploitative shock value, nor was he a director who varied his style willfully, merely trying to keep critics and audiences off-balance by playing with technique, but rather was an artist who carefully chose—and then brilliantly executed—a specific style for each of his films based on the dual demands of its narrative and political content.

Keywords: Nagisa Oshima, Japanese Film, Counter-Hegemonic Cinema, Film Studies

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Introduction

It is ever the fantasy of those who feel oppressed, downtrodden, and powerless to somehow steal control of the tools of power and turn them back against the oppressors—to defeat the ruling clique using the very means of hegemonic control they had wielded to maintain their position over the rest of society. In the years immediately following the American occupying forces relinquishing their control over the Japanese government and culture industries, one angry young man was able to do just that. The 22-year-old Oshima Nagisa quit law school, aced the Shochiku studios “entrance exam” and served a five-year apprenticeship, all the while seething at what he perceived as the dullness and conservatism of his studio’s films. He scoffed at the film journalist Tadao Sato for saying that the giant and successful Shochiku studio was a “Sleeping lion,” because to Oshima Shochiku was “a dead lion” (Oshima, 1992, p. 22). Eventually, Nagisa Oshima would make a string of movies which managed to be both politically and socially transgressive as well as formally challenging, simultaneously making money for his studio and transforming himself into a cultural icon.

Unlike the strict control of the Hollywood studio system of this time, Japanese directors are given almost complete creative autonomy, under the assumption they will behave as good “company men” and toe the line. Oshima’s first movie was a bleak melodrama about class-conflict. It was a commercial failure, but enough of a critical success that the studio felt compelled to give him a small budget for another film. This second feature, a dark, shocking, and unpleasant film about hedonistic teens, *Cruel Story of Youth*, was expected to be his last. However, to everyone’s amazement, it proved enormously popular with young film-goers. At the “height of political turmoil and massive protests against the renewal of the US–Japan Security Treaty, *Cruel Story* established Oshima as a leading figure in the generation of young filmmakers who rebelled against Japanese cinema’s status quo” (Yoshimoto, 2007, p.168), thus kicking off a half-century long career in which film after film would find radical new ways to fire-up the political sensibilities of the audience while simultaneously shaking the traditional rules of cinema down to their roots.

Just as Godard is seen as the intellectual leader of the French New Wave, Oshima was the motivating voice of the Japanese New Wave, and both directors share many ideas about what film should aspire to. Like Godard, Oshima was iconoclastic in his approaches and seemed equally dedicated to the notions of “filmic displeasure” contained in the Brechtian idea that “Realism doesn’t consist in reproducing reality, but in showing how things really are” (Brecht, qtd. in Monaco, 2007, p.321). As Noel Burch tells us, “a true subjectivism” is possible in film, and its criteria are “set forth by Oshima: refusal to appeal to the collective consciousness of the audience; refusal to echo the established forms in any way; [and] insistence upon establishing the subjective individuality of the author”(1979, p.321). Oshima had decided to break down and destroy cinema and then rebuild it based upon his own idealistic goals. To accomplish this, it is imperative that the director overthrow the belief that “the picture exists to tell a story’ and to ‘create a cinematic method whereby picture and editing themselves would be the very essence of cinema.’ And, of course, ‘works so conceived must reject ...traditional methods... naturalism, melodrama, etc.” (Oshima qtd. in Burch, p.327). In such ways, “Bazin’s ideal of objectivity and the *cahiers*’ elevation of sober, elegant *mis-en-scene* were confronted by a cinema of fragmentation, ambiguity, distanciation, and flagrant aesthetic effects” (Bordwell, 1997, p.87). In other words, from the very beginning Oshima had planned to make shocking, disruptive, political films that denied viewers the pleasures they had grown to expect from cinema.

This problem of style is what I want to grapple with in this paper, the bulk of which consists of an analysis of four of Oshima's films, three from the early stage of his career and one from the following decade, and take note of the startlingly different styles he employs in each to shock and jolt his audience as part of his rebellion against social stultification and passivity, the theme which makes up the greater part of his oeuvre, and thus demonstrate that his own stylistic attack on norms is far from empty reactionary iconoclasm, but is instead a creative choice through which he exploits various techniques—both radical and conservative—as demanded by thematic content rather than accepted industry practice.

Through an analysis of style in four of Oshima's films we will see how these various factors and philosophies play out in actual practice. The first three, *Cruel Story of Youth*, *Burial of the Sun*, and *Violence in the Afternoon* were made in the 1960s, and the intensifying of both the thematic and technical elements can be seen to progress in a linear, almost exponential, fashion. The last film we will examine, *Realm of the Senses*, was made in 1976, and although stylistically removed from his experimental cinema, continues on the same trajectory of radical filmmaking, breaking the accepted paradigms of accepted practice to force the audience to re-think social reality by being forced to “re-see” it on the screen.

1960: Oshima's Watershed Year

Oshima's second film, expected to be his last, is about a high school couple who operate a sexual extortion racket on businessman. Both die violently by the end of the film. Unlike Oshima's first film, *City of Love and Hope*, *Cruel Story of Youth* is shot in Cinemascope Technicolor, but remains fairly traditional, narratively, maintaining strict temporal linearity and coherent, readily apprehendable spatial relations. However, the film is unusual in that it eschews standard IMR editing and contains no reverse-field (shot/ reverse-shot) camera work. Instead, the camera simply pans or tilts to reveal the other speaker in a dialogue, or more commonly, contains them both in a two-shot. Frequently the characters will be at either end of the screen and we must shift our attention back and forth between them. The shots themselves are occasionally extremely long, although usually carefully choreographed both to flow smoothly and to hold our attention. However, the overall style is atypical, and can be disconcerting. As Yoshimoto explains:

The combination of the use of Cinemascope and a telephoto lens in cramped interior scenes isolates the characters physically from their surroundings. This claustrophobic feeling is further accentuated by the collapse of distance between foreground and background, the frequent absence of establishing shots, and Oshima's apparent lack of interest in constructing a coherent cinematic space or environment which would give a historical depth to fictional characters on screen. (2007, p.172)

These non-standard elements of *Cruel Story of Youth* are fairly conservative compared to those Oshima would later employ, but they still point towards his tendency to sacrifice accepted narrative practices for visceral feeling: “Many of these techniques, while ruining that perfectly realized technical film image viewers had come to expect of a polished theatrical release, instead heightened the emotional realism of the story” (Buehrer, 2017, p153). Even when narrative events are progressing in a fairly logical and understandable way, various formal, stylistic cinematic decisions are being made in *how* the events are shown that break with the habits of the era. These technical decisions are carefully chosen, not, as in typical “transparent” films styles, in an attempt to erase the presence of the filmmakers, but rather to bring form and content into closer harmony. As Tadao Sato explains the film's:

[S]tyle is closely related to its Theme of cruelty...and since almost everything is shot under a leaden sky, something red, like flowing blood, creates a striking impression when seen through a telescopic lens, burning sensually amid all the gray...Long shots conveying heavy oppressive images are interspersed with shots taken by a roving, hand-held camera, creating a jarring effect. Both these original, contrapuntal cinematic techniques brilliantly capture the tense relationship between a stagnant bottled-up social environment and a young couple who are beaten bloody while looking for an escape-hatch. (1982, p.216)

Cruel Story of Youth was a popular and critical success in Japan, and within a few weeks of its release Oshima was hard at work, again with limited budget and tight schedule, crash-filming his next movie (which would also be made and released in 1960), *The Burial of the Sun*. Where *Cruel Story*, structurally at least, is a fairly traditional melodrama with subversive elements, *The Burial of the Sun* has almost no traditional story elements at all, and while it is still temporally conservative, it is spatially very complex and takes the Bazinian notions of “editing within the frame” to almost unprecedented excess. Shot in an enormous Tokyo slum, the events in *Burial of the Sun* take place in a strange gray environment which is somehow both urban wasteland and trackless jungle, where “men bare their fangs and fight like wolves,” and “the story unfolds like a scroll painting of hell” (Sato, 1982, p.217).

Unlike what we saw in *Cruel Story of Youth*, the narration is disjointed and bounces around within this fragmented, constantly splintering and reforming society. The atmosphere tends to be cramped and busy but not frenetic or disorienting. The characters are usually framed in close or medium-shots with the camera often roaming, capturing the locals almost randomly as they go about their daily lives. The result is a messy, active picture screen with heads constantly being lopped off and bodies frequently disappearing off to the sides of the frame as they walk off-screen or the camera pans away from them. Most characters wear bright clothing that sets them off sharply and gaudily against the dully-hued backgrounds.

In outdoor shots, the action often occurs simultaneously in a number of planes. Often there is an extreme close-up at the far left or right of the frame, with great wells of semi-focused activity going on in the parts of the fore, mid, and/or background which are visible in the rest of the frame. For example, the back of a character’s head will fill the bottom left corner of the screen as he is talking to other people approaching or moving away from the camera in the distance.

Shots indoors are usually in claustrophobic spaces with many people lined up along the perimeter. As the camera cannot pull back to give establishing shots, a state of tension is maintained as we can never be sure what the various off-screen characters are doing. The camera will pan, tilt, and occasionally cut as it meanders throughout the space to reveal new human landscapes. In spite of all of the active and engaging characters and images, “The wide-screen framing maintains an aesthetic distance. Not only does no rapid editing excite the pacing, but the emphasis on composition becomes in itself a signifier...the imagery is visually lush without being romantic or participatory” (Turim, 1998, p.51).

If one graphed the artistic growth of Oshima in the year 1960 with change as the vertical axis and time as the horizontal, the line would begin at a 45-degree angle and then arc sharply upward. Oshima completed and released a third film in 1960, *Shadows and Fog in Japan*, considered a masterpiece not just of the Japanese New Wave but of world cinema. His

Bazinian exploration of the long take and political themes both hit a peak as he filmed a feature length socio-political study which has only 43 separate shots. Oshima's goal was to:

[T]ransform Japanese cinema into an intellectually powerful force comparable to the art, literature, and critical discourse that had had enormous influence on Japanese post-war public opinion...a self-consciously intellectual project, which rejected both studio productions as commodified entertainment and socially conscious films from independent production collectives as mere illustrations of leftist political ideas. (Yoshimoto, 2007, p.177)

To get permission for such an endeavor, Oshima lied to his studio about the leftist inflammatory content of the film, and when a seventeen-year-old boy assassinated the Socialist Party candidate soon after the picture's release (the one captured in the stunning photo in *Life Magazine* retrospectives), the studio promptly pulled the film from distribution. Oshima, just as promptly, quit the studio. It was an extremely bad time for the Japanese language box-office in general (it has never really improved), and in the uneven films Oshima made for various studios up through the mid-60s we can see him struggling in his role as an independent.

However, in 1966 Oshima returned to peak form with the release of *Violence at Noon*, a film even more radical than his previous films, but in stunningly different ways. If it is true that, as Oshima has said, "he chooses the style of his films according to their theme" (Buehrer, 2017, p.152), then extreme subject matter is likely to be combined with extreme style. Previously, Oshima had attempted to document the break-down of society through a variety of realism marked by long-takes with multiple planes of action within the screen, similar to the manner famously praised by Andre Bazin, but executed far less transparently. However, Oshima now sought to mimic social conflict and fragmentation through dialectical montage in the style of Sergei Eisenstein. Where *Night and Fog in Japan* has only forty-three edits, *Violence at Noon* contains 2000, putting the average shot speed very close to Eisenstein's *Potemkin*. The shots themselves often have the graphic, spatial, and size conflicts characteristic of Eisenstein's celebrated "collisions," and indeed, Noel Burch's description of the editing is reminiscent of Eisenstein's descriptions of his own technique.

'Straightforward' narrative has rarely been subjected to a more *excessive decoupage* than in this film. Almost no account is taken of orientational matching; eyeline position and direction are disregarded more often than not, so that every shot rings out like a pistol-shot, so to speak, all the more so as Oshima delights in juxtaposing very different shot sizes. (Burch, 1979, p.331)

Lest the viewer still manage to find traditional "pleasure" in the images, it is also filmed in black and white.

In this complex story of a serial rapist/murderer and two women who are tied to him (his wife and his most significant victim), the manipulation and plasticity of space itself becomes an important signifier. The story moves back and forth frequently between the lives of the two women with little or no regard to either geographical space or time; both women's stories are frequently told in un-cued flash-backs and flash-forwards. Whether in the past or the present, the editing intriguingly but often inexplicably jumps and dances in and out of the action, probing and exploring all aspects of the characters' space for, "in the modernist film 'decoupage articulations [will be] determining the 'scenario's' articulations as much as vice

versa” (Burch qtd. in Bordwell, 1997, p.90). We have no choice when watching but to surrender ourselves to the machinations of the film, and only in so doing does the story become legible, for we quickly realize that “Narrative causality is relegated to the status of one ‘voice’ in a polyphony that gives equal role to purely spatial manipulations” (Bordwell qtd. in Desser, 1988, p.17). Again, it would seem that we must break through the glossy surface of the typical film’s style through these other modes of representation to find a given situation’s “reality.” The style reminds us of Godard’s assertion that “a brilliantly directed film gives the impression of having been placed end-to-end, but a film brilliantly edited gives the impression of having suppressed all directions” (1972, p.40). And that is the sensation we have in this film. No up, down, right or left, forward or backward, before or after—and yet there is a story, and by watching we learn to follow it. With an average shot length of about 2.7 seconds, this is a film that requires total concentration and immersion to follow.

Regarding the story, there are two narrative trajectories played out simultaneously for each of the two female main characters. In one each reconstructs her relationship to the rapist, Eisuke, in order to come to terms with what he has become so that she can decide what action to take. Eventually the two women meet and agree to first help the police and then commit suicide. However, each woman also has a second narrative line, and these two are related and sometimes overlap. In these, a series of flashbacks acts as a kind of mystery story seeking to uncover the circumstances of Eisuke’s first act of rape which, as the lead detective on the case explains, holds the secret to why he is compelled to re-enact it. “Do they repeat the crime because they enjoy it?” Shino asks the detective. He responds, “What do you think?” to which, with strange conviction, she replies “I think they get tired of it, but it keeps them going.” In fact, she is the only one who can really understand Eisuke’s psychology because not only is she the most recent victim but, as we eventually learn, she was also the original one.

Filtered through the conflicted and tumultuous minds of the two women, the narration finds it difficult to trace its way back to the mystery’s key. We constantly approach it through flashes and brief scenes, but then are sucked back into the present as the women suppress both their own memories and each other’s. To add to the complexity, ghosts enter the scenes and talk to the protagonists, characters listen and respond to non-diegetic broadcasts, night turns to day and back again.

Donald Richie says that *Violence at Noon* has “a narrative so shattered that the audience is left with almost no ‘story’ at all”(1990, p.70). However, this is incorrect, for by the film’s end the story has been completely and clearly reconstructed. But more than that, the style has constructed complex portraits of the minds of three people, as well as what is intended as a snapshot of the mental health of Japanese society. Some of the supposed indicators of the post-modern condition are increased tempo, diffraction, fragmentation, and the proliferation of decontextualized images. With *Violence at Noon*, it could be argued that Oshima is trying to show us our future, and at one level his prediction seems to be coming true. Although the editing speed was disorienting and blindingly fast when the film was released, 2.7 seconds a shot is “Not unusual for a [Hollywood] action picture nowadays” (Bordwell, 2006).

Into New Realms

After *Violence at Noon*, Oshima’s style and reputation continued to morph and grow. With *Shinjuku Thief* and *Death By Hanging* (both 1968), it seemed that he had exhausted the directions he had mapped out in his explorations of the limits of cinema, and with the

scathing *Boy* (1969) perhaps Oshima agreed with many of his critics that he had chastised the degeneracy of Japan enough. Certainly, he seemed to have lost steam and his output fell sharply as he chose to spend more and more of his time on his popular television talk-shows, which continued sporadically nearly until his death in 2013.

In 1976, however, he accepted an offer from the French producer Anatole Dauman to finance the production of a film in which Oshima would have absolute free rein over content, including graphic sexual displays, leading to several firsts in Japanese film, in both financing and content.

In terms of the film industry, Oshima also saw the method of making *In the Realm* as ushering in a new system of filmmaking. By seeking foreign backing, importing film stock, shooting the film in Japan using Japanese actors and technicians and sending the undeveloped film abroad for processing and editing, Oshima...freed directors from the rigidities of the studio system and the constraints of censorship laws at one stroke. (Standish, 2007, p222)

For the final film in this paper, we will jump forward ten years, and briefly look at Oshima's most famous, and infamous, film; one which it was illegal to make or show in Japan due to its content. This movie is based on a true and well-known story, and in most ways is his most technically and narratively simple film, but also his most shocking and disturbing due to its content. Sex films had already become Japan's most popular and profitable genre, and were shown throughout the country, without legal difficulty. Japanese sex films had relatively strict rules on what could and could not be shown, unlike western pornography, which had almost no legal restrictions whatsoever, but did have strict generic conventions which Oshima's film would not adhere to—at all.

It turns out that mixing graphic sex with realism leads to a kind of film which would satisfy neither Japanese "pinku" erotic film fans, nor Western hard-core fans—for it would be one which shows not only actual intercourse, but also exhaustion, considerable flaccidity, and even impotence. When the male member is shown behind the scenes and out of costume, so to speak, it cuts a very unimpressive figure, suddenly seeming more pathetic or comical than radiating traditional phallic power and virility. Oshima does not shy from this in his portrayal; this is neither an extreme version of a typical Japanese erotic film, nor a western porno, but a dark and disturbing portrait of obsession without boundaries.

In filming *Realm of the Senses*, Oshima abandoned his trend of exploring technical innovations along with the widescreen format most of his films had been shot in. He would not need stylistic devices to be shocking, because the un-augmented images on the screen would be more radical, disturbing, and revolutionary than anything he could have done with technique alone. The editing approach to the material, far from being fragmented, remains unflinchingly focused on spectacle. If his previous experiments had been inspired by exhortations against stylistic beauty such as "whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has got to be given up" (Brecht, 1975, p.38), the material that he was now filming would make such concerns unnecessary. Although the spectacle early in *Realm of the Senses* could give pleasure, as the film progresses, tensions are slowly introduced which not only replace the pleasure with anxiety, but culminate in a scene which is perhaps the single most graphically un-pleasurable in the entire canon of cinema. Interestingly, this anxiety and un-pleasure would not be increased by non-traditional techniques, but *reduced* by anything other than "transparent" representation.

Ironically, Oshima created his most shocking movie by suppressing all of his enormous creative gifts.

Conclusion

Although Oshima would continue to make films—even daringly subversive ones like *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence* and *Taboo*—*In the Realm of the Senses* marks the end of his trajectory as an angry young man determined to politicize the national audience by challenging every conception of cinema they held while, simultaneously violating cherished cultural and social principles—not merely to grab headlines and be outrageous for his own aggrandizement, but to force Japanese society to confront its facile complacency and failure to meet its own liberal and intellectual promise.

Whatever Oshima's future reputation will be, it would be difficult to deny that he was stylistically one of the most fluid directors cinema has yet known, and like Carl Dreyer, Oshima was fearless in using extreme choices in form to complement his subject matter, exploring the themes he felt were most important to present to his audience and presenting them as forcefully as possible. Didactic and committed, his filmmaking was a constant battle against hegemonic influences and false consciousness, both within the stale and politically sterile modes of filmic production then popular, and complacent consumerism by post-occupation, industrial-capitalist Japan.

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