



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

In the Realm of the Senses

(Ai no corrida)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

A contemporary review

Perhaps it's the fact that so few of Oshima's films have been released here (twelve of the thirteen features made before 1969 have still to be seen in the West) which explains the reluctance of critics from other continents than his own to hazard any attempt at a synthesis of his work. Even though their reaction to his previous individual films has been, for the most part, laudatory, reviewers have maintained a certain respectful distance, as if dealing with a visiting foreign dignitary to whom they had not been properly introduced; and now the sudden onslaught of knowing familiarity with which they are greeting *In the Realm of the Senses* and his apparent shift from seemingly oblique historical references to seemingly explicit sexual material, while better for the box-office, is equally unhelpful.

For Oshima's films, despite their deceptive differences of idiom (naturalism in *Boy*, surrealism in *Death by Hanging*, formalism in *The Ceremony*), have a remarkable continuity of theme and tactic. And while his *Empire of the Senses* can stand unsupported by any feats of scholarship, it is considerably enriched when related to his previous attempts to elucidate the traditionally inscrutable. In a newspaper article in 1971, Oshima declared, 'I feel that unless we make clear the secret spirit of the Japanese, who hurry to live and hurry to die, Japan will soon be led to war again'; and from first to last, his films function as metaphors for a Japan whose spirit is represented as more at ease with death than with life, which spirit he closely identifies with that of imperialism. (All his films are, on one level, meditations on empire, experienced or remembered.)

Based, for the most part, as in the present case, on a real-life *fait divers*, they all deal with the extinguishing effect of this spirit on youthful (idealist) dreams: their heroes are society's proscribers, and the films build to a cathartic act of violence as the only possible resolution for irreconcilable tensions.

Withdrawing from an intolerable and intolerant society, his leading characters invariably walk an unsteady line between illusion and reality, sincerity and performance, finding in ritual and ceremony a convenient half-way house between them. These rituals, whether domestic or dynastic, provide Oshima's chamber-piece films with their form as well as their content, enabling him to develop the narrative through a variations-on-a-theme structure, while also developing to breaking point the tension between theme (prescribed behaviour) and variation (the characters' doomed attempts at self-expression), between forms and feelings. In every case, the distinguishing details of the individual plots, characters and passions are distanced; to quote from a precept of Brecht's *Short Organum*, 'portrayed as though they were simply illustrations of general principles valid for the place in question'.

Thus, while *In the Realm of the Senses* is the first Oshima film to break through the barriers of critical inhibitions, it can also be viewed as a coherent development of Oshima's recurring themes, strategies and obsessions as outlined in the crude, shorthand model above. The graphic explicitness of its

lovers’ couplings, still more the debate over whether their effect is erotic or chastening, is as much a red herring as the tantalisingly coded historical references of *The Ceremony*.

Although the film may be viewed as the choreography of an all-consuming passion (an approach encouraged by the symbiotic performances of its two principals), the dance of death in which the insatiable lovers wrestle their way towards the perfect consummation is not devoid of metaphoric value, and on more than one level. Not just the claustrophobic rooms (emphasised by low camera angles) but the couple’s bodies, too, become prisons in which their quest for freedom is doomed in advance. Sada and Kichi are doubly restricted, first by the society which outlaws their union, and then by their bodies – the limited means through which they endeavour to express their virtually boundless desire. Their constant love-making is less an imperative need (though it’s plainly that as well) than a rite through which they endeavour to express an ineffable emotion and a sense of one-ness which their human condition belies.

And although, in synopsis, the film may not sound much like a political movie, there is no reason, beyond our own inhibitions, why love-making should not provide a potent metaphor for the Japanese spirit. Oshima’s title is not idly chosen: the sensuality he depicts is effectively suppressed (or confined to a professional house) by that other Empire whose troops are seen mobilising in the streets in one of Kichi-zo’s rare moments out of doors. The fusing of roles and identities to which the lovers aspire (at different moments, each by a kind of erotic osmosis, ’becomes’ the other making love to a third party) is a subversive value in a hierarchical society. While the chorus of embarrassed chambermaids and geishas, besides breaking up any audience illusions of sharing in a privileged, private moment, also serve to bring home the fact that such an overriding passion is still, socially, out of place. Almost literally for most of the film, it is balanced on a knife edge. To object to the anatomical region on which the great axe falls is merest hypocrisy. By the final sequence, we are all implicated in the continuing social system which makes such love impossible. It is not Sada, but the censor in all of us who ultimately wields the knife.

Jan Dawson, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1978

**IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES
(AI NO CORRIDA/L’EMPIRE DES SENS)**

Director: Nagisa Oshima
Production Companies: Oshima Productions, Shibata Organisation, Argos-Films
Producer: Anatole Dauman
Production Manager: Koji Wakamatsu
Assistant Director: Yoichi Sai
Screenplay: Nagisa Oshima
Director of Photography: Hideo Ito
Lighting: Kenichi Okamoto
Stills Photography: Yukio Oymada
Editor: Keiichi Uraoka
Art Director: Jusho Toda
Set Decorators: Shigenori Shimoishizaka, Dai Arakawa
Costumes: Masahiro Kato
Make-up: Koji Takemura
Music: Minoru Miki
Sound Recording: Tetsuo Yasuda
Sound Mixer: Alex Pront
Sound Effects: Henri Humbert
Voiceover: Nagisa Oshima

Cast

Tatsuya Fuji (*Kichizo Ishida*)
Eiko Matsuda (*Sada Abe*)
Aoi Nakajima (*Toku, Kichizo’s wife*)
Meika Seri (*maid Matsuko*)
Taiji Tonoyama (*old beggar*)
Hiroko Fuji (*maid Tsune*)
Naomi Shiraishi (*Geisha Yaeji*)
Kyoko Okada (*Hangyoku*)
Kikuhei Matsunoya (*Hohkan*)
Yasuko Matsui (*manageress of inn*)
Kyoji Kokonoe (*Ohmiya*)
Kazue Tomiyama (*fat maid*)
Kanae Kobayashi (*Old Geisha Kikuryu*)
Akiko Koyama (*geisha*)

Japan/France 1976
101 mins

JAPAN 2021
100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

After Life (Wandafuru raifu)

Wed 1 Dec 18:10; Fri 10 Dec 20:40; Mon 13 Dec 20:40; Wed 29 Dec 14:20

In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)

Wed 1 Dec 20:50; Sat 11 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 18:20

Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no sôretsu)

Thu 2 Dec 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, Kyoto University); Tue 14 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 15:50

The Shifting Spaces of Modern Japanese Cinema

Thu 2 Dec 20:40

Woman of the Dunes (Suna no Onna)

Fri 3 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Espen Bale, BFI National Archive); Sat 18 Dec 17:30

Tokyo Drifter (Tôkyô nagaremono)

Fri 3 Dec 20:50; Thu 23 Dec 18:30

Black Rain (Kuroi ame)

Sat 4 Dec 17:50; Tue 28 Dec 18:15

Straits of Hunger (aka A Fugitive from the Past) (Kiga kaikyô)

Sun 5 Dec 16:30; Sat 18 Dec 14:30

Woman of the Lake (Onna no mizûmi)

Mon 6 Dec 18:00; Wed 15 Dec 20:50

Silence Has No Wings (Tobenai chinmoku)

Mon 6 Dec 20:55; Wed 15 Dec 18:00

The Long Darkness (Shinobugawa)

Wed 8 Dec 20:40; Sun 19 Dec 12:40

Pale Flower (Kawaita hana)

Thu 9 Dec 18:00; Sun 19 Dec 18:20

Death By Hanging (Kôshikei)

Fri 10 Dec 17:50; Fri 17 Dec 18:00

Muddy River (Doro no kawa)

Sun 12 Dec 11:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Thu 23 Dec 20:40

The Demon (Kichiku)

Sun 12 Dec 14:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Sun 19 Dec 16:00

The Man Who Stole the Sun (Taiyô wo nusunda otoko)

Sun 12 Dec 18:00; Thu 16 Dec 20:10

Tampopo

Mon 13 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King’s College London); Fri 17 Dec 20:45; Tue 28 Dec 15:10

Philosophical Screens: Tampopo

Mon 13 Dec 20:15 Blue Room

The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On (Yuki Yukite, Shingun)

Sat 18 Dec 11:40; Mon 27 Dec 18:20

Moving (Ohikkoshi)

Sat 18 Dec 20:35; Wed 29 Dec 20:30

Fire Festival (Himatsuri)

Mon 20 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 13:20

Suzaku (Moe No Suzaku)

Tue 21 Dec 17:45; Thu 30 Dec 21:00

Shall We Dance? (Shall we dansu?)

Tue 21 Dec 20:30; Thu 30 Dec 17:40

Love Letter

Wed 22 Dec 20:50; Tue 28 Dec 12:10

JAPAN 2021 AT THE BFI IMAX

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no Samurai)

Thu 9 Dec 13:30

Akira

Thu 9 Dec 18:00

Battle Royale (Batoru rowaiaru)

Thu 9 Dec 20:45

JAPAN 2021: ANOTHER GAZE

Naomi Kawase: Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth (Kya ka ra ba a) + Birth/Mother (Tarachime)

Wed 1 Dec 18:15; Wed 15 Dec 20:45

0.5mm (0.5 miri)

Sat 4 Dec 18:30; Mon 27 Dec 16:30

Dear Pyongyang

Sat 11 Dec 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by director Yang Yong-hi); Thu 23 Dec 18:10

Restoration Premiere: The Far Road (Toi ippon no michi) + intro

Tue 14 Dec 20:40 (+ intro); Tue 28 Dec 15:00

Experimenta presents: A selection of video and film works by experimental filmmaker Mako Idemitsu

Wed 15 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Another Gaze’s Daniella Shreir); Wed 29 Dec 20:40

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