



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Death by Hanging (Koshikei)

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

Nagisa Ôshima's most radical and brilliant film starts with an unsuccessful execution and proceeds into a stylised re-enactment of the crime that triggered the death sentence. Filming in a deliberately artificial, Brechtian style, Ôshima creates a film that is simultaneously angry, unnerving and bitterly humorous: a devastating critique of capital punishment and an assault on racism that still has the power to challenge and unsettle its viewers.

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A contemporary review

Ôshima's film opens with a bold challenge to the audience – 'Are you for or against the death penalty?' – then continues, after citing a recent poll which showed that 71% opposed abolition, by asking how many of us, how many of that 71%, have ever seen a death chamber or an execution. There follows a quiet, dispassionate tour of just such a chamber, and a representation of just what happens at an execution. But anyone who assumes that *Death by Hanging* is simply making a plea against capital punishment will soon get lost in its depths. For Ôshima's purpose lies elsewhere; not in arguing for abolition, not even in arguing that R is innocent, but in challenging the right of his judges to judge him. As with *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief*, his model is Genet; not so much, this time, the ceremonial masquerade of *The Balcony* or *The Blacks* as a means of expressing secret dreams and desires, but rather the ritual cleansing of guilts and hatreds of *The Screens*. The analogy is not merely striking but illuminating, since in Genet's play about the Algerian revolution the stage is empty of decor except for a number of blank paper screens on which the characters (the Algerians) draw their fantasies, their murders, their rapes, their hatreds, their fears, until these emotions live on the stage, pointing their own accusation. Fantasy and reality become indistinguishable; or rather, differently distinguishable depending upon whether one is an Algerian or a Colonist. In *Death by Hanging* the condemned man is a Korean, member of a race commonly held to be inferior by the native Japanese, and therefore as much a victim of racial discrimination as the Algerians in French Algeria. Like Genet's Algerians, he learns to distinguish his own reality from the fantasy he has been made to live by his oppressors; and as in *The Screens*, his affirmation of self takes place in an empty space – the execution chamber, whose blank walls enclose nothing but the noose – which will be filled by his imaginary realities (and those of his oppressors).

The mysterious Korean girl, conjured out of the air by the re-enactment of his supposed crimes, materialises both as an affirmation of his innocence and an accusation of their guilt. She does not exist, except in so far as, by exploring his crimes and the reasons why they are held to be crimes, R gradually begins to see his innocence, while his executioners begin to acknowledge that crime is among them. The one person who never does see her is the Prosecutor,

presiding impassively over the whole affair. Legally, in other words, R remains guilty and will die; morally, he is proved innocent and his purity lives on, preserved as in amber, in the magical shot which immediately precedes the final execution scene: R and the girl alone on the shimmering river, adrift on a raft, as the sun sets behind them. For three-quarters of its length, the film can be read as a brilliantly, insolently witty Brechtian parable; an alienation effect taking one away from the appalling realities of death by hanging, the better to make one understand the implications of those realities. Indeed the film is Brechtian throughout: in the chapter headings which baldly announce the point of the sequence to follow, robbing it of narrative suspense in order to crystallise its meaning; in the absurd re-enactments of R’s life and crimes by the prison officers, interpreting them for both him and the audience, which observe Brecht’s dictum (preface to *The Mother*) that the actor must ‘make himself observed standing between the spectator and the text’; and above all in the functional beauty of Oshima’s superbly geometrical, black-and-white compositions, which allow the texture and meaning of objects (the uniforms, the priest’s cassock, the noose, the knife, the bare walls in their various transformations) to emerge fully. But it is with the mystery of the Korean girl’s materialisation as a witness that the film takes its sudden leap into soaring metaphor to demonstrate the mutual combustion of crime and punishment (or rather, judge and criminal) in the human imagination.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1971

DEATH BY HANGING (KOSHIKEI)

Director: Nagisa Ôshima
Production Company: Sozo-sha
Producers: Masayuki Nakajima, Takuji Yamaguchi, Nagisa Ôshima
Assistant Director: Kiyoshi Ogasawara
Screenplay: Tsutomu Tamura, Mamoru Sasaki, Michinori Fukao, Nagisa Ôshima
Director of Photography: Yashuhiro Yoshioka
Editor: Sueko Shiraishi
Art Director: Jusbo Toda
Music: Hikaru Hayashi
Sound Recording: Hideo Nishizaki
Sound Effects: Akira Suzuki
Legal Consultant: Teruyoshi Mukae
Narrator: Nagisa Ôshima

Cast

Yu Do-yun (*R, the condemned man*)
Kei Sato (*prison chief*)
Fumio Watanabe (*education officer*)
Toshiro Ishido (*chaplain*)
Masao Adachi (*chief guard*)
Mutsuhiro Toura (*doctor*)
Hôsei Komatsu (*prosecutor*)
Masao Matsuda (*prosecutor’s secretary*)
Akiko Koyama (*Korean woman*)
Takashi Ueno, Shizuo Sato (*guards*)
Takao Usui, Daiji Ozeki, Masayuki Hoshi, Akiko Terajima, Keiko Sakurai, Yuki Osaka, Kurumi Suzuki

Japan 1968
118 mins

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