



Monstrous Transgression or Political Invasion? The cinema of Nagisa Ōshima

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The following essay analyzes a fundamental question in the history of the Japanese cinema: what is the reason behind the cinema of Japan undergoing a radical shift following World War II? Throughout the shift, it is evident that the classical formula of Japanese films that is characterized by its slowness and simplicity was quickly changing into the controversial Pink Films (Pinku eiga) and that the themes that appear throughout involve sexuality, masculinity, and violence. However, it is erroneous to reduce Pink Films to mere soft-core pornography because they also have varied cinematic values. The essay to follow will provide concrete evidence as to why this shift occurred. The term “invasion” regarding postwar Japan and its respective cinema is conceived in a broader sense. In specific, Japan is invaded by an imperialistic army while some Japanese filmmakers, such as Nagisa Oshima, who worked in the 60s, interpret “invasion” in a more extreme light: not only is Japan’s “body” being invaded, but it also tortured, raped, and murdered. The two concluding essay questions concern beyond just Oshima or even Japanese postwar cinema: what is the “political body” in cinema and why does the sexual transgressions of some filmmakers find it necessary to reference it? Moreover, how did Japanese postwar nationalism figure into this specific issue, and how is the “land” to be understood through transgressions?

Japanese Cinema: Quick Touch

To simply define Japanese cinema as one of the most influential film industries, one can compare it with American and European cinema: If Hollywood receives attention as the strongest in action, and if the European tradition gives high attention to developing characters, then Japanese cinema can be seen as a master in paying attention to tempo-spatial dimensions that enable cinema to represent action and characters simultaneously (Richie, 1971). From the start of Japanese cinema in June 1899 with a short documentary (Sharp, 2011) to the silent era and the usage of a character who narrates the storyline of movies called Beneshi (Akihiro et al., 2018), and then the emergence of legendary figures, most



importantly Kenji Mizuguchi and Yasujiro Ozu during the 1930s and 1940s, who significantly contributed to the development of *mise-en-scène* and long takes in cinema, an important pattern can be recognized. This pattern can explain how, historically, the themes and focused concepts in Japanese films shifted due to political struggles. In the 1930s, the Japanese state became significantly engaged in cinema, giving the government more authority to control and censor the film industry. The government dictated to major film studios (e.g., Toei, Shochiku, and Kadokawa) to produce propaganda films and documentary films called *bunka eiga*, which literally means movies about culture (Nornes, 2003). "Culture" here is a justifying word to guarantee that control and censorship can be rationalized. However, filmmakers found ways not only to make their own films but also to "implicitly" address political repressions induced by the state. The ability to aesthetically refer to censorship is one of the main reasons why filmmakers became interested in focusing on repetitive concepts, e.g., *geisha* and revenge (Mizuguchi's cinema), *Samurai* (Kurosawa's cinema), and family unity (Ozu's cinema), although some concepts within the 1930s and 1940s remained completely untouched, most notably Japanese eroticism or *Shunga*. It is only after the Second World War, particularly in the 1960s, that filmmakers dared to frankly represent eroticism in cinema. One of the main reasons for the increasing contribution of erotic movies to the film industry - not limited to Japan - was the appearance of television. Television in the late 1950s started competing with cinema to attract viewers. In response, Japanese film studios and filmmakers requested more freedom in terms of themes and narratives, particularly the possibility to depict erotic bodies and violence, although the depiction of eroticism in Japanese woodblock prints has a longer history dating back to the 13th century (Screech, T., 2000). Figure 1 depicts a Japanese soldier having sex with a Russian woman while being spied on during the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.



Figure 1: An imperialist soldier caught having sex with a Russian woman, 1905

The representation of naked bodies and sexual intercourse in 1960s Japanese Pink Films politicized the human body and introduced a new concept in those movies: invasion. What does "invasion" in this context mean? How can invading a sexual organ be similar to invading a city or country, assuming there is a form of equivalence between the body, city, and land? *Godzilla*, 1954, directed by Ishirō Honda, is a clear example of this claim (Figure 2).





Figure 2: Godzilla, 1954 directed by Honda Ishiro. Invading the city and the atomic trauma (Hiroshima)

Godzilla is undeniably one of most iconic cinematic monsters. The monster emerges from the post-World War II anxieties in Japanese society and tells the tale of an innocent creature, corrupted by radioactive exposure, in which transforms into a terrifying monster. This creature begins to invade cities and kill innocent people, highlighting the role of the trauma of invasion in the late 50s-60s cinema in Japan. The film's initial release includes audiences leaving theaters in tears. It is the first time since the occupation that the taboo surrounding the depiction of atomic bomb consequences and invasion was broken (Nenonen, 2004). Importantly, it wasn't until after the 1960s that the theme of monstrous invasions of cities makes a metaphor of invasions to the human body, depicted through rape and transgression. The subsequent chapters will look deeper into this theme relying on the works of Nagisa Oshima.

Occupation of Japan

The occupation occurred in 1945 by the United States supported by the British army, involving over 900,000 human forces (Dower, J.W., 1999). Although the Treaty of San Francisco in 1952 was expected to put an end to the occupation, the Security Treaty signed after San Francisco's treaty guaranteed a long-term presence of the American army in and around Japan, including land, air, and sea forces (Price, J., 2001). The presence of those soldiers and military officers changed the climate of the social context and cultural norms within Japanese society. Sex and violence increased to the extent that it affected the political economy in postwar Japan. With the presence of foreign white soldiers, the population of sex workers drastically increased, and organized crime syndicates, particularly the Yakuza (gokudō), gained more power (Hein, L., 2011). Representation of this juxtaposition between sexuality and brutality is one of the key concepts to comprehend postwar cinema, where the latter, without the former, can barely be recognized. Among postwar young filmmakers (e.g., Seijun Suzuki, Kan Mukai, Kihachi Okamoto, and Satoru Kobayashi), two figures play main roles: Beside Nagisa Ōshima, who is discussed in the current text, Shōhei



Imamura is a key filmmaker too. Imamura produced a series of movies that explicitly address the relationship between U.S. invasion, prostitution, and criminal gangs. Movies such as *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), *Unholy Desire* (1962), and *The Pornographers* (1966) are among the most important works of Imamura, which also center on this relationship.

Georges Bataille and The Idea of Transgression

Georges Bataille was a prolific French Marxist philosopher working on a wide range of subjects: eroticism, transgression, the notions of excess, inner experience, and sacrifice, all the concept mingled historically to his personal experiences. Bataille's philosophy defies conventional academic boundaries, making it difficult to categorize within traditional intellectual fields. The intent in this text is to solely focus on the notion of transgression in his philosophical shift from Marxist activist to an erotic novelist/theorist, so to understand Bataille's thoughts, see Kendall, S. (2007). Both transgression and eroticism have clear definitions in Bataille's thoughts. According to Bataille, "eroticism is the sexual activity of humans to the extent that it differs from the sexual activity of animals. Human sexual activity is not necessarily erotic, but it is whenever it is not rudimentary and purely animal" (Richardson, M., 2005). Transgression, also in Bataille's terminology, is not simply a transitional concept that tends to violate sexual taboos, but as Michel Foucault argues in his essay titled "A Preface to Transgression":

"transpires in and through the movement of philosophical discourse at the cost of the dissolution of the subject" (Carrette, J.R., 2013). Bataille was considerably influenced by his mentor, Lev Shestov. He reclaimed Shestov's ideas about aspects of our lives cut off by the primacy of reason. The centrality of logic is therefore rejected to prevent rationality from rendering the entirety of our experience. The rejection in Bataille's thoughts is not simply to replace the discourse of logic with a new discourse, but to transgress it. According to Bataille, there is an excessive entity that always leaks out of rationality and makes it incoherent. This excess, for Bataille, is the transgressive dimension of human imagination, occurring through incoherency (Mocatta, M., 2018). Transgression in this context means a permanent sacrifice of the dearest habits, tastes, inner attachments, political aspirations without even the assurance that the sacrifice will bring any logical compensation. As some commentators argue, the notion of Bataillean transgression is cross correlated with his political



disillusionment when the German occupation of France occurs and he gives up political activism in favor of being a thinker of anguish and transgression (Gordienko, A., 2012). This radical rupture leads to the development of a new philosophical radicality that has something to say about extreme states of human being: from horror and disillusionment to ecstasy, as Bataille quotes “what burst upon me ... was the fact that there two complete contrasts were identical- divine ecstasy and extreme horror” (Bataille, 1989). This aspect of inner experience that is mingled with transgression can be seen in the aimless erotic brutality of characters in Oshima’s cinema, where they lose their balance in the absurd, not in the tragic sense.

Nagisa Ōshima and Invasion

What Michel Foucault argues about the idea of inner experience in Bataille’s texts (Gordienko, A., 2012) can be extended to Nagisa Ōshima’s cinema, where both these philosophers and filmmakers develop an aesthetic that makes “the unlivable” a possible experience only if we exceed it in a transgressive way beyond the experience of everyday reality. This transgressive excess develops a certain form of intensity that supports the claim of the current text: in Oshima’s cinema, there is a tendency towards extreme states where sexual violence meets political disillusionment. The radicality of the cinematic style in Oshima’s works in the 1960s should be understood based on the historical context behind this meeting point. To investigate this meeting point, all the feature movies made by him are watched—from *A Town of Love and Hope* (1959) to *Taboo* (1999)—yet, as the focus of this text is on his 1960s cinema, three movies are chronologically selected: *The Sun's Burial* (1960), *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960), *Violence at Noon* (1966).

The Sun's Burial (1960)

This is a key movie in Oshima's cinema as it starkly rejects Japanese cultural norms both thematically and formally. It portrays the story of ruined youth during the era of foreign invasion, where young gangsters aimlessly wander in the war slums of Osaka and exploit marginalized people for blood and prostitution. The main character of the film is a woman named Hanoo. She navigates the slums with criminal and sexual purposes, manipulating and changing their fates while exploiting their hopes and bodies for money. She seduces enemies and develops an unreal intimacy with male bodies. The movie depicts multiple scenes of sexual



harassment, rape, and killing without justification. It also portrays characters with strong imperialistic dogma, lamenting the loss of the Japanese empire in a pretentious manner (Figure 3).

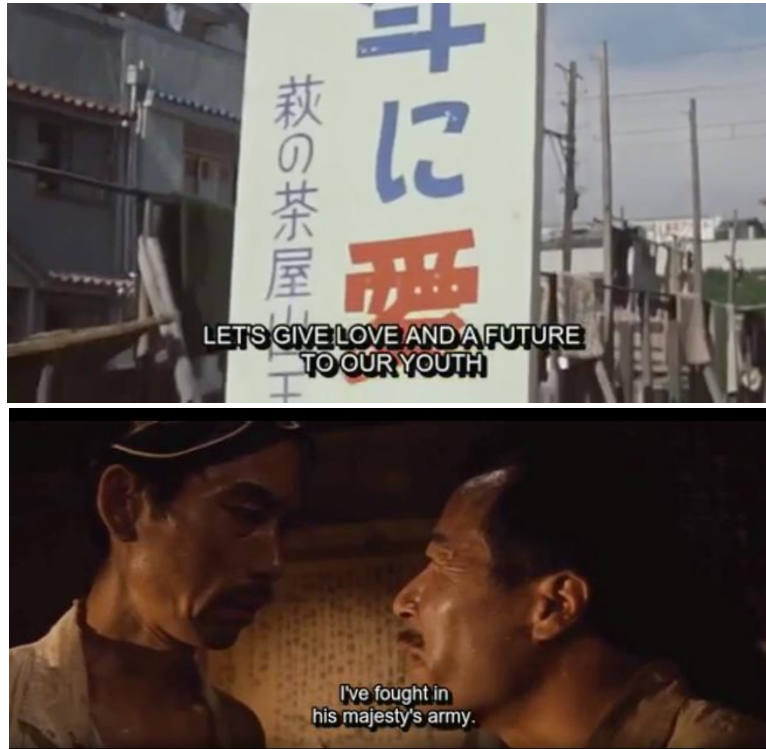


Figure 3: two pertinent shots from *The Sun's Burial* (1960)

Night and Fog in Japan (1960)

Echoing Alain Resnais' 1955 iconic documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), Oshima creates one of the most influential political Japanese films. The film tells the story of radical leftists who protest the signing of the security and cooperation treaty between the US and Japan. These young gang members reunite at the wedding of two comrades. As the story unfolds, the wedding scene turns into bitter recriminations about the political disillusionment of Japanese radical leftists, where the gang replicates a form of militarism with internal conflicts. Here, Oshima does not merely act as a filmmaker but as a disillusioned Japanese leftist (Talbot, D., 2022). This is evident as the film paradoxically rejects the gang's political aspirations as objects of desire. Indeed, the movie reflects the inner experiences of these disillusioned activists versus their political memories of lost aspirations. Throughout the film, there are multiple completely dark scenes where the focus is on the individuals rather than their surroundings (Figure 4). The spotlight thus plays a transitional role between scenes, intervening to highlight



what is suppressed: social relationships and collective disillusionments framed cinematically.



Figure 4.1 Spotlight on the characters



Figure 4.2 Spotlight on the characters

Violence at Noon (1966)

Violence at Noon is an essential movie in this text and in the cinema of Oshima because it explicitly shows how brutality and violence can lead the main character of the movie to an overwhelming feeling of joyful excitement (ecstasy in Bataille terms). By referring to the postwar cultural degeneration, Oshima represents criminality and social decay in a transgressive sense. It is the story of a man (Eisuke) and two women (Shino and Matsuko) who are locked to each other in a complex way, and until the end of the movie, there is no clue why all this is happening. A labyrinth with no exit unless Eisuke, as a brutal rapist and



psychopath, experiences transgression by sacrificing the lives of the two women. The film is full of close-up moments of rape, suicide, and violence, making it an erotically radical film for its time of release. A key scene occurs when the rapist happily sleeps with a corpse, making the scene frankly necrophiliac (Figure 5). After this film, Oshima decides to move towards a more unambiguous representation of eroticism and soft pornography, reminiscent of Bataille's erotic novels. Here, both cinema and literature recognize an opposition to the notion of transgression: one argues that no taboo cannot be transgressed, while the other posits that taboo also serves to prevent transgression. Both the thinker and the filmmaker navigate between two extremes: horror and ecstasy.



Figure 5: necrophiliac scene in the movie



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