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Weaponized Filmmaking in the Japanese New Wave

On April 28th, 1952, Japan regained its sovereignty. The United States' occupation had ended, and an independent future was possible. A decade later, Japan was "ready to sit down with the family of nations," revealing itself as a "new" Japan, culturally and economically reinvigorated (Richie). Yet of all the revitalized industries of postwar Japan, film lagged behind. Television was quickly usurping its dominance as a form of entertainment. If Japanese society was remaking itself, how could the nation's cinema follow suit? The Japanese film industry, perturbed by the persistent decline in movie ticket sales, looked globally for guidance. Shochiku Studios saw a particular potential in the conditions of film movements like the French New Wave, where films were cheaply made and appealed to youth, a demographic that Japan's film industry had failed to capture after the war. The financial promise of an expanded audience of moviegoers inspired the major film studio Shochiku to employ and support young filmmakers who could capture Japan's postwar youth culture. These filmmakers were united through the idea of a Japanese New Wave that both reflected a new Japanese prosperity and positioned Japan's film industry within a recognizable global context. Two of the Japanese New Wave's most prominent filmmakers, Nagisa Oshima and Masahiro Shinoda, were funded by Shochiku at the beginning of their careers. However, these filmmakers would not stay aligned with the studio for long. While Shochiku conceptualized Japanese New Wave films as simply following the French New Wave's example as to revitalize Japan's film industry, Japanese New Wave filmmakers

themselves were working with far more specificity and commitment to representing the sociopolitical realities of 1960s Japan. As author David Desser argues in *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to Japanese New Wave Cinema,* similarities between the French and Japanese film movements of the 1960s were only "superficial," and the identity of the Japanese New Wave is instead best understood through a contextualized historical and political framework; Desser defines the Japanese New Wave as including Japanese films produced after 1959 that "take an overtly political stance" through the weaponization of a "deliberately disjunctive form" that strays from the "filmic norms" of classical Japanese cinema (Desser 4). The incongruence between studio executives and artists' visions for the future of Japanese cinema would almost immediately be made clear through the release of Nagisa Oshima's *Night and Fog in Japan* in 1960. *Night and Fog in Japan* portrays the aftermath of the Anpo struggle, a series of protests against the US-Japan Security Treaty's allowance of the United States' military presence in Japan, which had occurred only a year before the film's release. Oshima's film proved too controversial for Shochiku in its politically current and explicitly anti-treaty subject matter, and the film was pulled from theaters mere days after its release. It was then that Oshima left Shochiku to pursue independent filmmaking, and made his own concept of Japanese New Wave cinema explicit; in an essay titled "In Protest Against the Massacre of *Night and Fog in Japan*," Oshima accuses Shochiku of political oppression, saying that in suppressing his film due to its political resonance, the studio reduces the New Wave to nonspecific images of sex and violence and erases films with any deeper messaging that reflects Japan's postwar political moment. He writes "my film is the weapon of the people's struggle" — a film for a people "demanding that the future of Japanese film be directly tied to their own future" (Oshima 57-58). To Japanese New Wave filmmakers, their films were not imitations of French films, generic products, or

methods of escape; they were weapons that examined Japan's present and past, and in doing so, determined its future. In Japanese New Wave filmmakers' examination of their society, recurring themes and ideologies emerged — notably the legacies of Japanese imperialism and the ways in which the changing roles of women and racial minorities in the 1960s were shaped by these legacies — and were often tackled through the subversion and abstraction of cinematic conventions set by the New Wave's mainstream predecessors.

After the controversy of *Night and Fog in Japan*, Nagisa Oshima continued to direct narratives situated firmly within postwar Japan's political landscape. His inclinations towards political filmmaking are particularly prevalent in the 1968 film *Death by Hanging*. The film adapts the case of Ri Chin'u, a Korean man living in Japan, executed for the rape and murder of two Japanese women. In *Death by Hanging*, a character referred to only as R is set to be executed, but when hanged, his body refuses to die. R, still alive but with no memory of his crimes, is an incomprehensible subject to the Japanese officials so used to closely following protocol and not questioning the ideologies that affirm their careers and superiority. State officials stage increasingly absurd interventions to remind R of his identity and convince him that he is guilty, including reenactments of R's childhood and his crimes — or, at least, reenactments of what the Japanese state imagines to have occurred. Oshima himself is uninterested in significantly examining R's actual crimes or determining his guilt; he is more interested in — through narrative and formal subversion along with surreal comedy — questioning the ideologies of nationhood, imperialism, and racial difference that the Japanese state relies on in dictating its entitlement to punish its subjects. In *Death by Hanging*, Oshima's positioning of films as weapons of struggle is invoked through the film's direct confrontation of its viewer. In the article "Nagisa Oshima's Essayistic Exploration of Japan's 'Korean Problem,'"

Dylan O'Connell examines *Death by Hanging* in terms of the "essay film," an experimental genre of film that "critically contends with an opinion framed within a public space" through "self-reflexivity [and] using its form to disrupt the illusion of film" (O'Connell 97). The opinion Oshima's film most frequently contends with, O'Connell argues, is that of the "Korean problem" in Japan, or the "animosity" between Japan and Korea closely tied to the enduring legacy of Japanese imperialism (O'Connell 96). The distance – or, as essayistic films conceive of it, the illusion — of cinema is continuously disregarded starting from the very first scene of *Death by Hanging.* The film begins with a pseudo-documentary about the death penalty narrated by Nagisa Oshima himself, who directly addresses the viewer in bluntly describing the process of state executions as the camera captures the interiors of a prison. Oshima implicates the spectator in the cyclical violence chronicled by the documentary, and "forcefully questions the values and suppositions that the film spectators and the characters in the witness box hold in regard to that ceremony" (Polan 37). Oshima's film posits that if cinema is an illusion, so is the state's narrative about its own processes, as the documentary is disrupted by R's survival. Oshima's disruption demonstrates "how a few stylistic traits, such as 'authoritative' narration, can all-too-easily make us watch as a documentary what is actually a fiction," making *Death by Hanging* a film that "upsets our faith in our standard classifications" (Polan 39). The confrontation of Oshima's narrative structure leads Dana Polan to argue that "because *Death by Hanging* so immediately plays on the spectator's faith in certain generic codings (...) the spectator comes to the realization that knowing a film is a simple activity only when the film corresponds to dominant classifications or stereotypes" (Polan 38). In portraying the state's protocol as incapable of classifying R and the resilience of his body against execution, Oshima depicts the Japanese state as limited, unable to reach what Ogawa calls "the space outside Law"

(Ogawa 314). As Oshima's highly political and experimental concept of filmmaking reaches towards a space outside of the state's legal classifications, it envisions a space outside of cinema itself, and imbues the possibility of this space within the spectator.

Death by Hanging not only disrupts the illusion of cinema; it recreates it through the metatextual reenactments of R's life throughout the film. Japanese officials direct each other in play-acting as R, his Korean family, and his victims, and through this acting, Oshima effectively creates a film within a film. The officials' portrayal of Koreans is that of an "old, inferior race" predisposed to criminality, and when some officials pretend to be Korean, they are directed to use more "vulgar" language. R remains unmoved by these performances, not recognizing himself in the constructed character of R, much to the frustration of the other characters; it is the separation of R's crimes from their current historical context and their correlation with racist ideas of an ancient, inherent inferiority that drive the dissociation between R and his own self. By the end of the film, R has accepted his own identity, but claims he is "a different R than the R you've been thinking of" (Oshima 1:48:56–1:49:25). If the reenactments of R's life are so divorced from reality — he had no siblings, yet they appear when R acts out his childhood — then how real is the rest of the institution punishing him? "What is a nation?" R asks before his second execution, "Show me one. I do not want to be killed by an abstraction" (Oshima 1:51:54–1:52:53). The answers the state provides to questions of race are inane and abstract; Oshima's film frames the nation itself as equally abstracted. In *Death by Hanging*, Oshima argues that distorted representations of Koreans stemming from Japanese imperialism and subsequently enforced by Japanese media dissociate the Korean subject from their own life, and therefore, dissociate narrative cinema from the confines of reality. Once R is "proved to be a Korean," as a title card denotes, he is again executed. This time around, his body simply

disappears. Confined by R's noose is neither a living or dead person; it is simply absence, the end result of when a national narrative subsumes the reality it fails to represent.

With *Death by Hanging*, Nagisa Oshima interrogates the recurring concerns of postwar Japan by directly invoking a highly publicized and politicized crime in Japan's recent history, but this was not the only significant approach to history in the New Wave. Masahiro Shinoda's 1969 film *Double Suicide* interrogates questions presented by the political landscape of postwar Japanese society through the adaptation of a classic Japanese text. *Double Suicide* is an adaptation of Monzaemon Chikamatsu's *The Love Suicides at Amajima*, a bunraku — or, a traditional puppet play – that first premiered in 1721. *Double Suicide* follows Jihei, a paper merchant who, despite being married with children, is sexually obsessed with a courtesan named Koharu. While Jihei is constrained by his obligation to his family, Koharu is constrained by her obligation to her clients, and the two decide they can only be together through mutual suicide. *Double Suicide* is exemplary of the the conflict between the concepts of "giri" and "ninjō" — representing societal obligation and individual desire, respectively — in "the feudal society in which Chikamatsu lived" (McDonald 1). In Shinoda's choice of adapting a classical text embedded in Japanese artistic traditions, he transports "the disruptions of the New Wave to the past, the rich setting of so many *samurai* movies that presented Japan as ahistorical and culturally continuous" (Cavanaugh 208). If Oshima's filmmaking in *Death by Hanging* creates spaces for its characters outside of law and even reality, the experimental filmmaking of *Double Suicide* works to confine its characters within the world of theatricality. Like Oshima, Shinoda begins his film through the frame narrative of a pseudo-documentary, where "the strain of tensions between the boundedness of the puppet play—the confines of the genre—and the limitlessness of cinema are immediately apparent" (Cornyetz 112). In a behind-the-scenes

segment where Shinoda and his screenwriter, Taeko Tomioka, contemplate whether the cemetery setting of *Love Suicides at Amajima*'s climax is "stale," but eventually decide that it captures the "nothingness" and the "fetishism" of the "space on stage"; as they deliberate, the camera shows multiple traditional puppets being manipulated on stage (Shinoda 0:01:36-0:03:28). When the film's main narrative begins and these puppets become human actors, elements of the theater remain. The film's theatricality is most prominently represented by the inclusion of the kurogo, cloaked figures that would, in bunraku, move the puppets on stage (Desser 176). Throughout the film, the kurogo can be seen observing the characters, and oftentimes "go beyond their conventional roles by guiding the characters firmly through the scripted scenes" (Cornyetz 113). A sequence where Jihei's brother Magoemon rifles through Koharu's personal effects and finds a letter from Jihei's wife, Osan, is punctuated by the crossing of "temporal bounds (...) when the kurogo takes the letter from Magoemon and holds it up to the lens, which then freezes the image" (Cavanaugh 212).

One of *Double Suicide*'s most direct subversions of the distance between cinema and its spectator, the kurogo's manipulation of Koharu's letter, is then tied directly to the relationship between Koharu and Osan, which is both narratively and metatextually subversive. Osan's letter begs Koharu to trick Jihei into believing Koharu has betrayed him so he does not go through with the suicide; later, Osan agrees to help Jihei buy out Koharu's contract at the brothel so she will not harm herself. The jealousy that may be expected from a wife whose husband loves another woman is not found in Osan; instead, there is a strong identification between the two. Shinoda employs cinema's boundless and bent reality to represent this shared identification; one actress, Shima Iwashita, plays both Koharu and Osan. The lack of separation between Shinoda's visual representations of the film's female characters conceptualizes them as variations on the

same body, separated only by the variance in their sexual relationships to Jihei and the concepts of giri and ninjō that they represent to him; through this concept, Shinoda simultaneously reflects and critiques the "feminized, essentialized, and transhistorical cultural imaginary of Japanese arts and convention" and the "arbitrary splitting of women into separate constructs of wife/prostitute" (Cornyetz 118). Writing about *Double Suicide* for Criterion, feminist film theorist Claire Johnston remarks that Shinoda's film employs "purely allegorical conceptions of women" (Johnston). The utilization of female characters — particularly depictions of the various ways in which they are manipulated, constrained, and violated — as political allegory is yet another element that Shinoda's film shares with *Death by Hanging.* In a botched reenactment of R's crimes, one Japanese executioner accidentally strangles a schoolgirl while trying to demonstrate the perversity of R and Koreans in general; Oshima utilizes sexual violence as an example of Japanese subjects being just as capable of violence as they portray Koreans. Yet, this schoolgirl too does not die, and it is because she is R's sister, or she at least claims to be She is the only speaking female role in *Death by Hanging*, and her speech is often didactic, with political monologues aiming to remind R of his crimes' political dimension. She chronicles Japanese imperialism in Korea, and in doing so centers her womanhood — saying, "when the state is sad, we women are especially sad" (Oshima 1:17:45–1:18:10). If R's sister is a symbol of Korean subjugation, R's victims become symbols of Japanese oppression, and, despite Oshima's varying view of their culpability or victimization, all three women become objects of R's political and personal self-actualization. Political scientist Ferran De Vargas posits that the use of women as tools of male development in *Death by Hanging* is "an unconscious reflection of the Japanese New Left reality" as a "political space where, although female figures (...) were extolled in the collective imaginary, they were no more than mere symbols, while in practice, men dominated

the movement" (De Vargas 697). When it came to the role of women in their films, Japanese New Wave directors reflected the political moment of postwar Japan, for better or worse.

In his 1979 book *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, film theorist Noël Burch writes that "over the past fifteen years, Japan has produced the most eccentric cinema of revolt that the world has known," citing Nagisa Oshima's films in particular (Burch 331). While a perhaps too restrictive perspective on world cinema, Burch's statement nonetheless speaks to how politics of revolt defined the Japanese New Wave, with filmmakers conceptualizing their work as political weaponry that had the power to fundamentally change a country already in a state of transition in the aftermath of World War II. Japanese New Wave filmmakers recognized the boundaries placed around their work, their selves, and their nation, and questioned them all. Whether adapting stories ripped directly from Japanese newspaper headlines or traditional Japanese puppet plays, New Wave filmmakers like Nagisa Oshima and Masahiro Shinoda were continuously redefining and breaking apart the boundaries of cinema, and in doing so, the boundaries of postwar Japan itself.

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