
 FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review

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Joan Mellen (2004) *In the Realm of the Senses*

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A film that has garnered much controversy inside and outside of its own country of production, and ignited a wave of debate concerning the role of censorship and its relations to pornography in Japanese cinema, Oshima Nagisa's *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no corrida*, 1976) deserves a full length book study which can enumerate the various socio-cultural and aesthetic conditions underlying its production. Joan Mellen's study of the film takes an auteur-oriented approach by discussing it in the light of its progeny, its filmic analogues or precursors in international and Japanese cinemas of the 1960's, the auteur's biography and his rites of passage as a director. This is followed by a close study of the film itself and its subsequent reception over the decades in Japan and the Western world at large. At just less than eighty pages, as part of a collection of book studies on landmark films of world cinema, Joan Mellen's book is a worthwhile addition to the private collection of the Japanese cinema *aficionado* as well as the cultural critic's arsenal of academic books.

Insofar as our critical understanding of an "auteur" is derived from the assertion of the director-filmmaker's political-ideological engagement with the dominant cultural ideologies of his day, and his bid to subvert or critique them, Mellen reinforces this in her emphasis on the radical and revolutionary aspects of Oshima's filmmaking. The picture she paints of Oshima is one of an iconoclastic director, one who "defied the narrow strictures

of naturalism, taking the psychic temperature of the Japanese and dramatizing retrograde modes of thinking" (8), militating against the predominant cultural attitudes of "resignation, acquiescence in traditional, passive modes of being Japanese" which he had perceived in the cinematic art of Ozu, Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, and Naruse. These former auteurs are seen to be figures affirming the status quo through their art which had taken for granted a "sense of victimization" in Japanese culture and society (Mellen, 8). For Mellen, Oshima's appeal to modernisation in Japan post-1868 Meiji Restoration is thus to be found in his attraction to the young, who resist full integration into society, and are responsible for the creation of change.

Chapter divisions within the book are topical and thematic, rather than chronological. Chapter heading titles such as "Oshima Nagisa, Auteur," "Reverse Utopias," "Mise en Scène," "Crime, Morality and *In the Realm of the Senses*" and "Codas" divide the chapters into thematic sections which reveal Mellen's focus on Oshima's fascination with the sociological dimensions of his filmmaking, which must inherently destabilise the standards of social morality as determined by traditional Japanese society. The first chapter particularly devotes itself to a biographical study of Oshima's rites of passage as a director, beginning with his university days in Kyoto University, during which he is part of the student protest movements against the deification of the Japanese Emperor and the subsequent tragedy of deaths in the name of that quasi-divinity. This stage in Oshima's life is revealed to be a seminal phase of his development as a director, insofar as the active involvement he had in the student demonstrations effectively led to difficulties in finding a job after graduation, and a later decision to join a film company, "implying that his motivation had not originally been a passion to make movies" (11). Oshima's later move in joining Shochiku Ofuna, the company and home of the renowned director Ozu Yasujiro, in 1954 is another seminal phase in his life. Here he was exposed to the melodramatic tear-jerkers and "flavorless domestic dramas in which imbecilic men and women monotonously repeat exchanges of infinitely stagnant emotions" (11), Mellen points to his aspirations to create a shocking film style, one that would challenge the ease and self-restraint epitomised in cinematic maestros like Ozu and Kurosawa, whose films Oshima claimed to hate. Mellen illustrates this through a filmmaking trajectory in which Oshima moves from his directorial debut at Shochiku, *A Town of Love and Hope* (1959) to subsequent features for his own company Sozosha, after a debacle with Shochiku over his fourth film, *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960).

The second chapter, "Reverse Utopias" is the chapter which locates the film in the context of earlier films in Europe and America as well as in Japan itself. As cultural film criticism, it takes into consideration the phenomenon of "international" cinema, where directors across the globe respond similarly to current political events despite being unaware of each others' work. This chapter therefore crucially situates *In the Realm of the Senses* in a global context. Mellen locates the revolt of Oshima as an auteur against the predominant cultural ethos of Japanese society and its headlong rush into the Pacific War — including its imperatives towards imperial conquest — in his earlier films, *Violence at Noon* (1966) and *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1968). These two films exemplify the removal of a conventional sense of shame towards sexual acts and the reversal of traditional gender roles, via a masculine girl and an effeminate boy respectively. In these films Oshima affirms the revolutionary spirit of the demonstrations of 1968 and 1969 in his linking of sexual and political liberation. However, for Mellen, Oshima's film must not only be viewed in terms of Oshima's earlier works, but also in its continental analogues and predecessors, such as Luis Buñuel's *Belle du Jour* (1966), the Yugoslavian film, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (Dusan Makavejev, 1971), Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) and his *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). With their proliferating treatments of radical forms of sexuality (such as transvestitism, public sex, lesbianism, and male and female nudity), these films are seen to be profoundly liberating for bringing cinema out of its own "repression" (25), its own taboos as to what not to allow on-screen. Mellen finally draws the reader's attention to American director Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1972) and Japanese director Imamura Shohei's *History of Postwar Japan as Told by A Bar Hostess* (1970) and *The Insect Woman* (1963), which reveal sexual freedom as a "casualty" of the political repression of liberty (27). In comparing Oshima's film to these continental and earlier Japanese films, Mellen's aim is to reveal the intellectual-political ferment of ideas colouring the world at large, as demonstrated in its various counter-cultural reactions against the emergence of totalitarian political cultures such as Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and neo-feudal post-Meiji Japan.

As the longest part of the book, the third chapter, "Mise en Scène," is a close study of the film per se, taking it apart scene by scene, and shot by shot, and this is a vital part of the book which introduces the subject matter of the film with clear, succinct descriptions. At the very outset, Mellen delineates Oshima's style as a director, wherein he "alternates rhythmically between those high-angle shots that compel spectator distance and extreme

close-ups, drawing the eye towards images, from male genitals to female pubic hair, to the act of sexual penetration" (37). Oshima's style is defined as one which challenges the audience's attitudes, steeped in sexual taboos and inhibitions. She also argues that these formal techniques subvert any "pornographic response" (37). Considering that *In the Realm of the Senses* has often been viewed as "pornographic" in its character, leading to its censorship abroad and in Japan, and was even described as such by its director, Mellen's argument underlines her belief that Oshima is a director who seeks to breach limits in filmmaking conventions.

The inclusion of explicit black-and-white stills from the film itself may very well be another form of taboo-breaking by exhibiting images commonly associated with pornographic and the offensive within the scope of a book of film criticism.

The last two chapters, "Crime, Morality and *In the Realm of the Senses*" and "Codas" are brief and their focus turns respectively to the subsequent reception of the film and its parallels with Tanaka Noboru's *The True Story of Abe Sada* (1975) and Oshima's later films. Mellen highlights the comparative ease with which the film was screened in its entirety in France, at the Cannes Directors' Fortnight in 1976, and in Germany, as opposed to the constant airbrushing or censoring of virtually one-third of the film in Japan. Oshima himself was embroiled in a legal squabble about the film's classification as "obscene" from 1978 till 1982.

Mellen also highlights the subsequent international recognition Oshima garnered with *In the Realm of Passion* (1978), which was awarded a Silver Palm at Cannes, *Max, mon amour* (1986) and *Gohatto* (1999). *Max, mon amour* particularly parodies the traditional *jidai-geki* (samurai film) and Mellen explains the repression — sexual and political — undercutting the male-bonding warrior culture common to neo-feudal Japan, and its tragic consequences of "social chaos and barbarism" (83). The discussion of *Gohatto* is scant by contrast, and this film might have deserved a more extensive treatment.

Mellen's book constitutes a useful study of Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* and the legacy that Oshima has established as a director. The auteur approach undertaken by Mellen is traditional in comparison with the various theoretical and philosophical approaches abounding in film studies, but no less useful as a means of understanding Oshima's cinema in its socio-cultural context, but also outside of it in line with its international appeal. It will undoubtedly appeal to fans of Japanese cult cinema and

serious critics of Nagisa Oshima alike, and spark off further debates concerning *The Realm of the Senses* itself.