

THEME 12 : ESTHETIQUE ET GEOPOLITIQUE/AESTHETICS AND GEOPOLITICS

ARCHIVE PICTURES AND POLITICAL CONTEXT
IN THE JAPANESE NEW WAVE

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La dénommée nouvelle vague Japonaise, comme la nouvelle vague Française et d'autres « cinémas nationaux », a contribué à exercer le renouvellement du langage cinématographique dans les années soixante et soixante-dix. Cependant, le cas japonais est spécialement intéressant parce qu'il sera parfois simultané à ses homologues européens et parfois pionner dans le développement de pratiques avant-gardistes.

L'une des techniques à la fois provocatrice et inquiétante est précisément l'utilisation d'images d'archive dans ces films de fiction. Images sur les manifestations étudiantes prises par des réalisateurs politiquement engagés avec la Nouvelle Gauche Japonaise.

Ce texte essaiera de déchiffrer la mystérieuse fonction de ces images liant au le contexte politique. La tâche se révèle difficile puisque ces pièces cinématographiques apparaissent dans le film sans être intégrées, en apparence au moins, au reste de la structure narrative.

For a long time, there was a generalised idea in the West that Japanese cinema was placed in its legendary past, linked to its traditional culture and isolated from any context. However, it was the consequence of a deliberate policy of the Japanese studios aimed at exporting an *exotic image* of Japan making them successful at the Berlin, Cannes and Venice film festivals, where this cinema became known in the West during the fifties.

Nevertheless, the great masters Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi and Akira Kurosawa eclipsed a young generation of filmmakers which appeared in Japan bringing fresh air into film production and offering a new concept of cinema itself. It was the so-called Japanese *nuberu bagu* - from the French term *nouvelle vague*. These directors re-defined cinematographic language, experimenting with new strategies to reach avant-gardist aesthetics. One was the inclusion of newsreel images in feature films. These filmmakers would deal with contemporary events happening in the explosive moment of the sixties. For the first time, the political and historical context would be explicitly introduced in the film discourse as a formal resource.

The decade began with the demonstrations of the *April Revolution* of South Korea in 1960. The protests of union workers and student groups would end up overthrowing the autocratic *First Republic of South Korea*, under the authoritarian president Syngman Rhee, anti-communist strongman, who led the country into the Korean War and oversaw several massacres against opponents during his rule.

Only two months later, Nagisa Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth* (*Seishun zankoku monogatari*), the first film considered New Wave by the Japanese specialised press,

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was released. The scenes are interspersed with newsreel images from the struggles that had occurred in Seoul and are followed by images of Tokyo's student demonstrations against the renewal of the United States-Japan Security Treaty (AMPO). During the same year, images of Ampo demonstrations also appeared in *Good for Nothing (Roku de nashi)*, by another young filmmaker of Shochiku studios, Yoshishige Yoshida. Therefore, inserting images of student struggles would wave the national flag for the early Japanese new wave.

The protests, organised by the *zengakuren*¹, reached the peak of their uprising in June 15th, just after the approval of the Treaty in the Lower House of the Japanese Parliament. A massive demonstration was held outside the Diet (Japanese Parliament) building, where thousands of students broke through the gates and became involved in a violent battle with the police. Kamba Michiko, the student leader at Tokyo University died as a consequence of the brutal police response. The real images of that tragic event can be seen in Shohei Imamura's documentary: *History of Postwar Japan as Told by a Bar Hostess (Nippon Sengoshi - Madamu onboro no Seikatsu, 1970)*. Through revolutionary storytelling, Imamura seeks to investigate an alternative interpretation of recent Japanese history through the eyes of a person belonging to the lowest level of society.

Yoshida and Oshima's films have documentary footage, as well, but unlike Imamura, they never have a documentary purpose. In actuality, these films are formal and thematic transgressions of the *taiyozoku* phenomenon² – a genre of youth cinema which originated in the mid-fifties from the adaptation of Shintaro Ishihara's novels for the big screen. Nevertheless, moving away from bourgeois view of Ishihara's youth, Yoshida and Oshima transform the wealthy youth into working class youngsters to depict the contradictions of poor youth living in the Japan of the *economic miracle*. The films were a harsh criticism against the *new democracy* installed after the U.S. Occupation.

These young filmmakers were committed to the *Japanese New Left*. Thus, the influence of politics in aesthetics can be seen through the claustrophobic spaces, freedom of filming, using hand-held camera, quick camera movements, and sudden changes from colour to black and white, which also represents their ideological stand, and their fight for political liberalisation.

However, as the films continue, we realize that the story is by no means related to the demonstration or its demands. The newsreel images lose any narrative function and nothing else is explained about these historical events. There is no cause-effect relation among the previous and following sequences. The struggles are just shown as a *collage d'images*.

Up until this point, if there is neither documentary intention nor narrative function, why were these archive pictures inserted? The question remains open for discussion but the presence of newsreel images within the story makes the *montage* a sort of visual *collage* that reminds me of William Burroughs' idea of the *collages narratif*, a concept used by the American *Beat Generation*; intellectuals and artists of postwar American counter-culture aimed at destroying semantic and syntactic norms, postulating that language is a virus one must get rid of. Both *narrative* and *visual*

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collage would share the motivation of language destruction in order to finish with the tyranny of the system.

Besides political motivations, what seems evident is the underlying intention of creating images from an authentic *shutaisei* (subjectivity), the Japanese equivalent to the western concept of *auteur*.

What we notice here is the willingness of the filmmakers to get involved in the quest for a new film style. This search goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of genre cinema as such, making inter-textual references and giving the cinema a new status as a medium between reality and fiction. And they never stop provoking and disturbing the audience, no matter whether they are familiar with the particular historical context or not. New Wave directors find themselves with a “permanent identity crisis, which does not mean a lack of control, but on the contrary, a willingness of going always further in the suitable stylistic means” (my translation).³

Their rejection of the former cinema implied also a response against the universal values of postwar humanists (Akira Kurosawa, Kinoshita Keisuke, Kon Ichikawa or Masaki Kobayashi): generosity, friendship, and other common values that were necessary to be projected after the war. However, New Wave directors claimed to sustain not an ambiguous but a tougher ideological stand.

After police pressed charges against demonstrating students, it became evident that state violence had been installed in the postwar society. The filmmakers could no longer believe in spreading some *brotherly love* during the period of American Occupation. They were witnesses of how power used violence, not as isolating and chance happening, but as its main means of action. It was quickly understood among intellectuals that violence was an element used to preserve the social order and support the *status quo*.

Recording hard doses of violent and sexual scenes became the strategy of choice to save the studios from bankruptcy, after the arrival of television in the late 50s. Sex and violence would become the engine of restructuring the film industry. As an interesting result, the sequences of protests against the Security Treaty were mixed with the erotic *pink genre*. Both political partisans and pornographers joined hands and challenged the establishment going beyond the boundaries of what was considered “obscene”.

Funeral Parade of Roses (*Bara no soretsu*, 1969) is the best example, in which Toshio Matsumoto introduces transvestism, sexual experimentation, homosexual and even incestuous relationships with the background of the Shinjuku struggles. The new state of affairs, with the appearance of independent filmmakers, made it possible that for the first time cinema became the spokesperson for alienated minorities.

Matsumoto uses the context of social bustle with the sexual provocations of scandalous scenes in order to create a space where taboos and moral values could be attacked. Thus, we can say that sex became a symbol of resistance and political revolution. *Funeral Parade of Roses* projects the revolutionary euphoria channelled through sexual acts of a group of transvestite youngsters who try to watch the news from vanishing images on a screen. Everything becomes change, revolution and

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metamorphosis but later brutal police repression generates frustration towards the protests, which disintegrate in the same way like the images of the riots seen on the television.

Even though the political message is usually rather ambiguous, Koji Wakamatsu is probably the director who most strongly linked politics and cinema, creating the background where characters find their *raison d'être*.

Wakamatsu was an independent director who worked far away from the film industry. He started making low-budget, soft-core pornographic films, *pink-eiga*, in the mid-sixties and soon became the director most worried about fusing sexual and revolutionary topics. Films like *Sex Jack* (*Seizoku*, 1970) consist of sexual acts of small groups of activists, while they are hidden from the police in claustrophobic dumps. Sex is used to free themselves from society's restrictions.

This sort of *sexual wave* was the vehicle for messages of any kind, although some questions remain unclear: did those sexual acts belong to a collective willingness or did they just depict their own individual subjectivity towards their historical present? Despite thematic differences among filmmakers, they all tried to grasp the nature of human problems that lie deep within the psyche but at the same time are influenced by the social environment. In the astounding case of Wakamatsu, Chris Desjardins comments:

*[His] poetic irony of juxtaposition combined with a surface detachment creates an atmosphere of clinical study gone gonzo, beyond all limits, establishing links with nether regions and tapping directly into the sexual libido and the subconscious –unconscious states of being beyond morality shaped in the womb, then molded by our families or lack thereof, and, by extrapolation, society-at-large.*⁴

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During the sixties, various filmmakers understood how human conflict stems from the psyche but at the same time is conditioned from external historical circumstances. This explains why Wakamatsu reaches from the primordial essence of the human being and bases many of his films on real events taken from newspaper headlines of that time period. For example: *Violated Angels* (*Okasareta Hakui*, 1967) is based on the murder of eight nursing students in the U.S. by Richard Speck; *Dark Story of a Japanese Rapist* (*Nihon Bōkō Ankokushi*, 1969) is based on a serial-rapist case in Japan after World War II and *Go, Go Second Time Virgin* (*Yuke yuke nidome no shojo*, 1969) influenced by the Tate-LaBianca murders in the U.S. by the Manson Sect, in which occurred that same year.

Nevertheless, the strong connection between real events with the feature films is mainly due to Wakamatsu's collaboration with his scriptwriter Masao Adachi, who scripted literally dozens of his most famous titles under the pseudonyms *Izuru Deguchi* or *De deguchi* 出出口, one of the most controversial figures ever to emerge from Japanese cinema. He was an activist of the extreme left whose collaboration with Wakamatsu has remained one of the best-kept secrets in Japanese cinematographic history for decades.

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In 1974 Adachi stopped making films and left Japan to join the *Japanese Red Army* in the Middle-East and fight for the Palestinian cause. This clandestine organization which was involved in a series of attacks during the 70s was dismantled after the *Asama-Sanso incident*, a ten days lodge kidnapping in 1970, in which two policemen lost their lives. The last day of police siege was the first marathon live broadcast in Japan, lasting ten hours and forty minutes. The remaining members founded the *Japanese Red Army* in Lebanon. In the recent film *The Red Army*, released in 2007, Wakamatsu deals with this incident.

The *Japanese Red Army* became famous worldwide after the Tel Aviv Lod airport terrorist attack on May 30, 1972, wherein three Japanese killed twenty-six people and injured eighty others. It is obvious the implication of Japanese terrorists was shocking for the Israeli police. Among the three, the only survivor of the attack was Kozo Okamoto, whose older brother had gone to North Korea after hijacking the J.A.L. plane in 1970. Adachi has recently made a film about this figure in the film entitled *Prisoner/Terrorist (Yūheisha – terorisuto, 2007)*.

Going back to the 60s productions, in *Running in Madness, Dying in Love (Kyōsō jōshi-kō 1969)*, screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 1971, Wakamatsu inserts images of the struggles against the Security Treaty at the beginning of the film.

The images of repression against the student and labour protests serve to criticise the oppressive forces of the state. And here, the main characters are not passive witnesses but have an active role in the riots; they are activists who end up having confrontations with the police. The poetic juxtaposition of newsreel images combined with the actor's face creates an atmosphere of escape beyond all sexual and moral limits.

However, the film develops a story about a murder and an impossible love between a boy and his sister-in-law and once again, the demonstrations are quickly forgotten and the non-fiction sequences are left as a *collage visuel*.

The student resistance is the central topic only in *Sex Jack*, script also written by Adachi. To shoot the first scenes, Wakamatsu and Adachi climbed onto a rooftop to film a demonstration being brutally put down by the police. Later he shows a fleeing group of students who are finally cornered by plain-clothed detectives. In this way, Wakamatsu projects the sensation that the revolution had come to an end; the resignation to the impossibility of any collective fight after the police repression.

Despite the edition with this amazing footage, Wakamatsu and Adachi have no intention of making complete films about their struggles. They were aimed at projecting provocative stories always keeping in mind that in those days there was a strong ideological rhetoric surrounding their creative endeavours. The insertion of "extra-diegetic sequences meant to ground the hero's psychosis in social reality, to designate it as emblematic of social and political repression and revolt"⁵.

The scandalous erotic scenes were aimed at producing in the spectator the idea of sexual alienation as an individual revolt, symbolically linked to the political alienation in capitalist society. This subject probably motivated left-wing filmmakers to create a sort of artistic avant-garde of the revolution. As Jasper Sharp claims, the films

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“represented an exciting period of vast upheaval in the social and cultural spheres (...) and of a unique synergy between political idealists and counter-cultural artistic movements”⁶.

The connection of these directors, Wakamatsu and Adachi, with the contemporary political events is even closer within and far from the screen. After screening *Violated Angels* and *Sex Jack* in Cannes, the disillusion and frustration towards the revolutionary riots motivated Wakamatsu and Adachi to travel to Palestine. These directors, just as their characters, became politically active sometimes on the fringes of the law. Adachi joined the *Japanese Red Army* in the early seventies. Wakamatsu went to Beirut about once a year after 1975. Their political activism cannot be separated from their film aesthetics and conceptual developments.

Therefore, looking around the depiction of contemporary facts in feature films, we can find three different strategies used in Japanese New Wave:

-Insertion of newsreel images like a *collage*: *Cruel Story of Youth*, *Good for Nothing*, *Running in Madness* and *Sex Jack*.

-Archive pictures seen through this new media, television: *Funeral Parade of Roses*

-Recreation of the demonstrations in fiction: *Funeral Parade of Roses* and *Cruel Story of Youth* (others examples can be found in *The Insect Woman*, *Escape from Japan*.)

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To sum it up, using archive pictures in *montage* was a way of making the protests visible and reconstructing the memory of recent history. But it was also a part of the quest for new ways of expression through political commitment which ends up crossing again and again the boundaries between reality and fiction.

This presence of newsreel images in non-documentary films becomes an aesthetic resource which remits to the essence of the cinematographic language itself and opens the debate about the relationship between history, cinema, and political activism.

Notes

¹ *Zengakuren*: all-Japan federation of Student Self-governing Association (zen nihon gakusei jichikai sorengo), a communist, anti-imperialistic and anti-militaristic league of students, established in 1948 at Tokyo University. In the first year, the institutions affiliated reached 266, with roughly 60% of the nation's student population as members about 222,581 students. They were seen as subversive left-wing elements and hundreds of its members were arrested. They took part in activities against the Korean War and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, Ampo (1960).

² The *Taiyozoku* (the “Tribe of the Sun”): It was a phenomenon of Japanese mass culture. Even their most apolitical manifestations represented a cultural resistance to the

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Occupation. These films capitalized on the success of the *Taiyozoku* phenomenon originated by Shintaro Ishihara's novels, with stories of alienated rebellious youth without traditional values, losing their time by the sea.

³ Shohei Imamura & Hubert Nyogret, *Shohei Imamura : entretiens et témoignages*, Dreamland, Paris 2002, p.14.

⁴ Chris Desjardins, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film*, I.B.Tauris, London; New York 2005, pp. 166, 167.

⁵ Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (revised and edited by Annette Michelson). Scolar Press, London 1979, p. 354.

⁶ Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain: the Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema*, FAB, Godalming, Surrey 2008, p. 69.