

## NAGISA ŌSHIMA: the imaginary and the real

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The film work of Ōshima directly affects the core of our residual but indomitable aesthetic anxieties. We might define them didactically in a simple question: what credit can still be given to artistic expression once you have been wholly converted to the seriousness and toughness of the world? To many of the most worthy among us it seems quite ridiculous to reply with the gratuitousness of fiction to the seriousness of the contemporary scene. The smooth and violent images of this forty year old director are, on the other hand, aimed at giving creativity the greatest value: the words with which the motionless face of a man condemned to death pronounces the eulogy of the imagination and contrasts it to the shackles of reality make clear the basic theme of this work. Ōshima does not commit the error of mistaking the film for reality, or even with a specific copy of it; such a limiting faithfulness, which grants all creativity to the world (or to ideology?) and none to the work, is rejected here. He shows himself to be acutely aware of the fictitious nature of each symbol which forms part of the film, even of those of documentary origin, which he makes use of as well. Wishing to introduce into his film a metaphor summarising cinema itself, he gives it, in *The secret story of the postwar period after the war in Tokyo*, the disturbing aspect of a ghost or hypnosis which obsesses the young protagonist. The need for the cinema (fiction), or otherwise, is not measured by its realism, but perhaps by the function which it carries out with regard to reality, and precisely that single concrete reality represented by the person for whom the film is intended, the spectator, on whom film risks, in the long run, all its effectiveness. In *The secret story of the postwar period* this symbolic effectiveness is so broad and destructive that the protagonist is compelled to commit suicide.

Ōshima reminds us that even before the world the work is concerned with the author's subjectivity; and what is more, in order for the work to exist, it is necessary to produce a vacuum within the unity of life, so that the profound quality of man, that is to say the unconscious, can burst into it. It possesses a special language, the imaginary for Ōshima, and it is precisely from this metaphorical zone that the film takes its shape. Hence, each time the director tries to trace the difficult path leading from the imaginary to reality; and so he does not limit himself to a reformulation of the world from the peremptory point of view of the imagination, obeying the pressure of its elementary needs - sex, greed, anger - but attempts to translate the imaginary into concrete terms. The work functions in a way which closely resembles a psychodrama, so obtaining a powerful therapeutic effect - the projection to the exterior of our conflicts already marks the beginning of a solution (of healing). This poetic form, in which the theses of surrealism combine with however much of an aesthetic concept it is possible to obtain from psychoanalysis, is not really supposed to impress us, while, on the contrary, I was impressed by the firm resolution with which Ōshima sets out

to demonstrate its functioning and the care with which he always maintains an opening towards the spectator. By introducing into the structure of his works a number of explicitly metaphorical themes, like the kabuki in *The Diary of a Thief of Shinjuku*, the psychodrama in *The Hanging*, and cinema itself in *The secret story of the postwar period*, he makes sure of supplying a habitual pattern of the imaginary and theses of the film itself. If in *The Hanging* recovery by the man condemned to death of his own lost identity passes through theatrical improvisation, and if in *The Diary of a Thief* the virulent action of the kabuki is able to unravel the sexual complex of the two young protagonists, this occurs because the trajectory of the cure for the problems tormenting his troubled universe always passes through the zone of fiction. Hence fiction has real efficacy, and like the film as a whole, this articulate fiction will have the chance to influence the spectators.

The motive forces behind Ōshima's imaginary world are two major disintegrating powers, which also contain the more explosive potentiality of life. They are sex and individual and collective violence - which involves both the body and the ideology which have been in the forefront of youthful rebellion. The director uses it to force open the gates of the unconscious, and at the same time to attack the political difficulties of the situation in which we find ourselves. Throughout all his work these forces have been embodied in the figure of the 'outsider', the social outcast (as are, in fact, the imaginary and the unconscious), until they can be identified in the criminal's behaviour. Already existing in embryo in the Negro airman taken prisoner in a Japanese village in one of his earliest films, *The Tamed One*, this obscure motive finally bursts through in *The Demon in Broad Daylight*, in the very peculiar thief in *The Diary of a Thief of Shinjuku*, and in the man condemned to death in *The Hanging*. Not only through that power to proliferate which each metaphor possesses, but also through that discriminating power which the present system wields, all those who form part of a minority subject to repression become delinquents having an equal state of alienation. Thus Ōshima's world can place beside the criminal the student rebel in *The secret story of the postwar period after the war in Tokyo*, as, well as the son trapped in the splendid cage of the family in *The Ceremony*, since even the depressing role which the family assigns to its own children within itself is that of the outsider. And if this not enough, piling on the repression, the condemned man in *The Hanging* is also a Korean, and the son in *The Ceremony* is also a Manchurian - in other words they represent the 'negroes' of the Far East. Finally Ōshima seeks to ensure that the outsider, the delinquent, becomes the artist himself, and every action of his takes on the weight and decisiveness of a crime. «Making a film in the society in which we live is above all a criminal act» - more than anything else this defines the ambitious programme of the Japanese director.

The rules of the game seemed to be fixed from the start by the rigidity of the world with which the imaginary (the work)

NAGISA ŌSHIMA was born in Kyoto in 1932. While at university he engaged in political and theatrical activity, and these remain the two main themes of his work. His first films, made between 1959 and 1960, *The Area of Love and Hope*, *Bitter Story of Youth*, and *The Ceremony of the Sun* exhaust the themes of traditional naturalism. The following period, from 1960 to 1964, is a transition from early Ōshima, naturalistic and psychological, to the later one, increasingly tending towards the unconscious, and political and sexual violence. Two key films belong to this period, *Night and Fog in Japan* and *Amakusa Shiro Tokisada*, which are two film-discussions on political problems. The commercial failure of these films obliged him to leave the cinema. In 1965, with *The Enjoyment*, eroticism and violence and their relationship with the imagination are made the central points of the film. These themes were expanded in 1966 with *The Devil in Broad Daylight* and later in particular with *About Japanese Bawdy Songs* (1967) and *Obligatory Suicide for Two - Japanese Summer* (1967). This marks the beginning of what is probably Ōshima's most inventive and original period, or, anyway, that most well-known in the West: *The Hanging* (1968), *The Diary of a Thief of Shinjuku* (1968), *The Child* (1969), *The Secret story of the postwar period after the war in Tokyo* (1971) and *The Ceremony* (1971). Whilst in Japan he is considered the most important director to come to the forefront in the sixties, the specialised European critics generally give Ōshima a place in Japanese cinema of no less importance than the one Godard has enjoyed in European cinema. The most complete showing of Ōshima's work took place during the course of the Seventh Festival of Experimental Cinema held at Pesaro in September 1971.



collides, so that it is only through infringement, disfiguration and crime is he able to work. For Ōshima there exists a gesture which combines sex and violence: the sadistic act, rape, which is repeated obsessively in each of his films, thereby acquiring a strange relish, and can be compared to a frantic urge to get rid of the encumbrance of the body with its tremendous opaqueness, to make way for the transparency of the imagination. Hence it is significant in *The Diary of a Thief* that there is violence just the same despite the consent of the woman — the consummation of the act of love between the two complicated protagonists occurs when the woman is having her period, a symbol of taboo in Japan, as elsewhere. In this film of Ōshima's — among his most optimistic works — there is a parallel between sexual and political violence, inasmuch as they are both explosions of the same life force, whilst the relationship which finally succeeds between the two young people coincides with a furious student demonstration against a police station. Links joining the real and the imaginary — no longer seen painfully as contradictory — political revolt and erotic aggression signal rather the moment in which the power of the imagination smashes the inertia of reality surrounding us. More precisely, and the breaking of the clock hands at the beginning and the end of *The Diary of a Thief* is a clear symbol of this, sex and violence allow the vertical dimension of ecstasy to be reached. Rent deeply within himself, the director wavers between the ecstasy of life and its negative aspects but since the optimism of 'how to live' in *The Diary of a Thief* seems now to be cancelled in *The secret story of the postwar period* and *The Ceremony* by the desperate consistency of 'how to die', ecstasy increasingly begins to turn in the direction of death. It is from this that the constant temptation to suicide arises, afflicting his young characters, and forming an outlet for self-destructive violence. In suicide, the imaginary, which has not been able to survive in the framework of a day-to-day existence, indicated in *The secret story of the postwar period* by the symbol of the commonplace 'landscapes' amongst which the people live their humdrum lives — in this extreme gesture the imaginary has at last found its inevitable negative metaphor.

Due to this position of supremacy awarded to the imagination and the unreal, the thread of each of Ōshima's films is always to be found outside the realm of logical consequence; it contains on each occasion one or more interruptions in the normal relation of cause and effect, or a turning of this on its head. The director contradicts logic and likelihood because they bar the way to the breaking in of the imagination. A work like the remarkable *The Hanging* appears to be tied to a kind of unexplainable vacuum, which the unfolding of the film never attempts to account for, since it is connected to the very origin of the film's construction. The vacuum intervenes like a paradox which smashes the logical coherence of the events which have been filmed up to that point with the unrelenting objectivity of an eye trained in the école du regard. R., a young Korean condemned to death for carnal violence and murder, inexplicably survives

his execution. This is the breaking-point, the vacuum, which the consequent development of the film tries to cancel out by re-establishing the shattered order, with the added difficulty that now the condemned man can no longer remember his identity or his past. The virtue of this film lies in the fact that it makes the use of the imagination necessary, and what is more that the warders themselves improvise a kind of psychodrama which has the object of reconstructing R's personality and the series of events which have brought him to the scaffold. But it's not always possible to employ the imagination without getting hurt; and the dismal and bizarre venture, even if it manages to put together the condemned man's personality in an approximate way, certainly manages to unleash the unconscious of each member of the small community of judges and policemen, each of whom seethes with criminal desires. This unexpected participation of the imaginary faces us with a guilty collective unconscious which quite clearly bears the scars of the system. It establishes the common world of crime, which is no more than our familiar existence. The disconcerting psychodrama, in which the possibilities of the gesture and suggestion are fully exploited, is taken to such a point that the obsessions of those taking part gradually assume a definite shape; but at the end all the ghosts are laid and the restoration of normality is rounded off by R. being executed again. But now, by means of a disturbing awakening of the conscience which has lasted through the whole film, it is normality itself with its deadly apparatus of victims and judges which appears absurd.

In *The Hanging the imagination*, by provoking an upheaval in the course of events, obliges the characters (the warders) to behave in an unusual way, both eccentric and dangerous: Its results are both clear and upsetting in other films by Ōshima the imaginary acts like an irresistible hypnotic force (*The secret story of postwar period*) or else as an erosive force which little by little defeats the deadly oppression of social custom (*The Ceremony*).

Besides causing upheavals in the story line, the pressure of the imaginary tends to avoid the possibility of imposing a preconceived style — it is for this reason that Ōshima's films vary so much in their styles, even within the same film. If we consider four of the director's most important works, the range of their formal styles seems fairly broad. In *The Hanging*, the stiff scene at the beginning, with the objective description of capital punishment is interrupted by the bursting in of the theatrical gesture. Fiction manages to abolish all limits of space and time; but finally the rigid pattern is restored in the ending which resumes the objective manner of the opening sequences. On the contrary, *The Diary of a Thief* presents an open scheme which is flexible and well spaced; and the sudden jumps between the sequences are simply obeying the economy of the imagination, of which the interior dynamism is the result of sexual pressure, which like a second taking off of nocturnal violence, attempts to make itself felt at its height firstly within the limits of normality, then within cultural limits, but can only attain fulfilment, through theatrical fiction, in a collective explosion.

*The secret story of the postwar period* is based on a circular structure, the conclusion of which, with the rebellious student's gesture of suicide, demonstrates that events have gone back to where they were, that they have been repeated. His most recent work, *The Ceremony*, also a negative assessment of twenty-five years of postwar Japan, is based exclusively on a series of traditional ceremonies held by a powerful family, which the protagonist attends from one end to the other of his existence. In this way biographical events seem to be frozen and almost cancelled out by the monotony of the family liturgy. Unlike such flexibility, the adoption beforehand of a particular style would mean the setting up of a continuity both independent and parallel with regard to the dynamics of the unconscious and reality itself. Free from the need to be coherent, the style is formed on each occasion by the requirements of the imaginary with a continual flight by the director from himself and the work he has scarcely completed.

From a linguistic point of view, in each of his films Ōshima establishes a broad metaphor attempts to give form to imagination; and to the extent that it is founded specifically on the unconscious, metaphor attempts to give form to a magmatic subject-matter, difficult to enclose, and already inevitably charged with disfigurement and violence. I think it is quite useless to try to distinguish within his work what is real (objective reflection or documentary), and what is, on the other hand, imaginary (oneiric, fantasy, paradoxical). Nothing is real, or everything has the degree of reality of the metaphor, which itself represents an active beginning of transformation. «When I used to write for a film magazine, one of the problems I raised was the integration of the documentary and surrealism» — this gives us the point of departure for his linguistic concerns, while this second statement by Ōshima indicates the point of arrival: «In *The Diary of a Thief* I have merged real life and fiction. Someone has said that in so doing I am guilty of irresponsibility, but as far as I am concerned they care both at the same level».

However much he constantly includes a strong urge to rationalisation, and knows how to indicate his objectives precisely in the present-day Japanese situation, from the traditional family to the neo-capitalist state, the choice of these aims always goes through a taking of a stand more radical than a mere awakening of the conscience, because it involves basic needs and instincts and deep-rooted symbols.

Ōshima's cultural horizon lies beyond the Japanese or even the Oriental ones. He himself said that he has been trying to fuse Marxism with surrealism; and to this combination we can also add psychoanalysis. Anyway, the marriage between these doctrines has always been difficult, so much so that the result has been very different from the easy mixing of the ingredients at the start. In other words, Ōshima, too, finds himself involved in the process of contamination typical of our times. Certainly the surrealist element remains important in his work through his insistence on the imaginary; and the therapeutic value which he gives to the imagination brings him close to the heretics



## VICTOR BURGIN language, perception and representative function

CATHERINE MILLET

Contemporary avant-garde, divided as it is into fragments, displays a plurality of attitudes, not incompatible, as often stated, but rather complementary in their antinomy. Today, no individual or separate school may pretend to cover the whole sphere of artistic investigation, and to consider this sphere means considering those individuals and schools as a whole. The movements of each one, either regressive or progressive, can be mutually accounted for. Though it embraces only one particular aspect of the artistic issue, nevertheless each 'avant-garde' lays claim to universality and whatever it rejects is taken over by the next 'avant-gardes', not acknowledged, or course, by the former. Thus, the subjectivistic effusion expressed in different ways by Beuys, Heizer or Acconci, for example, will make possible a criticism of the radical nature of minimal positivism. Similarly, the forceful come-back of a pictorial (hyper) realism on the same scene where Conceptual art has just asserted itself with essentially textual productions, shows how pressing it is for it to theorize its breach from the image. Any appraisal leaving out one or the other or many of these avant-gardes, merely setting them in chronological order (i.e. rejecting some on grounds of anachronism or obsolescence) would amount to agreeing to the arbitrary dismissals of a select avant-garde, taking a partial, biased view.

However great the historical importance attributed to the American Cool Abstraction, we must not, however, accept the breaches it operates as definitely verified. It may not be analysed outside of what contemporary schools have opposed to it. It will be particularly interesting to study the attitudes which, stating they are directly issued from American geometric painting and sculpture, will turn back to problems evaded by the latter. Objective methods, the principle of looking back upon 'what has already been done', common to the best examples of Conceptual art and particularly to Burgin, may cause this fragmentary artistic sphere to be rectified and a generalised purpose to be achieved.

### *A functional objectivation*

Such as it appears through Hard Edge and Minimal art, abstraction lives on a paradox. It takes upon itself the heritage of American Expressionism and gestural painting, while it deprives it own productions of all expressive elements. This deprivation is evinced by a functional reduction tending to provide an essential, axiomatic definition of the art-work. To this end, the work is stripped of all that appears external to its distinctive nature: all that constitutes a reflection of the world, all representative elements and, as such, representative of the artists himself. Minimal art's interpretation — and also, let us own it, some Conceptual artists' somewhat hurried interpretation — of Pollock's work, reduces the latter to its effects alone taking no part in the methods which made them possible. Our attention is drawn to the casting-off of the easel, the

use of the canvas no longer focused, 'forgetting', though, that such a modification has been made possible to Pollock only through the expressive element. In order to abide by the principle of a self-definition of the art-work, Minimal art gives mechanically rise to works which merely disclose their apprehending process disregarding totally the process through which they are produced. For example, the only accepted psychological references are those supplied by the psychology of perception.

In 1969, Burgin still produce pieces close to the purpose of Minimal art, such as the one carried out in London's Greenwich Park. It consists of two equilateral triangles traced slightly above the ground with a rope threaded through three rings. These triangles, which are similar, are set at opposite sides of the park but, being both placed within view of the same path, they are seen inevitably one after the other. As explained by Burgin in the description of his work, the first triangle calls upon a subliminal level of perception. The simple geometric form, the commonplace material, enter the walker's consciousness even though he hasn't payed them any particular attention. On the other hand, the sight of the second triangle can't fail to recall the first to mind and the perception of it is more complex. It calls upon memory and the phenomenon of association. A process of perception is evinced which, in the case of the second triangle, is a direct and physical process as well as a psychological one. «Schematically and in terms of dischimation any path of consciousness through time might be represented as a meander. Attention to objects 'out there' in the material world is constantly subverted by the demands of memory. Wilful concentration is constantly dissolving into involuntary association». Burgin attempts to show the absolute necessity for a clue — a historical precedent — in the identification of a work, necessity that has become all the more evident since the casting-off of the traditional plastic media. For this, he makes use of a method typical of Minimal art which consists, by displaying the work within the physical space — the observer must add up several points of view — in revealing the psychological space it occupies simultaneously. Another very similar work is the one for which a file-card container is used. The container is moved on the ground in a straight line by regular stages. At each stage, the container is photographed. The photographs are then filed by means of index-cards in the container, in a sequence corresponding to the serial order of the stages. Thus, the object, directly perceived, is confronted with its perception in time, punctuated by the photographs.

Compared to the previous piece, this work is more successful; it is not confined to one aspect alone of the art-work. While Minimal art (and the triangles of Greenwich Park) is only concerned with the spectator's point of view, Burgin, with this piece, succeeds in associating the former (perception of the real object and the photographs it contains) to the artist's point of view (perception of the photographed object). He goes back to considering the representative function that the previous generations ad more or less arbitrarily dismissed, and this without

of psychoanalysis, just as his concept of eroticism has more affinity to that of a heretic of surrealism like Bataille than to Breton. Also in this partiality for heretical ideas Oshima shows himself to be an artist of the moment. Basically his attitude remains that of an anarchist who concentrates on tearing a few enraptured moments out of reality; his feelings conflict with established order more with the impatient anger of the rebel than with the positive persistence of the revolutionary. It is always this anger which causes his characters (his 'ghosts' as the director calls them) to expose themselves so easily to the temptation of suicide, which is not so much death of the body as that of a genuine-ness of existence which cannot be reached, despite so much fury. Since his inspiration is in the unconscious, his true tendency urges him towards impersonality, the symbol, the public and institutionalised rite, and the private one which attempts to smash the former (eroticism and volutary death highly ritualised as they are, both in our unconscious and the oriental tradition itself). Thus he has been able to give the collective crime in *The Hanging*, and the individual - collective release at the end of *The Diary of a Thief*. What really obsesses him deep down is the threat of emptiness, which is also a synonym for impotence and creative death, to which Oshima reacts rather like Godard through feverish abctivity because he is continuously being persued by the ghost of incommunicability, the torment of our times. All his successes are the result of this capacity which he possesses of filling in this vacuum, although he refers to it and remains dangerously close to it. His disasters always correspond to trials of unfaithfulness, that is to say attempts to exchange the vacuum for the richness of some thematic or linguistic solution which is too stiff and limiting, apart from being pre-established. But *The Ceremony* is still a splendid disaster. Because Oshima is certainly not a purist, and is anxious to go ahead whatever the theme so as not to be silent, he has shown himself ready to borrow eclectically from the whole experimental tradition of the theatre and cinema. Here too his strength lies in his ability to erode, or otherwise, the cultural and linguistic heritage on which he has put his hands.

Transl. David Stanton