

“Japanese Avant-Garde Cinema and the Question of Form:

Diary of a Shinjuku Thief

By Isolde Standish

One of the themes of Ōshima Nagisa’s early writings was a concern with cinema as an artistic endeavour that should be reintegrated into social praxis, but not, in the terms of the commercial cinema as a coming to speak for the interests of the dominant culture, but rather, through a process of assimilation into critical discourse. As Ōshima’s critique of the independent, left-leaning, Dokuritsu Pro film, *The Matsukawa Incident* (*Matsukawa jiken* directed by Yamamoto Satsuo with screenplay by Shindō Kaneto) of 1961 indicates, he saw this potential in film not as “a direct weapon of social reform through direct political outcomes”, that is, through what we might refer to as propaganda or the didactic aims of Soviet-style “social realism”, but “as a weapon of social reform through indirectly reforming people’s consciousness [...]” (Ōshima 1963). In broad terms, this meant reformulating the relationship between the filmmaker and film, the audience and film, and filmmaker and audience. These altered relationships rested on a renegotiation of the question of “form” in cinematic representations as opposed to plot line.

This issue became paramount as a result of the aftermath of World War II and ongoing “holocaustal events” that characterised the twentieth century. It was in relation to the trauma of these events in the context of the immediate post-war period of European cinema that Gilles Deleuze, in his discussion of cinematic “form”, makes the distinction between “the movement-image” dominated by the controlling actions of the characters through space and the “time-image” which he states “makes perceptible [...] makes visible, the relations to time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present” (Cinema II: the Time Image). As I have argued in *Politics, Porn and Protest: Japanese Avant-Garde Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s* this shift in filmmaking practice and perception was not limited to Europe, but is also evident in Japanese cinema.

This question of “form” as opposed to narrative content became a major issue in Ōshima’s oeuvre from his first commercial film made at, and released through, the Shōchiku Studio in 1959, *A Town of Love and Hope* (*Ai to kibō no matchi*). In his early films made under the auspices of the studio he sought to challenge mainstream genre films through a radical approach to “form” through a direct challenge to the Shōchiku, ‘Ōfuna-style’ championed by the long-term head of the Studio, Kido Shirō. This direct attack on the studio system’s aesthetic conventions resulted in the furore and the withdrawal, of his third film of 1960 *Night and Fog in Japan* (*Nihon no yoru to kiri*), which references, in its title, Alain Resnais’ 1955 documentary *Nuit et Brouillard*. This incident pre-empted Ōshima’s acrimonious departure from the Studio to become an independent filmmaker.

Diary of Shinjuku Thief (*Shinjuku dorobō nikki*), released in 1968, is one of several films made by Ōshima at the height of his post-studio, independent years that blur the boundaries between “fact” and “fiction” through multiple visual registers that complicate accepted distinctions between documentary and fiction films. The other significant films from this period are *Death by Hanging* (*Kōshikei*) 1968, *Boy* (*Shōnen*) 1969, and *The Man who Left his Will on Film* (*Tōkyō sensō sengo hiwa*) 1970. In this same period, many politically motivated filmmakers working within the studio system or through the independent Dokuritsu Pro film

collective were also attempting to express a semblance of the irrationality of the human condition in the post-war era of high economic growth and violent social protest in narratives that were lucidly and rationally constructed according to realist conventions of “classic” cinema. And this is the nub, while politically committed filmmakers were trying to express the new content in old conventions, Ōshima Nagisa and his avant-garde compatriots went further in trying to achieve a unity between the irrationality and ambiguity of the “modernist events” being depicted and the “form” in which they were expressed.