

# **JAPAN'S CINEMA OF TRANSGRESSION**



**WHAT OSHIMA'S TRANSGRESSIVE  
FILMS TELL US ABOUT BROKEN  
TABOOS AND DEEPER TRUTHS**

Words by Roman Kalinovski

Japanese cinema was put on trial twice during the post-war era. The first case involved Tetsuji Takechi's film *Black Snow* (1965), a movie in the softcore Pink Film genre that contained overt anti-American themes on top of its erotic content. While the Japanese film industry mostly kept quiet during the trial, a few prominent filmmakers and authors rallied around Takechi's cause, one of them being Nagisa Oshima, a director whose films helped define the Japanese 'new wave' style of the 1960s and 70s. Oshima ended up as the defendant at his own obscenity trial in 1976. His film *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), while not screened uncensored in Japan, was brought to court over a book containing the script and stills from the film. In his defence, Oshima said:

*The concept of 'obscenity' is tested when we dare to look at something that we desire to see but have forbidden ourselves to look at. When we feel that everything has been revealed, 'obscenity' disappears and there is a certain liberation. When that which one had wanted to see isn't sufficiently revealed, however, the taboo remains, the feeling of 'obscenity' stays, and an even greater 'obscenity' comes into being.*

Oshima's film, with scenes of unsimulated sex, was undoubtedly transgressive, but is there a greater point to be found within the obscenity? Oshima mobilized his transgressive visual language to not only draw attention to the absurdities of Japanese censorship law, but in the service of a larger political and social critique that weaves its way throughout his entire filmography. When seen from a contemporary point of view, the film's stark depictions of genitalia and penetration have lost some of the shock value they may have had forty-six years ago, but they still carry transgressive power.

In the Realm of the Senses was based on a true story that gripped the public imagination of Japan in 1936, on the eve of war. A restaurant apprentice named Sada Abe was found wandering around Tokyo, going from inn to inn, with just a few possessions in her handbag: a knife, a rope, and a human penis. She had severed the organ from Kichizou Ishida, the owner of the restaurant where she had worked. The two had maintained an intense love affair over the month prior, culminating in Sada's strangulation and emasculation of 'Kichi' and her subsequent arrest. Her trial was a media sensation, and she immediately became a celebrity, variously admired and feared as a femme fatale and a feminist icon.

Sada Abe's story was brought to the screen as a Japanese/French co-production, funded by European backers looking to profit from the Porno Chic trend of the 1970s, which saw films like *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (1972) cross over from seedy adult cinemas to mainstream notoriety in the West. Nagisa Oshima jumped at the chance to direct a film featuring uncensored, unsimulated sexual activity. Filming such content, however, necessitated shipping the undeveloped film all the way to France for processing, since labs in Japan couldn't legally handle the forbidden material.

The film recounts the affair between Sada Abe and Kichi Ishida, starting with Sada's employment, changed to that of a maid at Kichi's inn, and ending with a view of the bloody aftermath of Sada and Kichi's final encounter. Between these two points are many scenes of explicit, unsimulated sex. The majority of it is between Sada and Kichi, but there are other pairings: Sada takes a trip to prostitute herself and sleeps with her former high school principal, and Kichi violates a hotel maid in retaliation for a rude remark made about Sada. In one of the film's more disturbing sequences, Sada orders Kichi to have sex with an elderly geisha while she watches them, the old woman possibly dying from the strain.

At the height of their affair, Sada and Kichi's lives revolve solely around sex and their mutual obsession with possessing each other's bodies. They barely speak of anything other than sex, and in one scene even the simple act of sharing a meal becomes sexualized as Kichi dips his food in Sada's vaginal discharge before consumption. Kichi's body can't keep up with the intensity of this affair, however, and Sada starts strangling him during sex as a form of stimulation. Strangulation turns into a fetish that ends up going too far, past the point of no return, in an extended final encounter that leads to Kichi's death at Sada's hands. The film ends with Sada's mutilation of Kichi's corpse, and the final shot shows them lying side by side with the words 'Sada and Kichi together forever' written in blood on Kichi's torso. As they lie there, Oshima himself provides a brief account, via voiceover, of the facts of the Sada Abe case upon which the film was based.

Oshima tended to editorialize his films like this. Voiceovers were used to great effect in one of Oshima's most famous political films, *Death by Hanging* (1968). The film begins as a documentary, narrated by Oshima, about capital punishment in Japan and gives viewers a tour of an execution chamber and demonstrates the execution procedure. This documentary quickly becomes a Kafka-esque farce as 'R,' a Korean man executed for rape and murder in Japan, survives the gallows. R awakens in an amnesiac state, and this presents a problem for the prison warden and the other officials in attendance: can R be executed again if he has no memory of his crimes or, indeed, any concept of right and wrong at all?



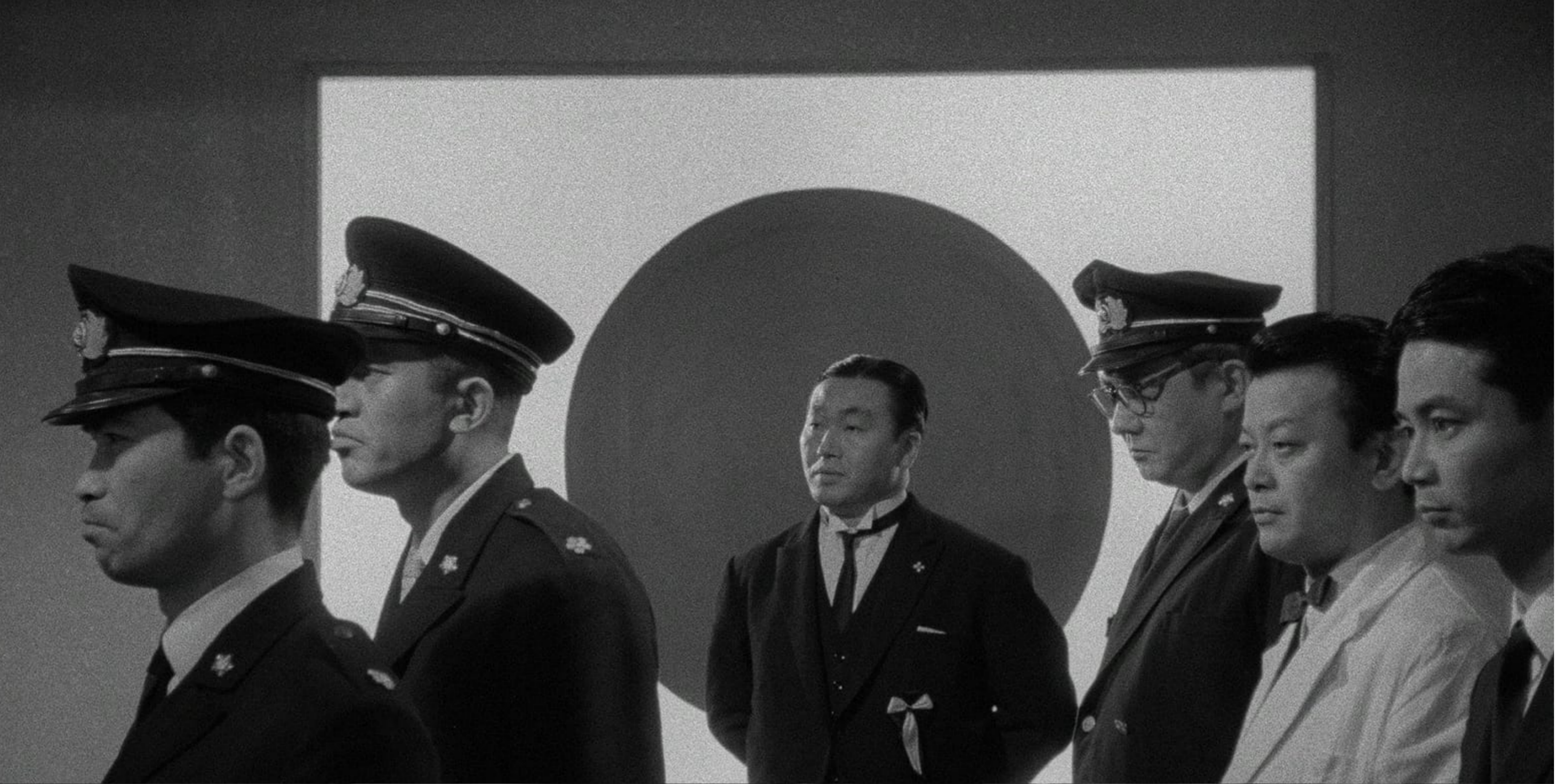
During the film's conclusion, R states that he is indeed guilty of his crimes but should not be executed for them, that his execution is just as much a crime as his own transgressions were. The prosecutor exonerates R, vacating his conviction and sentence and allowing him to leave the execution chamber, but R cannot step outside into the glaring light. Unable to return to the outside world, R accepts his fate, inverting his previous assertion by proclaiming his innocence yet allowing the execution to go forward. The final shot of the film shows an empty noose hanging below the trap door of the gallows. Like he would later do for *In the Realm of the Senses*, Oshima himself provides a final voiceover, congratulating the warden, the other officials, and the audience on witnessing a successful execution.

*Death by Hanging*, like *In the Realm of the Senses*, was based on a real case, the execution of Li Jin Wu for the murder of a female student at Komatsugawa High School in 1958, as well as that of a woman the previous year. 'R' isn't just a nod to Kafka's use of single-letter character names, but also a reference to the Japanese pronunciation of the first syllable of Li's name. Li was convicted and, unlike in Oshima's telling, executed for the crime without incident four years later.

*Death by Hanging* presents politics, sex, and violence as entangled concepts that are impossible to fully separate from one another. R's sexuality is shaped by violence: not only the violence he committed against his victims, but the political violence committed against him by the nation as a Korean in Japan, from poverty and prejudice up to his own state-sanctioned execution. Similarly, *In the Realm of the Senses* presents sex and death as being in a constant state of tension, with each encounter bringing them closer together until they finally collide during the bloody finale.

Like much of Oshima's oeuvre, *Death by Hanging* and *In the Realm of the Senses* barely resemble each other, having been shot on totally different equipment and filmstock and utilizing different camerawork, editing techniques, and soundtracks. This disparity is characteristic of Oshima's films: each one was a totally new experience and he carried little between his productions except for the thematic elements that held his body of work together. Themes of liberation – political, sexual, personal, and cultural – pop up throughout his filmography. *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960) questions the liberatory power of revolutionary politics as it chronicles the failure of two student political movements a decade apart. Presenting a view of leftist politics in Japan as hobbled by infighting and a desire for impossible levels of ideological purity, Oshima's pessimistic vision remains sadly accurate for much of today's left around the world. *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1969) takes a more hopeful perspective, linking the act of shoplifting books from Kinokuniya with sexual release and ultimately with freedom of expression, whether literary, sexual, or theatrical.

While the political content in films like *Night and Fog in Japan* and *Death by Hanging* is overtly displayed, being each film's *raison d'être*, *In the Realm of the Senses* is a politically charged film as well, and not just because of the censorship trial that surrounded its release. The film is set in 1936, during the build-up of militarism that would lead to Japan's conquest of much of East Asia and eventual involvement in World War II. War is the absent centre of the movie's composition, a void around which the rest of the film revolves, as there are just two instances of the political world outside of Sada and Kichi's chambers becoming visible. At the beginning of the film, a group of children tormenting a homeless man are carrying Japanese national and military flags, and towards



Death By Hanging

the end of the film, as Kichi returns from the barber, he walks through a military parade. Uniformed soldiers march down the street as onlookers wave flags and cheer. Kichi, apparently oblivious to the spectacle, walks alone, moving against the parade to go meet his fate at Sada's hands. Is Kichi's fate an allegory for the soldiers, and the Japanese Empire in general, marching towards inevitable mass death and disaster? Or maybe the only war that matters to Kichi is the one between himself and Sada, their affair being a battleground of conflicting lusts and desires that ends in their mutual destruction of each other.

The film's Japanese title, *Ai no Corrida*, can be translated as 'Bullfight of Love.' This title seems appropriate, given the film's content, and there are multiple interpretations that could be drawn from it. One reading might be that, in the titular bullfight, Sada represents the beast, goring and mutilating Kichi with her uncontrollable, animalistic desires. The opposite arrangement could also be justified, though. A matador is expected to wear down and overpower the bull before moving in for the kill, and this accurately describes Sada's actions towards Kichi in the film's climax. Maybe Sada is the matador, orchestrating a performance in which she forces Kichi to exhaust himself before making the kill and severing her 'trophy.'

This title also raises another question: a bullfight is an inherently unequal contest between two very different entities, a cunning but fragile matador and a powerful bull. Can this vision of love, and the sexual act, be reconciled with the commonly held contemporary view of love and sex as, ideally, an equalizing act of enthusiastic mutual consent and participation? A famous dictum by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, 'there is no sexual relation,' might provide some insight. Lacan's point

is that sex doesn't exist, but that all sex is inherently one-sided from the perspective of each participant: a harmonious relation on equal terms is impossible. From this viewpoint, one doesn't desire a person, but rather desires one's internal fantasy of that person. The actual person, as a subject, is completely inaccessible. Every sexual act is a failed attempt to rip this fantasy from someone else's body, an impossible feat because the internal fantasy has no actual correlation to the physical reality of the other person.

The tragedy of Sada and Kichi provides an allegory for this view of sexuality: a vision of two people trying to fulfill their desires with each other's bodies and ultimately becoming untethered from their physical reality and losing themselves in their fantasies of each other. Kichi allows Sada to strangle him to death in the film's climax, sacrificing himself to fulfill his desire of being completely desired by the other. Sada seeks to possess Kichi, and she ultimately succeeds in the worst way possible, carrying his severed member around in her purse until her arrest.

While Kichi's exact fantasies are not explored in the film, a few of Sada's internal fantasies are put on display for the viewer. There are multiple scenes that stand apart, in stark unrelation, from everything around them: moments that seem to only reside within Sada's mind. These include slitting Kichi's wife's throat with a knife, Kichi running after her train while wearing nothing but her robe, and herself lying half-naked in an abandoned arena. The film's final scene, in which Sada severs Kichi's penis, might also be seen from the perspective of her fantasy, since the severed member remains erect and doesn't shrink as the blood drains out of it.

The most controversial of Sada's fantasies, which was censored in multiple countries, involves Sada playing in the rain with two nude children and painfully grabbing a young boy's penis. This moment, perhaps even more shocking to watch in today's world, not only prefigures her later emasculation of Kichi, but it also provides an inside view of the depths of her depravity. It shows how little of the outside world remains as her relationship with Kichi intensifies and the two of them seal themselves off in their own private universe, floating freely away from society's norms and morals.

In the end, Oshima prevailed against the Japanese legal system and won his court case: he, his film, and his book were all acquitted years later in 1982, long after the enthusiasm for porno chic had dissipated and the immediate shock value of his transgressive film had worn off. The images that Oshima captured on celluloid, so sensitive that they had to be processed halfway around the world, still resonate to this day. The story of Sada and Kichi continues to be transgressive, challenging a new set of norms centred around notions of consent and the ethics of human desire. While hardly unique anymore in its explicitness, as sexually provocative content can be easily found online, Oshima's cinema of obscenity still resonates, showing that the sexual relation isn't an equation that can be neatly solved. Sex, as depicted by Oshima, is a violent collision of private fantasies, a bullfight of love in which neither participant can claim any sort of meaningful victory.



Nagisa Ōshima (Photo by Rita Molnár, Wikipedia)