Death by Hanging

A challenging exploration of capital punishment and ethnic prejudice in Japan, inspired by Godard, Brecht and the 1958 failed execution of a Korean, this formally challenging, Kafka-esque satire presents the story of an unsuccessfully hanged man, R. As he has lost his memory, the establishment is unsure of what to do, leading to a series of grotesque and tragi-comic events.

Are you for or against the abolition of the death penalty? According to a 1967 public opinion poll by the ministry of justice 71% were against the abolition, 16% were in favour and 13% undecided. But you, who oppose abolition, have you ever seen an execution chamber? Have you ever seen an execution?

Marking the beginning of Death by Hanging with a series of handwritten (kanji) placards, Nagisa Oshima wastes no time in communicating his opinion of the death penalty. He then narrates a documentary-style tour of the execution chamber as the condemned is guided to the noose to be hanged. The lever thrown, we witness the hanging from two angles, the second a disarming repetition in slow-motion. Thus begins Nagisa Oshima’s surreal, polemical, metaphysical and very much under-appreciated masterwork.

The chamber itself, steeped in religion and possessed of the kind of lived-in austerity one would expect to find in a rectory, is sheathed within a modest building that looks like it could be a retirement home and located at the terminus of a gravel path that snakes behind the prison proper. Oshima uses the very first shot for an overhead sweep of the prison grounds and its death house—then he takes us inside.

A physician checks the body, still hovering a foot from the ground, to find that it has survived. The officials debate the proper course of action, their training clearly insufficient for such a contingency. The representational form has now become presentational in nature; the fact of an execution gives way to fiction. They resuscitate the boy, a Korean of Japanese parents named R (Yu Do-yun), discovering that he suffers severe amnesia. He has no identity, he hasn’t even rudimentary knowledge of the world around him. Due to a legal technicality, the condemned must have cognizance of their actions to be executed; everyone takes a side. The priest, convinced that the boy before them is no longer the R who committed rape and murder (for the soul of that R has ascended), pleads with the officials and admonishes them for their determination to try the hanging again.

One man in particular, the prison warden, played by long-time collaborator Kei Sato, takes his work far too seriously—the kind of madman Kafka might swoon for. With R’s refusal, or inability, to acknowledge his identity, this man, now completely immersed in the fantasy he has constructed, goes so far as reenacting his crime by assaulting an innocent girl. Oshima then throws spatial and temporal continuity out the window as we move from a focus on the death penalty to our very notions of identity and reality. Apparently, only the lead screw can see this dead girl. While trying to convince his peers that there is indeed a body on the floor she suddenly sits up, alive and well and claiming to be R’s sister.
She has a long conversation, or perhaps a lecture is more appropriate, with R (or non-R) and the guards as one by one they perceive her presence in the room—urging R didactically to revolutionary Korean nationalism and hissing venom at the guards and, indeed, all of Japan. This dialogue seems to transcend time and space, moving from the chamber to an obsidian lake as in a dream while provoking the viewer to confront one’s conceptions of social hierarchy and the structure of political life. Oshima, after all, had much invested in the life of Chin’u Ri, on whom the character of R is based. He was an ethnic Korean born in Japan and had been arrested, tried and executed for raping and killing a Japanese schoolgirl in 1958. A book of Ri’s letters was eventually published showing him to be, in Oshima’s words, “the most intelligent and sensitive youth produced by post-war Japan.”

This film was released in 1968, barely a decade since the murder and only two decades removed from the Japanese occupation of Korea. The director boldly uses it to raise his voice against the death penalty and the racialism practiced by the authorities, the prejudice against Koreans being systemic to Japanese society. Of course, more than 40 years on, Japan retains the practice of institutional execution (as does the United States), but relations with Korea have improved dramatically (and even the death penalty may be reaching a tipping point in the coming years).

This is less a genre film—and therefore unique among the films chosen for this feature—and more the work of an auteur. It doesn’t attempt to deal with the issues confronting life in prison and it seems at first a satire of the death penalty and those opposed to its abolition only. But in the course of events, graduating from documentary to absurd theatre to surrealist fantasy in ever-widening gradations, Death By Hanging deals with sexual politics, race, religion, identity, a metaphysical conception of self and more. And throughout, despite the profundity of the increasingly absurd parody, Oshima insists upon its reality. He never draws us directly into the comedy/tragedy, and the film’s message is all the stronger for it. Like the public prosecutor we are kept at arm’s length to observe and afterward reflect.

This is surreal, self-aware, provocative and daring filmmaking. And Brechtian in every sense of the word. This even extends to Oshima’s use of handwritten placards at film’s open, something the playwright often incorporated into his epic theatre. And it’s interesting that this style—which emphasizes representation to induce rational self-reflection on the drama—rather than clashing with the non-fiction, documentary form, actually enhances the film’s total effect. By juxtaposing the two, conflating them even, we are led to ask ourselves if the reality is not stranger than the fiction. Oshima, in effect, begins with the concrete, the particular (the fact of capital punishment) and progresses toward the general (i.e. surreal, metaphysical), passing through realistic, though absurd, drama along the way. In the same way Koshikei progresses from indicting these particular, foolish men to indicting the entire body politic.

Unfortunately, Nagisa Oshima is largely known for his sexually exploitive (some would call pornographic) work: In the Realm of the Senses in particular and others like The Pleasures of the Flesh. Both are laudable but neither is as compelling as the four brilliant films he produced from 1967 to 1968, three of which address the colonization of Korea with Death By Hanging being by far the most inventive, intense, provocative and experimental. He undermines conventional storytelling and logic, almost constructing a unique cinematic form, while pontificating and politicizing… and beckoning our recognition.

by Matthew Mesaros, Mark Mesaros


2 A Treatise on Japanese Bawdy Songs (1967) and Three Resurrected Drunkards (1968) being the other two.