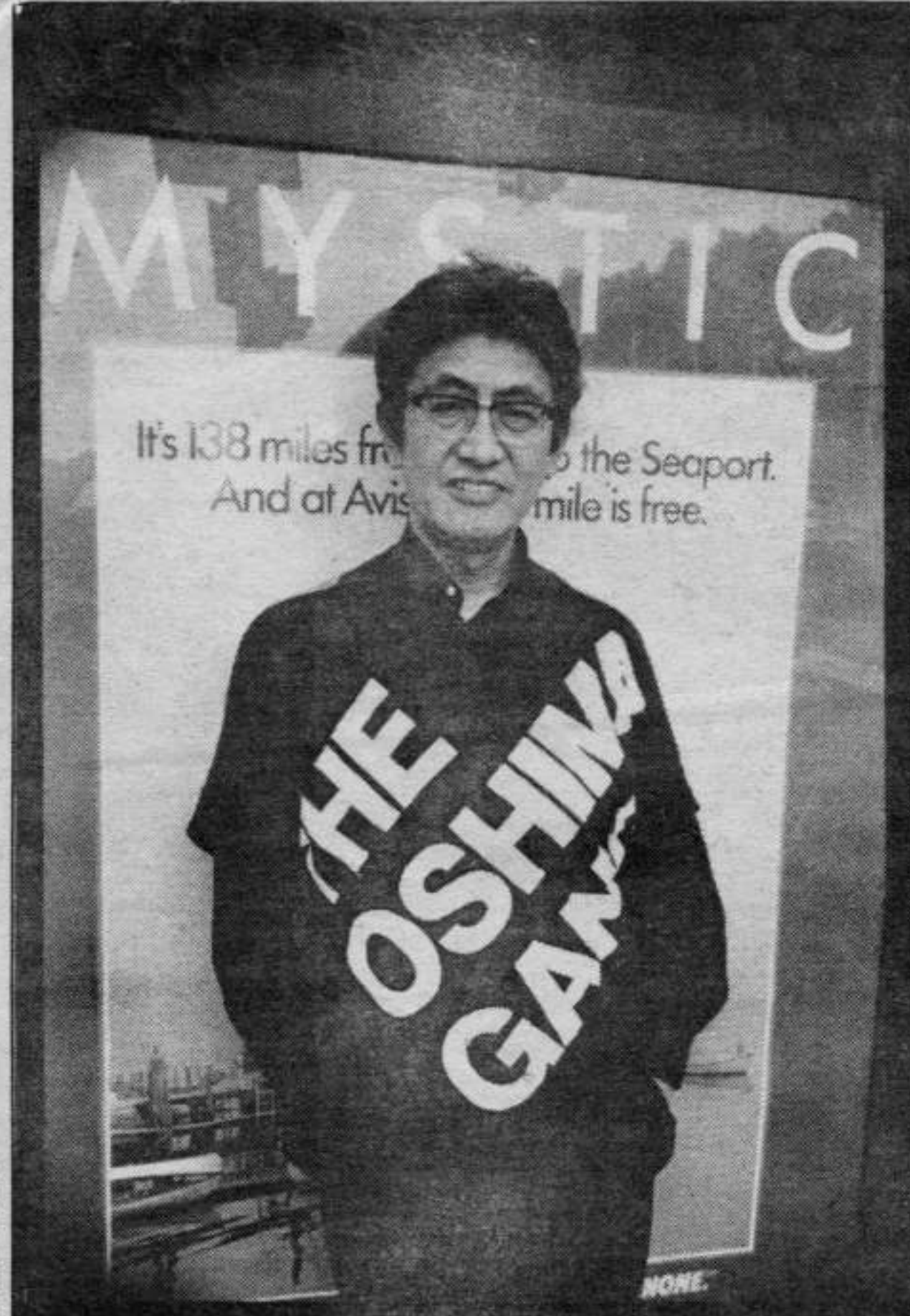


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Japanese film's once angry young man Nagisa Oshima (left); *Cruel Story of Youth's* teenage lovers, Yusuke Kawazu and Miyuki Kuwano (right)

FILM

All Shook Up

Village Voice
7/24/84

By J. Hoberman

CRUEL STORY OF YOUTH. Directed and written by Nagisa Oshima. Produced by Shochiku Film. Distributed by New Yorker Films. At the Film Forum, through July 30.

Nagisa Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth* is the sort of movie that restores your faith in tabloid expressionism. Set in a world of strident rockabilly and lurid neon lights, boldly synthetic fabrics and flashy cars, turquoise telephones and motorcycle punks, this 1960 film is less Japan's *Rebel Without a Cause* than its *Brave New World*. (Maybe it's both, like *The Cool and the Crazy* gone to *The Lost Civilization of Atlantis*.) Released briefly on the West Coast in 1961 under the suitably steamy rubric *Naked Youth*, the movie has its New York theatrical premiere today at the Film Forum and, although nearly a quarter-century old, it's weirdly contemporary—more new new wave than old new wave, the most hallucinatory youth film to open here since *Time Stands Still*.

Oshima's Fuller-like sensationalism has seldom been more apparent than in this, his second feature, made when he was 28. The opening titles are scrawled on newspapers; the colors are hotter than the soundtrack's intermittent rock 'n' roll sax; the film's sullen and sultry heroine, Makoto (Miyuki Kuwano), is like a cartoon teenage doll with her dyed bouffant hair and crinoline dresses. *Cruel Story of Youth* makes bravura use of the quintessential '50s wide-screen format (which had only recently been introduced into Japanese cinema with Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*). Oshima favors hand-held passages, skewed angles, and the sort of eccentric close-up that isolates a chin, a dangling cigarette, and a colossal phone receiver in one corner of an otherwise empty frame; he revels in startling effects, using them to map a superficially chaotic yet lethally repressive social milieu.

The film's herky-jerky plot development matches its jangling, flamboyant vi-

sual style. *Cruel Story of Youth* opens with Makoto and a girlfriend wandering around the Ginza, getting their teenage kicks by soliciting strange men to drive them home. Inevitably the virginal Makoto is attacked by one middle-aged creep only to be saved by Kiyoshi (Yusuke Kawazu), a dissolute university student who is being kept by an older married woman. A man of the world, Kiyoshi not only beats the would-be rapist but has the presence of mind to demand hush money as well.

The streets are filled with student demonstrators when next Kiyoshi and Makoto meet. The couple rent a boat on the previous night's hush money and wind up on a deserted industrial waterfront under a blazing sky. Kiyoshi offers to satisfy Makoto's sexual curiosity. She slaps him, he throws her in the dirty water. As the camera floats up into the glaring light, they have sex on the logs. It's a no-frills defloration; afterward Kiyoshi takes Makoto to his squalid room where they find another student couple in bed. The affair seems to be going nowhere—particularly when a gang of neighborhood hoodlums tries to put Makoto on the street—but, after her older sister Yuki attempts to nip young lust in the bud, rebellious Makoto moves in with Kiyoshi and promptly gets pregnant.

Kiyoshi and Makoto spend their evenings in a garish bar or else lounging about Kiyoshi's room listening to the radio. "Beethoven, bah!" he exclaims at one point, as though taking his cues from Chuck Berry. Oshima uses blaring rock 'n' roll to underscore the transitory nature of all the couple's pleasures, from motorcycling to cigarettes. When Makoto tells Kiyoshi that she's pregnant, he kisses her and they dance to the anarchic honking rockabilly for about 30 seconds, until Kiyoshi abruptly announces that "we can't have it born." In another memorable scene, they sit around drinking, Makoto in her slip, with another student couple, until the other girl gets insulted and runs out. If Kiyoshi's pad is an emblem of their illusory freedom, Makoto's ramshackle neighborhood—filled with construction sounds and iconic cement mixers—is a metaphor for the rampant growth of postwar Japan. Social welfare, such as it is, is represented by the sweaty, shabby clinic where Makoto gets an abortion. Yuki's old flame, a drunken medic in a bloodstained smock, runs the place in a dissolute parody of his idealistic younger self.

According to the Japanese critic Tadao Sato, *Cruel Story of Youth* was distinguished from other contemporary juvenile delinquency dramas (a genre known as *taiyozoku*, or "sun tribe" films) in that

its protagonists were portrayed "neither as sad victims of society nor as daring rebels." Actually Kiyoshi and Makoto are both victims and rebels, up to a point. Their affair establishes the outer limit of acceptable sexual behavior. Indeed, Makoto—more victimized and hence more rebellious—is socially ostracized for her sexual acting out. Although the couple are resolutely apolitical, *Cruel Story of Youth* creates a dialectic that could take its subtitle from Wilhelm Reich's 1932 essay "Politicizing the Sexual Problem of Youth." It's apparent that their passion will be thwarted as long as things remain the way they are.

The film is as filled with unexamined sexual frustration as it is fueled by political rage. In Oshima's central metaphor, the couple become the willing agents of their own reification, using the hitchhiking ploy Makoto once played for thrills as a means to get money. In other words, they create a scam that permits them to turn a profit, punish society, and romantically (at least at first) recapitulate the way they met.

Although Makoto and Kiyoshi aggravate the film's various ineffectual adults by flaunting their romantic nihilism, the world of *Cruel Story of Youth* is so pervaded with cynicism, corruption, and sexual exploitation that ultimately they become the most innocent characters in the film. In despair at the "moral bankruptcy" of postwar Japan, Makoto's ineffectual father dodges confrontation, rushing off to work rather than asking his daughter where she's been all night. The sister and doctor who represent Oshima's generation, were part of the student demonstrations of the early '50s and have made an unhappy adjustment to the status quo, acquiescing in the blighting of their youthful dreams. "We have no dreams, so we can't see them destroyed," Kiyoshi boasts at one point. After they're arrested by the police—one of their marks having turned them in—he maintains that his only crime was getting caught.

This is a key assertion, because as Kiyoshi leaves the police station (released in the custody of his former mistress whose husband is a business associate of Makoto's mark), his sense of social justice is confirmed. On the steps, he encounters the idealistic doctor, who's just been arrested as an abortionist. So much for political idealism; the remainder of the film ties everything into a neat noose. Makoto has been sent to a juvenile detention home. Her father and sister come for her but she runs back to Kiyoshi. He says goodbye to his mistress (again) and goes with Makoto. The lovers jump into a cab but, of course, have no money to pay the driver. (The mistress,

who has been following them in her Buick, promptly appears and ironically foots the bill.) Their hopeless situation dawning on them, Kiyoshi and Makoto wander aimlessly through the Ginza. "The world makes us into tools," Kiyoshi finally announces and exercises his male prerogative by vanishing into the crowd.

In the end, Kiyoshi is surrounded by the hoodlum gang he's been dodging all film, while Makoto has reverted zombie-like to her former means of excitement and been picked up hitchhiking by a middle-aged lech. As Kiyoshi is beaten to death he screams, and, in a haunting travesty of Japanese romantic convention, the faraway Makoto "hears" him. She jumps from the speeding car to her doom. Oshima tracks slowly along her torso, ironically superimposing Kiyoshi's opposite—as blunt and classic a closer as any Kabuki tragedy could provide.

For an American audience, *Cruel Story of Youth* is a fascinating example of Americanization in action. Although it's more likely that Oshima's cinematic models were Andrzej Wajda or François Truffaut than Hollywood action flicks, he's compelled to use American cars, clothes, and music as emblems of the modern world. The film is at once Americanized and anti-American, and its political complexity is a measure of Oshima's own. Born in 1932, the director came of age during the general strike of 1947 and was the leader of a left-wing student association at the height of the Korean War, his first films appearing during an equally strained and crucial period in U.S.-Japanese relations.

Nineteen-sixty was a year that proved as productive for Oshima personally as it was a watershed in the history of postwar Japan. The new U.S.-Japan Security Treaty—effectively locking Japan into the American sphere of influence—was announced in January, with President Eisenhower scheduled to visit in June. Mass demonstrations erupted that spring as *Cruel Story of Youth* was being shot, and Oshima uses documentary footage of students snake-dancing in the street. (In another topical touch, Makoto and Kiyoshi go to the movies and see newsreels of student demonstrations in South Korea, where the dictatorship of Syngman Rhee was toppled in April.) By the time *Cruel Story of Youth* was released in June, Eisenhower's trip had been long since canceled in the face of the escalating tumult.

Despite the largest mass movement—an alliance of students, intellectuals, university professors (including 75 per cent of the faculty at Tokyo University), housewives, and unions—and the largest work stoppage (five and a half million

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workers) in Japanese history, the security pact was ratified. This defeat notwithstanding, Oshima was consoled when *Cruel Story of Youth* proved a sensation. ("Through *Cruel Story of Youth*, Oshima became the darling of the age," Tadao Sato dryly observed.) Although saturated with the political tensions of the period, the film was identified with the current cycle of "sun tribe" films. As a corrective, Oshima quickly produced a follow-up, *The Sun's Burial*, in which—even less romantic than the protagonists of *Cruel Story of Youth*—his young subjects were followers of a right-wing militarist. Shot on location in Osaka's biggest slum, the film rivals *Los Olvidados* in the ferocity of its vision, filled with routine rapes, murders, and rumbles.

Immediately after *The Sun's Burial* was released in fall, 1960, Oshima began production of his precocious masterpiece, *Night and Fog in Japan*, a scalding portrayal of the failure of two generations of left-wing idealists—his own and that of 1960—which makes painfully explicit all that can be read between the lines of his previous two films. Banned after four days (ostensibly because of the assassination of Socialist Party leader Inejiro Asanuma, but actually because of its bitter politics and unconventional film form), the movie immediately terminated Oshima's career at the Shochiku studio. Now that *Cruel Story of Youth* has belatedly arrived, one hopes that *The Sun's Burial* and *Night and Fog in Japan* won't be kept on ice another 25 years. ■