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# Lot of Pain in 'The Senses'

By FRANK RICH

"In the Realm of the Senses," Nagisa Oshima's explicit account of an obsessional sado-masochistic love affair, has aroused more advance interest than any other movie in this year's New York Film Festival. The talk about this film began in Cannes last spring, where civilized people in fancy clothes pushed and shoved each other to attend screenings, and it climaxed yesterday, with the U.S. Customs Bureau's reprehensible efforts to seize the movie which has delayed its American premiere scheduled for tonight at Alice Tully Hall.

Well, I hate to burst balloons — especially balloons as large as this one—but the sad news I have to report is that "In the Realm of the Senses" doesn't begin to merit all the fuss that has surrounded it. This movie is merely a stultifying failure by a somewhat less than first-rate Japanese director, and it isn't worthy of extended discussion by serious people. To watch this film is the kind of chore that makes me feel, this week at least, that I've earned my pay check.

The movie's story is based on an actual 1936 incident, and it has to do with a gangster (Tatsuya Fuji) and a geisha girl (Eiko Matsuda) whose passion for each other is so great that it literally consumes them.

## Marathon Bouts

During most of the film, we watch the couple conduct marathon copulation bouts that leave them little time for routine human activities (such as sleeping)—and, as the film and their affair progress, the protagonists' love-making becomes insistently more baroque. For these lovers, sexual love is everything: Their bizarre connubial pyrotechnics are a natural and inevitable expression of their intense feelings for each other — even when their sexual pleasure takes the form of pain, and, finally, death.

Certainly sado-masochism is a suitable subject for a movie; it has already been the subject of a great film, Bunuel's "Belle de Jour." But Oshima doesn't have the talent, intelligence or empathy to accomplish his mission. Like a kid with a new toy, he's been carried away by the sheer fun and audacity of filming hard-core sex sequences—more of a novelty in Japan than it is here—and, along the way, he's forgotten to make the movie he apparently intended to make.

"In the Realm of the Senses" fails at every level, from the most mundane on up. The characters are haphazardly sketched and colorlessly acted. Story points in the very spare plot are fumbled to the point of confusion. The film's style—which attempts a ritualistic Japanese formalism—falls apart at its highly visible seams. (There are two brief, thrown-in fantasy seq-

## 'In the Realm of the Senses'

Executive producer, Koji Wakamatsu. Producer, Anatole Dauman. Directed by Nagisa Oshima from his own screenplay. Cast includes: Biko Matsuda, Tatsuya Fuji. 105 minutes. Not rated by MPAA.

uences that are not only aesthetically inorganic, but fail to communicate the psychic information intended.)

The Mashima-esque connections between the couple's lovemaking rituals and the rituals of Japanese militarism are hinted at but never explored.

## Never Elucidates

As a result, the movie never elucidates the strange, claustrophobic, sexually-defined universe of the lovers; the gangster and geisha girl's sexual activities unfold in a human, spiritual and cultural vacuum. In the end, the sex scenes of "In the Realm of the Senses" have to be their own reward, and they are not—unless, perhaps, if you are part of the increasingly fashionable s-m crowd.

For me, there were only a couple of erotic moments, and what aroused my ardor, to be genteel about it, was the shape of the heroine's body rather than any of the acts that body participated in. Those acts—which include sodomy, slapping, and some more gruelingly rough stuff—do amount to a mini-course in the manners of s-m, but, except for one bit involving some sushi, there isn't anything here that hasn't been explicitly depicted in one of several hard-core films to play New York over the past year.

Even when Oshima reaches for shock effects, he doesn't get anywhere. We've seen self-inflicted cuts before in "The Night Porter," orgasm by strangulation in Chabrol's "Just Before Nightfall" and gory on-screen castration in Ferreri's "The Last Woman."

Maybe Oshima doesn't invoke these images purely to shock—presumably they are meant to be moving manifestations of a genuine, if perverse, human relationship—but it seems that way because his movie provides no emotional or intellectual context for the fireworks.

## Tedious Film

The real reason why this tepid and tedious film has stimulated so much brouhaha is not so much due to its routine hardcore footage anyway; people go berserk about the movie simply because it's a hardcore film that happens to bear the name of a serious (if minor) director and the imprimatur of the film festivals where it's been shown.

It isn't difficult to figure out why film festivals—particularly the New York Film Festival—embrace this picture, either: Ever since

"Last Tango in Paris" indicated that sex and film could mix to produce powerful art, every faddist in the film world has been anxious to discover that next breakthrough film.

"In the Realm of the Senses" isn't it — anymore than "Exhibition," the low-brow hardcore documentary in last year's festival was—and it, too, will pass. With-

in a year, I'm sure, Oshima's movie (in a dubbed version) will take its place alongside the other recent s-m exploitation films (from "Snuff" to "The Story of Joanna" to "Drum") on Broadway.

After that, this movie—like such past hot properties as "I Am Curious (Yellow)," "Dear John," and Hedy Lamarr's "Ecstasy" — will be but an item for a trivia quiz.