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# L'EMPIRE DES SENS

(in the REALM OF THE SENSES)

in the REALM OF THE SENSES

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Written and directed by  
NAGISA OSHIMA

with

Eiko MATSUDA (*in the role of Sada*)

and

Tatsuya FUJI (*in the role of Kichizo*)

Decors and costumes  
Jusho TODA

Photographer  
Hideo ITO

Lighting  
Kenichi OKAMOTO

Sound  
Tetsuo YASUDA

Editor  
Keiichi URAOKA

Music  
Minoru MIKI

and

Traditional Japanese Songs

General Coordination  
SHIBATA ORGANISATION INC.

CO-PRODUCED BY  
ARGOS FILMS PARIS  
OSHIMA PRODUCTIONS TOKYO

in the REALM OF THE SENSES

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Official selection in Film Festivals in 1976 :

Cannes (non-competitive)  
 Locarno  
 Taormina  
 London  
 New York  
 Chicago (Grand Prix)

Official selection in Film Festivals in 1977 :

Los Angeles  
 Sydney

Chicago International Film Festival : Grand Prix.

REALM OF THE SENSES was awarded the prize of the best film of 1976 in England for its originality and imagination.



AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDRE PIEYRE DE MANDIARGUES  
BY ORNELLA VOLTA

L'EMPIRE DES SENS is the first film by Oshima that I have seen : it gives me a great desire to know this director's work better, since he seems to me to be the most fascinating director of the new Japanese cinema.

L'EMPIRE DES SENS is a totally erotic film. To say that is not to state an affirmation, because nowadays the adjective "erotic" is employed frequently for any common sexual manifestation, for everything that the French with their beautiful language call "smutty talk", all that well brought-up call "cunt".

Watching this film I thought, almost all the time, of Mishima and his great book "L'Ordealie des Roses". In L'EMPIRE DES SENS it is at an ordeal of sex that one assists. A man, in the same way as Saint Sebastian is pinned to the tree, is rivetted by his sex to the woman who loves him and who will mortally strike him with her implacable love.

It is almost too obvious to quote, in relation to this film, George Bataille's famous definition of eroticism being the approbation of life until death. Certain scenes, and I am thinking particularly of the one in which the mistress forces her lover to make love to the old "geisha", who reminds him of his mother's corpse, seem to me not only very akin to Bataille's thinking, but even directly inspired by his work. The significance of such a scene in fact goes far beyond the notion of communion with the forebears, which is part of the Japanese religious tradition. "L'Histoire de l'Oeil", and "Le Bleu du Ciel" can help us to understand this better.

The real relationship between Oshima and Bataille is such that the only question that should be asked, it seems to me, by the critics, the general public and the magistrature is the following : whether or not we consider Georges Bataille to be one of the greatest geniuses of this century, one of the greatest classical writers of French literature, one of the greatest philosophers of sexuality, and one of the major exponents of the burning question, what is eroticism ? If, as it is to be hoped, the answer is yes, then one has to agree that L'EMPIRE DES SENS is the most noble illustration that can be given to Bataille's work.

Watching this pageant of images of an intensity and an incomparable force, I also thought of Balthus' painting, and not just because Balthus is married to a young Japanese who is one of the most beautiful and intelligent women I have met, but because in his work it would seem that Balthus has a lordly and feudal conception of love, somewhat like that of Tristan and Isolde, and which at the same time is specifically Japanese.

In passing it should be noted that the role of the lover's wife in the story is to personify the limit to be overcome, to signify the forbidding of violation so that love can flower in death. The wife plays the same role here as Canon Fulbert plays with Abelard and Heloise. She personifies the condemnation without which there would be no tragic awakening.



When the young woman, Sada, feeds her lover with food that she has put in her womb, one thinks of Pierre Jean Jouve and of the important chapter of his book "Dans les années profondes", in which the two future lovers, exchange flowers which they have bathed with their sexual liquids. However, Oshima goes even further. For him it is a matter of the nutritive sex and its consumption, as the end of the film proves.

Lacan, I am told, claims that the film is one of the most chaste he has ever seen. I agree with him. Eroticism enlightened by death such as Bataille conceives or preaches, is, in fact, absolutely chaste, desperately pure. I do not think that "Madame Edwarda" excited even the most excitable of schoolboys. It appears that one of the most successful films of recent years, "Les Valseuses", which I have not seen and certainly will not, has sexually excited at least half of the French population, women included. It will certainly not be the case of L'EMPIRE DES SENS which could, on the contrary, be recommended by the regional bishoprics as a wholly salutary instrument of terror. The glacial nature of eroticism, such as it appears in this film, comes from the nobility, the pureness, the extreme simplicity with which the question of love is considered, the absence of any frills, which places it, I've already said, on the level of Tristan and Isolde.

Throughout the film, the young woman plays with a knife. The man meets her for the first time, when she is brandishing a knife at his wife. Later, when they live together, every day as she shaves him she shows him the blade that will serve in the last rite. The surprise, if surprise there be in the film, is that the ritual killing of the lover is not with a knife, which is used for the ablation of the sex. I insist on the word ablation here, rather than castration, because it is not a question of deprivation, of a diminution, on the contrary. When the woman holds up the man's sex like a torch - the sex she has just cut off - one feels that she has achieved the ultimate objective of love. The woman's soul seems to be wholly concentrated in the man's sex.

What seems very Japanese to me, and which is very beautiful, is the representation of the sexual pleasure of the woman, that the Japanese knew and know how to show with astonishing intensity. The famous amatory engravers, Utamaro and Hokusai, have thousands and thousands of times drawn the face of a woman embellished by sexual ecstasy, transfigured by the wave of pleasure, exalted by the orgasm. It is quite surprising that until now the influence of Utamaro and Hokusai has not been felt on the Japanese cinema - to my knowledge, I am not an expert. It could be said that Oshima consciously used these splendid watercolours and wood-engravings for the numerous close-ups of faces, which never cease to recall the beauty of Japanese 18th century engravings.

It is admirable that it should be a man, the director Oshima, who shows such veneration for feminine eroticism. In L'EMPIRE DES SENS, the virile character, sexually abnormal because he is in a state of almost perpetual erection, is little by little reduced to the role of object. Towards the end of the film, he is ready to die, he only asks to be finished off. The desire to possess fully the object of her love, the fear of killing her male, seems to me a normal female fantasy, and I might add that nothing can flatter a man as much as such desire, which unfortunately is shown much less often than one might wish ...



The connection between the sex and the knife inevitably refers to Sade. We are tempted to see a definite allusion in the first name of Sada, chosen by Oshima for his heroine. However, this is a fairly common name in Japan, and I consider that one should rather see in this coincidence a sign of natural sympathy or spontaneous agreement between Sade and the sensitivity of the Japanese people, perhaps because of the aristocratic refinement of the Marquis' eroticism, when one thinks of Japan, the notion of aristocracy always arises. The Japanese masses with their canned foods, cluttered with cameras and transistor radios seem to be as common and ill-mannered as are the American masses. However, there are in Japan a few artists, a few writers, a few poets whose position is incomparably above the rest of the country. Oshima is one of these great lords.

It is particularly interesting that the story of Sada was not invented, but concerns an event which really took place in Japan in 1936. It is significant that this young woman, by her act, became a national heroine in Japan, a sort of Joan of Arc - and I must insist on the comparison. That it can be seen as a forewarning of the acts of the Kamikases, I would not deny. Another connection, if not relationship, between Joan of Arc, Mishima and the very present-day Oshima.

André Pieyre de Mandiargues.

## INTERVIEW WITH NAGISA OSHIMA

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Question : You had thought of calling your film in Japan "Corrida of Love". It is, therefore, in your mind, a killing ?

Answer : For a long time I had been thinking of a project based on the famous story of Sada. Anatole Dauman, the producer I admire the most in the world, one day suggested this title which determined the making of the film.

Q. : What relation do you establish between physical passion, enjoyment born of sexual pleasure and death ?

A. : An indissoluble link. In the ecstasy of love, the cry is : "I'm dying".

Q. : Did you think of Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud or of Sade, who inevitably come to mind because of Sada ?

A. : I'm too lazy to have re-read them before writing my script.

Q. : The action of the film is presented like an act of uninterrupted love : only the places where it is carried out change in accordance with an itinerary which allows no halt for the two lovers. There are 20 different decors, 20 rooms of love, cloistered places like an arena and consecrated to a deadly rite. Are you, like we are, convinced of the unicity of your action ?

A. : As you state so pertinently, I wanted gestures and words emanating from one language : the sexual language. Had it been different, I would consider my film a failure. The chosen space is certainly that of Love and of Death, and to me it covers the whole of Japan.

Q. : You will not allow us to look at Sada as a murderer. The man, her victim, accepts and even provokes his own end. Going further than mere anecdote you seem to celebrate Mad Love as a religion of the Absolute.

A. : In connection with Sada, the word "murderer" shocks me as it would any Japanese. If, in the beginning, Sada and Kichizo seem to be libertines, they move towards a form of sanctification, and I hope that everyone will understand it.

Q. : "The Young Boy" and "The Hanging" refer to very recent events : "L'Empire des Sens", is based on an event that took place 40 years ago. What is its relativity for you today ?

A. : Facts lose nothing of their relativity as long as they awake in us some echo, even if they belong to another century.

Q. : Some people will reproach you for having given up your social and political commitments.

A. : Is it not extremely significant to show one's indifference to politics ?



- Q. : What remains of the principal theme of your previous films ?  
Childhood dreams - Japanese reality ? Can it be found in the oedipal relationships which unite these near-orphans Sada and Kichizo, to sexual partners older than themselves ?
- A. : I do not intend to deny this form of psychoanalytical approach that you are free to use in relation to my film. It is your responsibility. I would, however, say : does one know what to do with one's life when young ? Later, one ends up by perceiving something, and it is precisely the case of my characters who state their desires, in opposition to society.
- Q. : What, in your opinion, are the key scenes ?
- A. : Let each spectator answer for me.
- Q. : To avoid any misunderstanding, could you define the meaning of the words "geisha" and "prostitute" in the Japan of 1936 and today ?
- A. : The word "geisha" implies very different professional categories. It means "sell one's art" but at the bottom of the social scale it means "sell one's body". I should add : according to ideas specific to our country, the world of sensuality is far from compromising to human values. This notion of "koshokou" which combines "know how to appreciate" and "know how to love" was never neglected. In the past, it was even a condition for being a gentleman. In the 10th century the "novel of ghenji" founded the Japanese aristocratic society, and for the first time, because of it, a sexual culture claimed "to know how to love". Polygamy and polyandry were paramount in this aristocratic society. This refinement in erotic morals ended during the brutal era of the "Samourais", but it was revived during the "Edo era", that is between the 17th and 19th centuries. Of course, such a culture was the privilege of the ruling classes, who practised it in houses of pleasure. Houses which were not devoted to shame - absolutely not. Monogamy was imposed during the "Meiji" period encouraging the economical modernisation of the country, based on an imported model. The beautiful tradition of "know how to love" fades away and dies out just before the outbreak of the second world war. Sada and Kichizo are the survivors of the sexual tradition which has lived on and which, to me, is admirable Japanese.
- Q. : The end of the film recalls that 4 days after her crime Sada was found resplendent with happiness and holding in her hands her lover's sexual organs. Where did this information come from ?
- A. : All the police reports state this fact, and they inspired the last shot of my film without which it would be false from start to finish.
- Q. : Your dialogue is short ... pointillistic. You force the spectator to see, to feel, to think. For each person the film becomes more personal, more intimate.
- A. : I preferred to use short dialogues, and the French subtitles reflect very well the conciseness. After all the act of love does not need words.



- Q. : Mad Love seems to find its accomplishment in the final castration and perhaps it would be appropriate to bring up the idea of sin in the Christian sense ?
- A. : Certainly. And I hope that Kichizo does not evoke for you the image of Crucified Man.
- Q. : Who is part of your spiritual family ?
- A. : All those who wanted or want to change Society and those who wanted and want to change themselves. But, choosing between famous people and those who are not, I prefer the company of the latter.
- Q. : "Oshima" aesthetics naturally call on the use of decor, costumes, music and you are always helped by the same decorator.
- A. : In the beginning I considered myself someone who wanted to destroy all aesthetics and yet, from film to film, I have discovered my own aesthetics, particularly since my meeting with the eminent decorator, Jusho Toda. If I have to explain myself, it would be a mixture between a form of asceticism and an ineffably epicurean feeling. If I resume myself in one shot it would be a flame on a black, or a very dark background. In this way "L'Empire des Sens" deliberately shows the limits to which these aesthetics have brought me.
- Q. : In fact, and it can only be deliberately, for the first time you have shut yourself up in a physical and even sexual action, being aware of all the misunderstandings that might arise.
- A. : It is true that I felt totally free to make this film as I wanted.
- Q. : In Japan, Sada is a popular figure. What does she represent today and why dedicate this film to her ?
- A. : The name of Sada is so popular in Japan, that it is enough to say it, to raise the question of the most serious sexual taboos. It is quite natural that a Japanese artist would want to dedicate his work to this marvellous woman. Thanks to the magnificent collaboration of the actors and the means provided by the producers, I do not think I betrayed her image.
- Q. : Do you obey any axiom, any rule ?
- A. : I have always dreamt of mixing dreams and reality.
- Q. : What is the subject of your next film ?
- A. : Ask Mr Anatole Dauman.



## IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES

First one thinks that Juliette, Sade's fascinating Juliette, who demanded pleasure, arranged orgies and killed her lovers, has reappeared on the other side of the world, in the Japan of geishas and flowering cherry trees. It is not so. Sada, the young prostitute and the silent Kichizo, who smiled even at death, are the lost heroes of another terrible and unforgettable story. A story of mad love, in which the desire for love and for death are the same desire, the same pleasure.

The priests of ancient religions, forgotten through two thousand years of Christianity, claimed that the gods have hidden from mortal life's supreme happiness : the happiness of death. What is hidden is never entirely lost. The madness of the senses sets men on its trail, and the best shared thing in the world is not good sense, which refuses death, but mad love, which accepts it and, at times, demands it.

Popular language speaks of "small death", which destroys lovers. All the images of total pleasure are of desolation and of death : burning, drowning, destruction. What girl has not one day said to her lover : "I would like to die in your arms" ? What lover has not begged : "Do with me as you please" ? Yes, even the most ordinary lovers are for a moment seized by this tragic call to feel trapped. They escape. Sada and Kichizo did not escape.

Brilliant and a hundred-times consenting victims, they were exemplary victims, who offered themselves with delight to their downfall. We are talking about physical love, about pleasure. These terms are superficial to describe, without ever explaining, the atrocious and fascinating mystery through which the body submits to the soul, elating and destroying it. Contemplating the gentle murderess Sada, holding in her small hand, like a trophy or a relic, the severed sex of her lover, one thinks of the Bacchae who cut up Orpheus. They ran screaming through

the woods and prairies of the mountains of Thessaly, while the terrified shepherds ran away. For three days Sada erred in Tokyo. That was forty years ago, and without shouting she has become as famous as the Bacchae. Today as her double moves on the screen, she constantly holds our attention. It is beyond common sense and makes one shiver.

There is a feeling, perhaps, of the renaissance of horror of the myths left by feminine religions : in which love and death were solely in women's power. The body and mind tremble at the sight of love in death, both desired and received. This is a sacred horror.

DOMINIQUE AURY

Dominique AURY has been for several years  
the editor of the famous NOUVELLE REVUE FRANCAISE  
(GALLIMARD) and has also written many well-known books  
published by Gallimard.



It is a continuously and spectacularly erotic work ... Attractively and intelligently played by Eiko Matsuda and Tatsuya Fuji ... Oshima orchestrates a sort of counterpoint of feelings, with giggling gaiety as the first main theme but with a minor and agitated theme of frenzy insinuating itself from below and growing louder and more menacing. Almost from the beginning there is an intimation of violence and death ... What has won the movie, the regard of women even more than of some men is that the geisha is seen as a symbol of equal sexual rights... It is unmistakably a pioneering work of the movie arts, the first by a major international talent to deal with eroticism in personal and nonexploitational terms.

CHARLES CHAMPLIN - LOS ANGELES TIMES

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Extraordinary. To begin with, it looks marvelous. Every frame might have been based on a print by one of the 18th Century Japanese masters of erotic art. And the performances, by Eiko Matsuda and Tatsuya Fuji, have an intensity beyond belief ... In the Realm of the Senses is the movie that all of us who have advocated an open screen have dreamed about - a film that is at once erotic, meaningful and true.

ARTHUR KNIGHT - THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

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The most convincing and compelling portrait of an overpowering sexual and romantic obsession that I have seen on the screen.

STEPHEN FARBER - NEW WEST

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An extraordinary powerful film ... Oshima ranks among the most important living directors : his film may be the first to succeed in placing explicit sex in a serious context. It deserves an audience equally daring to its achievement ... An adult film in every way, and a masterful achievement for Oshima.

CHRISTINE NIELAND - CHICAGO DAILY NEWS

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Two superb leading performances by Eiko Matsuda and Tatsuya Fuji ...  
A superior film about intense physical love. This is a mature, beautifully made motion picture. Nothing about it is sensational or crude.

GENE SISKEL - CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Working in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade, the French philosopher Georges Bataille and the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima, Oshima has dramatized an orgiastic, obsessive affair with the gravity and visual elegance of a Japanese woodprint and has obtained from his leading actors, Eiko Matsuda and Tatsuya Fuji, performances of intense naturalness.

CHARLES MICHENER - NEWSWEEK *(after CANNES FILM FESTIVAL)*

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Oshima has used the saga of Sada to make a superlatively beautiful, disturbing film ... His film has a controlled, somber violence. It has a formal beauty of its own, reminiscent of the eighteenth-century masters of Japanese erotic art, Utamaro and Hokusai.

EDWARD BEHR - NEWSWEEK *(after CANNES FILM FESTIVAL)*

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The festival's one real sensation never made it to a public showing ... Absorbing ... Powerful ... There is melancholy poetry and a humane empathy ... And there is beauty and terror.

JACK KROLL - NEWSWEEK *(after NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL)*

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A work quite without prurience, as direct and pure in its expression as an erotic drawing by Utamaro or Hokusai... Complex, rigorous ... Unique in the cinema as the expression of a total erotic passion.

DAVID ROBINSON - THE TIMES

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This is a remarkable work of the imagination, a pioneering film from a director with impeccable credentials. And he has made as pure a study of an obsessive physical relationship as could be fashioned without denying the basic power and logic of sex itself ... In the Realm of the Senses is not a sex film. It is a film about sex ... It seems to me so beautifully and purely achieved that the only real obscenity would be to ban it ... The film is a landmark of its kind and will be remembered long after our present controversies about censorship have been forgotten or dismissed out of mind... I regard In the Realm of the Senses as a major work of art. A sincere and brilliant film.

DEREK MALCOLM - THE GUARDIAN

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A remarkable film, a work quite without prurience. Undoubtedly a true work of art.

TOM MILNE - THE OBSERVER

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A work of outstanding talent and complete integrity.

NIGEL ANDREWS - THE FINANCIAL TIMES

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A remarkable work of art, of startling beauty.

DILYS POWELL - THE SUNDAY TIMES

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It is a work that transcends its subject of human sexuality to become what may well be a major work of art.

TOM HUTCHINSON - SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

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ANATOLE DAUMAN  
(Producer)  

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For twenty years the history of independent French cinema has been written in the wake of Argos Films. The newcomer, Anatole Dauman, has made his way through this closed universe, this vast academic school, this professional near-monopoly : the cinema of the late forties. An Ariadne was necessary in this black labyrinth, as was immense courage.

Alain Resnais and surrealism were Anatole Dauman's Ariadne. That is why it is not surprising to see Argos Films move from "Night and Fog" to "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" to "Muriel".

In 1957 the Minotaur was killed, the true cinema was everywhere at Argos. Feature film followed feature film, Everything that was difficult was attempted. The difficulty was not only "Muriel", "Two or Three Things I Know About Her" (Jean-Luc Godard), "Au Hasard Balthazar" (Robert Bresson), but it was also continuing to show confidence both in youth and in everything that existed marginally, while at the same time remaining faithful to short films - Chris Marker, Ruspoli, Prévert, Joris Ivens - and to animation. This latter cinema form had been condemned by French production, when it might have reaped the fruits of an art which was at the origin of the renaissance of contemporary animated filmmaking.

Argos Films, despite the silence to which they are condemned, or to which the best have condemned themselves, continues to live while once again preparing the future.

Henri Langlois  
Hommage to ARGOS FILMS  
CINEMATHEQUE FRANCAISE 1970.