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Cinema

Gavin Millar

Act of love

In an interview, the Japanese director, Nagisa Oshima, makes a clear distinction between a period of 'refinement in erotic morals' and 'the brutal period of the Samourais' which brought it to an end. He speaks of the idea of 'koshokou', which combines the notion of 'know how to appreciate' with that of 'know how to love' and stresses that possessing that quality was once part of the condition of being a gentleman in Japanese society. Certainly, it was a mark of high culture, and he is pleased to celebrate the legacy of the tradition in the persons of the two lovers of his extraordinary film, *Ai No Corrida* (also known as *L'Empire des Sens*, at the Gate Cinema Club).

It is extraordinary not only because Oshima is a fine craftsman who surefootedly produces a succession of delicate and precise images, but, notoriously, because it is the most explicit description of sexual passion ever in the serious cinema. It tells a true story, apparently, of a servant girl, Sada, who falls—in love, I suppose is the word—overnight, with her master, Kichizo, in an industrial Japanese town in 1936. They begin to spend more and more time together until their obsession prevents them from leaving their lodging-house rooms long enough to allow the servants in to clean. The sober, indeed intense tone does not preclude the odd sly joke: an affronted housekeeper leapt upon by a temporarily alone Kichizo, and protestingly welcoming the diversion; more sympathetic maids slyly enjoying the *corrida* from the corridor.

For the love affair is, as the word suggests, a fight to the death, and this is where it is likely to leave its Anglo-Saxon audiences puzzled, and most aware of their separateness from the intriguing culture to which Oshima's work is a sure and polished guide. Sada and Kichizo slide gradually into a delirious sado-masochistic ritual in

order, it seems, to prove ever more vividly the presence of one another's bodies to themselves. Sada starts, with Kichizo's willing co-operation, to strangle him while in the act of love. Eventually, still with his co-operation, she succeeds completely. We are meant to see in this triumphant defeat an exultation which somehow transcends his death and her loneliness.

If it fails to do this for all Western audiences, it is not for any lack on Oshima's part. The beauty of the images, the scrupulousness of the feeling, the control, even to the very tenderness of the violence, ensures that *Ai No Corrida* is the most chaste of erotic films, if chastity in this context can be seen as a high regard for the loved partner, combined with an utter lack of voyeurist appeal to the spectator.

There is an unusual bridge passage around the middle of the film in which the couple are seen out of doors; once in the industrial landscape (an extremely beautiful shot of a clearly 'ugly' scene) and once as Kichizo unheedingly passes a column of soldiers outside an inn. The fleetingness of the references to the outside world are a reminder that Oshima sees his two protagonists as revolutionaries; not rebels in any narrow, political sense, but people in revolt against their society and its sense of priorities. Whatever relationship the actions of Sada and Kichizo have with women's liberation, say, or the tradition of heroic martyrdom, must be left for further reflection. At any rate, Oshima is anxious to point out that both Sada and Kichizo are popular figures in Japan even today, and that for him, these two who 'knew how to appreciate', even to the point of death, are heroes.

The old wizard, Luis Buñuel, would hardly be likely to be caught proposing heroes, especially in the ridiculous business of love, even if *amour fou* has provided the main source of much of his work. Fernando Rey as Mathieu, a rich bourgeois, is the victim of the plague in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (Academy), an entertainment as cynical and delightful as any we have had from Buñuel in years. Mathieu relates the story of his stormy and frustrating affair with a servant-girl, Conchita, in a hilarious send-up of the flashback, from a railway-carriage full of typical Buñuel grotesques. Throughout the teasing action (in which the girl is played, bewilderingly and without explanation, by two actresses) bombs go off and outrages are committed, reportedly by a unit called 'The Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus'. Buñuel is the only director who could thus cock a snook

at the Church and terrorism without appearing either self-righteous or reactionary. In fact, he continues, despite fashion, to be utterly himself, and to prove by this latest excursion, told with all his old narrative skill, that he is as firm in his belief as ever that we are all the victims of our obsessive drives, whether we call ourselves presidents or psychoanalysts, and that the noblest emotion we can muster, poor thing that it generally is, is *amour fou*. One wonders what he would make of Oshima's film.

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