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“Self-revolutions of everyday life”: the politics of ATG

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ABSTRACT

In 1968, Japan’s own “season of politics” was full of strikes, protests, and university closures. Much of the exigence behind students’ revolutionary fervor revolved around a “self-revolution in everydayness,” as activists sought to criticize capitalist consumerism and imperialism, and aimed to transform their own depoliticized consciousness. The films of the Art Theater Guild (ATG) reflect these desires. This paper argues that the films produced by ATG are a deeply political film cycle united by a “house style” which serves to destabilize and dehabituate our perception, and echoes the student protesters in their desire for a self-revolution of everyday life.

KEYWORDS

ATG; Japanese film; avant-garde; political avant-garde; ANPO; capitalism; revolution; 1968; experimental film; protest

While France was engulfed in the political and cultural revolutions of May ’68, Japan was similarly swept up in what is commonly called the “season of politics,” full of strikes, protests, and university closures. However, as Yuriko Furuhashi notes, it was also the “season of image politics”: politics and media were increasingly intertwined, and young Japanese protesters were especially image-conscious – for example, wearing construction helmets that would look especially striking on the color televisions that began to increasingly populate middle-class households.¹ Yet these “image politics” were not restricted to imagery of protest or political actions; Japanese activist youth were also themselves vehement consumers of media – whether of television programs, the increasingly-adult *gekiga* comics which populated bookstores and convenience store shelves, and, especially, political avant-garde films, shown in outlets such as Scorpio Theater, Shinjuku Bunka, and the Sogetsu Art Center.

Just as Japanese youth radicalized in the late 1960s, so did Japan’s cinematic tradition, which reached unprecedented avant-garde heights during this period due to a multitude of industrial changes: the collapse of the studio system, alongside the appearance of new industrial genres such as Pink Film, the creation of television animation, and new modes of distribution and production of radically experimental works. The Art Theater

Guild, or ATG, emerged as a vital locus for the creation and distribution of some of the most unabashedly experimental works in Japanese cinematic history. ATG, an independent international film distributor, formed in 1962 as a coalition of ten small and medium-sized theaters, and became a production company in 1967. In its late-1960s heyday, it produced, distributed, and screened a large number of art-house films made by directors from the heights of the Japanese political avant-garde, from Oshima Nagisa to Matsumoto Toshio and from Hani Susumu to Terayama Shuji. Unlike what the ATG moniker might suggest to anglophone audiences, the “Art Theatre Guild” did not symbolize the joining of art and theater, but was created to be analogous to the small art theaters cropping up in Europe and North America from the 1950s onwards – theaters which did not depend on star power of big budget blockbusters, but instead relied on an audience of cinephiles.²

ATG was an integral part of the New Left zeitgeist in Japan, with a peak in its popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, it is not merely the form of ATG films which are political, but the subjects of the films themselves, which interact with Japan’s political moment and the haunted memory of World War II. These films delve into highly controversial themes, ranging from poverty and capitalist exploitation to racism and the aftermath of the atomic bomb. However, while delving into such taboo topics, these films also abandon standard narrative fiction filmmaking practices, especially Hollywood-influenced continuity editing. ATG films are instead known for their interest in and influence from a wide range of global documentary and avant-garde filmmaking styles, as well as other media such as comics and animation. In many ATG films, the influence of documentary is especially felt. Yet, ATG films do not align with standard modes of documentary: they abandon the “fly on the wall” appeal to objectivity seen in contemporaneous movements like Direct Cinema in North America, exemplified by Drew Associates and the Maysles Brothers, as well as the stern inquiry into social and political “truths” investigated by *cinéma-vérité* in France. Instead, ATG films were a hybrid film *cycle* which attempted what Matsumoto Toshio described as a synthesis between the dialectic of fiction and nonfiction, avant-garde and documentary.³

I use the term “cycle” here, rather than genre, to refer to a series of films associated with each other due to certain similar themes, images, narratives, or settings. In contrast to genre, a film cycle is industrially based: their formation and longevity depend on their financial viability, as well as modes of reception.⁴ In contrast to genres, a film cycle is dependent vitally on audience desires and the public discourses surrounding them; it is therefore specific to a time and place. ATG films are thus a verifiable *cycle* of films rather than a genre, given its historical and geographical specificity, and given the similarity of the films to one another, in both form and content. In

fact, I would argue that each film within the ATG film cycle is more similar to other films within ATG, than other films within the respective director or screenwriter's filmography – despite how different these directors' works are from one another outside of the ATG context. For instance, taking three ATG films from 1969 as an example: Yoshida Kiju's *Eros + Massacre* (*Eros Purasu Gyakusatsu*), Matsumoto Toshio's *Funeral Parade of Roses* (*Bara no Soretsu*), and Shinoda Masahiro's *Double Suicide* (*Shinju: Ten no Amijima*) all have more in common with one another than they do with the directors' respective narrative filmmaking oeuvres.⁵ Most researchers follow a typically auteurist model in describing the oeuvres of these filmmakers, often associated with what is still occasionally termed the “Japanese New Wave.” However, filmmakers like Oshima Nagisa argued against using such a relatively meaningless term. Oshima argued that filmmakers in Japan did not consider themselves a coherent group; he and others considered the term mere branding, crafted by the Sochiku studio as a means to sell tickets⁶ Rather than focusing on so-called New Wave, I instead argue that ATG films participate in a cohesive film cycle that responded to the political situation on the ground, documenting the anarchically flavored New Left zeitgeist. These films, though unrepentantly fictive in their narrative conceits, are nonetheless exemplary in their commitment to political filmmaking in the 1960s, and document Japan's long 1968.

Evidently, although ATG films are deeply politically motivated, the experimental form typical of the ATG house style indicates that they highlight more than the mere documentation or recording of activist struggle surrounding 1968. Indeed, this aligns with the rather philosophical and inwardly-focused nature of the student protests during this period: much of the urgency behind students' revolutionary fervor in the late 1960s revolved around what Takemasa Ando called a “self-revolution in everydayness,” as activists sought to highlight the increasing control of mass economic consumption over everyday life, and aimed to transform their own depoliticized consciousness. I argue that film – particularly, and especially, the political avant-garde filmmaking typical of ATG – was a crucial means to transform consciousness, to revolutionize everyday life, and, perhaps most importantly, to dehabituate and destabilize their perceptive capacities. The fervent avant-gardism of ATG not only reflects but enacts and embodies students' desires for a radicalized, self-revolutionizing consciousness.

In this article, I analyze the general nature of ATG films alongside the historical analysis of student radicals during this period, before delving into a short analysis of three ATG films released in the seminal year 1968: Oshima Nagisa's *Death by Hanging* (*Koushikei*), Okamoto Kihachi's *Human Bullet* (*Nikudan*), and Hani Susumu's *Nanami: The Inferno of First Love* (*Hatsukoi: Jigoku-hen*). As I will show, although these three

films vary widely in content, and appear to utilize rather different esthetic, cinematographic, and editing techniques, their exuberant variation and the purpose of these varied techniques exemplifies the ATG house style, and responds to the call for self-revolution described by student radicals. Oshima, Okamoto, and Hani – alongside most other filmmakers associated with ATG at this historical juncture – use strategies of estrangement, dehabitation, and alienation, influenced by figures such as Bertolt Brecht and Viktor Shklovsky, to destabilize viewers and re-orient, refresh, and renew viewers' perceptive capacities.

First, however, let me provide a brief historical overview of the student movement at this time. In Japan, student uprisings between 1967 and 1969 ultimately forced the closure of university campuses nationwide.⁷ As in France, students did not have a solid plan, and actions emerged spontaneously. Yet this occurred even earlier than France's famed university closures, and Japan's protests were loosely tied to the even larger anti-US Japan Security Treaty (ANPO) protests of 1960. However, as Ando Takemasa argues, the ANPO protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s were focused less on repealing ANPO itself, compared with the mass movement of the 1960 protests. These protests were instead focused on the negation and reconstruction of everyday life.⁸ This inquiry into everydayness, or *nichijosei*, developed as a critique of liberal democracy in the wake of the economic growth of the mid-1960s. Likewise, students criticized their increasingly stringent and overcrowded universities, seeing their authoritarian classrooms as symbolic of an inherently immoral capitalist industrial society.⁹

Students felt a contradiction between their daily comforts and what they considered the crimes of their conservative and imperialist government. Because of this strong feeling of guilt, much of the exigence behind the students' revolutionary fervor was not defined by concrete political goals, and instead revolved around what Ando Takemasa calls a "self-revolution in 'everydayness.'"¹⁰ The addition of "self" explicitly countered another "revolution": what the government's 1960 White Paper on National Life called a "consumer revolution" and a "revolution of everyday life" (*seikatsu kakumei*).¹¹ By contrast, the "self-revolution" sought to counter the barrage of consumer goods and complicity with conservative and imperialist regimes. By contrast to the consumerist *seikatsu kakumei*, this "self-revolution" was profoundly theoretical and abstract by nature. For these student protesters, "self-revolution" through political activism and organizing was key to a meaningful and dignified life; at stake was a complex ethics of selfhood and lived experience. In a 1968 survey which asked University of Tokyo students what they were fighting for on campus, responses stressed this rather abstract "self-revolution in everydayness":

“asserting the self”: 41.7 percent

“self-transformation”: 31.7 percent

“dismantling the current university structure”: 27.2 percent

“pursuing fundamental thought”: 25.6 percent

“rejection of the system”: 25 percent.¹²

Such beliefs connote a desire to dismantle current political systems as well as to revolutionize consciousness. Students knew that reformist policies in themselves would not lead to a fundamental transformation of thought and selfhood. For this reason, art was vitally important as well as politics. Indeed, youth of the era were known for their passionate support and interest in experimental art. For Yomota Inuhiko, the center of underground art and culture was Shinjuku in Tokyo – an area “filled with vulgarity and nihilistic energy . . . [where] artistic experimentation and political contestation went hand in hand.”¹³ Yomota’s effervescent description of the period evokes descriptions of similar occurrences elsewhere in the world, from the Situationist-influenced student radicals in Paris to the young artists of Prague Spring to the hippies of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and New York’s Central Park:

In the square in front of the station *futenzoku* (Japanese hippies) from all over Japan, homeless and hungry, sleep on the grass and sing songs. In the café Fugetsudo, self-declared artists with long hair and beards rub shoulders with leftist activists, while American soldiers who are against the Vietnam war and who’ve gone AWOL from their bases huddle with anti-war groups, plotting escapes to northern Europe. Out in the main street, ten or so men and women form a strange procession. Apart from the gas masks on their heads they’re completely naked. At the other end of the main street a gay bar district has grown up. A French semiotician, not yet famous in Japan, is a furtive regular.¹⁴

Yomota’s description of the Tokyo underground in the late 1960s indicates that art and politics were entirely intertwined. Activists and artists rubbed shoulders and engaged with Vietnam War deserters in bars and coffee-shops. Outside, performance art interrupted the quotidian, forcing an experience of the unfamiliar in an otherwise familiar space. The “self-revolution of everydayness” described by Ando was achieved by this porosity between esthetics and politics, militant activism and playful aestheticization.

The ATG films created in this turbulent and fruitful period evoke these selfsame aspects described by Ando and Yomota. Not only do the content of the films reflect the happenings of the Tokyo anti-establishment underground, but the form of the films exudes the same desire to reject the system, to “pursue fundamental thought” while asserting and transforming the self,

society, and the experience of everyday life. Importantly, these films saw a porosity between popular culture and high-brow arthouse productions. However, these were not simple references for the purpose of increasing ticket sales. Rather, these films used popular culture to criticize the bombardment of mass media upon *nichijo* (everyday life).

Although Japan had only one national radio station in 1950, by the 1960s, Japan acquired a wide variety of commercial and noncommercial broadcast outlets. It became a nation of avid radio listeners and obsessive television watchers. Newspapers expanded from some four pages of print to twenty pages of features; weekly magazines rapidly overtook monthly magazines, and were voraciously consumed. In 1960, the average family spent hours absorbing this bombardment of media and information from a wide variety of outlets; according to one source, the average housewife spent five hours per day watching television, listening to the radio, and reading print media.¹⁵ As Watanabe Hiroshi notes, everyday life “was swallowing up [young people’s] dreams for a revolution . . .”¹⁶ At this time of relative peace and prosperity for the Japanese people, the mixing of media genres, the infusion of documentary within media and popular culture, as well as the immersion of mass media into left-wing documentary, allowed a transformation and reconsideration of *nichijo*. For the youth of the era, popular culture was not something passively consumed but a mode for participation in radical anti-establishment culture, working with more militant documentary forms in a dialectical fashion. The theaters associated with ATG became spaces where *nichijo* was reconsidered and transformed, where new futures and new forms of thought were rendered visible on screen.

ATG was formed in 1962, as a theatrical space in urban centers dedicated to art-house cinema. As Yomota notes, it had a tremendous significance on the distribution of Japanese independent productions.¹⁷ Between 1962 and 1967, ATG screened small numbers of Japanese films, but most of its output consisted in international productions, favoring films from Eastern Europe, especially Poland (largely by Jerzy Kawalerowicz and Andrej Wajda), and by auteurs such as Ingmar Bergman (the most popular director screened at ATG), Tony Richardson, François Truffaut, or Luis Buñuel. American films were relatively rare – rarer, even, than films from Scandinavia. ATG was unique in showing each film for at least a four-week run, irrespective of attendance, with the repertoire changing weekly; the ATG therefore had considerable faith in its audience to recognize the value of global arthouse productions.

In 1967, while also continuing to screen independent Japanese and foreign films, ATG began to fund its own films by utilizing a co-production system of 10 million yen films (*issenmanen eiga*), generally with the director independently funding half of this amount with their own independent production company. While this number, equivalent to less than \$28,000

in US dollars, might seem paltry, it was about three times the amount given to the average Pink Film from the same period. The ATG thus presented directors with a considerable amount of creative freedom, although understandably these same directors would necessarily need to employ cost-cutting measures. These budget strategies, however, would develop into a fervently experimental and avant-gardist house style: where color film stock was too expensive, black and white was largely utilized, with color only used for short bursts of narrative, if at all. Where studio rental space was overly expensive, films employed meta-cinematic and highly reflexive techniques, frequently rendering the artificiality of the studio space especially apparent, and often breaking the fourth wall. The audience is refused the suspension of disbelief, as the viewer is perpetually reminded that they are watching a constructed, crafted narrative. Similarly, carefully constructed long takes tended to be eschewed in favor of fast-paced montage sequences, jump cuts, and a myriad of editing tricks that could be actualized in post-production. The result was a feverishly experimental house style that mirrored the exuberantly avant-gardist filmmaking styles of the 1920s.

With these new ATG-funded films, the Japanese audience likewise grew to expect the films developed through ATG as high art, rather than passive entertainment. Yet, in contrast to global receptions of many contemporaneous “new waves,” these works were not meant to be largely apolitical works of independent artistic genius; as Sato Tadao reminds us, they were part and parcel with the global revolutionary spirit of the time.¹⁸ ATG films, politically unaffiliated but placed in direct opposition to the hegemonic studio system, join leftist politics with radical formal experimentation, and engage directly with the political fervor of Tokyo’s barricaded universities. The films made by ATG tend to be visually stunning and thematically complex works, rife with political imagery and leftist intention.

ATG’s first productions during the late 1960s demonstrate a fervent tie between artistic experimentation and current events, which has not been reached in Japanese cinema since. Indeed, two of the films discussed here, central to ATG’s highly-lauded productions in the 1967–1969 period, begin with statistics relevant to the political mind-set of 1968: *Death by Hanging* starts with the results of a survey which asks the Japanese population of their views on capital punishment; similarly, *Human Bullet* begins by laying out the life expectancy of the Japanese male and female populations in 1945 and 1968, respectively. Such strategies immediately place ATG films into the socio-cultural and political landscape of the turbulent 1960s, and link their productions to the self-critical, self-revolutionizing goals of the student protest movement. This, coupled with the modernist esthetic practices typical of ATG films, allow them to serve as useful lenses through which to view political avant-garde cinema in Japan’s 1968.

Let us begin with Oshima's *Death by Hanging*, which has received more scholarly attention. The film is also notable for being the first official film planned and produced by ATG.¹⁹ *Death by Hanging* is often praised for its Brechtian alienation techniques, and use of current events: its protagonist is based around the real-life character of Ri Chinu'u, a Korean national who stole foreign works of literature from the library, and raped and murdered two Japanese schoolgirls.²⁰ In *Death by Hanging*, this character is R, who is condemned to death but manages, in a stroke of strange luck, to stay alive after his own hanging.

Of Oshima's filmography, *Death by Hanging* is the most clearly aligned with the alienation effect. As Bertolt Brecht describes, the aim of the alienation effect is "to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident."²¹ This technique, meant to lead to a transformation of political beliefs through art, is maintained from the film's shocking opening sequence: a narrator quickly describes the process of hanging a condemned man. We see R tremble and shake with his head in the noose, while the ritual is hurriedly performed. The result is chilling, and places the rest of the film into this decidedly inhumane context.

This sense of inhumanity is echoed by the film's use of character tropes. In *Death by Hanging*, aside from R, characters are only named by their professions – Education Officer, Chaplain, Doctor, Prosecutor – and these have highly stereotyped personalities, akin to a satirical *com-media dell'arte* play. For example, the Education Chief, played by Watanabe Fumio, is equivalent to a comedic fool. Indeed, not only are the characters stereotyped, but the entire film appears highly performative and play-like: set almost entirely in one room, the film performs performativity itself. Oshima's films often utilize rituals and ceremonies as a thematic trope, and *Death by Hanging* is no exception: each character attempts to play his or her proper role within the ritual of a hanging. Yet here, Oshima shows us what occurs when a ritual falters: in this case, when a hanging does not successfully kill. What results is an absurdist hodgepodge of half-moralistic, half-legalistic jargon from these stereotyped characters that turns Kafkaesque in its bureaucratic incomprehensibility.

The various officers attempt to first awaken R, and then kill him, but first, he must admit guilt. The hapless R, surviving only to be sent immediately back to the gallows, appears to have amnesia. Meanwhile, the officers reenact scenes from R's life in an attempt to trigger R's memory of his crimes, while the young man, a Korean victim of extreme discrimination and a miserably poor upbringing, slowly grows in political consciousness. As the officers play-act R's crimes, fantasy begins to blend into reality, and the characters begin to truly "see" the people they had previously imagined;

they are even able to kill them. The ritual, meant merely to depict, suddenly goes haywire, with the officers fearing their own turn in the execution chamber.

As R states in the film, “I just want fantasy and reality to become one.” This blend of fantasy and reality is echoed in the film’s unique use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound. In one memorable sequence, during which R reaches a state of lucidity and political awareness, the officers and R are play-acting a scene from R’s childhood; R’s siblings are hungry, and his father drunkenly berates them while they cry. The doctor begins to suddenly sing a North Korean song praising General Kim Il-Sung, ostensibly to try to replicate the scene of a stereotyped Korean household. The camera focuses on R’s hands on his knees, which slowly clench into fists, while the sound changes from the doctor’s drunken singing to an official-sounding anthem. Here, the audience is privy to R’s inner thoughts as the Korean man begins to remember his past. The barriers between the interior and exterior world break down in this way throughout the film, while Oshima’s camera depicts an imagined and real universe simultaneously. Indeed, this collapse between imagination and reality is so extreme that the film lacks a single, coherent diegetic space, with the camera portraying the apparent imagined universes of several characters at the same time. For example, near the film’s conclusion, the officers are drunkenly carousing with cups of sake which are either real or not-real, depending on the scene; meanwhile, R lies nude, draped by a Japanese flag, and holding the naked body of a Korean correspondent he calls *Nee-san*, or big sister. In one moment, the flag might be there, or not there, and the Korean girl might be clothed, or nude, or not exist at all. Potential universes collide through this play-acting. Even the film’s conclusion continues to evade strict realism: when R finally admits guilt, and is once again hanged until dead, the camera pans down to reveal an empty noose.

Such techniques relate to Wollen’s description of “counter-cinema” in the works of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin’s Dziga Vertov Group productions, and are in fact common to much of ATG’s cinematic output. As Wollen notes, such films challenge standard modes of cinematic representation by highlighting aperture over closure, utilizing multiple diegetic frameworks, and privileging estrangement over identification.²² However, in ATG films, the particular style of estrangement varies considerably between films. Where *Death by Hanging* utilized Brechtian alienation techniques to critique contemporary Japanese society in 1968, Okamoto’s *Human Bullet* uses playful, comedic techniques closer to what is frequently discussed as estrangement in literary scholarship to discuss similarly critical themes. The film is a satire of wartime films, especially those created in the Japanese 1930s and 1940s frequently termed “spiritist”. Spiritist, or *seishinshugi*, films emphasized what Peter B. High

describes as “the harmonious contiguity of hearth and barracks”²³: the deep tie between one’s home life and the actions on the battlefield. Spiritist films take as their slogan “One Hundred Million Hearts Beating as One,” or *ichi oku isshin*, indicating the complete enveloping of the citizen within the imperial state. Okamoto’s film uses certain formal techniques of a spiritist film on the surface but argues the opposite: that the powers-that-be are impossibly removed from the fate of the average citizen. In the film, this average Joe is a Cadet named Sakura, or Cherry Blossom; given the obvious importance of cherry blossoms to Japanese history and culture, Sakura thus becomes a metonymic representation of Japan itself – in all of its confused, well-meaning mediocrity.

In the film, Cadet Sakura is drafted into the war while a university student, and is assigned a kamikaze mission during the last week of the war. He and his battalion are meant to detonate explosives under enemy American tanks, losing their lives in the process. Through a fluke of poor planning, the Americans never arrive, but manage to bomb the neighboring town in Kyushu – decimating almost the entire population, including Sakura’s fiancée. Finally, Sakura is sent to float in an oil drum beside a torpedo, waiting to sacrifice himself when enemy ships are in sight. However, the once-again hapless Sakura sends the torpedo flying downwards, and continues floating in the oil drum.

These absurdist scenes are given an additional darkness due to Okamoto’s clever editing: during yet another scene where Sakura is berated by a commanding officer, Okamoto inserts a shot of a record being played over and over again: literalizing the “broken record” of the officer’s speech. Irony is key, for the film constantly juxtaposes scenes of war with the basest and most animalistic of human functions: for instance, Sakura’s mother “squeezes out a tear as if squeezing out a pimple.” Losing the war is “as embarrassing as someone seeing your belly button” – a constant refrain in the film. Finally, a bookseller who lost his arms to an earlier war asks Sakura to help him urinate. The inclusion of such base functions within a wartime film explicitly mocks the genre of spiritist cinema, reminding the viewer of its diametrical opposite.

Outside of this grotesque absurdity, however, the film is most notable through its childlike sense of play. Innocence is juxtaposed with the most extreme of atrocities, and indeed, much of the film is less wartime melodrama than lighthearted romantic comedy, as Sakura meets a schoolgirl love interest in a sailor’s uniform. The girl, who we know only as “the Rabbit,”²⁴ studies algebra, and the bulk of the film entails the protagonist reciting meaningless algebraic equations to himself. The two lovers communicate in jokes, songs, and riddles; instead of discussing the war, they act it out – a morbid play-acting communicating far more pathos than words would allow. While *Death by Hanging* similarly employed theatrical methods,

here the theatricality is less meta-cinematic than highly ludic; Okamoto's playful touch delicately weaves through even the most harrowing of scenes. For instance, Sakura meets three precocious girls from the Red Cross, who speak in a manner reminiscent of children's tales; these girls are subsequently raped by villagers, an act whose juxtaposition with the quick-witted, comic dialogue of the girls creates an even more horrifying effect.

This playful estrangement carries through the film to its conclusion, in which Sakura's ill-fated oil drum, containing the gruesome remains of his skeleton, begins to drift toward Shonan Beach – a site of pleasure-seeking and leisure, famously immortalized in Ishihara Shintaro's 1955 novel *Season of the Sun*, and the subsequent film adaptation that launched a series of "Sun Tribe" films featuring rather hedonistic youths.²⁵ This beach scene, nearby which the skeleton continues to float inside its oil drum, is, notably, set in the Summer of 1968. Okamoto's clever editing shows the viewer documentary footage of Japanese citizens, newly economically prosperous, sunbathing in bikinis and indulging in a variety of watersports. The jolt back to contemporary times reminds the viewer of the skeleton hidden within the hedonistic Japanese 1960s, and its eerie proximity to an all-too-recent wartime past. As Igarashi argues, the absurdity of this juxtaposition – the skeleton with the irreverent beach-goers in 1968 – uses the bizarre and the burlesque to shake the audience out of its complacency.²⁶

Okamoto is known for re-invigorating the war film with his own idiosyncratic, highly satirical touch. As Yomota Inuhiko argues, Okamoto enjoyed gazing at the "vulgar comedy of human desire" – thus causing many of his films to have a wry and absurdist sensibility which he equates with spaghetti Westerns – yet the anti-war messaging of his films stemmed from his own experiences as a student soldier during the Pacific War.²⁷ *The Human Bullet*, which Okamoto both shot and directed, was shot in reaction to his previous film *Japan's Longest Day* (*Nihon no ichiban nagaihi*, 1967), shot with the Toho studio. Okamoto was highly dissatisfied with this film, as it was made in accordance with studio restrictions and the standards of an officially approved production. With *The Human Bullet*, Okamoto was able to eschew such restrictions and release his film with the freedom allotted to ATG-distributed productions.²⁸

Interestingly, Okamoto's film is sometimes interpreted as unpolitical, despite its highly anti-war stance. Tom Mes, of the distinguished Japanese film website Midnight Eye, describes Okamoto's films, quite inaccurately, as "unbiased, apolitical, and agenda-free."²⁹ As he notes: "Okamoto's stance is one of sanity amid folly – unbound, unsentimental, self-assured, and blessed with an innate sense of humor."³⁰ However, I argue that such a humorous touch does not necessarily rid the film of bias or politics. While the film has a decidedly light touch, it does not claim neutrality; instead, it uses techniques of estrangement common to ATG films to change viewers' perceptions,

to, in Samuel Beckett's words, to free viewers from the "ballast of habit" – away from the hackneyed, nationalistic, and jingoistic war films with which they are familiar.

Similarly, Hani Susumu's film *Nanami: Inferno of First Love* follows the precedent of estranging films produced by ATG, and likewise uses modes of theatricality and reflexivity to remind the viewer that they are watching a film. Hani had burst onto the Japanese film scene with the PR documentaries *Children in the Classroom* (1955) and *Children Who Draw* (1956), made with Iwanami Productions, a studio that would go on to train many fervently leftist Japanese documentary filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s. Mark Nornes describes Hani's PR films of the mid-1950s as "documentaries that set the film world off balance," writing that "These were the kind of seismographic film events that Bazin describes, where the river of cinema begins carving new routes after the equilibrium of their bed is upset."³¹ Similarly, in 1972, reflecting on the history of these short documentaries, Sato Tadao wrote that they played an epoch-making role in postwar Japanese film.³² Because of the enormous influence he maintained over filmmakers in Japan, Mathieu Capel notes that Hani, in the French context, finds an equivalent figure in filmmaker Alain Resnais,³³ whose ekphrastic documentaries such as *Van Gogh* (1948) and *Guernica* (1950), as well as the seminal Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), served as a stepping off point for the Young Turks of *Cahiers du cinema*.

After Hani's immense – indeed, seismographic – success in the documentary sphere, he continued his investigation of interior, psychological worlds within the external world of realism in his 1960s films that merge documentary and fictional forms. *Nanami: Inferno of First Love* is a particularly experimental result of the play of fiction and nonfiction that possessed Hani throughout the 1960s. Although famed iconoclast Terayama Shuji is listed as the film's co-scriptwriter, Terayama was not actually involved in the writing of the screenplay; his name was included (with Terayama's permission) as a way of promoting the film.³⁴ More so than Hani's earlier films, *Nanami* is defined by extremely surrealistic imagery, sexual themes, a heavy use of masks, and a heightened sense of theatricality – all of which are mainstays in ATG productions. Yet, highlighting the fundamental collaborative mode of ATG productions, Hani's trademarks are nonetheless seen even within ATG's house style: for example, the film uses a nostalgic soundtrack which includes a wistful operatic aria and soft guitar strumming, reminiscent of Hani's melancholic semi-documentary film *She and He*. Young children in *Nanami* are shown playing at a Japanese shrine, indicating Hani's interest in documenting the world of children's imaginaries. This scene – a montage of still photographs, echoing Chris Marker and Matsumoto Toshio – has an innocent and playful air, despite the fact that the children are frequently nude except for their

donning of terrifying Tengu masks. Likewise, because it grapples with such heady topics as sexual abuse, class disparity, and profound loneliness, the film in any other hands might become nightmarish, but in Hani's control it is surrealist and oneiric.

In *Nanami*, Shun, a deeply introverted teenage boy whose mother abandoned him in the care of foster parents, falls in love with Nanami, a teenage girl from the countryside who works as a nude model. Both are victims: Shun of sexual abuse, which renders him painfully shy and impotent, and Nanami of sexual objectification, only able to see her body as a tool for capitalist exchange. Their first sexual encounter is a failed sexual act, but both attempt to escape their oppressive conditions through love, which is presented as a form of liberation. Abused by those in power, they subvert objectification and instead recognize one another's subjecthood.

Importantly, it is through play and laughter that Nanami and Shun finally appear to heal their psychological wounds: after Nanami solves a riddle posed by the 5-year old girl Momi, both characters laugh joyously, and Shun is able to consummate their relationship. Love in the film is represented as a lightness and urge to laughter. Indeed, Hani's films, even his most surreal, are more characterized by playful humanism than any other filmmaker of the Japanese political avant-garde – and Hani certainly viewed himself as a humanist, promoting a *ningenteki*, or human like, filmmaking in his books and film criticism. Fearful of an increasingly image-dominated culture, an increasingly artificial nature and manmade environment (*jinkou hankyou*) which permeates modern life, Hani appeals to a more human and affect-driven filmmaking: “Whether to gaze at the humanistic characteristics of the image, whether to create a humanistic image – we must consider it, and today we live in an era where it could be sought.”³⁵ In other words, the 1960s was a fertile period for the reimagining and questioning of image culture, and Hani's films attempt to guide the image toward a reflection of the human sensorium.

Briciu terms Hani's tender humanism “ethical filmmaking,” noting that “Hani believes in the filming as a human, taking into account the inter-subjective engagement of the director and the filmed persons (objects) in a mutual encounter.”³⁶ Although Hani is certainly engaged in the question of subjectivity in filmmaking, treating his protagonists as documentary subjects with their own interior worlds, Hani's humanism is also childlike and playful. Hani's camera-ethics double the subjectivity of its child protagonists in the cinematography itself. As Takuya Tsunoda noted,

Hani's conceptualization of cinematic experience—as a progressive, participatory and synthetic process of interaction that the subjects go through—seems to echo a phenomenologist approach that stands upon a fundamental distrust of a uniform mode of consciousness based on rational and schematic explanation of human interiority.³⁷

Hani's ethics are fundamentally participatory: the filmmaking participating in its subjects' interior worlds without forcing itself into them. The result is a filmmaking of interactivity between lens and subject, which Tsunoda describes as a phenomenological approach rejecting uniform conceptions of interiority. Hani's films reject the viewer/viewed dichotomy; Briciu notes that his films reject the "male gaze," instead focusing on a synthetic interaction between these two worlds.

It is important to note, however, that Hani's emphasis on hybrid interiorities and subjectivities reflects the ATG film cycle's emphasis on aperture over closure, and the use of multiple diegetic frameworks operating simultaneously. Likewise, while Hani's oeuvre does tend to highlight the fact of its own creation, his films with ATG are the most reflexive of his entire filmography; the film *Morning Schedule* (*Gozenchu no Jikanwari*, 1972), also made with ATG, is another example. *Nanami* includes two meta-cinematic scenes: in one, Shun, whom others have (unfairly) accused of molesting the child Momi, is hypnotized by a psychologist, who urges him to imagine his subconscious as a white "cinema screen" onto which his deepest and darkest thoughts are projected. We, the audience of his "cinema screen," see these images through an iris lens, in which elements from Shun's subconscious – a dead pigeon, cheerful Momi, Nanami, and his foster father's sexual abuse – are rendered as if through water and haze. During this simultaneously psychological and cinematic "projection," his foster mother intervenes, tells the projection to end, and physically steps in front of the metaphorical "screen"; the "footage" appears partially on her face, indicating a total merging of real and sur-real, visible and invisible worlds.

In the second meta-cinematic sequence of *Nanami*, the two protagonists attend an amateur film screening, where a former classmate of Nanami's from Shizuoka screens a romantic personal essay film entitled *Hatsukoi no Kiroku* (*Record of First Love*). The film is projected in its entirety, and its naive and pure-hearted representation of first love become the catalyst for Nanami and Shun's freedom from their repression; they sit enraptured, and clap fervently at its conclusion. Hani depicts filmmaking as the personal, ethical mode which, upon viewing, allows personal transformation to transpire: the revealing of personal psychological truths, a return to innocence, and even self-actualization.

Such personal transformation is meant to be actualized in *Nanami's* cinematic audience, composed of leftists and students aiming to fight an oppressive system in the name of a “self-revolution of everydayness.” Taken together, the estranging techniques used in these three films utilize their form in the name of viewer liberation and emancipation, alongside highlighting political and social justice-oriented themes. This liberation is not one from a physical bondage, but a mental one: the silent complacency of the *salaryman* worker with global (especially American) atrocities, and the routine life-sapping drudgery of the capitalist everyday – a notion the Soviet avant-gardists called *byt*.³⁸ Whether through Brechtian alienation, as in *Death by Hanging*, or playful estrangement, as in *Human Bullet*, films in the ATG cycle lay bare the immoral and unjust remnants of the wartime period, easily ignored by the blind consumerism of Japan's postwar economic boom. In so doing, they actualize the revolutionary goals of the student protest movement, linking both the art and politics of 1968.

Notes

1. Furuhata, *Cinema of Actuality*, 2.
2. Tadao, *Understanding ATG Films*, 10.
3. See Toshio, *Eizou no hakken (Discovery of the Image)*.
4. According to Novotny Laurence, in the North American context, other cycles include film noir and blaxploitation cinema, and all cycles emerge as a result of social, economic, and political factors. See Laurence, “Introduction,” 9.
5. For instance, Yoshida Kiju's earlier 1960s filmography followed a similar track to Oshima Nagisa by being influenced by noir and melodrama, but without the extreme self-reflexivity of ATG productions. Likewise, Matsumoto Toshio's earlier 1960s films such as *Nishijin* (1961), *Song of the Stone (Ishi no uta)*, 1963) or *Mothers (Hahatachi)*, 1966) align closer to documentary (despite being experimental “neo-documentaries”), whereas *Funeral Parade* mixes fiction and nonfiction in a resolutely ATG style.
6. As Oshima famously said in 1960, “Stop using the term ‘New Wave’ once and for all! Evaluate each film on its own merits!” See Nagisa, *Cinema, Censorship, and the State*, 57.
7. Eiji, “Japan's 1968,” 1.
8. Takemasa, “The absence of the new left: the (un)changing cultures of activism in Japan.” Lecture, “ANPO Revisited” Workshop in the ICC Workshop Series on Youth Activism in Postwar Japan, Sophia University, Tokyo, November 142015.
9. Oguma, “Japan's 1968,” 11.
10. Takemasa, “Transforming ‘Everydayness,’” 1.
11. Neitzel, *The Life We Longed For*, 1.
12. Eiji, “Japan's 1968,” 11.
13. Inuhiko, “2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'ATG,” 30.
14. *Ibid.* It may be worthwhile to note that the semiotician is likely Roland Barthes.
15. Partner, *Assembled in Japan*, 173.
16. Hiroshi, *Abe Kobo*, 71.
17. Inuhiko, “Upheaval Amidst Steady Decline: 1961–1970,” 144.
18. *Ibid.*, 154.

19. Although ATG had co-produced Imamura Shohei's *A Man Vanishes* (1967), it only screened in ATG theaters for a short run before being shown in Nikkatsu-run theaters. *Death By Hanging* was therefore the first official, truly ATG-made film. See Go Hirasawa, "Underground Cinema and the Art Theatre Guild" in *Midnight Eye*, August 25, 2005, <http://www.midnighteye.com/features/underground-cinema-and-the-art-theater-guild/>, Accessed November 14, 2020.
20. Sato Tadao, quoted in Turim, *The Films of Oshima Nagisa*, 83.
21. Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique," 136.
22. Other techniques include privileging narrative intransitivity over narrative transitivity, foregrounding over transparency, unpleasure over pleasure, and reality over fiction. See Wollen, *Godard and Counter-Cinema*, 499. However, as I will argue, the privileging of displeasure does not apply to ATG films in the same manner as the Dziga Vertov Group films do in France.
23. High, *The Imperial Screen*, 392.
24. Intriguingly, this is the second ATG film to substitute *Usagi* (Rabbit) for a woman's name, the first being Imamura Shohei's *The Man Vanishes*.
25. Igarashi, "Lost and Found in the South Pacific," 147–148, footnote 2.
26. *Ibid.*, 148.
27. Yomota, "Upheaval Amidst Steady Decline," 130.
28. *Ibid.*, 131.
29. Mes, "In No Man's Land," 64–66, 65.
30. *Ibid.*, 66.
31. Nornes, *Forest of Pressure*, 14–15.
32. Tadao, "Hani Susumu-Ron," 28.
33. Capel, *Évasion du Japon*, 48.
34. Susumu, interview with Rea Amit and Alexander Jacoby. "Susumu Hani" (April 22, 2010). <http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/susumu-hani/>
35. Susumu, *Ningenteki Eizouron*, 32.
36. Bianca Briciu, "Love and power," 68.
37. Tsunoda, conference presentation quoted in Briciu, "Love and Power," 61.
38. For a lengthy discussion on *byt* in the context of the Soviet avant-garde, see Boym, *Common Places*, 3.

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