

**AI NO CORRIDA AND FEMININE EROTICISM.  
AROUND A CONTROVERSIAL GLIMPSE  
OF THE HEAD OF MEDUSA  
(NAGISA OSHIMA, 1976)**

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**ABSTRACT.** The French-Japanese movie *Ai no corrida* is one of the most controversial movies in the history of cinematography. Nagisa Oshima found inspiration in a famous true story from 1936 imperialist Japan and then his movie about a destructive passion without limits was presented at Cannes in 1976. *L'Empire des sens*, as the translation of the title in French referring to Barthes's *L'Empire des signes*, is the story of a destiny and of a psychic structure. In the end of the movie there is a powerful scene with an open air theatre and the image of a young girl who plays hide and seek with an old man and keeps asking him if he is ready or not, the old man saying not yet and then vanishing: here the eternized use of the object can be understood in the framework of what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called forclusion. In the case of the psychotic structure there has never been an extraction of object *a* due to which the reality field could find its frame. And thus, the destiny of Sada Abe finds itself bounded to an object without cession and to its fulfillment in the Japanese *kareiakana*, that is clear open sky. Yet, since the phantasm is the writing of the non-sexual relation, as the subject's entrance to the real, Oshima's movie is not only about the phantasm, it is about the real.

**Keywords:** *object, love, Japan, phantasm, erotism, cut, death, forclusion.*

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*"I doubt that love is ever a passion"<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction: Nagisa Oshima**

During a visit in Paris, the Japanese director Nagisa Oshima met with the French producer Anatole Dauman who made him an unusual proposal – that of making an erotic film: “it was the proper time to assert the right of the artistic creation in the field of erotism”<sup>2</sup>, Dauman later said.



*Image 1: A Samurai among Farmers: Nagisa Oshima.*

Source: <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/a-samurai-among-farmers-nagisa-oshima/>

So, here we are in 1972 when Oshima was passing through a period full of doubt which was, of course, connected to the economic and political context in Japan during that period of time: cinematography was in a deep crisis when even the great director Akira Kurosawa had financial difficulties. Like the latter, Oshima would find a solution that saved him from an external financial support. Nevertheless, at the age of 43 already, Oshima hadn't filmed anything for the past four years. Following Dauman's proposal, he wrote the scenario for his 21<sup>st</sup> movie, *Ai no corrida* – that is *Corrida of love*, referring to Bataille –, which in France was presented under the title *L'Empire des sens* – referring to Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes*<sup>3</sup>, to

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Anatole Dauman, Jacques Gerber, *Souvenir-écran*, Georges Pompidou editions, Paris, 1989, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Vincent Capes, “Empire des sens”, oct. 2017, <http://www.zoanima.fr/lempire-des-sens>.

which Lacan refers too in his text "Avis au lecteur japonais"<sup>4</sup>. *Ai no corrida* is a French-Japanese coproduction made in 1976. It is one of the most controversial movies in the history of cinematography. It is a graphic portrait of insatiable sexual desire presenting an incident which took place in the reality of the '30s between a man and a woman consumed in a destructive love, in a period of Japan's increasing imperialism and governmental control.

In such circumstances, although in the '70s Oshima was taking into account abandoning filmmaking, he is coming back and filming his greatest success: *Ai no corrida*. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan watched the movie in March 1976 and mentioned it in his lesson from March 16, 1976, of the seminar *Le Sinthome*. Oshima found his inspiration in the above-mentioned famous true story from 1936: Sada, a former prostitute, hired as a servant in an inn, begins a love affair with the owner of the inn, Kichi-san. A devouring and destructive passion begins between the two, with neither contention nor limits. A passion that pushes them to abandon everything: work, respectability, and social life.<sup>5</sup> The story of this passionate love ended with Sada Abe's imprisonment because she was found wandering for four days in the streets holding his lover's cut genitals in her hand. Thus, *L'empire des sens* illustrates Bataille's words: "Erotism is the approval of life until death"<sup>6</sup>.

## The movie

In his lesson of March 16, 1976 of the seminar *Le Sinthome* Lacan says:

"I've seen a Japanese movie... I was literally blown away (*soufflé*)... the feminine eroticism seems to be taken to an extreme there. And this extreme is the phantasm, neither more, no less than that of killing the man"<sup>7</sup>.

The first title of the movie had been *The Corrida of Love*, which, in a way, resumes the ambiguity of the feelings the two lovers have: it is about an act of uninterrupted love and a way towards death. The concise dialogues, the simplicity of the setting and music, allows sex to occupy the entire field. Oshima marvelously captures boundless physical love, until death. But, with all these, there is nothing

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 497.

<sup>5</sup> See Olivier Nicklaus, "L'empire des sens", <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/films-a-l-affiche/lempire-des-sens-2/>.

<sup>6</sup> Alberto Moravia, *Introduzione a Georges Bataille*, in *Storia dell'occhio*, Gremese Editore, 2000, apud. Vincent Capes, "Empire des sens".

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome*, Paris, Seuil, 2005, p. 126.

of the obscene. Lacan said that this is one of the most innocent movies he had ever watched. The movie was presented at Cannes in 1976 and it generated a scandal regarding Oshima's choice to make a pornographic movie.



Image 2: The poster of the movie.

Source: <http://www.zoanima.fr/lempeire-des-sens>.

The story of Sada Abe in the '30s emotionally moved Japan up to the point that Sada earned a strange popularity. There were two movies, and both of them, Oshima's and Tanaka's, were considered to be "of breathless obscenity", thus Lacan's expression "blown away (*être soufflé*)"<sup>8</sup> that Lacan used regarding *Ai no Corrida*. Catherine Breillat says that she "had the experience of some people whose memory systematically neglects the pornographic character of *L'Empire des sens*, pretending to classify it among the major masterpieces of the seventh art"<sup>9</sup>. The movie is, she

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome*, lesson from 16 March 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Luc Richir, "A propos de *L'Empire des sens* de Nagisa Oshima et Jacques Lacan: « L'erotisme féminin, c'est tuer l'homme »", in Murielle Gagnebin (ed.), *Cinema et inconscient*, Champ Vallon, Seyssel, 2001, p. 63.

continues, nothing but a “corrida of love”, an exercise of tauromachy in which the woman leads the man in a ballet with death.

Oshima turns this fact, which Japanese movie art already owned, in a “ceremony of sex and death from which we can only escape petrified (*medusés*)”, says Celine Gaillieur<sup>10</sup>. In this close circle, desire and reclusion – sometimes confounded with a sort of ascetism – seem mixed together. The more the two lovers separate themselves from society, the more unbearable it seems for them.

In 1936, when Japan was ready to invade China, Kichi, instead of being part of the national prototype, decides to go against the flow of a battalion of soldiers, head down, like a shadow, choosing to die of love instead of war. In the ‘70s Sada and Kichi offer the model of an absolute contestation of a society that is proud of its economic miracle. The only purpose of their desire is desire itself, they refuse to produce and to reproduce themselves. Therefore, they cannot be, under no circumstances, assimilated.



*Image 3: Kichi-San going against the flow of soldiers.*

Source: <http://www.zoanima.fr/l'empire-des-sens>.

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<sup>10</sup> Celine Gaillieur, *Le regard de... Celine Gaillieur*, in <https://www.celluloid-angels.com/movie/l%E2%80%99empire-des-sens>: “Lui seul se place totalement du point de vue du désir féminin: c’est un film qui parle aux femmes. Et il ose faire ce que jamais personne n’avait fait sur grand écran : il remet au premier plan l’acte sexuel, il montre ce que l’on ne doit pas voir, ce que la société veut que l’on cache, et en fait de l’art”.

Oshima's movie, with French producers, was filmed in quite particular conditions in order to escape the Japanese censorship which was, evidently, much stricter than in France. Oshima filmed each sentence just once, all of which was more like a stunt, and because he could not develop the film in Japan, he could only watch it in France while it was being edited. Helped by Wakamatsu, Nagisa Oshima proves to be very ingenious trying to avoid the censorship problems of the Japanese state of that era. The film was imported in France, but it was taken out of the movie set before being developed, which means that the customs could not know what it contained. Even the movie sets were French territory, as they were spaces rent by Anatole Dauman, and, obviously, any person that was not involved in the direct making the movie was excluded.

If in Oshima's preceding movies there were large images symbolizing loneliness or the isolation of the characters, in *L'Empire des sens* he uses close frameworks, in a fix angle, decreasing the space over the Kichi-Sada couple, isolating this couple from the rest of the world, the latter being totally neglected. That is why *L'Empire des sens* is a political movie as well, and Oshima states it clearly: "the fact that my characters are apolitical is totally political for me"<sup>11</sup>.

In his eleventh Seminar, Jacques Lacan distinguishes, and even opposes, sight and gaze: "In the scopic field the vision of the eye is in the back, I am watched, meaning I am a painting"<sup>12</sup>. The split between the eyes and the gaze can be found between "on the one hand the exhibition of objects of the gaze according to the law of pornography", as Andrea Bellavita<sup>13</sup> notes, i.e. the first plans on various sexual acts, and, "on the other hand of the exhibition of the gaze on these objects according to the Law of cinematographic language". Thus, all the scenes of intimacy are happening in the presence of a third – a servant or a geisha –, which reduces the position of the person watching the movie, that position as an authorized voyeur. In addition, many scenes show the room from the outside, the couple being seen by the transparency of the Japanese window panels.

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<sup>11</sup> Nagisa Oshima, interview with Jean Delmas, in *Jeune cinéma*, no. 96, July-August 1976, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Seuil, Paris, 1973, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller (Dir.), Jeanne Joucla (coord.), *Lacan regarde le cinéma Le cinéma regarde Lacan*, ECF, Coll. Rue Huysmans, Paris, 2011, p. 110.

## The story

The story in the movie is simple: Sada – played by the actress Eiko Matsuda –, a young former prostitute who became a housekeeper, and Kichi – played by the actor Tatsuya Fuji –, the owner of the inn where she works, make love to each other in numerous rooms of the inn. “The space in *L’empire des sens* was delineated by the different rooms of love. It was artificially created, completely designed for voluptuousness”<sup>14</sup>. They make love in the backyard as well, in the street, in the rain, during night and day, for an indefinite time, up to the moment where she strangles and then emasculates him. They do not talk much. She wants endless *jouissance*, repeatedly, wanting to start again immediately after the previous act has finished, and she wants more and more, and better, as if every time it was the first time. But here, there is the killing wish as a final form of possessing the object. In fact, this killing promise subjugated Kichi: he lets himself slide in this one-way passion with a smile on his face, offering himself totally to his mistress, Sada. This slide seems to be with no cutout. He often sings sad arias while caressing her. The feeling comes foreground on their silent faces, turned towards the camera, traversed by pain or pleasure:

“We are confused, writes Celine Gailleurd. Still censored in Japan, the presentation of sexuality has never seemed to astonish the society in such a manner: it is the absolute movie. This happens because it reveals a woman that is completely in love with her lover’s sex, who spends her time touching it, licking it, holding it and all these without any cuts, artificial things or a duplicate. We can be shocked or feel sick but in this attempt of finding absolute love nothing seems to be degrading”<sup>15</sup>.

Insisting on letting apart the Jewish-Christian idea in Japan, Oshima says that:

“this idea is based on a clandestine importing of the Christian sexuality concept, meaning that of the sexuality puritanism. Love in modern Japan is basically founded starting from the denial of the sexual desire. Why was this distorted idea of love created?”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nagisa Oshima, interview *Empire of Passion*, in <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1107-empire-of-passion-interview-with-nagisa-oshima>.

<sup>15</sup> Celine Gailleurd, *Le regard de... Celine Gailleurd*, in <https://www.celluloid-angels.com/movie/l%E2%80%99empire-des-sens>.

<sup>16</sup> Nagisa Oshima, *L’Empire des sens*, DVD, Arte editions, 2016, p. 9.

Oshima says this in connection with *koshoku* or the art of “knowing how to love”:

“The marvelous tradition of knowing how to love died at the beginning of the second world war. Sada and Kichi, my characters, are survivors of a sexual tradition which lived and which, for me, is admirably Japanese.”<sup>17</sup>

There is no moral transgression in this couple, not even the slightest notion of sin or guilt, hence, here, death has no longer a negative or destructive role, but it becomes an absolute generator of pleasure, the source of a final spring of life. For men, blood is a sign of death, while for women it is a sign of vitality<sup>18</sup>: men spill their blood in war, while for women it is the flow of the period, of their first sexual encounter, when they give birth, it is life. There is a Japanese saying: *ko iwa yami*, which means “love is darkness”<sup>19</sup>.

Oshima respects the period setting in his movie, mindful that it was the year of an attempted military coup to restore Imperial rule. But the phantasy has an implacable logic all of its own: the lovers create a world in which the man submits to death to heighten his and the woman’s pleasure, and in which his genital organ remains erect even when it is severed from his lifeless body. Wondering why she did not cut it before killing him, which would have been plausible as well, Lacan reveals a point of doubt on which he relies in order to highlight that castration is not phantasm. What matters most, is to get to that extreme point, proper to feminine eroticism, to the extreme point of her phantasm. As Lacan says, the day after seeing the movie: “because the phantasm of a woman is not castration”<sup>20</sup>.

The erotism in this movie is centered upon the intimate and the intimacy of being. The ways of reaching it are associated with violence, wrapping, transgression, and, thus, the forbidden – transgression is not a denial of forbidden, but it “surpasses and completes it”<sup>21</sup>. Following its paths forces to a crossing no matter the consented necessary sacrifice: nausea, disgust, horror, shame, cruelty, anxiety, all these under the command of the real, of the encounter.<sup>22</sup> Today, Japan holds the record for sexual abstinence. The Japanese National Institute of Sexology

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<sup>17</sup> Nagisa Oshima, quoted in Anatole Dauman and Jacques Gerber, *Souvenir-écran*, Georges Pompidou editions, Paris 1989, p. 232.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Vincent Capes, *Champs d’expériences - L’empire des sens de Nagisa Oshima (1976)*, <http://www.zoanima.fr/lempire-des-sens/>.

<sup>19</sup> Agnes Giard, *Histoires de revenants dans l’imaginaire érotique au Japon*, Glenat, Grenoble, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome*, lesson from 16 March 1976.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Bataille, *Œuvres*, pp. 139-145, *apud*. Albert Nguyen, “Bataille, le lord af ou le Passant du rire”, in *L’en-je lacanien*, 2008/ 2, no. 11, pp. 47-80.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Nguyen, “Bataille, le lord af ou le Passant du rire”, in *L’en-je lacanien*, p. 54.



invented the term “sexless” for those couples who have no sexual life and this happens at about 60-70% out of the couples in the past 40 years.<sup>23</sup> The issue about this voluntary abstinence is that sex is everywhere, sexual industry covering 1% of Japan’s GDP<sup>24</sup>. There is a documentary called *L’empire des sans* by Pierre Caule in which Japan’s sexual misery is presented: video boxes, love dolls etc. – a man can satisfy himself without being worried about whether or not he has procured pleasure to his partner. Celine Gailleurd says that today Sada and Kichi’s transgression is important because the porno industry conquered all and sex became an object of consumption which has lost all its power of fascination. This is one reason to remember about Oshima’s film *Ai no corrida*.

Lacan says that desire opens towards death. Eroticism raises the problem of the being and leads man to loss. The peak of eroticism is that silence in which being is lost. But anxiety answers and makes life vibrate. The general interest for the first projections of the movie gave Lacan the opportunity to refer to castration, phantasm and  $\Phi$ . There is, we can see in the movie, a post-mortem cut. Physical death is not enough for Sada Abe because the man continues to exist through  $\Phi$ , a significant which at the same time is signified or “if there is a bar that every woman knows how to jump over, ... that is the bar between the significant and the signified”<sup>25</sup>. But, continues Lacan, there is another bar, that from not-all  $\times \Phi$ , in the table of sexuation that he constructed:

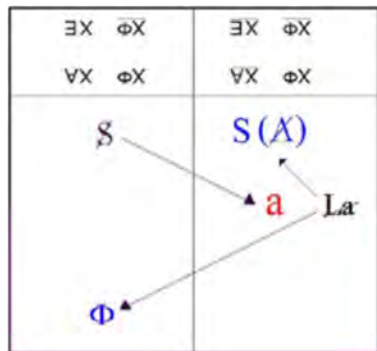


Table 1: Table of sexuation in Lacan's seminar *Encore*.

Source: <http://staferla.free.fr/S20/S20.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Amanda Goya, “Unhappy Jouissance”, *Congress of the WAP*, Paris, 2014, [http://www.Congresamp2014.com/en/template.php?file=Textos/La-jouissance-triste\\_Amanda-Goya.html](http://www.Congresamp2014.com/en/template.php?file=Textos/La-jouissance-triste_Amanda-Goya.html).

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, lesson from March, 13, 1973.

### Characters: Sada and Kichi

*L'Empire des sens* is the story of a destiny and of a psychic structure. In the case of psychotic structure – and Sada is a well-contoured example in this sense, due to her unique relation to the object as it develops throughout the movie – there has never been an extraction of object *a* due to which the reality field could find its frame. Lacan builds the topology of the phantasm in relation to reality. The articulated structure of the phantasm in a non-psychotic structure consists of two heterogeneous topological parts when we cut the cross-cap with a cut that closes after two laps. The two sides are: a unilateral one that is the subject as fundamentally divided, and another one that is that of the object *a*: a double disc with one face and a reverse.

To some, Abe Sada seems to be almost a vocation: Sada expresses herself with the object and with it only in “the way a musician expresses himself with his instrument; in other words she has a complete relation with the real”<sup>26</sup>. The lovers seek the feeling of completeness, but “we can know the real through eroticism only with the price of a complete and irreparable destruction of reality itself”<sup>27</sup>. So the film is not just about erotomania – in fact, the real Sada Abe defended herself against this idea during her trial in the '40s – or simple sexual games, but for Sada it is a spiritual quest, a total fusion not only with her lover, but with reality as a whole and whether he is loved or not, the lover is just a vector, a mean of reaching that. There is a going into nothingness of the self in pleasure or pain but nevertheless the lovers are not blinded by a desire that would make them irrational, yet they are aware and extremely lucid, and they freely choose their destiny. They are “masters of their destiny in a seigniorial way”<sup>28</sup>.

At the same time, Kichi is out of his social rank. The point of no return is obvious when Kichi walks against the current in the scene with the soldiers: young people marching to be massacred while he abandons himself to love; his sacrifice is opposed to the vain and useless sacrifice of those young men. Oshima explains: “my characters assert their desires, thus opposing society”<sup>29</sup>. In Oshima’s view, this is neither a sadistic or a masochistic movie, nor a domination of one lover over the other. It is a movie about an absolute donation in love, physical love, until death and beyond. There is also domination, but it takes place outside the rooms of love and it is none other than the mortifier one of the imperial Japan.

<sup>26</sup> Alberto Moravia, *Trente ans au cinéma: De Rossellini à Greenaway*, Flammarion, 1995, p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> Alberto Moravia, *Storia dell'occhio*, Gremese Editore, 2000, *apud* Vincent Capes, *Champs d'expériences - L'empire des sens de Nagisa Oshima (1976)*, <http://www.zoanima.fr/lempire-des-sens/>, n 8.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Pierre Bouyxou, “L'Empire des sens”, in *Sex Stars System*, no. 13, 1976.

<sup>29</sup> Nagisa Oshima, *Souvenir-écran*, p. 233.



*Image 4: Sada and Kichi.*

Source: <https://www.quinzaine-realisateurs.com/en/film/lempire-des-sens/>.

Oshima films his characters in close plans, as if he wants to extract the field of their game's rhythm. "As a certain fact, there is a single thing that matters for Sada: a passion which, without being love, lacks measure"<sup>30</sup>. This passion has an object: sex. She accepts the man just because he is an appendix to the object she wants; thus the man can be also a detachable part from his genitals; in this way, the idea of killing the man becomes clearer: in order to have that organ to which the man is nothing but the appendix. Lacan, in that very Lesson 9 of the seminar *Le Sinthome*, states that it is all about being or having. In fact, the lesson begins and ends with Freud. At Freud it is all about "faire l'homme", being him and having him, killing him: here, it is about having the object penis without the appendix that would be the man.

Kichi too loves sex, but his desire is without a determined object or, better, his object coincides with the jouissance of the Other, the one he forces himself to have of the body of that woman in such a way that he imagines procuring it to her, too. Her voluptuousness amazes him, he connects to the rejuvenescent feeling that she has the power to renew in him. When she asks him, referring to his organ: "tell

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<sup>30</sup> Luc Richir, "A propos de *L'Empire des sens* de Nagisa Oshima et Jacques Lacan: « L'erotisme feminin, c'est tuer l'homme »", p. 63.

me why it becomes hard so fast?”, he answers “because it is you who desires it”. “Through this, he does nothing else than revealing the hidden resort of desire that is submission to the almightiness of the Other”<sup>31</sup>. For Kichi, the sexual jouissance is associated with his phantasm that he would answer to Sada’s demand by giving himself to her sexual games. His phantasm supports his jouissance. What Kichi grasps in the Other, incorporated by Sada, is his object *a*: “he (Sbarred from the masculine position on the table of sexuation) will never be able to reach his sexual partner, which is the Other, otherwise than through a mediation that is cause of his desire”<sup>32</sup>. For a man, the sexual jouissance passes through his organ, via castration. And for this, there has to be something like the phantasm which sustains him as a being who desires. The object of the phantasm is the object that substitutes the partner of the Other sex. As a matter of fact, Kichi himself is the one that introduces the idea of strangulation as well as the one who tells Sada to kill him. He loses everything: power, life, genital organs after death. He reaches other position, he knows there is no escape from the sexual jouissance towards the empire of love, he knows that “il n’y pas de rapport sexuel”, so he commands Sada “Jouis!”, as the only chance to escape their jouissance. Kichi abandons himself to submission with a certain humor.<sup>33</sup> But masculine erotism – which can reach up to the phantasm of an agony orchestrated by the whim of a mistress – remains mostly blind to feminine erotism. Sada is “hypersensitive”, frenetic in becoming sick of pleasure, but her passion is magnetized by a different pole of love. She has a precise object: that organ of which she endlessly makes her object. It is not enough for her to be the master of her lover’s ardors, but for her it is necessary to appropriate his organ even if for that she must cut it off. Her relationship with the phallus does not limit to that substitutive jouissance which is a metaphor for love. The lovers play, of course, crowning some objects with a phallic meaning, they manipulate substitutable significant that order the series. But the problem is when the woman, Sada, shamelessly tears the veil apart.

The reality field “does not work but is blocked by the veil of the phantasm”<sup>34</sup>. We have no access to reality without going through the phantasm that hides our real, which occults our impossible to see. The phantasm is a shutter<sup>35</sup>: a shutter whose desire is the darkroom. But when she opens it, the fire enters. The cold fire

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<sup>31</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore*, p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> Luc Richir, “A propos de l’*Empire des sens* de Nagisa Oshima et Jacques Lacan: « L’erotisme féminin, c’est tuer l’homme »”, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Lacan, “D’une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose”, in *Ecrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 553, note 1.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Michel Bousseyroux, “Réalité, fantasme et réel”, in *L’en-je lacanien*, 2007/ 2, no. 9, p. 148 sqq.

of the real, as in the famous “father, can't you see I'm burning?”, which comes to impress the darkroom. The first function of the phantasm is to obtain the reality of the Name of the Father. It veils the reality of the Oedipus, in which the love for the father makes armature. The phantasm veils, hides an incestuous love for the father.

Since the symbolic castration – i.e. the interdiction of an incestuous jouissance that is reserved to the dead father – is doubled by an organic forbidden and since the man has a male organ and not a phallus, this exposes him during the sexual act to just spell in the ditch of pleasure.<sup>36</sup> The sex is the cut that separates the body from its jouissance; desire is enrolled in the repetition of the failure, which supposes that there is a third term which would be obstacle against jouissance. The medium term – i.e. the organ of copulation – prematurely retracts its support. Hence the race towards death in which Sada precipitates her partner, as if death, far from an ending, would be a true beginning. Or, what she really wants is to eternize a suspended time.

## The Object

Kichi is amazed by his partner's insistence of wanting again and again. What is obscene in Sada's stupid face, mouth open, is the return to the infantile on the scene of sexuality. Sexuality is linked to adulthood; it is the place where the maturity of the two sexes is asserted along their conjugated searches; or:

“in this film the puerility is constant (only Bataille understood that sex is childish). They love like a game because the two lovers are playing as if they are released partially from their obedience to the phantasm. Winnicott says: «The creative game is in relation to the dream and with life, but does not belong, in its essence, to the phantasm»<sup>37</sup>.

The point of capiton – in the way Lacan defined its function – corresponds to that point when the chain of significant, which until then was floating, undetermined, and open to all meanings, is now condensed in a sort of precipitation. In her phantasy Sada uses the man to find the lost object, the precise object that can substitute it, without any equivocation. It is a detachable object – the way we read in the dialogue between Sada and Kichi –, which can be cut, as we see it in the end of the movie, an object placed on the Other's body, an object that she stubbornly holds with her orifices. So it is not ever a proper object to be given away, an object of

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<sup>36</sup> Luc Richir, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

cession, in the way Lacan presents it in his seminar about anxiety, namely a part of oneself that the subject gives away in a subjective cession.<sup>38</sup>

During the sexual relation, the phallic organ plays the role of the object *a*, and Lacan gives its detumescence – that is so important in the subjective experience – a function of separation from the Other, homologue to the function of the cession of drive objects which, actually, stops the desire from going further towards the enigmatic jouissance of the Other: the impossibility of meeting this jouissance is due to the fact that the organ fails. This anticipates, of course, the thesis of the non-sexual ratio: in any sexual act, for the man the falling of the phallic object in his separating function is repeated, and this fact gives a relief, says Lacan. Of course, object *a* cannot be considered without the Other, without the symbolic, since it is the effect of the mark of the symbolic upon the living, yet without being a significant element of the Other. In his seminar XXIII, Lacan insists: “we do not believe in the object, we merely apprehend desire and, from this acknowledgement, we induce the cause as being objectivating” because “object *a*, as a support of desire in the phantasm, is not visible in the image of desire”<sup>39</sup>.

Or, in what concerns Sada, she phantasizes what makes obstacle to the encounter – she phantasizes it even if the phallus cannot be phantasmized, cannot even be imagined since the veil is a common manner of apprehending it as a hidden object. There is a fact: object *a* is that something which misses and all the objects which exist in reality just try to make us forget this. But not Sada, since for her the object is there and can be grasped, detached, contained in herself: “I could keep it in myself”, she says.

### Cutout without Metaphor

“There is no sexual ratio/ relation (*rapport sexuel*), only embroidery”, says Lacan<sup>40</sup>. If there is no sexual relation, if through this formula Lacan makes embroidery

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre X: L'Angoisse*, Paris, Seuil, 2004, p. 363: “Dans une situation dont le figement suspend devant nos yeux le caractère primitivement inarticulable et dont pourtant il restera à jamais marqué, ce qui s'est produit c'est quelque chose qui donne son sens vrai à ce « cède » du sujet : c'est littéralement *une cession*. Ce caractère d'*objet cessible* est un des caractères du *petit(a)*. (...) Ici nous apparaît que les points de fixation de *la libido* sont toujours autour de quelque *un de ces moments* que la nature offre à cette structure éventuelle de *cession subjective*.”

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome*, lesson from December 9, 1975.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, lesson from March 16, 1976: “J'essaie de vous donner un bout de réel, à propos de ce dans quoi, dans la peau de quoi nous sommes, à savoir la peau de cette histoire incroyable, enfin, qu'est l'espèce humaine, et je vous dis qu'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel, mais c'est de la broderie. C'est de la broderie parce que ça participe du oui ou non. Du moment que je dis « il n'y a pas » c'est déjà très suspect. C'est suspect de n'être pas vraiment un bout de réel. Le stigmaté du réel c'est de se relier à rien.”

around the real, he yet sustains a relation between language and sex: the cut. The cutout is a metaphor and he speaks of it before discussing the movie *L'Empire des dens* during the lesson in order to highlight that the metaphor indicates sexual relation; the cutout of the relation between language and sex evokes, of course, the cutout that the Japanese heroine Sada Abe does over her strangulated lover's body.

Lacan said that sexual relation refers to taking a bladder as a lantern (Fr. *prendre un vessie pour une lanterne*): the most important is that in the movie it is not about a metaphor, things do not happen at the level of language and Sada, the heroine, takes the organ of her lover as something more than a phallic issue. It is not like the  $\Phi$ , but she makes it her own object – cutout – *linked to nothing*; “the stigma of the real is to be linked to nothing”, says Lacan<sup>41</sup>.

There is also another element that has this particularity, that of not being linked to anything: object *a*. And, the way phallus is what verifies the real, thing shown in the previous lesson, through object *a* through the way the heroine possesses it, a dimension of the real is suggested. And, maybe, something unthinkable, something which, by this dimension of real forcludes the meaning.

“The castration is not the phantasm”, says Lacan; it is about killing the man which, here, means touching the object itself that has no connection to anything; or better it is simply connected to nothing, meaning death: “because this aspect of unthinkable is death, so it is the foundation of the real that it cannot be thought”<sup>42</sup>.

At the end of the movie there is a scene when Sada strangulates Kichi and then she seems to have no interest in his organ –, and only after that she cuts off his penis and scrotum and in the end she writes with Kichi's blood on his chest: she writes letters, ideograms on the amputated lover's body, writing that they, from now on, will be united as one forever. The amount of blood in the movie, which comes from the cut, is used as ink so that she writes something that refers to the One, the two lovers, etc. that was translated like “Sada and Kichi are now together forever”. Over the final image, a voice says that Sada walked in nonsense on the streets of Tokyo, holding his organs in her hands under the kimono and with her face in *kareiakana*, which means clear open sky, without clouds.<sup>43</sup> We ought to mention that the final moment when she is shown naked on the benches of the open air theatre and there is a girl who plays hide and seek with an old man and keeps asking him if he is ready or not, the old man saying not yet and then vanishing, clearly shows the *Verwerfung*, the *forclusion*, as Lacan translated, that is the original subjective choice of rejecting the significant of the Name of the Father.

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<sup>41</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>42</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Fabien Tremeau, “Ai no korrida: The Cutting Edge of Feminine Erotica”, <https://www.lacan.com/frameV2.htm>.



Image 5: Sada Abe.

Source: <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/472596554623146288/>

### Castration

Lacan, in “Propos sur l’hystérie”<sup>44</sup> says that the notion of castration means that we fool ourselves with the object  $a$ : this is the reason why we created the notion of phallus – phallus means a privileged object over which we must fool ourselves.

Commenting on this movie, in the aforementioned lesson of March 16, 1976 of his seminar *Le Sinthome*, Lacan describes the intensity of the Japanese feminine eroticism which, in his opinion, is at the level of the phantasm and then underlines the key point of the movie in which Sada cuts off the penis and scrotum of her lover after she killed him: if it had been a simple act of castration, she would have done it while he was still alive. But as long as she did that after his death, it means that for Sada it was important to play with the penis or the on-off phenomenon of the organ:  $\phi$  and  $-\phi$ . Let us not forget that the movie was based on a true story, Sada Abe carrying the  $\phi$  with her allover in the streets of Tokyo for several days.

For psychoanalysis to work, symbolic castration must be possible: meaning that the desire for the Other must be introduced by the significant  $\Phi$ . According to Lacan, the symbolic phallus cannot be negated. Or, due to the extreme intensity of Sada’s phantasy, the  $\Phi$  is at risk of being negated and becoming a game of  $\phi$  and  $-\phi$ .<sup>45</sup>

There is, incidentally, a popular Japanese belief that Japanese families are a combination of strong maternal role and weak paternal role. The Japanese writing system, especially Japanese ideographic characters – i.e. *kanji* – are why Lacan was

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Claude-Noële Pickmann, “L’hystérie dans l’air du temps”, in ERES, 2014/ 1, no. 27, pp. 15-24.

<sup>45</sup> Nina Cornyetz, J. Keith Vincent (eds.), *Perversion and Modern Japan: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Culture*, London, Routledge, 2010.



pessimistic about psychoanalysis in Japan<sup>46</sup>: if the Japanese subject really is positioned between on *Yomi* and *Kun Yomi*, then the *aphanisis*<sup>47</sup> of the subject is not possible. Symbolic castration is thus blocked, in favor of the type Sada fantasies, and the rediscovery of the subject by object *a* in the analytical cure would be expected in vain. In Japanese language, several sounds can be written in several possible ways in *kanji*, because there are many homonyms.

In the seminar *Le Sinthome*, the discussion about the movie *Ai no corrida* began apparently unexpected: Lacan, speaking about Joyce, the Catholic, remembers saying that Catholics were unanalyzable and then about Jacques-Alain Miller reminding him that he had said the same thing about the Japanese. Then, in reply, Lacan begins to comment on the Japanese film *L'Empire des sens*. The movie reveals the attempts of the couple to create the sexual relation<sup>48</sup> (Fr. *rapport sexuel*) and demonstrates, at the same time, both the vanity of such an endeavor as well as its lethal horizon because the more the two partners try to make One through sexual encounter, this appears to be impossible even with the price of death and mutilation. People dream of accessing the sexual relation that does not exist. The love discourse is, in this way, a major attempt of creating a suppleance. "When we are two, we dream of making One. And love, a certain form of love, has this belief."<sup>49</sup>

According to Lacan, death is unthinkable pretty much as sexual relation is unthinkable, too. We think about death because we talk, otherwise we wouldn't have any clue about the idea of being dead or alive. The Japanese call the feeling of death "the feeling of the wind"<sup>50</sup> in order to metaphorize the sexual relation, to bring it closer, to touch that limit beyond which something should be said, something which, in fact, is impossible to say: I am dead. The malediction of sex and of death are the impossible, the real. The non-sexual relation is the real of sex.

The access of the subject to the body of the Other is not a proof of love, but of violence. The proper body is the only absolute private property: one cannot take it away from a subject unless taking his or her life, too. Because the subject has a body, he is not a body: between the subject and the body there is an abyss, the body being organic and the subject being symbolic. Love is a matter of demand and it is reciprocal: there is always complementarity ("you are what I lack, therefore I

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<sup>46</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Avis au lecteur japonais", in *Autres écrits*, p. 498.

<sup>47</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, lesson from May 27, 1964.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Esthela Solano, "Rêves, délires et réveils", <https://www.lacan-universite.fr/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/R%C3%AAves-d%C3%A9lires-et-r%C3%A9veils-9.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> "Ça n'est pas ce avec quoi l'homme fait l'amour, c'est-à-dire en fin de compte avec son inconscient, et rien de plus. Pour ce que fantasme la femme - si c'est bien là ce que nous a *présenté le film* - c'est bien quelque chose qui de toute façon empêche la rencontre", Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome*, lesson from March 16, 1976.

<sup>50</sup> Florence Signon, *Trame*, 1, ACIDI, 2008, *apud*. Albert Nguyen, *art. cit.*, p. 60.

love you” and vice versa): this is why it is not always a good idea to search for the reason why people love; we simply thirsty for illusion, the other completes us. For Lacan, the only proof of love are words and the love discourse: couples stay in love as long as there is love discourse. Hence, love is a matter of discourse – i.e. what is said; desire is a matter of unconsciousness, it is kept in language which is constituted as a message of the unconscious which is not said, but we have it in its formations; and *jouissance* relates to the subject’s own body, of which he or she wants to satisfy himself or herself. For Lacan, love is what makes *jouissance* to set free the desire, to give access to desire; love marks a limit to *jouissance*. In his seminar *Anxiety*, he says: “Love is the only thing that can make *jouissance* condescend into desire”<sup>51</sup>. The condition for these two registers of *jouissance* and love to be influenced is that there must be a manifestation of discourse.

How can a subject reach his or her partner?

“There’s nothing but encounter, an encounter in the partner of the symptoms, of affects, of all that in each one marks the trace of his exile, an exile from the sexual relation”<sup>52</sup>.

Love means that the knot of two subjective solitudes implies the (real) presence of a third term.<sup>53</sup>



*Image 6: Tatsuya Fuji, Eiko Masuda and Nagisa Oshima.*  
Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/820992207050128800/>

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre X: Angoisse*, lesson from March 13, 1963.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore*, p. 132.

<sup>53</sup> Albert Nguyen, *art. cit.*, 73.

## Conclusion: the Real

The jouissance of the Other, of the body of the Other who symbolizes it, is not a sign of love, as Lacan<sup>54</sup> said: the jouissance of the body of the Other is neither a necessary nor a sufficient answer because the demand for love does not cease to ask for love: encore/ en corps! “Encore” is the proper name of that gap from where, in the Other, starts the demand for love. The gap in the Other (S Abarred) is structural: love which would allow completeness is demanded again and again and in the body. Love means, thus, to make One. In *Crucial problems of psychoanalysis*<sup>55</sup> Lacan mentions Frege in order to demonstrate the opening of the 1 towards something connected to being and, beyond being, to jouissance.

The phantasm is writing of the non-sexual relation. The phantasm is the last line of defense against jouissance. In a psychotic structure, there had been no extraction of the object *a* from which the field of reality could find its frame.<sup>56</sup> The field of reality “can only function as obturated by the screen of the phantasm”<sup>57</sup>. We don’t have access to reality without passing through the phantasm which hides the real, veils the impossible to see. The phantasm is like an obturator and the desire is a camera obscura. But when this opens, fire enters. The cold fire of the real, like in the famous dream of “father, can’t you see that I am burning?” which comes to impress the camera obscura.

The topologic structure of the knot of the phantasm makes it possible for the subject to perceive himself as an object. Because the structure of the phantasm is a double chain – Whitehead – that is characterized by the reversibility of its two closed curves: object *a* and Sbarred. In his seminar *Le Sinthome*, Lacan makes this equivalence specific to the non-sexual relation: *il n’y a pas* of the sexual relation means also that there is an exchange between the two components of the phantasm: thus the phantasm is the writing of the non-sexual relation. This is the reason why, for the subject, the phantasm is “the entrance to the real”<sup>58</sup>. And this is why Oshima's movie is so important. As it is not only about the phantasm, it is about the real.

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<sup>54</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore*, lesson from November 21, 1972 *sqq.*

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XII: Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1981, lessons from January 20 & 27, February 24, 1965.

<sup>56</sup> Michel Bousseyroux, “Réalité, fantasme et réel”, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, note from p. 553.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Bousseyroux, *art. cit.*, p. 156.

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