

# EROS + MASSACRE

The Film on Film Foundation ([www.filmonfilm.org](http://www.filmonfilm.org)), an organization dedicated to encouraging the exhibition of celluloid motion-picture film in the manner it is meant to be screened, presents at the Pacific Film Archive Theater the second of its on-going series "Radical Strategies": Yoshishige Yoshida's revolutionary Japanese New Wave masterpiece "Eros + Massacre".

In Yoshishige Yoshida's **Eros plus Massacre** (1969) fiction and fact, present and past confront, collide, intermingle, and illuminate each other. Aptly called a "phantasmagoria", **Eros** intertwines the "true" story from 1916-23 of Anarchists and Free Love-espousers Sakae Osugi, Noe Ito and their circle, and the fictional tale of Eiko, a contemporary young woman engaged in Free Love explorations of her own, as she researches the ideas and lives of Ito and Osugi. In keeping with her pursuits, she has a circle as well, this one all-male, including Wada, a young pyromaniac, Unema, a suicidal film director, and Hinoshiro, who claims to be a police detective investigating her supposed involvement in a prostitution ring.

These various strands intertwine in a manner that ranks among the most oblique narrative styles in cinema history, betraying an on-going artistic dialogue not only with Yoshida's fellow members of the Japanese New Wave, but also the leading luminaries of European art cinema, such as Antonioni, Resnais, and Godard (especially *Weekend* and *Le Gai savoir*), as well as the Truffaut of *Jules et Jim*. Critical discussions of **Eros** are often at pains to determine just whose narrative the film is: that of Eiko and her various men, or perhaps Ito? The on-screen evidence to ultimately determine the solution to this issue is slim, but arguably Yoshida is less concerned with character perspective than with all the characters collectively serving as stand-ins for modern Japan, which he anthropomorphically subjects to a form of Reichian Character Analysis, in which "a person's entire character, not only individual symptoms, can be looked at and treated as a neurotic phenomenon." In this reading, the film's characters from both past and present mirror each other like facets of a single psyche, as well as represent the various aspects of the Japanese character as it transitions through the modern age. Yoshida sees the political and erotic world of late-60's Japan as a direct development of experiments attempted in the 10's and 20's. To diagnose Japan's neurosis, it's necessary to interrogate the past, and, as in a dream of a survivor of trauma, to intuitively ruminate on the cause, consequence, and meaning of debilitating events -- recreating their origins, reforming motivation and action, remolding outcomes, until the key to liberation slips into place.

Yoshida, with Nagisa Oshima, shared not only the interest in psychoanalysis alluded to above (though they tended to be a bit wary of its application to the Japanese context), but were also members of a small coterie of independent directors who had taken to dealing with their Marxism explicitly in their work. (The title **Eros plus Massacre**, in fact, alludes to an earlier attempt to blend Marx and Freud, Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.) Unlike the vast majority of Oshima's work, however, Yoshida's films fell squarely into the *feminisuto* (a term derived from the Japanese pronunciation of the English word feminist) camp of Mizoguchi, Imamura, etc. Tadao Sato describes the *feminisuto* perspective thusly: "The image of a woman suffering uncomplainingly can imbue us with admiration for a virtuous existence almost beyond our reach, rich in endurance and courage. One can idealize her rather than merely pity her, and this can lead to what I call the worship of womanhood, a special Japanese brand of feminism." By 1969, Yoshida had created a major body of *feminisuto* work in collaboration with his wife, Mariko Okada, the greatest star of the Japanese New Wave (she plays Noe Ito in **Eros**), to which **Eros** served as the thematic and stylistic climax. In their series of films, the skewed world-view embodied by Yoshida's famously radically de-centered compositions and fractured narrative strategies is brought into emotional balance by images of the idealized characters played by his wife, who functions as the alluring anima, leading the wandering hero out of his solipsistic maze. (Appropriate to the Freudian-informed **Eros**, this lure often leads





to a bringing to consciousness of the death-wish, though one more in the manner intrinsic to traditional Japanese culture than Freud's *Thanatos*.

Yoshida's Osugi is seen in this Marxian/*feminasuto* light. Despite an unusual adherence by a filmmaker to factual detail, Yoshida has "his" Osugi evolve to a position diametrically opposed to the historical one -- rather than liberation coming from an on-going process of inward-looking self-development, liberation is *from* the solipsistic self. Human freedom is seen as possible only when self-development is in a constant state of evolution in relationship to *others*.

The dramatic style of **Eros** evinces what Noel Burch describes as a "remarkable reading of the new theatricality" of the 1960's. Yoshida discovers a tone and purpose balanced somewhere between Brecht and Artaud. Through distancing techniques, rational perception and judgment are engaged. Thereupon we are bowled over by the film's ecstatic beauty. Immediately afterwards, the viewer's sensibility is forced through a sieve of agonized absurdism, leading him or her along a series of multiple-catharsis inducing experiences akin to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. In actuality, all these elements occur simultaneously, adding up to what might be called the Cinema of Apocalypse, in which our consciousness, and perhaps even the nature of our being are challenged to evolve by this cinematic experience.

Appropriate to an Apocalyptic Cinema, in **Eros plus Massacre**, cinema itself is brought into question as a mode of perception keeping the solipsistic male locked in his bubble, and to enact what Yoshida sees as a necessary change in human consciousness may, in fact, involve the death of cinema itself.

### Film Series: Radical Strategies

As part of its mission, the Film on Film Foundation seeks to showcase exciting and unusual celluloid motion-picture film works which have rarely been screened locally, unleashing some for the very first time. Our debut series, 'Radical Strategies', represents the opening salvo in this part of our undertaking. Each film in this series of experimental narratives questions the nature of cinema itself, and in its realization, each proffers potential answers to the questions of what cinema is, can, or should be.

A concurrent thematic: the 100-plus years of film's existence have been aligned with dramatic international political upheaval. Experimenters in form have often seen their work as connected to a fundamental recreation of the social/political world, and this adds an additional, sometimes explosive, resonance to the ideas of 'Radical Strategies.'

