

Shonen

("Boy")

Japan : 1969 : dir. Nagisa Oshima :

: 97 min

prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:

[Tetsue Abe](#)

Fumio Watanabe; Akiko Koyama; Tsuyoshi Kinoshita

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	KBytes	Ω □ ☞ Z ♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3317c	2½	3	2	3	- - - -	No	unseen



The victim culture personified – Abe's kerbside drill consists of waiting for an affluent driver and stepping out in front of his car. "Morality" is what your parents tell you is "right". Source: indeterminate

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"It came from a Japanese newspaper story: a down-and-out family were making their young son fake road accidents in order to blackmail motorists for "hospital fees". Oshima starts from character studies of the members of the family as outsiders in Japanese society: the lazy, facilely embittered father, the tackily glamorous mother longing for her stepson's love, the 10-year old boy hopelessly confused about his role as the family breadwinner. With characteristic tender roughness, Oshima then develops this extraordinary story into an open-ended question about the truth of appearances, centering on the boy's own fantasies about his

sci-fi hero. A key film in the struggle for a modern, political cinema."

13th London Film Festival (1969) programme review:

"Nagisa Oshima's **"BOY"** is perhaps his most fascinatingly achieved film. The boy in question belongs to a family who earn their living by getting run over by automobiles - they fake it, of course - and then "settling" out of court. Father was wounded in the war and hasn't worked since; the stepmother is genuinely fond of the boy but feels he must do his share of the bread-winning, so he learns how to pick the expensive cars and how to groan convincingly. In addition to the film's anecdotal interest, it is ravishingly

photographed (the family get through most of

Japan) and it is cleverly structured by the



gradual closing of the police net that threatens

Conscience warring with obedience – Tetsue Abe Source: International Encyclopedia of Film

them throughout their strange odyssey. A truly original and startling work.”

Sight and Sound - Summer '70 - review:

“Nagisa Oshima’s sixteenth film displays its credits against the blackened sun of the Japanese flag. The symbol, recurring throughout the film, is intended as an ironic reminder of militant nationalism, the dominant mood (as Oshima sees it) of the society within which his little band of criminals makes its gestures of revolt. In addition, the flag stands for the paternalistic structure of the Japanese way of life, a structure both constricting and emasculatory which has already received a thorough trouncing in two other recent Oshima works, **“DEATH BY HANGING”** and **“DIARY OF A SHINJUKU THIEF”**. In both these predecessors, youthful offenders against the established order struggle to reconcile their social transgressions with what they are conscious to be their moral ones - only to reach the conclusion that the values of the older generation are neither valid nor relevant to their own problems.

The killer in **“DEATH BY HANGING”** concludes, with a terrifying logic, that as long as the state finds him guilty he is innocent; and while the guilelessness of the family in **“BOY”** is

never as boldly defined, the individual members are seen to find their own level of crime and punishment quite separate from the conventional requirements of the impersonal cities on whose roads they occasionally dare to trespass. For them, the flag is neither provider nor protector; rather, they are its victims - and in turn the boy is victim of his parents, whose exploitation of his body as a sacrificial offering to one car accident after another (so that remunerative claims for damages can be made against the drivers) is stoically accepted by him as their right. He even takes pride in his craft, making as it does a vital contribution to the welfare of his group.

In such a context, criminality in the legal sense ceases to exist and its place is taken by primitive loyalty to ideals that could only be challenged (in the remote possibility that a challenge would be conceivable) at risk of parental chastisement. In Oshima’s view, the Japanese Imperial Household is similarly in a position to transform justice into a matter of personal caprice.

The ten-year old in **“BOY”**, based as he is on a real child whose case made Japanese headlines in 1966, could have been given the full sentimental treatment. Like the arrogantly vulnerable miscreants of **“SHINJUKU THIEF”**, however, he is contemplated by Oshima with a

gaze that is almost cold. All the heart-rending sequences are there that one would expect, but their emotive qualities are carefully muted, in particular by the use of natural sound at times when more popular soundtracks would be a tapestry of strings, but also by the omission of reaction shots and by the selection of distant vantage points for the camera (as when the parents quarrel on the top terrace of a deserted sports-ground but are so far away that it is some time before we can be sure who they are).

Tucked into the core of the film is the delicate story of the boy's private tragedies, the game of hide-and-seek he plays alone (and loses), the grandmother he wanders off to find but never does, the yellow cap he lovingly cleans and dries after one mishap only to see it flung beneath a truck-wheel, the watch his mother buys him which his father hurls into the snow, and, bleakest of all, the disintegration of the comforting fantasy into which he and his tiny brother retreat until the point at which he recognises it no longer holds any security for them.

Again like the preceding films, **"BOY"** spirals from the apparently rational to the fragmentation of crisis point - in this case the real accident unwittingly caused by the family - after which the central character can at last begin to think clearly, unaffected by the pressures which have previously confused him. Interrogated by the police, the boy answers only with non-sequiturs, for the questions he hears are his own. His announcement, with which the film ends, that he was at Hokkaido where the real accident occurred, is the confession emerging from this interior interrogation - a confession the full paradox of which is that it admits guilt for what society has failed to recognise as a crime. And on this, the purest kind of tragedy, the film fades into darkness.

Since the basic narrative of **"BOY"** is of its own nature multi-faceted, Oshima had confined his style to the most direct observation, with none of the extraordinary theatrical complications of his other works - indeed, the only departures from strict naturalism are the arbitrary sepia passages (which Oshima admits are chiefly designed to enhance the shock effect of the red boot in the snow), and the emphatic slow motion with which the boy at last destroys his Andromedan snowman. Yet the film has its undercurrents - the persistent links with rain and snow, the periodic return to the sea, the vital function of meal-times in the development of the family relationships, and of course the regular punctuating scene of a car halting abruptly as a small body bounces from it, an apocalyptic metaphor in which truth and deception are in disturbing contradiction.

Oshima has said that he made the film as a prayer for all human beings who find it necessary to live in this way, and that for him the group in **"BOY"** have come to represent a holy family. While the divinity of their journey may be open to question, their martyrdom, as befits a prayer, is celebrated with dignity, poetry, and a crystalline precision."

- Philip Strick

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Not to be confused with a 1925 Spanish silent of the same (English) title. Oshima could never have suspected, in 1969, what resonance his film would acquire thirty years later. His serial road accident "victim" personifies splendidly the new American culture of litigation, trivial damages suits, and the revivalist zeal with which people compete to proclaim themselves childhood "victims", hence acquiring moral superiority over those who have not "suffered". Like all American diseases, the UK has been keenest to acquire it, and our television screens today creak under the weight of competing ads from "no win, no fee", "where there's blame there's a claim" ambulance-chasing law firms. Oshima's boy is of course, in one light, a prostitute, his body exploited by his parents in the most graphic of senses, but he has many cousins on our city streets today in the shape of children set to begging by their families.



One is hard pressed to think of parallels, given the social context of the confidence trick at the heart of this story. One could point to Tatum O'Neal and father Ryan as Depression-era travelling con artists in "**PAPER MOON**", for example, or the culture of matter-of-fact thievery in "**DOM ZA VEZANJE**" ("Time of the Gypsies"), or the desperate money-making schemes of the young social outcasts in "**PIXOTE**", but none of those carried the same implicit critique of family loyalties, or drew telling parallels between filial obedience and social conformity in the wider sense. It might be tentatively said that children's disillusionment with parental values is a core theme in Japanese cinema, but we see too little of it here to draw ready generalisations. Nothing else is known of Tetsue Abe.

See subject index under **ASIA, CARS, CRIME / DELINQUENCY, STEPMOTHERS / STEP-FATHERS**, and possibly see in particular "**OHAYO**" (59) and "**THE FAMILY GAME**" (84).