

Welcome to a deep dive. In this episode two Japanese films that use lust and desire to explore the human need for belonging and order even as those things vanish all around us.

Thanks for joining me for Gohatto, A Beautiful Mystery.

I remember reading that Nagisa Oshima who had directed in the Realm of the Senses and Merry Christmas, Mister Lawrence had made a film about male/male love among the samurai I was thrilled. Only to be deflated later because that's not what the film is about at all. Only to be enthralled with what the film IS about and how this master storyteller gives of a glimpse of something as it is in the act of disappearing.

In fact, the film like most of Oshima's films is a social commentary. In an essay, he wrote early in his career Oshima listed things he was wary of in cinema and in Japanese life in the late 1960s early 1970s, things he thought weren't questioned enough.

There are several things to note here. First, the condemnation of the "premodern" Japanese mentality: feudalistic, xenophobic, undemocratic, hostile to personal liberty, mired in dead traditions.

Gohatto or Taboo which is the English film title is set in 1865 within the ranks of an elite group of Samurai chosen to protect the shogunate. 1865 was at the end of the Edo period just before Japan was forced to reopen itself to the west. Into this company comes two recruits Tashiro is from a respected samurai family and Kano from a merchant family.

Merchants were the money makers, but they were considered the lowest of the low because they were seen not to have created anything of value.

Of the two recruits, Tashiro begins to stand out. He's a deft fighter but it's the merchant's son who garners all of the real attention. When questioned about why he wants to become a samurai Kano says he wants to become a samurai so that he might have the right to kill. This is our first clue, killing for killing sake among the samurai would have made you a dishonorable person and you would have been kicked out, but Kano is allowed to stay. A story that sticks in my head is of a drunken samurai stumbling home drunk when he encountered a loud barking dog, he took out his sword and killed the dog. in doing this the samurai had disgraced himself and he was ordered to commit seppuku.

Keep in mind during the Edo period which brought on 100 years of peace most samurai were reduced to selling the myth of their past glories both real and imagined. Often, they would teach the merchant classes and other wealthy tourists some of the many things samurai had to know like swordplay, poetry, calligraphy, decorum, and comportment. To put it more crudely Bushido, or the way of the samurai was up for sale. Oshima uses this stereotypical elite samurai environment which should be a sanctuary for the lessons of the past and introduces an interloper who will destroy this last bastion of tradition and strength from the inside out using the facade of male/male love, one of the most cherished aspects of the samurai as the weapon.

As the film progresses Kano proves his blood lust. His beauty and implacability begin to draw men to him. He rebuffs most of their advances until he strategically allows one and that will be the catalyst for the final unraveling.

In review after review of the film, Kano's beauty and femininity are noted but these observations are misinformed.

Among the samurai there was a long tradition of male/male love it was referred to as nanshuko. So pervasive was "the flower of the samurai spirit" that it wasn't strange to have a male lover it was strange not to have one. These relationships became the stuff of popular novels like *The Great Mirror of Male Love* as well as the subject of Ukiyo-e woodblocks created by ever working woodblock artists including Utamaro and

Harunobu.

Nanshuko was fundamentally a pedagogical system between young men aged 14 (really starting at about 16) to 18 and an older Samurai males.

The older samurai would embark upon a courtship that could last years before it was consummated. Like everything else in samurai culture, there were very strict rules that had to be adhered to. The younger male would pledge to study hard to become a fine samurai warrior and the older man would pledge his emotional and financial support.

One of the rules of these courtships was that the younger person had the right to refuse and if that refusal were not respected it could lead to the older samurai committing seppuku.

So, when we see man after man throwing himself and Kano even though he refuses them they all have violated the code, the Do, or the way of the samurai.

What most reviewers mistake as Kano's feminine looks is in fact what the romantic ideal of the perfect young love object what have looked like. Beautiful on the cusp of manhood with more than a hint of a warrior spirit dedicate to the killing way of the samurai.

Even the last scene in this film is a subverting of tradition.

I won't describe it to you, but I will say when you see it keep in mind that this act is normally performed for fallen heroic warriors. Not this. If you take even these few notes in mind when you watch the film, you won't find it difficult to understand at all. As a film is it arrestingly still with a dreamlike quality.

The score for the film is by Ryuichi Sakamoto. Yearning, reaching, pulling with a steady rhythm of a clock going backward.

One other thing. There is a scene of a geisha like no other geisha I've seen. She makes an entrance worthy of kabuki. She seems ten feet tall. Her entrance is a sublime moment of grandeur that stays with me.

The thing both films have in common is the exploration of our need to be a part of something bigger than ourselves and the things we're willing to ignore to experience that commune.

What if you throw a coup d'état and no one showed up? That is the question the film *Beautiful Mystery* poses.

Director Genji Nakamura released "*Beautiful Mystery*" directly to local adult cinemas in 1983 as a Pink film. Some of you might be familiar with censorship in Japanese erotica. That censorship didn't start in the adult film industry it started with films that were pushing the boundaries of taste and decorum in Japanese cinema in much the same way films did in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. *Beautiful Mystery* was the first gay-themed film to be shown outside of Japan.

In many ways, a *Beautiful Mystery* involves many of the same themes as *Gohatto* but with a decidedly different level of craftsmanship. The film luxuriates over the sweaty male bodies of muscled young men. but very little of what we see is erotic. There is a distance, a remove in the way things are shot.

Where the film is unflinching is in its takedown of the writer, artist, and activist Mishima and what's still referred to in Japan as the Mishima Incident.

Mishima formed the Tatenokai, an unarmed civilian militia, for the avowed purpose of restoring power to the Japanese Emperor. On November 25, 1970, Mishima and four members of his militia entered a military base in central Tokyo, took the commandant hostage, and attempted to inspire the Japan Self-Defense Forces to overturn Japan's 1947 Constitution.

He gave a speech demanding the military to overthrow the government and restore the Emperor and thereby Japan's former glory. The helicopters that formed overhead and jeering from the troops assembled below drowned out most of what Mishima had to say.

When this was unsuccessful, Mishima climbed back into the commandant's office and committed seppuku, slashing his belly with a knife then being beheaded by one of the young members of his militia. When Mishima was dead the 25 young man who had tried three times and failed to behead him then committed seppuku and was decapitated by the only militia member left in the room.

Mishima's suicide was something he seemed obsessed about he even made a beautiful short film called *Yûkoku: The Rite of Love and Death*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJyzoFWNAy4>

Beautiful Mystery uses these events to satirize the cult of personality and like Gohatto to warn against over-romanticizing the past.

The film follows a group of young men who join the militia cult as they are schooled in the art of bodybuilding their minds are being filled with nationalist rhetoric from the leader. In the course of this indoctrination, one of the followers catches the leader's eye and they embark upon a love affair that becomes the center of the film.

The title of the film Beautiful Mystery comes from a 1936 incident when a group of young officers launched an ill-fated coup, similar to Mishima's maybe that's where he got the idea, it was reported that they knew they were destined to fail but in failing they would become a legend, a beautiful mystery. The young men in film Beautiful Mystery are much more devoted to the leader than any type of ideology.

The night before the Mishima styled coup they rehearse the events of the following day. It's more of a passion play's opening night than a rehearsal. The acts of seppuku are presented with great depths of feeling, the bodies pile up on stage now covered by fake falling snow the audience and even the stagehands are in floods of tears with the leader proclaiming how beautiful it all looks. aesthetics over the political intent.

This wave of emotion fans passions and soon this depiction of ritual acts of self-sacrifice transforms itself into a hedonistic orgy.

On the day of the real event, the commander and his lover oversleep and miss the coup d'état.

This leads to the final knowing events of the film which I won't disclose here.

Aside from the comic erotic tone I love the fact that Nakamura made the film at all. The folks who loved Mishima for his work as a writer quickly moved on from "the Mishima incident" they were not pleased by this type of satire. Mishima was beloved by gay artists in Japan several artists changed their names to Mishima in the wake of his death.

The great photographer Tomatsu Yato created the first book of photography featuring bodybuilders, Mishima who was a great proponent of bodybuilding and he wrote the forward for the book entitled Young Samurai and he was also photographed for Yato's book Otoko.

Oshima and Nakamura in very different ways are both reminding us that there is value in sifting through the wreckage of the past to salvage some of what was lost.

Shining a glaring light on the cause of the calamity while avoiding the soft-focus lens of the romanticized and the mythologized.

Only then can we make a clear-eyed, informed decision about what comes next.

Music

Thanks for joining me.