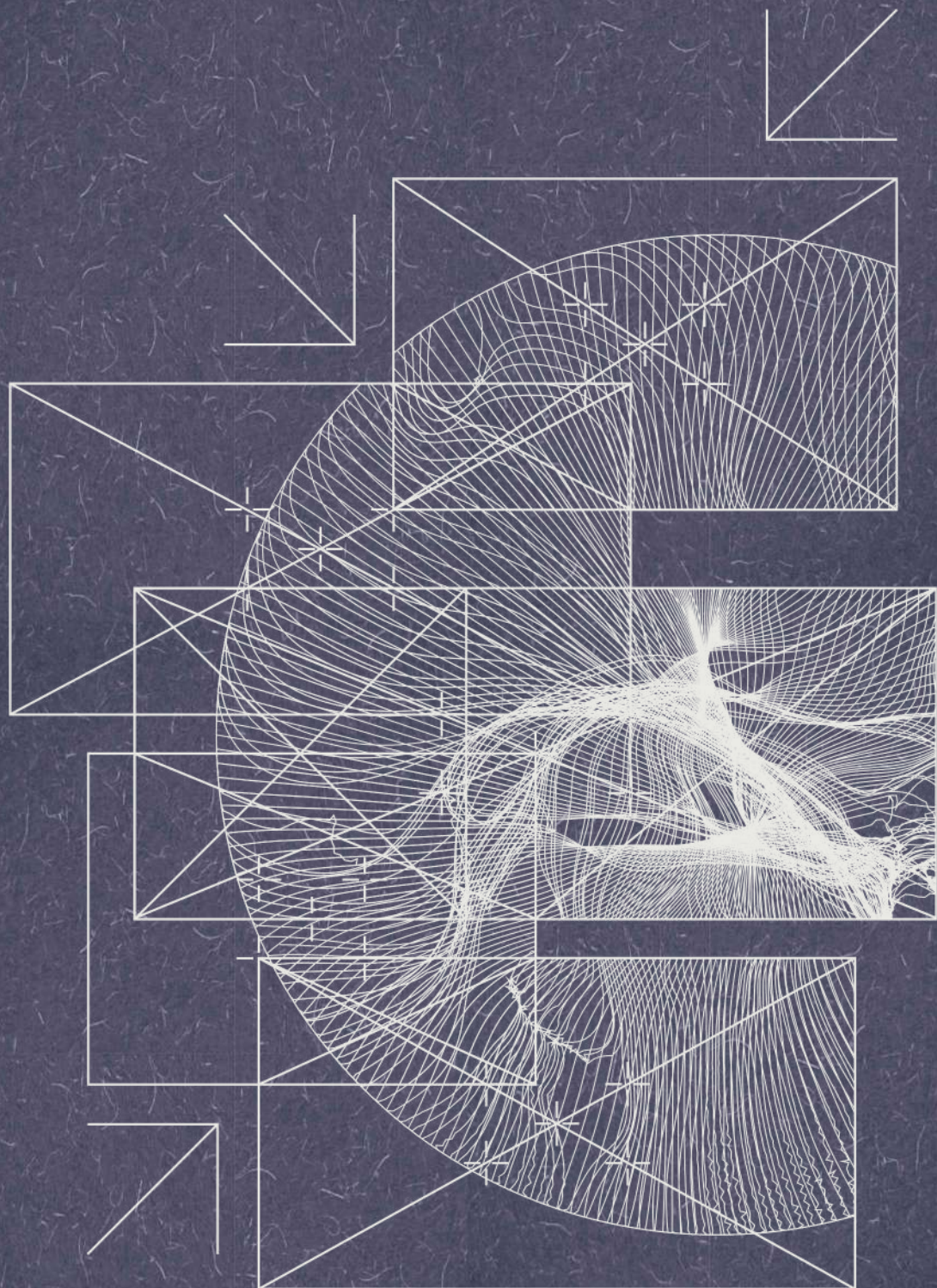


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_Total Cinema: Film and Design



Disegno

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KŌJI WAKAMATSU:

ALIENATION

AND THE WOMB

Pedro Crispim

ABSTRACT

This essay intends to analyse four feature films from Japanese filmmaker Kōji Wakamatsu: The Embryo Hunts in Secret (1966), Violated Angels (1967), Go, Go Second Time Virgin (1969) and Violent Virgin (1969). Besides its narrative simplicity bordering on appalling eroticism, this informal tetralogy shares a particular design and spatial trademark: all four films are set in a single, tight, claustrophobic space. By resorting to Wakamatsu's poetics of cruelty, political criticism and his use of sexuality as social commentary, I intend to inquire into the actual nature of his tetralogy's use of filmic space in three particular dimensions: firstly, through an understanding of postwar Japan—especially the 1960s—, which contextualises Wakamatsu's blossoming career in pink films during chaotic times; secondly, through individual analysis of each film, underscoring common denominators like their use of horrific sexual violence, themes of pseudo-revolution that degenerate in alienation, and Brechtian stylistic flourishes: all emerging from these films' spatial dramatic unity, its chamber-like enclosure which recurrently resonates with metaphorical designs of the “womb;” and thirdly, by the tetralogy's—and Wakamatsu's other work from this period—ability to conceptually predict the ultimate paroxysm of its sociopolitical context, when revolution, sexuality, and death came together in Yukio Mishima's bizarre suicide in 1970. Hence, Wakamatsu's use of womb-like design of space in his informal tetralogy acts as a nihilistic, feverish cinematic rendering of all those major Japanese afflictions that, climaxing in Mishima's attempted coup, ultimately put an end to the social turmoil of 1960s Japan, and paved the way for the social transformation that steered the country in a mostly steady, conservative way from the mid-twentieth century onwards.

#Kōji Wakamatsu, #Yukio Mishima, #film, #space, #alienation

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INTRODUCTION

Movies can't really be called "pink" if they're being accepted by the general public. They've always got to be guerilla. Pink films are about putting it out there in the public's face and smashing people's minds!
—Kōji Wakamatsu

Japanese filmmaker Kōji Wakamatsu is one of cinema's most subversive and extreme auteurs. Grounded in the fictional nature of the medium—which he believes renders him morally unassailable (Desjardins 2005, 166)—Wakamatsu boasts an incredibly extensive body of work, even though most of it is virtually impossible to access. Arguably the most controversial figure to emerge from the Japanese New Wave, despite his peripheral association with the movement,¹ and known as either the “godfather of *pink*” (Weisser and Weisser 1998, 287) or the “king of *pink*” (Yomota 2019, 347), Wakamatsu's work offers a surprising perspective on the complexities of Japanese society.² His films appear to function as a vortex of social, sexual, and political afflictions from post-World War II Japan.

[Wakamatsu] has the ability to depict disturbed mental states with a gritty visual eloquence, supplying an unobtrusive psychological subtext that coaxes a mysterious compassion for even the most unsympathetic monsters. Wakamatsu's poetic irony of juxtaposition combined with a surface detachment creates an atmosphere of clinical study gone gonzo, beyond all limits, establishing links with nether regions and tapping directly into the sexual libido and the subconscious—unconscious states of being beyond morality shaped in the womb, then moulded by our families or lack thereof, and, by extrapolation, society-at-large. (Desjardins 2005, 166–67)

Symbiotically, Wakamatsu intermingles the psychological anguish of his sociopolitical context with a sordid, sensationalistic pulse—which Noël Burch simply names *journalistic* (Furuhata 2014, 166). His cinema is essentially darker than that of his *pink* peers, and mostly due to the extremist nature of his political observations. If Wakamatsu seems, in a certain way, aligned with other *pink* luminaries whose work also has political overtones such as Tetsuji Takechi, Toshio Okuwaki,

¹ Wakamatsu's most direct association with a Japanese New Wave film was as co-screenwriter and assistant producer (albeit uncredited) on Nagisa Ōshima's controversial and seminal *In the Realm of the Senses* (Ai no korīda, 1976).

² *Pink* derives from *pinku eiga* (pink film). It initially appeared in 1962, coined by film critic Minoru Murai, referring to excessive female nudity, and ended up characterising a certain kind of low-budget erotic cinema. Despite Wakamatsu's several evolutions and ramifications, his career is mainly associated with the first wave of pink film, from 1964 to 1972, and his films are among the most influential in the genre (Weisser and Weisser 1998, 15–20). In a way, *pink* is the Japanese congener of other filmic explorations of sexuality within their own cultural peculiarities, like the *lederhosenfilme* in West Germany, *pornochanchada* in Brazil, or the *commedia erotica* all'italiana in Italy.

³ *Claustrophobia is also present in other Wakamatsu films from the same period that do not feature unity of place. Films like Secrets Behind the Wall (Kabe no naka no himegoto, 1965), Season of Terror (Gendai kōshoku-den: Teroru no kisetsu, 1969), The Woman Who Wanted to Die (Segura magura: Shinitai onna, 1970) or Secret Flower (Hika, 1971) take place, in most cases, in a handful of different rooms or small apartments. Moreover, by not clinging strictly to the three dramatic unities (action, time, and, most importantly, place) as the four films of the “womb tetralogy” do, these examples nevertheless remain powerful examples of a claustrophobia inducing use of space by narrowing the spatial scale of its own production values.*

and Masao Adachi, his work nevertheless often feels quite distant from most of the *pink* farces that constituted escapist, adult-themed forms of entertainment in Japan, and which have been frequently linked with other (and mostly later) *pink* filmmakers such as Tatsumi Kumashiro or Masaru Konuma. Yet, in the hands of Wakamatsu, the marginal nature of *pink* cinema becomes a kind of observational vantage point.

Unlike most film eroticists, Wakamatsu was uninterested in sexual titillation and was eager to collapse sexual excitement in favour of a political edge that, as I will try to demonstrate, is intimately connected with the afflictions of alienation, featuring the recurrence of the womb motif, whether clear or tacit, thematically or visually.

Firstly, I will establish the *pink* context of early 1960s Japan: how the Japanese erotic film medium raged in an otherwise highly political and convoluted time and place. That curious dichotomy is integral to Wakamatsu's poetics. Secondly, I will delve through what I have informally coined the “womb tetralogy:” *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* (*Taiji ga Mitsuryō Suru Toki*, 1966), *Violated Angels* (*Okasareta Hakui*, 1967), *Go, Go Second Time Virgin* (*Yuke Yuke Nidome no Shōjo*, 1969) and *Violent Virgin* (*Gewalt! Gewalt: shōjo geba-geba*, 1969). These four Wakamatsu films can be understood as a tetralogy by the fact that all of them take place in a single location, that is, they are narratively constructed by the unity of place and, consequently, are completely pervaded by the womb concept.

Taking into consideration the gargantuan size of Wakamatsu's filmography, I decided to include only the tightest, most severe set-bound examples. These films are largely not set on a given diegetic space; *they are set entirely in a single diegetic space*. This chamber-like oppressiveness (depriving us of spatial omniscience that is usually granted by parallel editing and the inclusion of other diegetic settings and eternally trapping us in the very same poisoned space) becomes a vital element to identify the womb concept in the filmmaker's poetics; therefore, even aspects such as claustrophobia become secondary to the hermetic nature of the themes invoked by the womb.³ This methodological aspect serves a double purpose: firstly, it narrows down Wakamatsu's massive work output to its upmost extreme spatial cases (unity of place in its absolute superlative state), allowing it to be, analysis-wise, practical; and secondly, this spatial tightness eventually becomes symbiotic with the womb. Wakamatsu's insistence on the womb serves, as I will try to demonstrate, thematic preoccupations. In that sense, the context of unity of place becomes a way to operationalise it, turning it into a tangible, set-bound way to materialise the womb's airtightness.

In what follows, I will analyse the way Wakamatsu uses unity of place to intensify his revolutionary and alienating themes according

to the womb metaphor that so closely pervades this tetralogy. Finally, we will inevitably arrive at the sociopolitical realm of early 1970s Japan. With the invocation of the Mishima Incident, an attempted coup led by ultranationalist writer Yukio Mishima, which imploded those rowdy, troublesome times and paved the way to the steady, conservative path that Japan has followed ever since, I will try to dislodge Wakamatsu's "womb tetralogy" from its original *pink* designation and reframe it as a serious observation of Japanese afflictions that effectively predicted the Mishima Incident.

In short, I will analyse the tetralogy's filmic space, and how, through the womb motif, Wakamatsu's use of the spatial dramatic unity can instil ways of observing or commenting the *zeitgeist* of its time and place.

WAKAMATSU AND THE PINK BACKGROUND

The importance of *pink* cinema of the 1960s is a vital element to understanding the intents of the Japanese New Wave. The recklessness of filmmakers like Nagisa Ōshima, Shōhei Imamura, or Masahiro Shinoda, and how they proposed a new way to critically think contemporary Japan, usually through the opposition of tradition and actuality, is also important to understanding the prominence of erotic productions. These audiovisual products were not simply sleazy, escapist entertainment; they provided an uncanny point of observation on a society experiencing deep sociopolitical aftershocks ever since the surrender of Imperial Japan in World War II.

The Japanese 1960s—dubbed *seiji no kisetsu* (season of politics) (Hamblin 2015, 125)—was the epicentre of that social and ideological battleground. If the Japanese New Wave daringly depicted that time and place, *pink* cinema constitutes the reverse-shot of the New Wave. Despite the heavy criticism he usually directed at the genre, even preferring to name it "eroduction,"⁴ Japan-based American writer Donald Richie repeatedly noted the social importance of *pink* (Richie 1987, 156)⁵.

Whatever its name, the genre's often lurid, degrading nature was fertile terrain for Wakamatsu. Firstly, it is important to consider that *pink* started in the 1950s and flourished in the 1960s and 1970s with a studio-based industrial mode of production making *soft-core* products.⁶ *Pink* was one of the most important parts of the studio system, mostly to boost declining box-office numbers due to the rise of television (Cazdyn 2002, 173).

Nevertheless, *pink* cinema was broad enough to attract very different filmmakers, in both studio and independent productions. The typical cheapness of the genre was the main reason for Wakamatsu's prolificacy from the 1960s onwards, as well as the creative liberties he was afforded throughout most of his career.

⁴ Eroduction is a portmanteau derived from erotic production.

⁵ In the introduction to the publishing of some of Richie's final writings before his death in 2013, Abé Mark Nornes sustains that Richie's relationship with pink cinema was essentially paradoxical. Despite all his criticisms, Richie was a regular in pink movie theaters. His unfinished essay "Outside: Gloriole" describes the interiors and attendance of a pink movie theatre (Richie 2014).

⁶ Distinct from hardcore pornography, pink cinema does not include any kind of genital nudity and all sex scenes are simulated, otherwise it would have been swiftly banned under censorship.

⁷ Adachi was also a main ideologue of the Japanese Landscape Cinema (which postulates that the filmic representation of the landscape is a way to demonstrate the prevalent political leanings of its time). His extremism led to the suspension of his film career in 1971 when he joined the Japanese Red Army (JRA), a militant Communist terrorist group with close ties with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Relocated to Lebanon as a JRA spokesperson (Jacoby 2008, 79), he was arrested in 2001 and, after serving time, resumed his activities as a filmmaker in 2007.

⁸ If *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* was solely written by Adachi, *Violated Angels* was cowritten by Adachi, *Jūrō Kara* (the film's protagonist), and Wakamatsu himself; *Go, Go Second Time Virgin* by Adachi and Kazuo Komizu; and *Violent Virgin* by Adachi and Atsushi Yamatoya.

Even though we can find action films as well as dramas, thrillers, even historical films, horror, and erotic dramas, Wakamatsu's films of that genre are nevertheless made as if under the *pink* spell, with an impetuous, abrasive, and confrontational style. His four films that I will discuss here, made between 1966 and 1969, range from classic to obscure *pink* examples, despite premiering before the 1970s, *pink*'s decade, when it represented forty percent of all Japanese film production (Yomota 2019, 353).

In short, these chaotic times were an important catalyst for Wakamatsu's film career. Coming from a poor family of rice farmers in the Miyagi Prefecture, Wakamatsu arrived in Tokyo early in the decade. After some menial jobs, he then famously became a yakuza, a member of the Yasuma-gumi clan in the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo. His very first contact with cinema, still as a yakuza member, happened when he was ordered to "supervise" a film crew shooting in their turf (Desjardins 2005, 179).

It was after quitting the yakuza and unsuccessfully applying for a television job that Wakamatsu entered the film industry. By this time, he had met Masao Adachi, a director and occasional actor already involved in *pink* circles and other avant-garde tendencies, who became one of his most frequent collaborators as a screenwriter. Adachi's far-left worldview is a decisive factor in the political pulse of Wakamatsu's *pink* films of the period.⁷ As a tentacular figure connected to the yakuza underworld as well as pseudo-revolutionaries of the Japanese Red Army, Wakamatsu merged with the left-wing artistic circles that raged in Japan, witnessing a storm of student insurgencies, social turmoil, and everyday rioting.

In the 1960s, rioting escalated to systematic field battles between students and the police. Violence in front of the *Kokkai*, the Japanese parliament, became the norm (Barber 2013, 7–8), which, together with the radicalisation and larval growth of several militant groups, gave birth to the eventual acts of terrorism committed by the Japanese Red Army.

This is the context of Wakamatsu's tetralogy. This sociopolitical turmoil was the reflection of Japan trying to adapt to a new post-war order. In this conjuncture, the far-left meanders were also the ideal setting for yet another kind of revolution, sexual in nature, which was promptly reflected (and commented on) by *pink* cinema, and certainly by Wakamatsu and his main story-maker Adachi, who scripted all the films of the tetralogy. (Screenwriting credits in Wakamatsu's work of the 1960s usually include pennames such as Izuro Deguchi or De Deguchi. Those pennames could refer to a single person or to a collaborative effort between several writers. However, Adachi, apparently the main driving force behind the stories, is ever-present in these films, even in those written collaboratively.)⁸

THE “WOMB TETRALOGY”

As I have stated previously, Wakamatsu's *pink* films are typically more outrageous than those of his peers. The impetus for this is not only his radical political energy, but also his aesthetic adventures. Wakamatsu's style (and this tetralogy) is shot in grainy black-and-white, and its minimal plots are riddled with sudden bursts of paroxysmic violence that tear through its sexually charged atmosphere. Most notably, its thematic gravitational point is sexual alienation, juxtaposing distancing effects (especially montage sequences with freeze frames, usually extra-diegetic)⁹clashing with sparse colour scenes.¹⁰

Aesthetic discussions aside, what remains fundamentally more challenging in Wakamatsu's poetics is the way he deflates any kind of eroticism in his treatment of sexuality (despite belonging to the *continuum* of erotic cinema). Instead he elevates sexual status to the level of a rebellious political stance.

The Embryo Hunts in Secret (1966) is the first film of his single-location tetralogy and the one that most directly references the womb. It shows a couple locked in an apartment, where a man subjects a woman (presumably his girlfriend) to a long session of sexual torture (fig. 1). Eventually, the man breaks down emotionally and gives up, and in the end, the woman takes advantage and kills him. The bleak nature of the story is very clear from its synopsis, but it is important to note that this is nevertheless a *pink* film, a hedonistic, erotic entertainment.

This is the first way in which Wakamatsu displays his sociopolitical edge. The very fact that he uses tactics of overtly escapist entertainment—erotic pictures—to problematise sociopolitical anxieties (in this case, issues of birth and abortion) demonstrates an aesthetic and thematic boldness. Even though Japan was one of the first countries to legalise abortion, the confrontation of this question in the context of erotic cinema is nevertheless a disruptive experience.

The Embryo Hunts in Secret practically inaugurates all the trademarks to be found in Wakamatsu's next single-location films: sketchy plot, small number of characters exhibiting or inflicting acts of cruelty, power, or subjugation on each other, usually in an intimate, sexualised way (which may or may not have explicit political references), and the stifling use of unity of place. In fact, the enclosure of the story also mimicked its self-imposed production constraints, as Wakamatsu himself states:

I got together the crew and the actors. I ordered them not to set foot outside the apartment until we finished shooting. “You’ll sleep here, and I’ll cook dinner; I’ll feed you until we finish the movie.” We were like these refugees living in there. (Desjardins 2005, 182)¹¹

⁹ I am referring to very brief, insert-like montage sequences featuring newsreels, newspaper clippings, and other topical images usually depicting manifestations of social unrest (riots, police charges). These burst-like sequences are a fundamental element for Noël Burch's consideration of Wakamatsu's journalistic qualities (Furuhata 2014, 166).

¹⁰ Burch stresses the importance of these “distancing techniques” in Wakamatsu's work, which he bases in the clashing of opposites. The clearest examples are the clash between black-and-white and colour, and between scenes of jarring violence with others featuring suppression of movement and decrease in sound (which he dubs scenes of “aesthetic distance”). Those clashing techniques, together with a kind of filmic primitivism—considering Wakamatsu as someone who “had learned the rudiments of ‘film grammar’ and still relied on them completely” (Burch 1979, 350–54)—form a kind of perverse, formal reading of Brechtian distancing effects, which I consider a very illuminating way to approach Wakamatsu's poetics.

¹¹ Despite its guerrilla-style production, as if the crew and actors were also a kind of revolutionary group, enclosure and entrapment are key motifs throughout the tetralogy. In *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* all actions are indoors, and the film's political commentary is inevitably achieved through sex.

The reduction or elimination of erotic arousal in an otherwise erotic pink setting already constitutes a certain revolutionary, even liberating approach—even though it is possible to argue that Wakamatsu's sociopolitical revolutions bear little to no efficacy whatsoever. Even the microcosmical nature of his films can be quite fuzzy regarding the social portrait of its time.

FIGURE 1. Frames from *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* (1966). Despite the minimalism of the apartment setting, Wakamatsu constantly includes small glimpses regarding a certain womb-like inscription. It can be, as in the frame above, by using non-diegetic shimmering lights (there are no light sources in the room), or, as in the frame below, through the various ways his characters contort or squat, evoking the fetal position, usually with aquatic or liquid elements (baths, rain, and blood).
Source: Clap Filmes.



¹² This is also an important political aspect of pink cinema: according to Richie, pink manages to examine Japanese urges and sexual complexities in a country (and context) that banned pornography (Richie 1987, 156–57). Therefore, pink cinema reigns as the sole representation of sexuality allowed by Japanese censorship—even though the exhibition of genitalia remains forbidden.

But equally, Wakamatsu's "womb tetralogy" offers a kind of puncture in the country's collective psyche; an attempt to portray the intimate, the private and the forbidden, a look through the keyhole (peepshow-style) of Japanese homes (fig. 2). Therefore, *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* inaugurates Wakamatsu's theatre of cruelty (Weisser and Weisser 1998, 499): with a single apartment and two characters, Wakamatsu instils a constant provocation about Japanese sexual politics, the deterioration of the nuclear family, and the evidence of a widespread, smouldering libidinal frenzy plaguing all his characters and society at large. It is also important to contextualise the fact that Wakamatsu intimately and inherently connects sexual depictions with political power.¹²

I believe that in Japan sex is the privilege of men who have power, like politicians, very rich people, etc. They all have girlfriends, don't they? In the past we Japanese were told: "You the poor people, be content with eating rice."

And even now they say to us: “Be content without seeing images of sex.” In the Edo period everything was more broad-minded, from what I heard. It is after the Meiji and Taisho periods that the authorities became very strict. (Wakamatsu apud Hunter 2012, 81)

Considering the free access to pornography in the Western world, the satisfied curiosity of pornography consumers opposes the excited lust of the Japanese, deprived of catharsis from sexual audiovisual experiences, thus explaining the long-lasting, compulsive success of *pink* cinema (Richie 1987, 157). Then, Wakamatsu resorts to the single artistic representation of sexuality in Japan and mirrors it with a certain puritanical flair associated with the ancient norms of his country.

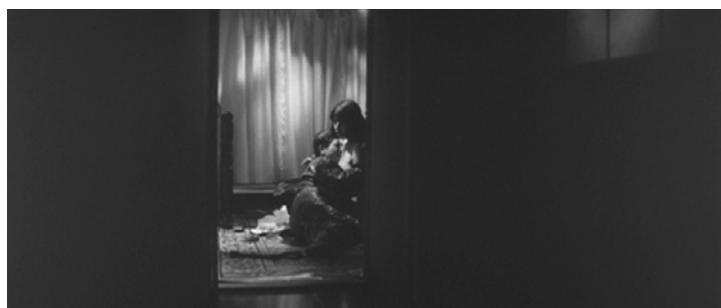


FIGURE 2. Frames from *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* (1966). Fetal motifs occur when staging the corporality of actors in the setting. Loneliness and oppressiveness are heightened by using space to frame and isolate the characters. Source: Clap Filmes.



A series of fetuses shown *in utero* in the title sequence are the source of the womb metaphor (fig. 3). For the setting, Wakamatsu uses a house. If a quick recalling of Gaston Bachelard's seminal *The Poetics of Space* (1998) takes us to the understanding of the “maternal features of the house” (7), the enclosure of its dramatic unity of place (and the appalling sexual crimes that take place inside) is relatable to Sue Best's suggestion that male—especially Bachelard's—perspectives on space (mostly on the house) are of female nature, because “the house is a woman—a warm, cozy, sheltering, *uterine* home” (Best 2002, 182, emphasis added). On this

basis, *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* can be understood as the rape of the uterine home. Even though Wakamatsu will not use a house in the next three films, this female inscription is nevertheless present in his understanding of space.

FIGURE 3. Frames from *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* (1966). Opening credits play over fetuses in utero, signalling the entrance in Wakamatsu's womb tetralogy.
Source: Clap Filmes.



Violated Angels (1967), Wakamatsu's second single-location film, is a reinterpretation of the crimes of American mass murderer Richard Speck. Here, the filmmaker's trademark narrative brevity is the closest he ever got to the depuration of a sadistic haiku: at night, a group of young female nurses notice a peeping tom outside their rooming house, and mockingly bring him inside. Sensing a sexually charged atmosphere, the man starts to kill them one-by-one, with varying degrees of torture and cruelty, heightened by what he perceives as the girls' initial jeering of his impotence.

Probably the most claustrophobic of the tetralogy is its setting, which resembles "the back room of the house [...] an oneiric torture chamber" (Hunter 2013, 16), and considering the concentrative nature of its womb-like enclosure, it ultimately evokes the alignment of the "catamenial compulsion with the melancholy of the exposed embryo, the unbearable isolation in time and space that drives us to our daily rites of annihilation" (Hunter 2013, 20). Wakamatsu's womb space, however crowded or fuming with activity, is, in essence, a space of loneliness. One of the most convincing portraits of paranoid psychosis (Desjardins 2005, 168), *Violated Angels* is one of Wakamatsu's bluntest and driest works; its laconic mise en scène works in counterpoint to the extreme violence it depicts.

If the youthful, desperate killer of Wakamatsu's Violated Angels represents a disenfranchised generation stripped of its potency by both American neo-colonialism and residual Japanese neo-feudalism, he only does so by suffering an Oedipal complex and concluding his murderous rampage of the women who mock his male inadequacy by burying his head in one of their maternal laps. (Grossman 2014, 247)

However strong or even unbreakable Wakamatsu's misogynistic pulse seems to be, judging by the behaviour of his sadistic, usually impotent male protagonists, *Violated Angels* presents one of the most eloquent visual metaphors of the complexities of Wakamatsu's womb: striking a Brechtian chord, in a brief, insert-like colour scene, the killer coils in foetal position on the lap of the only girl he spared, surrounded by blood splatter and naked female corpses rearranged to resemble the flag of the Japanese Imperial Army (fig. 4).

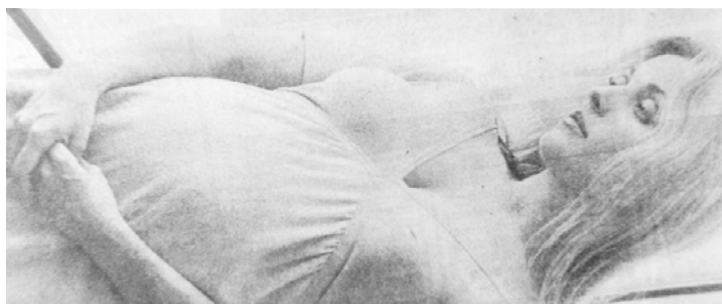


FIGURE 4. Frame from *Violated Angels* (1967). Colour is used for a kind of Brechtian shock value in the flag reconstruction, with the sun replaced by the killer 'returning to the womb.' Source: BLAQ OUT.

Again, sexual pleasure is pulverised. Both the torturer in *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* and the lonely killer of *Violated Angels*, strong enough to subdue others to their own whims, are not capable of extracting pleasure from their actions—not without feeling equally affected by them. Andrew Grossman suggests that the origin of that kind of violence lies in American neo-colonialism. Of course, this implies that neo-colonialism manifests itself by proxy of Western influence in Japan (Grossman 2014, 247), both from American presence in post-war Japan, and the ensuing cultural invasion from the West. Hence, that generation, the heirs of the defeated and capitulated in World War II, develops an extremely marked nihilism, with only feverish sexual passions capable of acting as painkillers.

Go, Go Second Time Virgin (1969), Wakamatsu's third and most famous single-location film is set in a strikingly different space: on a terrace (figs. 5–6). In that open space, a boy watches passively as a girl is raped by a gang of four boys. When they leave, the young couple start to bond emotionally and sexually over their equally traumatic past experiences, as the girl intensifies her suicidal thoughts (she keeps asking the boy to kill her). When the gang returns to rape her for a second time, her “new boyfriend” kills the whole group, despite her protests that she had been spared by them. Then, the couple commit a double suicide by jumping off the terrace.

FIGURE 5. Frames from *Go, Go Second Time Virgin* (1969). An early montage sequence boasts two images of pregnancy, again linking it to the previous films and the subliminal thread of the womb. Source: Clap Filmes.



The performative nature of this film, as well as in Wakamatsu's womb tetralogy, relies mainly on spatial isolationism. Viewed as a cohesive body of work, they offer a dark (albeit honest) portrait of Japanese society as a disintegrated, fragile social unit. In all four films, Wakamatsu uses marginalised or isolated characters. Using Giorgio Agamben's terminologies, I think that Wakamatsu's narratives deals almost exclusively with that form of life called *zoē*, the bare life (which also serves as a codename for merely private, reproductive, or intimate life), and rejects *bios*, the good or political life, mostly associated with participation in the organics of the city and politics.¹³ Wakamatsu does not ignore *bios*, he even has a very critical view of it, but always manages to distance himself or to isolate his diegetic worlds from it, enclosing them in a womb-like unity.

Therefore, Wakamatsu's characters are stuck or trapped in their own interiority and intimacy. This is the most subliminal (and metaphorical) manifestation of the womb as an enclosed, alienating space, which is then physically evoked by the unitary nature of the single set. And considering the vague character development in these films, Wakamatsu's alienating pulse gives them a certain wandering nature, not in the nomadic or travelling sense, but as beings not adapted (due to inability or refusal) to any social model.¹⁴

¹³ For a deeper, more complete overview of both concepts in Agamben's political philosophy, see 2017, in particular, the first major work featuring *zoē* and *bios*: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

¹⁴ In fact, this is very clear if we watch any of his characters (in any of his films) when they are outside. As they walk or wander through the streets, they are frequently shot by the long lenses of Wakamatsu's favourite cinematographer Hideo Itō, appearing alone and isolated against extensive flattened and blurred backgrounds—quite unlike the widescreen shots in the interiors, using all available depth of field, focusing and exposing the characters' closed worlds, becoming one with them.



FIGURE 6. Frames from *Go, Go Second Time Virgin* (1969). The return of the same strategies seen in *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* (1966). Above, a figure in a fetal-like squatting pose, drenched in aqueous imagery, and below, the melancholic couple in the darkness of the night, together in a parabolic pool of light, hinting at the contours of an inhabited uterus. Source: Clap Filmes.

Wakamatsu does not see any difference between interior and exterior. Closure, as he says, can be achieved in both ways: “I had done a lot of films inside on one location, but I wanted to try to do the same thing *outside*.” (Desjardins 2005, 183) His fourth and final single-location example, *Violent Virgin* (1969), presents both a continuation and an intensification of the outdoors from the previous film.

Its plot revolves around the kidnapping of a couple. In a barren wasteland, they are subjected to a series of sadistic games of erotic nature at the mercy of an aspiring yakuza group (fig. 7). Narratively, *Violent Virgin* (1969) is also Wakamatsu's most complex film because halfway through the story a kind of mise en abyme dimension opens when all the events are under surveillance by another yakuza group monitoring the actions of the kidnappers. The whole situation is a kind of rite of passage, as the aspiring yakuza group is simply trying to be admitted to that criminal organisation by showcasing their cruelty.

FIGURE 7. Frames from *Violent Virgin* (1969). Wakamatsu uses a couple of stratagems of confinement in the vastness of the open space. Namely, the use of a tent, inside which naked bodies move and act in a sexual manner, and the scene in which a character, near the end, manages to crawl out of a bag, as if re-exiting the womb. Source: BLAQ OUT.



Despite its narrative plot-points, Wakamatsu's final single-location work distills his essential thematic preoccupation and aesthetic trademarks, sometimes even bordering on surrealism. Its landscape “represents an infernal circle of sex and violence from which there is no escape and in which all the pawns who play out Wakamatsu's cinematic schema are sentenced to either death or a purgatorial eternity as lost souls” (Hunter 2013, 23). Its setting can also be a way to pulverise all the previous spatial notions about the womb.

This film's unity of place is achieved not through definable borders or even by architecture; instead, it happens through extreme spatial decantation. Its lunar landscape setting is complemented, early on, with the rising of a wooden cross—later used to crucify one of the characters—, helping our sense of spatial orientation, as the film's chaotic mise-en-scène bewilders the very few points of reference for the audience (fig. 8). The omnipresence of the cross, together with the monolithic nature of the setting, acts as a kind of spatial anchor, akin to some kind of magnetic point of attraction, as if urging the characters to spin around them, no matter their attempts at escaping or hiding.



FIGURE 8. Frame from *Violent Virgin* (1969). *Landscape turned womb.* Source: BLAQ OUT.

Again, sexuality, branded like a punitive instrument, is depicted as an overtly subversive behaviour. The kidnapped couple eventually succumb to the poisonous pleasures of sexuality in a futile conclusion dominated by the same alienated tone, noting that the definitive way of revolutionary resistance against the *status quo* is to engage (possibly *ad eternum*) in a compulsive circle of sexuality, in which the ultimate orgasm literally overlaps the liberation that comes with death—the ultimate pyrrhic victory over alienation.

Unlike the spatial delimitations of the terrace of *Go, Go Second Time Virgin* (1969), the vast landscape of *Violent Virgin* (1969) is no less confined or oppressive than any of the previous closed chambers of the tetralogy. The metaphor of the womb turns from claustrophobic to agoraphobic: it ceases to be linked with topical, merely private, or inwardly intimate preoccupations; it now suggests a systemic problem. Therefore, it overflows its original spatial nature. The final message of Wakamatsu's "womb tetralogy" maintains that alienation and its sexual enticements are now viscerally widespread, perfectly able to manifest itself in society—that is, politically.

THE MISHIMA AFTERMATH

¹⁵ The Tatenokai were a kind of private militia funded by Mishima to defend what he believed to be the traditional values of Japan, namely the unconditional veneration of the emperor and the restoration of his powers.

¹⁶ Twenty-five years after the surrender of Imperial Japan in World War II, Emperor Hirohito, enthroned since 1928, lost most of his formal power, including his divine status. According to the 1889 Japanese constitution, the emperor's divine power has its origin in a Shinto belief in which the Japanese Imperial Family descends from sun goddess Amaterasu. After a coercive call from general Douglas MacArthur, Hirohito rejected his divine status and, therefore, was reduced to a symbol of the Japanese state and people (Dower 2000, 308–9). That status was inherited by his son, Emperor Akihito and remains so today, with Hirohito's grandson, Emperor Naruhito. The Japanese positively embraced the loss of divinity, and more so considering it would also work as a kind of preventive measure against imperial divinity-motivated ultranationalism (Nathan 1974, 210). Therefore, it is nevertheless ironic that that particular aspect became Mishima's motivation for his political deviations.

From a historical perspective, the most chilling aspect to be found in Wakamatsu's cinema is not just the diagnostic of its time and place, but the transformation of Japanese society at the end of the 1960s. History proved that a final, bloody realisation (of an unprecedented theatricality) would occur with the culmination of two incidents.

The most significant one, known in Japan as the Mishima Incident, consisted of an attempted coup involving renowned writer Yukio Mishima, a far-right ultranationalist, when he, along with four members of the *Tatenokai*,¹⁵ entered Camp Ichigaya, Japan's defence headquarters in the Shinjuku area of Tokyo.¹⁶

It is important to note Mishima and his followers' bizarre adherence to old-fashioned ideals. Hoping to mobilise the army in a coup d'état to restore the emperor as the country's divine and indisputable leader—and then to re-establish Japan as an imperial power—Mishima delivered a speech based on a previously written manifesto to the soldiers, but to no avail.

Wearing a *hachimaki* headband, his theatrical, boisterous body language—widely captured in photographs and live on television (the media were previously summoned to the place by Mishima himself)—resembled a kind of modern samurai (one of his lifelong obsessions), and the whole situation was more akin to an outrageous happening than an effective act of military strategy. After that failure, Mishima retreated and committed *seppuku*, a form of ritual suicide, originally reserved for the samurai (Inose and Sato 2012, 726–29).

The bizarre nature of Mishima's act—its grossly extemporaneous historical appeal and a theatrical exhibitionism unprecedented in the history of coups and coup attempts—is totally aligned, just like his political writing, with his own private fantasies, the product of his own equally private cravings or yearnings, making it impossible to discern any kind of political or ideological seriousness in his actions, even though Mishima understood his own suicide as the most elevated form of nationalism (Nathan 1974, 211).

According to Marguerite Yourcenar, Mishima's literary work, as well as his own life experiences, are irrefutable proof of his smouldering obsession with death, most specifically how suicide was paradoxically the ultimate way to showcase the meaning of life (Yourcenar 1986, 5). Mishima's extreme idiosyncrasies were an invaluable contribution to his own alienatingly dangerous loneliness, in which the creative process and the refuge of the masks were palliatives that only grew progressively weaker in time. By the end of his life, Mishima understood that his martyrdom for the imperial cause was above any other notion of heroism, and conceptually represented the very essence of Japanese identity (Nathan 1974, 214).

These highly personal forms of violence in Mishima's life and work were not transmissible. There is both an attraction and an ambition for a proud exhibitionism projected in a certain erotic narcissism, a theatricalisation of his innermost problems—in a way, death was, for Mishima, his ultimate artistic work.¹⁷

By invoking this incident, I am not trying to identify Mishima with Wakamatsu, as they are of very different, even diametrically opposite, natures.¹⁸ If Mishima was wealthy, famous, world-renowned and a staunch far-right nationalist, Wakamatsu came from a poor background, operated in the criminal underworld and underground circles, recognition for his work came sporadically and extemporaneously, and he ended up associated with a very critical, far-left inflected scepticism. In this sense and as individuals, Mishima and Wakamatsu could not be more different; but the writer Mishima and the filmmaker Wakamatsu are not devoid of connection points, even beyond Wakamatsu's 2012 film chronicling Mishima's last efforts, *11.25 The Day He Chose His Own Fate* (11.25 *jiketsu no hi: Mishima Yukio to wakamono-tachi*).

It is certainly possible to relate Wakamatsu's poetics, especially his "womb tetralogy," with Mishima's *modus operandi*. But another important distinction must be left clear: unlike Mishima, Wakamatsu does not use film to stage his own personal complexities. Instead, his use of film entails a certain theatricalisation—or *cinematisation*—of his journalistic tendencies to dissect revolutionary, sexual, and alienating tensions from postwar Japan (tendencies that the Mishima Incident spectacularly combined). In other words, both Wakamatsu and Mishima's gestures consist of employing *artistic mediations of intimate afflictions*, being personal (Mishima) or sociopolitical, even anthropological (Wakamatsu).

By the end of the 1960s, the decade's turmoil was fading. Both Inuhiko Yomota (2019, 352) and Myriam Sas (2011, 27) point to the Mishima Incident in 1970 (and also a second one, the Asama-Sansō Incident in 1972)¹⁹ as a major turning point. On the one hand, the Mishima Incident was the most metaphorical event: a gruesome theatricalisation of revolutionary urges that reveal themselves as deeply personal instead of deeply sociopolitical or ideological; and means nothing more than the autophagy of its own intents.

The Asama-Sansō Incident, on the other hand, is a clear example of an equally solipsistic revolutionary monstrosity with no political or human value whatsoever. In the end, both incidents contributed to the decline of the (mostly left-wing) revolutionary *zeitgeist* in Japan. The rush for change decreased drastically, and Japan became a mainly conservative country once again (Yomota 2019, 352). Despite the mollified political climate, Wakamatsu remained on his own track, his prolific string of works extended through five decades of filmmaking until 2012, when he suddenly died after being hit by a car while preparing another film project.

¹⁷ On Mishima's erotic narcissism, it is important to note Eikoh Hosoe's *Bara-kei: Ordeal by Roses* (1985), where Mishima poses in homoerotic photographs riddled with an intense death drive. And concerning the theatricalisation of his intimacy, it is noteworthy how the short-film *Patriotism* (Yūkoku, 1966), the only film directed by Mishima (co-directed by Masaki Dōmoto) predicted his own demise. Based on his own short story, the film depicts, in *Noh* play-style, the ritual suicide of a Japanese lieutenant, in the aftermath of the 1936 coup attempt. In the film, the lieutenant, played by Mishima, commits *seppuku*—an act which chillingly predicts (and consequently stages and theatricalises) his own suicide four years later.

¹⁸ In a more oblique way, his earlier film *The Woman Who Wanted to Die* includes news of Mishima's suicide through insert-like shots of newspapers in freeze frame.

¹⁹ The Asama-Sansō Incident lasted nine days, from February 19 to February 28, 1972. It evolved after a purge in the JRA, when two of its leaders killed some members. After a police raid, five other members fled and took refuge in a mountain lodge, degenerating into a hostage crisis. (Yomota 2019, 354; Sas 2011, 27).

CONCLUSION

I have tried to establish Kōji Wakamatsu's "womb tetralogy" as a sort of flare gun for the future of post-1960s Japan, which was confirmed by the implications of the Mishima Incident. How was Wakamatsu able to dissect, to read and interpret the spirit of his time and, consequently, to predict the core preoccupations unveiled by that incident?

The answer mainly lies in a conjunction of two elements: being a narrative filmmaker, Wakamatsu's thematic obsession with sexual alienation and the recurrence of the unity of place are the main two structural points of the "womb tetralogy." Politics-wise, there is an almost unbearable sense of pseudo-revolution in Wakamatsu's universe. If present, the invocation of politics is a sophist alibi for the subversive staging of sexuality and cruelty.

Despite sounding sleazy or cheap, by tapping into those inner, taboo-like problems, Wakamatsu's single-set work achieves an almost crystal-clear portrait of the intimate (i.e., the psychological, the inner, the interiority) of that whole society and its people, systemically infected by the pulse of alienation—which in turn leads to dead-end pseudo-revolutions and/or fatalistic and anguished sexuality.

And as a way of setting and staging those questions, Wakamatsu resorts to the unity of place, conceptualising it as a womb, a place of seclusion and loneliness, of female inscription evoking some of the most primal and archaic elements of human life, namely sexuality, conception, and progeny. Therefore, by simultaneously shooting the inside of the womb and knowing what is happening outside, Wakamatsu's spatial poetics raises both political and intimate problems.

Then, the spatial concept of the womb means the encapsulation of that whole turmoil. In that regard, the "womb tetralogy" is clearly a development to Michel Foucault's claim that "a whole history remains to be written of *spaces*—which would at the same time be the history of *powers* [...]"—from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat" (Foucault 1980, 149).

And here lies one of the uncanniest similarities between Wakamatsu and Mishima: in addition to the resonance of the nature of their thematic preoccupations is their use of space. The Mishima Incident took place in a military headquarters and (understanding it, like Mishima did, as a work of art) it also employs unity of place, as Mishima theatricalised his own death; he used the military setting like an actor/director uses a theatre stage. Furthermore, he wrote the text, designed his military uniform, called up the audiences, had everything planned way ahead. And all of this to render an extremely alienated worldview, filtered by some form of artistic sensibility in an otherwise military setting.

As with Wakamatsu's "womb tetralogy," unity of place is achieved by confining diegetic space to a very strict single-location setting;

his characters submerged in sickly alienation, aiming at some sort of sexual revolution to cope with existential pain. Neurotically spinning between Eros and Thanatos—there is certainly a Freudian reading of *pink* film, as erotic cinema “beyond the pleasure” and into the oblivion of alienation—Wakamatsu also entails this gesture of social observation by employing a constant reversal of the natural, positive values of the womb. Warmth, protection, and nurturing gives way to coldness, isolation, and brutality (in a word, alienation), which is another clearly identifiable element of his subversive nature.

Wakamatsu’s “womb tetralogy” is an extremely nihilistic and feverish rendering of social malaise or, in other words, a filmic x-ray of the collective unconscious of the Japanese sexual death drive, exploring the alienation of its time and place by proxy of a womb-like reading of diegetic and dramatic space. In a way, the “womb tetralogy” is a staging of a kind of psychoanalytical rendering of the Japanese zeitgeist’s diseased intimacy; the very same affliction displayed by Mishima’s suicide.

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