



Avant-garde Narrative and Youth Expression under Experimental Audiovisual Aesthetics: A Study of Shuji Terayama's Film Art

Taking *Throw Away Your Books and Rally in the Streets* as an Example

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Abstract. In the history of Japanese experimental cinema, Shuji Terayama's film *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* is highly emblematic. Through bold color design, fragmented narrative structures, and subversive audiovisual expressions, the film reveals the ideological rebellion and spiritual dilemmas of youth under the repressive order of postwar Japanese society. This paper primarily examines the film's audiovisual language, integrating an exploration of thematic content with analyses of costume, props, and setting. It comprehensively investigates how cinematic techniques—such as camera work, sound, and color—are employed to represent, deconstruct, and articulate the director's critique of traditional Japanese family ethics, the educational system, social discipline, and the transformations of the postwar era. Furthermore, it explores how experimental cinema achieves a profound synthesis of form and ideological expression through extreme audiovisual language.

Keywords: *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets*; Shuji Terayama; audiovisual language; youth dilemma; experimental cinema

1 Introduction

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, Japan experienced a period characterized by the intersection of rapid economic growth and intensifying social contradictions. Supported by postwar reconstruction, government policies, and external aid, Japan's economy rose swiftly. However, material prosperity did not promote the progress of the younger generation. Instead, tensions emerged between turbulent social transformations and rigid institutions that lagged behind the times—namely, an outdated educational system, oppressive family structures, and hypocritical social morality. These entrenched traditions collectively formed a constraining network that suppressed human nature,

trapping a generation of youth wandering and searching amidst construction sites and urban ruins [1].

Against this historical backdrop, Shuji Terayama, with a distinctive avant-garde perspective and striking experimental visual effects, created *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* in 1971 [2]. Unlike conventional narrative cinema, this film does not follow a coherent storyline. Instead, it connects a series of absurd, fragmented, and stream-of-consciousness life episodes through the perspective of a young boy: adolescent restlessness entangled with sexual fantasies about his sister, resistance to militarized education, fleeting involvement with a group of thieves, escape from reality within a theater, and frantic running through ruins. Departing from traditional linear storytelling, the film employs fragmented, absurd, and surreal audiovisual language to concretize youth's confusion, anger, and rebellion. This paper proceeds from three aspects: content interpretation, audiovisual language analysis, and the auxiliary role of other elements. Particular emphasis is placed on how audiovisual language functions as the core vehicle of ideological expression, revealing Terayama's profound articulation of the dilemmas of both his era and its youth.

2 Content Interpretation: Rebellious Themes under Fragmented Narrative

2.1 Theme: The Disintegration of Discipline and the Liberation of Human Nature

The central theme of the film is resistance against various forms of discipline and moral indoctrination imposed by society and family upon youth. These pervasive constraints suppress human nature and neglect the psychological world of adolescents during their formative years. At the familial level, the sister's sexual repression and the parents' emotional numbness create an oppressive environment for the boy's growth. In education, rigid and outdated militarized management, along with standardized teaching content, ignores individual differences. Socially, adolescents entering society begin to perceive the hypocrisy and indifference of the adult world, finding neither future direction nor existential meaning [1]. The phrase "throw away your books and take to the streets" embodies both a concrete act of rebellion and a symbolic meaning. "Books" represent the traditional education system, knowledge structures, and social discipline, while "taking to the streets" signifies entering a real, uncertain, and chaotic world. This act becomes a metaphor for youth breaking free from imposed life trajectories.

At the same time, the film addresses adolescent sexual repression and spiritual dilemmas. Adolescents are filled with fantasies, restlessness, and curiosity, yet also confusion and anxiety. They long to escape but do not know where to go. This contradiction is not an individual anomaly but a collective spiritual condition of postwar Japanese youth. Economic prosperity fails to compensate for spiritual emptiness, and material improvement cannot replace attention to youth development. In an era of collapsing traditional values, young people gradually lose their spiritual compass [1]. This youth dilemma is closely tied to the postwar family structure characterized by "absent fathers

and dominant mothers.” At a deeper level, this reflects a break from the Oedipal complex and constitutes a dual resistance against traditional patriarchy and family ethics [1].

2.2 Plot: Nonlinear Collage of Absurd Fragments.

The film’s plot is fragmented, absurd, and fantastical. Episodes are assembled without conventional narrative elements such as beginning, climax, or resolution. Seemingly unrelated scenes are juxtaposed: confrontations with teachers in classrooms, the sister’s sexual fantasies, street thefts, and absurd theatrical performances. Although lacking direct logical connections, these fragments collectively reflect resistance to established order and disciplinary systems, subverting conventional cognition [2].

For instance, the recurring “theater” scenes (see Figure 1) serve as intersections between reality and illusion. On stage, performers engage in grotesque acts, fully immersed in absurdity, symbolizing how individuals in reality perform socially prescribed roles detached from their authentic selves. In contrast, the boy who leaves the theater and enters the streets represents a rejection of illusion and a rebellion against discipline, seeking authenticity in reality. The cinematic representation of theater reflects Terayama’s avant-garde theatrical philosophy developed in his experimental troupe Tenjō Sajiki. He blurs boundaries between theater and cinema, stage and reality, actors and audience, extending avant-garde spirit from stage to urban space [3].



Fig. 1. “Drop the Books and Take to the Streets”: “Theater” Scene

2.3 Structure: Multiple Perspectives and Decentralization

The film abandons centralized linear narrative, primarily unfolding through the boy’s perspective while shifting among multiple viewpoints—those of the boy, his sister, teachers, and thieves. This collage-like narrative structure (see Figure 2) itself constitutes a rebellion against traditional cinematic order and an experimental breakthrough. Moreover, the film employs flashbacks, fantasy spaces, theatrical imagery, and other narrative techniques, blurring the boundary between reality and illusion. This guides viewers to experience the psychological labyrinth of youth amidst confusion and chaos. The decentralized, fragmented structure aligns with the film’s thematic core, achieving a high degree of unity between narrative form and ideological content. It reconstructs

traditional narrative modes and corresponds to youth's rejection of centralized authority and disciplinary systems [2].



Fig. 2. Fragmented Scenes of "Drop the Book and Hit the Streets"

3 Audiovisual Language Analysis: The Concretization of Rebellion

Audiovisual language serves as the core medium for expressing the film's ideological content. Terayama's subversive use of camera, sound, and color concretizes the spiritual rebellion and dilemmas of youth. Formally, it resonates with their restless and searching psychological state, breaking through traditional cinematic aesthetics and re-defining audiovisual art within experimental cinema [3].

3.1 Cinematography: Constructing a Rebellious Perspective

The film extensively employs handheld or shoulder-mounted camera techniques, resulting in continuous shaky imagery (see Figure 3). This deliberate instability conveys anxiety, restlessness, and uncertainty—mirroring a state of confusion and searching. At times, this technique also responds to narrative needs, such as tracking the boy running through ruins. Such dynamic, unstable cinematography breaks from static visual conventions, symbolizing a disruption of established order and directly visualizing rebellion [4].

Close-up shots are used extensively to amplify emotional intensity, highlighting suppressed desires and psychological states (see Figure 4): the sister's distorted face during fantasies, the boy's confusion when gazing into a mirror. These close-ups penetrate the inner world of characters, delivering powerful emotional and visual impact.

Wide-angle lenses produce distortion effects, exaggerating space and rendering environments (see Figure 5)—rooms and classrooms—more oppressive and twisted. This reflects how external conditions distort and alienate individuals.

Characters frequently address the camera directly (see Figure 6), breaking the "fourth wall." This establishes direct communication with the audience, dissolving observational distance and encouraging emotional engagement. Such techniques are fundamental to experimental cinema, forcing viewers into confrontation and enabling resonance between creator and audience [3].



Fig. 3. Running shaky camera shot



Fig. 4. Close-up of a character's face

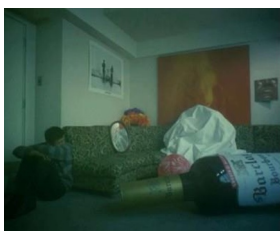


Fig. 5. Wide-angle shot of the room



Fig. 6. Character delivers lines directly to the camera

3.2 Sound: Auditory Symbols of Chaos and Confusion

The film extensively employs asynchronous sound, mixing noises from different times and spaces—classroom chatter, moans, and street noise—breaking the convention of synchronized audiovisual correspondence. This creates a chaotic auditory environment reflecting the protagonist's inner confusion [5].

Noise replaces harmonious music, with rock music (by The Dynamites) serving as a dominant auditory element. Experimental underground music of the 1970s—alternating between sorrow, intensity, and tenderness—combined with hysterical noise, becomes a form of emotional release. Fragmented, colloquial dialogue and internal monologues (see Figure 7) further emphasize psychological disorientation. Terayama blends rock, experimental noise, traditional Japanese waka, and incantatory monologues to create a hybrid “Japanese-style rock” aesthetic, expressing inner fragmentation.



Fig. 7. Fragmented dialogue

3.3 Color: Symbolic Visual Impact

Terayama uses monochromatic filters to depict psychological states, creating surreal atmospheres. Colors carry symbolic meanings (see Figure 8): green suggests oppression, purple evokes mystery, gray implies heaviness, blue conveys melancholy, red signifies vitality, and yellow represents hope. The contrast between cold and warm tones constructs a tension between oppression and freedom. Such bold, non-realistic color usage externalizes inner emotions, forming a key avant-garde expression [3].



Fig. 8. Color in *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets*

3.4 Audiovisual Relations: Subversive “Mismatch”

The film constructs a powerful audiovisual experience through montage, collage imagery (see Figure 9), jump cuts, and sound-image disjunction (see Figures 10 and 11). For example, when the boy gazes into a mirror, his confused expression is paired with unrelated sounds such as moans or scolding voices. Although seemingly mismatched, this disjunction achieves a deeper correspondence, reinforcing themes of confusion and surrealism. This unified yet paradoxical audiovisual relationship defines the film’s aesthetic coherence.



Fig. 9. Photograph



Fig. 10. Comic strip



Fig. 11. Illustration

4 Other Elements: Costumes, Props, and Performance

Although not central, costumes, props, and performance play crucial supporting roles [3]. Costumes are symbolic: teachers wear rigid suits, students loose uniforms, and thieves ragged clothing. Props such as books symbolize discipline, while mirrors represent self-awareness and alienation. Makeup is exaggerated and surreal, aligning with the experimental style. Performances reject naturalism, incorporating elements of theater and Noh drama (see Figures 12), characterized by exaggerated gestures and absurd musical sequences. The use of deformed figures and mannequins visualizes human alienation and objectification, continuing Terayama's symbolic aesthetic.



Fig. 12. Student Costumes and Noh-Theatre-Inspired Makeup in Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets

5 Conclusion

In this film, Terayama achieves a profound integration of form and ideology. Its experimental nature lies not only in its bold audiovisual aesthetics but also in its deep engagement with societal, national, and historical issues, while focusing on the spiritual dilemmas of youth. “Throw away your books and take to the streets” is not merely the protagonist's choice, but a generational call. The theme of “youth dilemma” transcends time. The film reminds us to reflect on the spiritual development of individuals amid

social progress. Through this work, Terayama provides a cinematic diagnosis of post-war youth's psychological condition. Its avant-garde audiovisual language continues to offer valuable inspiration for contemporary filmmaking [2].

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