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UNITED RED ARMY

A Film by Koji Wakamatsu

2008 / Japan / 190 min. / 1.85:1 / DTS

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THE RED YEARS

More than any other films, those made by Koji Wakamatsu in the 1960s and 70s are deeply rooted in the political and social upheavals of the era in Japan. One of the leaders of Pink cinema, Koji Wakamatsu is concerned with the history of student protest movements.

A relatively unknown subject in the West, the radical student protests that rocked Japan in the late 1960s peaked in violence not experienced anywhere else in the world and had many unique characteristics. The movement originated in the particular conditions that developed in the country after 1945, in the questionable decisions made by the Japanese Communist Party and in relations between Japan and the United States ratified by the Japan-US Security Treaty signed in 1951. This situation allowed the emergence of a new leftwing that broke away from the Japanese Communist Party, accused of rigidity and Stalinism.

In 1960, protests became more radical and the National Student League (Zengakuren) splintered into various radical leftwing groups. During the 1960s, youth mobilization was unprecedented: opposition to the Vietnam War, demonstrations against the increase of university fees (intensified by the revelation of a budget deficit of 2 billion yens at Nihon University (aka Nichidai) that had been embezzled by its leaders), refusal of discrimination against minorities (particularly Koreans), rejection of the rampant productivity of the 60's, anti-pollution movements, etc.

After 1967, protest movements reached all the universities in the country. One of the events that symbolized the unrest was the occupation of Tokyo University (called the Todai, it is the most prestigious university in Japan) between January 1969 and February 1970, that ended in violent repression and marked the failure of the student movement, pushing some students to become even more hard line. The most radical elements, having decided to take up arms, formed the Red Army Faction (Sekigun-ha) and went underground. Attacks against the police and other dramatic, bloody incidents punctuated the 1970s.

In 1971, in-fighting led to the scission of the Red Army Faction into two branches: the United Red Army (Rengo sekigun) and its international branch the Japanese Red Army (Nihon Sekigun) led by Fusako Shigenobu. He left Japan to join Georges Habache's PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) training camps. In Japan, the tragic end to the radical student movement was marked by the Asama Mountain Lodge affair: a spectacular and highly publicized hostage taking that ended in the arrest of the last members of the United Red Army and the discovery of 14 of their comrades executed in unimaginable circumstances. This is the story told by United Red Army, from the birth of the movement to the Asama Mountain Lodge affair.

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Dimitri Ianni or pinku eiga. This term comes from the English word pink, and the Japanese word eiga, meaning cinema. The pinku eiga – or Japanese sexploitation – were independent film productions that from the mid-60's to early 70's experimented with a new form of filmmaking that blended sex and violence.

Inspired by the narrative processes, esthetic and production means of the nouvelle vague, pink films and their makers are inseparable from the history of the Japanese revolutionary left. This film movement, certainly the most extreme that developed at the time in industrialized countries, is nonetheless comparable to the cinema of Pasolini, in Italy, or Fassbinder, in Germany, distilling the same subversive tendencies, the same taste for dreamy atmospheres and a denunciation of "bourgeois morality."

SYNOPSIS

Koji Wakamatsu, Japan's most controversial filmmaker, brilliantly reconstructs the most troubling episode in the bloody history of Japanese student-radical extremism through the true story of the United Red Army faction, which had its roots in the 60s when Japanese students protested America using Japan as a staging base for its war in Vietnam.

In 1972, 14 members of the United Red Army faction lynched each other during group "self-criticism" sessions while training in the mountains and the survivors holed up at the Asama Sanso Mountain Lodge, which quickly degenerated into a ten-day stand-off with the police that is one of the pivotal moments in Japanese history, as famous in Japan as Martin Luther King's assassination is in America. Wakamatsu's film is an earnest attempt to process the shock that the Japanese Left was experiencing at the time and to grasp the motivation of the militant students.

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CAST AND CREW

Directed by

Koji Wakamatsu

Screenplay by

Koji Wakamatsu
Masayuki Kakegawa
Asako Otomo

Starring

Maki Sakai……..Mieko Toyama
Arata……...Hiroshi Sakaguchi
Akie Namiki…….Hiroko Nagata
Go Jibiki……..Tsuneo Mori
Anri Ban……...Fusako Shigenobu

Also Starring (in alphabetical order)

Maria Abe
Kenji Date
Yuki Fujii
Yoshio Harada
Len Hisa
Megumi Ichinose
Keigo Kasuya
Junpei Kawa
Etsuko Kizen
Chie Kôzu
Genji Kuroi
Sentaro Kusakabe
Makoto Miyahara
Akiko Monou
Hideo Nakaizumi
Nao Okabe
Erika Okuda
Kaoru Okunuki
Nobumitsu Ônishi
Shima Onishi
Tak Sakaguchi
Yugo Saso

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Yasuko Tajima
Hassei Takano
Nobuya Tamaichi
Soran Tamoto
Kazuki Tsujimoto
Takaki Uda
Naoki Yamamoto

Produced by

Asako Otomo…….executive producer
Muneko Ozaki……co-producer
Koji Wakamatsu…..producer

Music by

Jim O'Rourke

Cinematography

Tomohiko Tsuji
Yoshihisa Toda

Sound

Yukio Kubota

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INTERVIEW WITH KOJI WAKAMATSU

Young yakuza Koji Wakamatsu was sent to prison in his twenties; there, he learned that power leads to repression and brutality. After his release, he wrote a book about his experience and found in filmmaking a way to expose the abuse of power. In 1959, he worked for television and, four years later, shot his first films. He was granted total artistic freedom, as long as sex and violence predominated. His "pinku eiga" (erotic Japanese films) attracted a lot of attention and, step-by-step, he realized that eroticism was necessary to the development of his political discourse; thus, the original constraint had become a necessity.

In 1965, he created his own production company, Wakamatsu Productions, and directed Secrets Behind The Wall. The film was submitted to Berlin Film Festival that same year and was nominated for the Golden Bear. It caused general indignation and a diplomatic incident between Germany and Japan; Wakamatsu's camera had thus become an active political weapon exposing the faults of a hypocritical government and the mouthpiece of the identity crisis of young people.

Wakamatsu's films, shot frenetically (around ten films a year), with a simplistic touch in their bare staging that reminds Jean-Luc Godard, but with sexual excesses and brutality that are typical of exploitation films, are virulent anarchist manifestos that are still maddening Japanese authorities.

What was the inspiration behind the United Red Army?

There were three fascist countries: Japan, Germany and Italy. For one reason or another, after the war, in these fascist countries, young people came together under a shared ideology, communism and the Red Army. Of course there were differences. In Germany and Italy, the people fought against the established power, whereas in Japan they killed each other and for me, this is a painful difference. I wanted to examine the reasons that led talented young people with promising futures to take a stand. I wanted to show what they rose up against and why they fought. I wanted to put these questions into a film, show why they all headed into the mountains and why it turned into a disaster.

Even if it seems a little over the top, I wanted to make this film for future generations. In Japan, there are so many films on the Asama affair, so many confused, fantasized, or misleading films that I wanted to reinstate the truth and hand it down to future generations. I feel it is my mission as a filmmaker. The trigger was the film adapted from the memoirs of a Sasa police officer, The Choice of Hercules. When I saw it, I knew I had to make a film on the subject to finally tell the truth. And I felt that the young people murdered or killed during

the events were telling me to say what really happened. They gave me the courage. In reality, a lot of history has flowed from the perspective of this police officer who described how the police caught the bad guys. At the time, the siege was broadcast live by Japanese television around the country as a way of killing the movement. It was a strategy to show that youth was bad and to say to them: if you join these movements, you will be up against the power of the State and you will turn into bad guys.

Was it your intention, from the outset, to make a film that was half-fiction, half-documentary? Which part is fictional?

There are the archives of newspapers from the 1960's and 1970's. I wanted to include these images because I believe you can't understand the context of the Asama events without them. You have to include these documents to understand how some Japanese people rose up against the established power. Afterwards, of course, I had to imagine part of it in fictional terms because the period is no longer the same and the landscape has changed. I did a lot of research and during this research, I realized I needed fictional elements to represent certain situations because otherwise, I couldn't talk about them. I wanted to be very honest. That is why the caption at the start of the film specifies that this is about real events with a few fictional additions.

So fiction serves to fill in the blanks of things we can't know?

Of course there are actors acting so it can't be a documentary. It appeals to the emotions. I talked to Kunio Bando who lived through the Asama events at the time. I asked him what happened. What you see in my film was described to me by real protagonists. All the events are based on facts. But there are no documents attesting what happened there.

Doesn't the documentary part also appeal to the emotions? There is a huge amount of information and different documents in an hour. Did you want something this oppressive in the documentary part?

These facts are necessary to understanding.

I wanted to start the film with the death of young Michiko Kanba in front of the Diet during the riot against the Japan-US Security Treaty in 1960. The Vietnam War had broken out. Malcom X had been assassinated. The Cultural Revolution was underway in China, and in France May 1968 was in full swing. The world was in turmoil. In Japan, there were student movements opposed to the rise in the cost of higher education, the financial scandal at Nichidai University, the peasant revolt in a Sanrizuka against the construction of Narita airport, demonstrations for the retrocession of Okinawa and against the Vietnam War. If we don't

correctly describe the context of the era, we can't understand why the United Red Army was created. I wanted to describe this and analyze this period.

In Japan today, some people do not know what happened. They do not even know that Japan fought against the United States. There is a cruel lack of understanding and knowledge of history and I wanted to ensure that these events would be told. I wanted to ensure that these young people who marched in the streets to shout out for change, and were even arrested by the police, would be heard.

During the Vietnam War, a lot of arms transited through Japan. It was a transit base for arms that were then sent to Vietnam. The people were very angry that the Japanese government agreed to carry out whatever America dictated. This is why there were riots at Shinjuku station (where the arms headed for American bases transited). It had a huge impact on youth.

How did you experience the events at the time?

I believe in these young people. Of course I too criticized student intellectuals who had never worked and who shouted, "Worker comrades!" and spouted complicated theories. I said to them, "Say things that are easier to understand!" But honestly, aren't young people the only ones who can rise up to change the world? It is thanks to their struggle that the system of military conscription does not exist in Japan and I can keep making the films I want without censorship.

When the shoot-out at the Asama Mountain Lodge happened, I was on their side, against the authorities. When they then announced that there had been a purge among members of the United Red Army, it was a shock. At that time, Masao Adachi* and myself had just made "Red Army - PFLP: Declaration of World War" and I heard that Mieko Toyama, who helped us find theaters for the film, was also killed. I was crazy with anger but I couldn't do anything. I said to myself I would never forgive them. Later, I calmed down and thought it through. How did it come to this? If things turned out that way, if students with career paths all laid out for them had come to the conclusion that society had to change, there was a reason. So I tried to understand. In any case, I refused to hide behind easy commentaries such as, "that's no good," or "that's wrong" as soon as information was broadcast.

You give the impression that, deep down, you want to approve of them.

Whether or not it is right or wrong to approve of them is not the issue. The main thing is to understand their driving force. Today, a lot of people think they were stupid. But I say that people who are simplistic enough to call young people - who have turned their backs on a comfortable life and themselves to fight - stupid, are

really the stupid ones.

Some people ask me what the point is of making a film today about the United Red Army. I would like to ask them in response whether the situation has changed at all. Have any problems been solved since then? There are still wars going on in the world, the Security Treaty with the US still exists and authorities monitor citizens even more strictly. At universities, you can't even carry a banner in peace.

Nothing has changed. If war broke out, our opponents and we would kill and be killed. The stupid thing is that we have become indifferent to this reality. We are stupid enough to be prepared to change the constitution so it allows us to make war.

I wouldn't say these young people were right. But I think the atrocities they were responsible for reflect a certain society. It is easier for those who have never fought to criticize.

You represented all the protagonists using their real names.

It was not my intention to make fun of them. I sincerely described them as they were and I thought, "if I get attacked, so be it." But none have come so far. The guys from the Red Army Faction (RAF) told me I had portrayed the truth faithfully. The actor who plays the character Takaya Shiomi is more handsome than the original. He must be happy about that! There is just Yasuhiro Uegaki who said the snowy mountain was crossed at night, whereas in the film it happens by day. But it is not a reconstitution. The camera has trouble showing the mountain at night! It is only a film. But the protagonists helped me a lot when I was shooting by casting light on the circumstances at the time and I thank them for it.

There is a rumor that during shooting, you lost your temper every 15 minutes.

Personally, I can't remember. [laughter] But it's true when I was watching the "making of," I realized I was always stepping in! It's because I was so caught up in the film at every level. I was shooting but at the same time, I had to deal with money problems. The more days we shot, the more it cost. I really made the film on a shoestring. On top of that, even as I watched that none of the cast and crew got hurt and they ate properly, I had to write my story. It was really tough. I desperately forced myself to get everything done.

And actors these days look different from militants back then. I had to redefine things and make them understand what it was like at the time. I was always

losing my temper because I was up to my neck in the extreme conditions of shooting. Maybe they slowly looked different because of it! [laughter]

Some interpretations are especially striking, like those for the characters Tsuneo Mori and Hiroko Nagata.

It's true. Maybe they went beyond interpretation. It was like a camp. We slept together, we ate together, we spent 24 hours a day together. It was hard to let our concentration slip. I don't think the spirit of solidarity could have emerged from normal shooting conditions.

For this film, there were no costume designers, no make up artists (except to simulate wounds) and I didn't let agents on the set. The actors had to be responsible for their costumes and accessories. If you just put on the clothes that have been laid out for you and turn up for make up, you can't get a real result. I only took actors who agreed to work in these conditions and wanted to do the film.

We saw you leading the way, heading into the wind, always strong in the face of adversity. If you hadn't shown the example, neither the cast nor crew would have shown such abnegation.

Every morning, I was the first to get up and I worked on the scenes I would shoot that day. I never prepare a storyboard. All the cutting is in my head. Every morning, I went over things before going on the set. I work that way so I don't get lost during the real shoot. I don't have time to get lost. If I do, shooting stops. But I think this film was shot by all of us together, including the assistant directors. If any one person had been missing, we couldn't have made the film. That's what I told my crew at the end of filming. That's why I kept saying during shooting, "Don't get caught up in routine. Stop pretending you know everything! Forget everything you've learned before!" That's why nobody had a regular job on the shoot. Everyone did what they were capable of. The cameramen drove the cars themselves. The lighting crew went all the way to Shizuoka to rent a cheaper truck. Everyone understood the budget was limited and they really went to great lengths.

On an ordinary shoot, there is the shooting team and the production team. Everyone only does what is in his job description. They work like bureaucrats. But this time, I decided to do away with this practice.

Sometimes, I even asked actors to think about how to shoot the scene on the set. Anyone can act, and if I can direct, then anyone can do it. You just have to want it.

Yet there are too many films made without any real desire these days.

The Ministry of Culture has to give money to these kinds of films. They never give any to me! [laughter] For this film, I asked for a grant but my request was dismissed. I had prepared a ton of papers for the grant application and they rejected it on a sheet of paper. So I mortgaged my house and the movie theater I own and I thought I was heading for bankruptcy! [laughter] This Ministry really undermines Japanese culture. I want to say it out loud. Because we need money to make films, we often end up shooting films that flatter the Ministry of Culture. Anyway, for a film that was dismissed by the Ministry, I still won a prize at the Tokyo Film Festival!

During the siege, it becomes very difficult to see clearly what is happening. There is a lot of dust and fog, with guns going off everywhere, and the camera stays inside so we never see what is happening outside. Was this only for financial reasons?

Yes and no. In reality, we only ever see things from one point of view so in so far as possible, that is what I chose to do. Is it criminal to shoot from the point of view of a policeman? It is criminal to shoot from the point of view of established power. The subject was really close to your heart…

You have to realize that before the Asama events and the purge that preceded it, artists and intellectuals supported the student movements, even the RAF. But after this affair, they all switched sides! To quote a more recent affair, the Kameda brother boxers recently lost a match and the media threw them to the ground and hit them. If you fall, they jump on you to beat you up. They hit the weakest, without trying to understand. In the same way, they threw themselves on the United Red Army. Suddenly, they all switched sides and took up with those who were hitting. I'm against that.

In your look at the young people in the Red Army, is there perhaps also some compassion?

They were prepared to die. Even if I've often heard it was like the Aum affair, the difference lies there. That is why Mori decided to pay his debt by killing himself. Of course his death is debatable. But the guru from the Aum sect was not even against the established power and didn't slice open his belly either. He just hid under a rooftop. If at least there had been a shootout with the police, I would have thought Aum had guts too.

When I wondered how I should represent Mori's death, I found a farewell letter that he had written to his brothers in arms just before he died and I thought I

had to use it. Even though Mori had done dreadful things, he did his self-criticism and wrote that he would die alone. Maybe I wanted to end the film by showing viewers a ray of hope. If I hadn't had affection for these young people, I certainly couldn't have described them like this. Isn't there somewhere some goodness in all human beings? The criminal is simply someone who can't control the dark side that we all have inside us. Look at me, for example, if I had not become a filmmaker, maybe I would have taken a darker path and become a criminal.

By the way Mori dies, I wanted to bring the human being back to life. I wanted those who thought they could not forgive him to see it and realize that what created a being that had no other choice than to kill himself was the United Red Army, it was the RAF, which is itself a product of post-war Japan, that by spilling blood during the Korean war was able to fix its economy.

Why were these young people pushed that far? Guys who don't understand that some people are ready to die when they enjoy a comfortable situation, without ever having to fight for it, have no right to judge them.

How do you feel now that the film is finished?

This film was a challenge and I threw myself into producing it. But I had doubts. I said to myself, maybe no movie theaters would screen my film and if I put one foot wrong, the film would be lost. I was very anxious. Now I think if I hadn't made this film, I wouldn't be able to die in peace. That's why I decided to produce it, saying, "Let's do our best and go it alone." Now the film is finished and I see viewers shedding tears and I say to myself, the film has come a long way. The more it is seen, the bigger it will get.

By Asako Otomo (2007) and Antoine Thirion (2008).