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Between Boundaries: Deconstructing Youth in Shinji Somai's 1980s Cinema

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Abstract

This article examines a series of youth films directed by Shinji Somai in the 1980s. Drawing on Tanaka's (2013) concept of "bodies on the boundary" (境界上の身体), the article argues that Somai's cinematic language consistently crosses three types of boundaries. These crossings occur on both formal and narrative levels. Through them, Somai constructs a deconstructive aesthetic that challenges the myth of "youth" in 1980s Japanese cinema. Firstly, Somai re-encodes the idol image of the shōjo through the star persona of Hiroko Yakushimaru. He both inherits the Kadokawa-style star marketing model and dismantles the consumable unity of the idol. This is achieved through characters' actions that cross visual boundaries in films such as *Dreamy Fifteen* (1980) and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981). Secondly, he constructs spatial-temporal boundaries that are static yet forcibly mobile. This is realised through his use of long takes, such as the collective exposure and isolation created by the theatre scene in *Typhoon Club* (1985). Here, youth is no longer presented as an eternal theme of growth. Thirdly, his films often place adolescent characters on the verge of death and disappearance. Characters frequently exit the frame, blurring the boundaries between growth and ending, life and death. This article argues that the interweaving of these three boundaries forms an effective deconstruction of the mainstream "eternal youth" myth of the 1980s. Youth is no longer romanticised as a suspended moment. Instead, it is portrayed as a generative process full of instability, fragmentation, and liminality.

Keywords: Shinji Somai, youth cinema, Shōjo Culture, long take, 1980s Japanese cinema

1. Introduction

At the end of *Typhoon Club* (1985), Somai shows a Yukio Mishima-style suicide scene: Mikami gives a speech about whether an individual can transcend the group, and then leaps from the school building to meet his death. This is a visual allegory that often appears in Somai's films: between the 'boundaries' represented by the seashore and window ledge, adolescents constantly test and cross them to complete the rite of growth. In this way, Somai breaks down the idealised construction of growth in 1980s youth films (*seishun eiga*). Adolescents are in a time-space of forced mobility, examining their lives and growth.

However, as a representative director of the 'missing decade' in Japanese film history, Somai has not received much attention from academia (especially the anglophone academia). Obviously, it is necessary to relocate Somai in combination with specific film texts, because his films themselves are at the boundaries between the collapse of the studio system and the rise of independent production. I argue that Somai's films inherently explore the concept of being 'between boundaries'. To prove my point, I will first discuss Somai's films in their historical context, then borrow and extend Tanaka's (2013, 48) concept of 'Bodies on the Boundary (境界上の身体)' to analyse the three boundaries constructed and crossed in his films: the boundaries between idols and screen images, time and space, as well as life and death. I will demonstrate how Somai's film serves as a means of interrogation that deconstructs and reinvents the construction of the myth of eternal youth in Japanese popular culture in the 1980s.

2. Context: The Boundaries Between Crisis and Opportunity

The 1980s was a time of rapid change in the Japanese film industry, and the traditional studio system faced a crisis. By 1970, 95% of households owned television (Desser, 1988, 8), the younger generation no longer used film as their main form of entertainment, which greatly reduced the audience for films. Although the total number of cinemas did not decrease due to vertical integration production, the studios with weak screening networks experienced economic differences: after two reorganizations, Shintoho and Daiei went bankrupt in 1961 and 1971 respectively, and Nikkatsu began to strategically produce low-cost adult films — a variant of pink film known as '*roman porno*' (Chung, 2024, 497). As can be seen, the mainstream studios of the old era developed different business and screening strategies, but this did not alleviate their existential crisis.

Secondly, independent production studios and directors began to emerge, and Kadokawa's youth films began to dominate the mainstream market. By shaping idol culture into a near-blank signifier, Kadokawa films present a utopian world of youth that is different from pink film (Zahlten, 2017, 98). Using the 'media mix' strategy, Kadokawa caters to young audiences' pursuit of a youthful aesthetic, in an attempt to win back young audiences that have been taken away by television. At the same time, directors such as Somai and Kiyoshi Kurosawa co-founded the independent production studio Directors Company in 1982. These directors came from a wide range of social production backgrounds, including softcore pornography and the emerging *jishu eiga*, and used film to express their artistic pursuits (Balmont, 2023). Therefore, the 1980s can also be seen as a time of rising innovation.

Somai's film production grew precisely between the boundaries of the collapse of this traditional system and the rise of innovation. On the one hand, Somai (1990, 18) said that he was influenced by roman porno: this is reflected in the fatalistic and sad temperament presented in his *Love Hotel* (1985) and *Luminous Woman* (1987). On the other hand, he embodies the independent production spirit. The films produced during the Directors Company cycle, such as *Typhoon Club* and *Moving* (1993), have both achieved good international performances. Many scholars have mentioned the 'crossing boundaries' quality of Somai's films. For instance, Tanaka (2013, 48) defines 'boundaries' as points that connect the interior and exterior of a building, such as bridges, coastlines, and walls. By contrast, 'crossing boundaries' refers to the process of characters repeatedly navigating these divisions, attempting to break through restrictions and symbolising the psychological or social state of adolescent wandering. Ryusuke Hamaguchi (2011, 7) further expands on this concept, arguing that dynamic camera movements also serve as a form of "border crossing" that participates in the film's narrative. From my perspective, I believe that Somai's 'boundaries' is not limited to the visual level but also extends to the deconstruction of idol culture and the redefinition of time and space. Next, I will analyse how Somai challenges traditional youth narratives by combining specific boundaries.

3. The Idol/Screen Image Boundaries: Hiroko Yakushimaru and Broken *Shōjo*

In the literal meaning of the English language, *shōjo* specifically refers to 'girls' and is often associated with the innocent and vulnerable identity of youth in popular culture (Monden, 2022, 454). However, as Shamoon (2009, 133) and Driscoll (2002, 53) point out, the meaning of *shōjo* in Japan is not as general as 'girl', but rather a space that monitors the process of identity formation and social placement. This image first appeared widely in *shōjo manga* and radiated to Kadokawa film productions in the 1980s, including Nobuhiko Obayashi's *School in the Crosshairs* (1981) and *The Little Girl Who Conquered Time* (1983). The teenagers in these films are often at the hormonal peak of youth, idealistic, and hopeful about the future (St-Hilaire, 2019, 7). Obayashi captures the best moments of these teenagers (and even the idol actresses themselves) and avoids boredom among the audience with a fast editing rhythm and a dreamlike narrative.

Somai's film uses Yakushimaru's idol image critically and reshapes the stereotypes of shōjo by breaking the 'boundaries' of the idol. As a typical shōjo idol, Yakushimaru's success stems from Kadokawa's 'media mix' strategy: the posters for *Dreamy Fifteen* (1980) and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981) both feature Yakushimaru's personal image; in addition, she performed the theme songs for both films, and the promotional material booklet came with the album purchase, with almost every image being a photo of her. I want to emphasise that Somai is not averse to catering to Kadokawa's model of cross-promotion through idol performances and hit songs. As he (1990, 16) says, "Without connecting the fascination of the cinematic nature with film as a commodity somewhere, I would not be able to find the meaning of my own filmmaking next time."

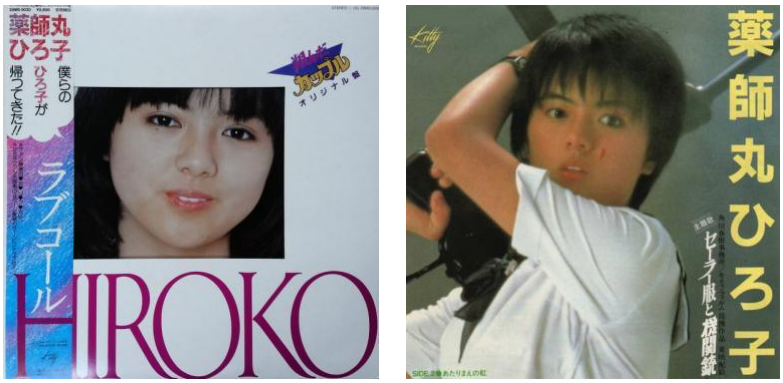

Figure 1-2. Yakushimaru's albums produced for *Dreamy Fifteen* (1983) and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981)

However, Somai also mentions that Yakushimaru's star image must maintain a sense of distance from his films (1990, 13), which is reflected in the fluidity of the screen image's identity through the influence of language. Hamaguchi (2011, 8) mentions that crossing boundaries is not just a matter of distance but exists as a dynamic approach to Somai's films, allowing them to exceed the ideal boundaries provided by poster photos. There are many visual boundaries in *Sailor Suit*: when the Medaka-Gumi comes to the school to pick up Hoshi (Yakushimaru), the camera cuts to an overhead shot of the entire basketball court, with the school crowd out of frame and unseen by the audience, symbolising Hoshi's transition beyond the confines of her identity as a student. In the next scene, Hoshi joins the Medaka-Gumi by walking across the boundaries of the basketball court. At this level, by completing the process of 'crossing the boundaries of order', Somai deconstructs Yakushimaru's idolised youth image, integrating her more deeply into the narrative structure of the film.

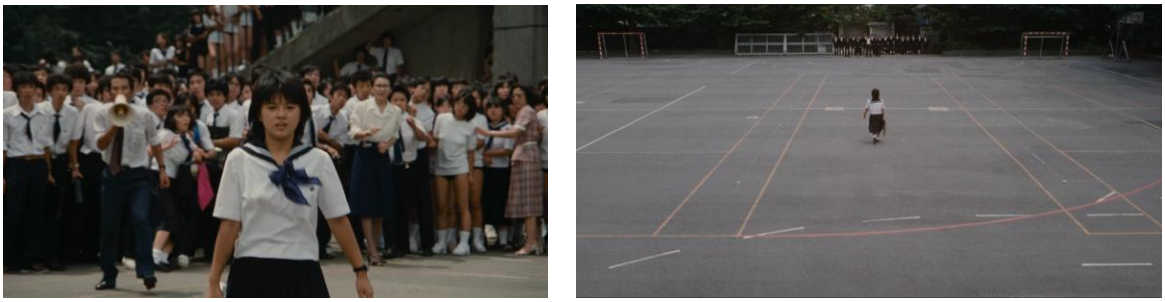

Figure 3-4. Screenshots from *Sailor Suit* and *Machine Gun* (1981) depict Hoshi crossing boundaries to embrace her gang identity

Hoshi returns to her student status, but her yakuza experience has left its mark on her, blurring the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood. While Yakushimaru's debut featured her eyes, Somai deliberately avoids using too many close-ups, with the body replacing the face as a symbol of youthful sensibility (Zhang, 2023, 158). I think this portrayal of the body also exists in the social identity symbolised by the clothing worn by Hoshi. In the final sequence, the sailor suit worn by Hoshi symbolises her shōjo identity, but this identity is incomplete: her red high heels epitomise her gangster past; the camera hovers ghostly in the air, following her movements among the crow. Audience can see her childlike side — she plays with the children. But then, as the wind lifts the hem of her skirt, she assumes a Marilyn Monroe- esque adult identity, and the film ends abruptly with her monologue: "I will be a stupid woman." In this long shot, Somai's gaze on Hoshi's body through the language of the camera further reinforces the deconstruction of the shōjo image. This contradiction in clothing symbolises Hoshi's liminal state between youth and maturity, disrupting Kadokawa's idealised idol image for Yakushimaru and granting the character a fluid identity: She embodies shōjo, but in a fragmented way — no longer the "idealised" version of a shōjo.

Figure 5-6. The fractured *shōjo* identity of Hoshi in *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981)

4. The Temporal/Spatial Boundaries: Between Stagnation and Flux

In Somai's film, long shots construct a state of liminality between time and space. By repeatedly crossing the boundaries between the stagnant and the fluid, the teenagers break the myth of eternal youth. Gerow (2007, 1-3) compares the aesthetic characteristics of Somai's film with the traditional Japanese long shot (nagemawashi), concludes that it focuses on expressing a '*watai*' style, in which the camera itself is both the narrator and the observer of the story. However, Gerow does not delve deeper into this style in connection with Somai's films. If we place his viewpoint in the concept of boundaries, Ando (2019, 145) presents a more convincing argument, asserting that long takes often reveal unexpected spatial expansions, enriching the depth of space with intricate complexities and contradictions. In my view, Somai's long take reveals the ambivalence of youth by shaping the boundaries of time and space: on the one hand, the stasis of time constructs a closed loop that seems to continue forever through the repetitive nature of the dance and carnivalesque atmosphere; on the other hand, the long shot symbolises an 'unstoppable' flow of time, breaking the stasis through movement, suggesting that youth will eventually be replaced by the reality of growing up.

First, Somai constructs a myth of eternal youth, where time and space seem to be suspended and isolated from reality. They are presented in a theatrical and carnivalesque manner. In almost all of Somai's films, a carnivalesque atmosphere is created, where teenagers recklessly insist on constant movement, while long shots neither predict nor judge the characters (Fujiwara, p. 1). This is reflected in *Dreamy Fifteen*: in the scenes of Yamaba and Tasiro's cohabitation, when the family space is misaligned, the room becomes their playground: they roller skate inside the room, experiencing a process of infantilisation. *Typhoon Club* presents a kind of forgetting about time and the past: in the striptease sequence, the heavy rain dissolves the clear boundaries between the real world and the group of teenagers. The camera frenzy begins with Michiko's speech, just a few minutes after she was almost raped by Ken. This rapid return symbolises Somai's compression of time (Fujiwara, p. 4). I think that the time here shows a kind of stasis independent of reality as well. The half-naked young people construct an imaginary youth ritual through their raucous dance: during the dance, the camera is behind Mikami, observing the events from a distant stance, which further illustrates this stasis. This also recalls the final dance sequence in *P.P. Rider* (1983): the long shot includes the children's dancing bodies within the frame, and the bright overhead lighting transforms the small room into a stage. Even though the sirens in the background symbolise external danger, the teenagers continue to dance freely. At this moment, the time the teenagers inhabit has no connection to real space, and they sing about youth in a mythical way.

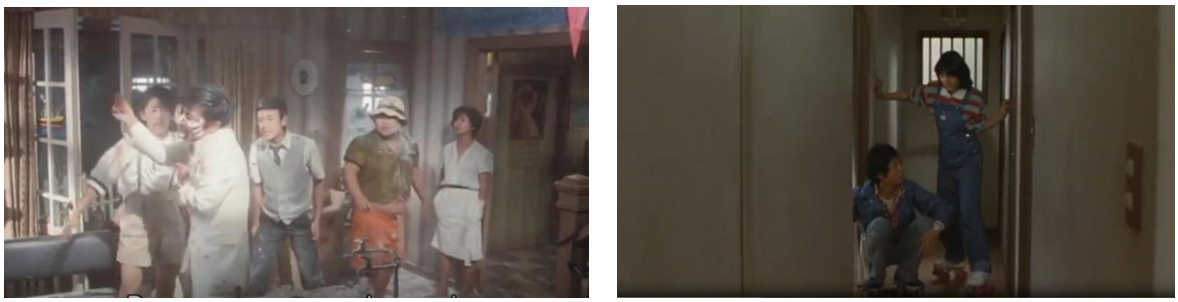

Figure 7-8. The theatrical interior spaces in *P.P. Rider* (1983) and *Dreamy Fifteen* (1980)

However, the slow movement of the long shot often symbolises a forced flow of time, brutally breaking the sense of stagnation in the narrative, and symbolising the teenagers being forced to cross the boundaries of growth. As Gerow (2007, 5) points out, even though Somai's construction of a youth myth means imprisoning his characters in a frozen time and space, the teenagers in his films eventually grow up. In the striptease sequence in *Typhoon Club,* the long shot starts to slowly pan forward after a brief moment of stillness, gradually crossing over Mikami's body. As Mikami joins in, six youths are trapped within the frame formed by the basketball hoop, as if symbolising the boundaries of identity. The camera pushes in, guiding the viewer's gaze as the teenagers' bodies are continually brought in for a close-up. People begin to notice the "mature" side of their bodies and the sexual characteristics that have begun to sprout. In the last shot of *Moving*, Renko imaginatively traverses the scenes of her childhood. Under the gaze of the long shot, she crosses the boundaries formed by the layers of tree trunks and suddenly changes into her middle school uniform — she has also experienced a brutal growth spurt in an instant. By using the objective gaze of the long shot to shape the stagnant time of youth, and then using the movement of the long shot to break this myth of youth, Somai breaks the boundaries, and the teenagers in his lens are placed in a contradictory state of flux.

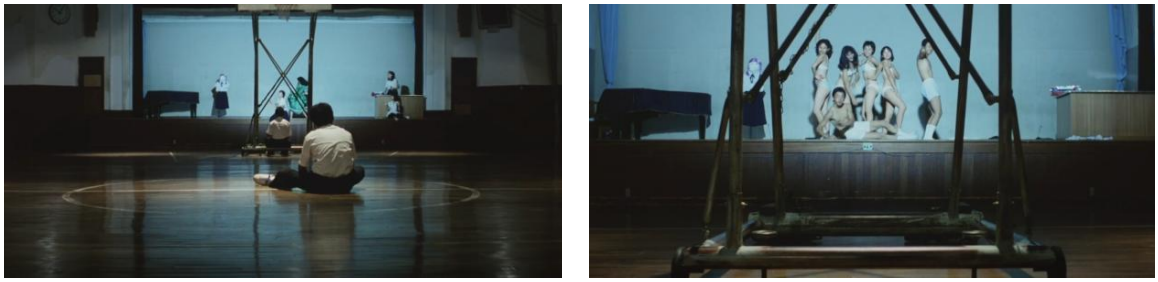

Figure 9-10. Screenshots from *Typhoon Club* (1985) The long take, as a gaze of "enforced flowing time," frames and defines the youths

5. The Life/Death Boundaries: Adolescents Walking Towards Death

The boundaries of adolescence in Somai's films point towards adulthood but also towards the danger of death. His films are about both youth and death, as if adolescence were not only a liminal state between childhood and adulthood but also between life and death (Gerow, 2005, 5). I think these boundaries between life and death can be interpreted as a way for adolescents to reject growing up. By exploring or crossing dangerous boundaries, Somai's films escape the idealised youth mythology of Nobuhiko Obayashi's films, which constantly look back to the past, and confront adolescents with growing up, thinking about the future, and potentially moving directly towards the end of life.

On the one hand, the bodies of teenagers in Somai's films often test the boundaries of danger. For example, in *P.P. Rider*, the teenagers travel between unfamiliar cities, dealing with drug dealers. In the riverbank chase sequence, they keep falling into the water and disappearing from the camera, as if disappearing from the audience's field of vision symbolises death. In *Typhoon Club*, Michiko extends her body out of the window ledge, crossing physical boundaries to express her experimentation with death. On the other hand, when adolescents transgress or witness the process of transgression, adolescence comes to an end. Just as the scene of Mikami's suicide was mentioned at the beginning of the article, the camera objectively observes his speech. The tables and chairs stacked in the foreground symbolise the modern order that has been broken artificially. His classmates tried to stop him from crossing the boundary and walking towards death, but in the end, Mikami still jumped off the building. Mikami's death was not romanticised or played down in a dreamlike flashback through time, as in *The Girl Who Conquered Time*. Instead, in the following shot, the audience sees his body fall playfully into the muddy water after a rainstorm, creating a strong sense of absurdity — he has crossed the boundaries and gone to death, which cannot be reversed.

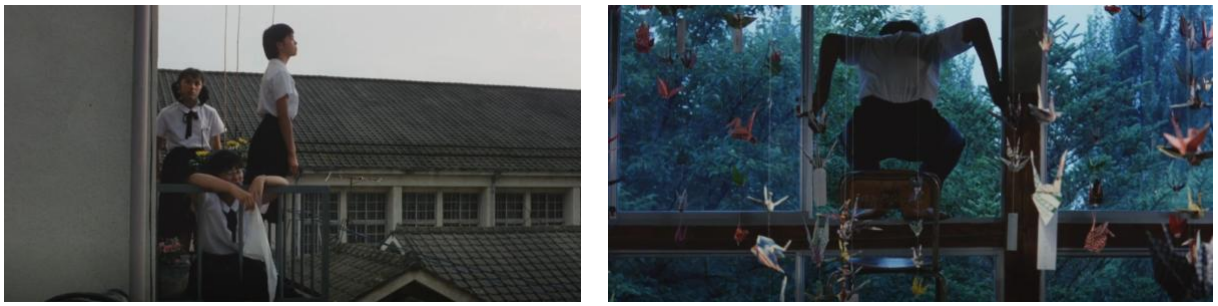

Figure 11-12. Screenshots from *Typhoon Club* (1985) depicting adolescents caught between dangerous boundaries

It is worth noting that the boundaries of this death are not limited to Somai's youth films: in *Love Hotel*, Mayumi attempts suicide by jumping into a river; in *Lost Chapter of Snow: Passion* (1985), Iori walks on a log bridge, searching for her own place of death; in *Luminous Woman*, Matsunami continually falls into danger on the wrestling mat. The characters in Somai's films are always in a state of frenetic movement, crossing from one boundary to another. This is not only an outward movement, testing the contours of a constantly changing world, but also an inward movement, probing one's own unknowable emotions, thoughts, and spirit (Bryant, 2023). But when death is linked to adolescents, growth and death form ambiguous boundaries in terms of youth. As a real and irreversible existence, it explains the broken reality that adolescents will eventually face after crossing the boundaries. Through constant 'crossing of boundaries,' the adolescents in Somai transcend the threshold of adolescence and embrace the cruelty of youth.

6. Conclusion

Somai's films redefine the presentation of youth in Japanese popular culture through multiple explorations of boundaries. His films revolve around the boundaries between shōjo idol and character, time and space, and adolescence and death, challenging the idealised construction of 'eternal youth' in Japanese popular culture in the 1980s. Through the deconstruction of the idol image of Yakushimaru, Somai breaks through the boundaries between idol and character, presenting youth as a complex and fluid state. Through long shots and spatial design, he constructs and breaks the stasis of time, expressing the contradiction between fixation and flux in adolescence. At the same time, by presenting the exploration process of young people on the edge of danger, he forms a unique way of questioning the proposition of growth. Without saying, due to the limitations of the source material and word count, this article cannot fully contextualise Somai. However, I firmly believe that Somai's repositioning of his historical status is necessary. By constantly questioning the 'eternal youth' created by idol culture, Somai continues to give future directors new ideas across multiple boundaries. His historical status, like the boundaries created by his visual language, is worth further crossing and re-examining.

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