



THE FRIDA ZINEMA

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-PLOITATION

THE MYTH OF #701

FEMALE PRISONER SCORPION: JAILHOUSE 41

by Brendan Kraus



Oftentimes when an exploitation film gets a sequel made one can usually expect bigger and crazier. Everything that made audiences like the original dialed up to 11. Usually, the messaging of the original gets watered down to make room for more blood, nudity and action. *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Jailhouse 41* is not only one of the greatest sequels ever made but completely flips the exploitation sequel formula on its head.

The original *Female Prisoner Scorpion #701* is a classic, a melding of the revenge and woman-in-prison exploitation film genres with incredible mind-bending directing from Shunya Itō. Prisoner #701 Nani Matsushima (Matsu), played by the immortal Meiko Kaji, was on a one-woman mission to get revenge on the man who wronged her and landed her in prison. By the film's end, Matsu had become the scorpion and achieved legendary status. She had destroyed the oppressive prison hierarchy, led an unprecedented prison riot and finally got her revenge on the man who did all this to her.



One would think that the natural progression of the series would be to put Matsu back in prison and just do the same thing but crazier. No, *Jailhouse 41* does the opposite of this. There is less nudity, sex and action set pieces than the predecessor. Very little of the film even takes place in a prison. Itō uses his sequel to get even more abstract in presentation and explore the idea of myths. When we first meet Matsu in the sequel she is back in prison and it has been a full year since anyone has seen her. As soon as she is brought out before the other prisoners it's as if they have seen a mythological creature of old. The scorpion herself is here and she is actually real. In the original Matsu had very little dialogue but here she is almost mute the entire movie. She is less a person but rather a force of nature. She moves and is shot in the same way Leone would have shot Clint Eastwood in a western. A figure who can be wounded, but feels inevitable and whose mere stare can force change.



The first movie explored through an exploitation lens how men will use and discard women. In *Jailhouse 41* this is built on by exploring how men will try to tear down a woman who others look up to. At the beginning of the film rather than subject Matsu to hard labor like the other prisoners, the guards inflict sexual violence on her. They want to humiliate and dehumanize this mythical figure for any other prisoner who may feel inspired to riot themselves.

The majority of *Jailhouse 41* largely revolves around Matsu and a few other prisoners on the run from the prison guards sent to capture them. Eventually, the group finds an abandoned village to rest. There the group encounters a seemingly mythical knife-wielding older woman. The film goes full art house avant garde as this old woman tells us how each woman was wronged by a man and ended up in prison. The all knowing woman then hands Matsu the knife as her body disappears, her last words being "I'll kill them".



Itō's thesis for the film is now clear. Matsu is no longer just the legendary scorpion. She has taken all the hopes, dreams and desires, both good and bad of her fellow prisoners. It's unclear however if she wants it. The group of prisoners hijack a bus and sadistically treat the people on it which include women and children. Matsu's facial expressions suggest she doesn't approve but understands how these women ended up like this. We cut to the past as each woman is beaten and humiliated after they commit their crimes with Matsu eventually appearing in their place. She eventually manipulates the prison guards into assaulting the fortified bus. She specifically tells the warden the women are dead in order to get his men to move in, this is after she has a deep look into the eyes of her fellow prisoners. Does Matsu see death as the only way these women can be free? One of the more sadistic women in the group dies cursing her husband and deliriously ranting. Matsu looks at her

with a stare that could be interpreted as sadness. Did she think that this patriarchal system had turned them into monsters and she saw them going down in a blaze of glory as a way to end this cycle? It's certainly open to interpretation.



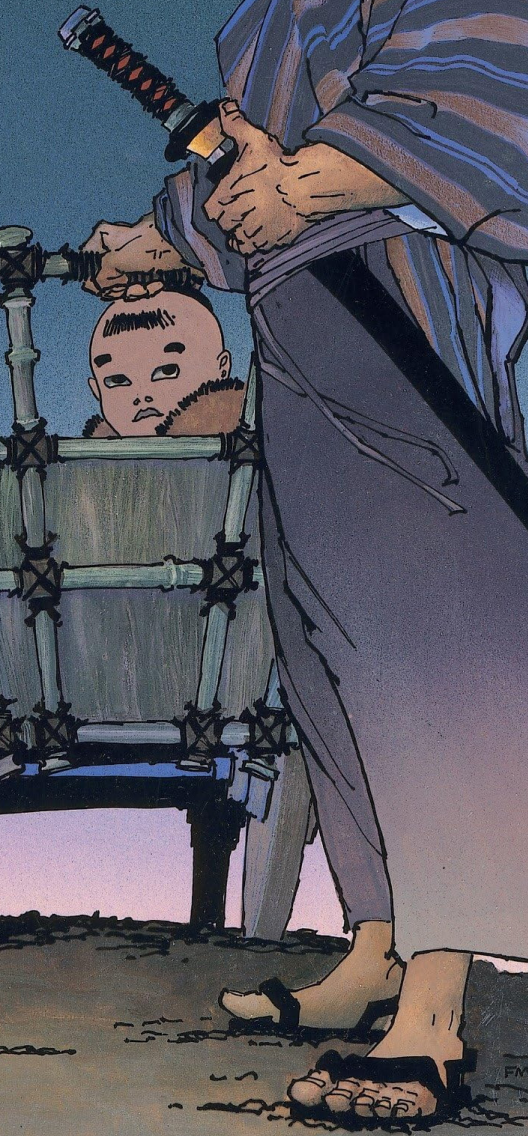
The film ends with Matsu hunting down and killing the prison Warden who had inflicted so much pain on all the prisoners. The final shot has Matsu and all the female inmates, including those who had died earlier running down a road with Matsu herself leading the pack. The memories and pain of those now dead, and the hopes of those still imprisoned living on through Prisoner #701 Scorpion.



ESCAPING ON 'THE DEMON PATH IN HELL'

BY TRISTAN PARKER

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I vividly remember the first time I watched *Shogun Assassin*. I was 19 years old, on my way home for Thanksgiving, and my flight had been delayed. Chaos surrounded me as I sat on the dirty airport floor. It is a testament to the hectic insanity of peak travel time at San Francisco International Airport that the whirling blades, gushing blood, and overall unremitting violence of *Shogun Assassin* seemed calm in contrast.

I had a vague understanding that it was a hack job worthy of the shogun's executioner. An American duo, Robert Houston and David Weisman, had slashed apart, restitched (and even rescored!) the first two films of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series and distributed it to American audiences. The result is a strange, dreamy, somewhat plotless dive through death and destruction. It hooked me at my core. In my late-teenage eyes, the cinematography was beautiful, the rivers of blood artistic, and the stoic bravery of the main characters inspiring. It was a film that held no pretensions of what it was. To quote one of my favorite sayings, "it does what it says on the tin."



There's something genuinely admirable in that straightforward approach to storytelling. That's not to say there are not deeper themes operating in *Shogun Assassin* and the films it's based on. The narrative touches on shifting social structures, violence, the exploitation of women and children, the loss of innocence, fatherhood, masculinity, the shifting nature of morality, and much more. Even the production of *Shogun Assassin* brings to mind discussions of the appropriation and manipulation of other cultures for the Western audience. All that being said, at the end of the day, it's a movie that immediately and persistently focuses on a very talented killer doing what he does best.

That day in the airport, the film was an instantaneous escape from my dreary reality. The interminable wait passed quickly as I watched Ogami Ittō and his young son Daigoro hack their way through cold-hearted samurai, deadly ninjas, and ruthless warrior-monks. Since that first

viewing, *Shogun Assassin* and then later *Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart on the River Styx* (the film most of *Shogun Assassin* is cut from) have become comfort watches for me. In fact, I recently saw *Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart on the River Styx* for the first time on the big screen, at a moment when I was going through some personal setbacks. It was a welcome escape and it genuinely helped me mellow out about what was going on in my life.



And that's crazy. Within the first three minutes of the film, a man's head gets bifurcated. Why does that make me feel better about life? Upon reflection after watching the film, I ran through a quick checklist to make sure I wasn't a serial killer (good news, I'm pretty sure I am not) and then tried to determine what about these movies that provided me with a sense of relief.

The answer, I think, lies in the absurdity of it all. The human condition is, to a certain extent, grappling with the fear of death. We live in an inherently violent world. Even driving to get groceries invites the possibility of traumatic demise. Thanks to social media and 24 hour news cycles, we are relentlessly bombarded with a litany of images involving death and destruction, often on a massive scale. Mortality saturates our lives and that is incredibly uncomfortable. But *Lone Wolf and Cub* takes that ever present violence and trivializes it. A high pressure jet of bright orange-red blood shooting out of some bandit's neck like a fire hose turns the mundane threat of mortality into something so overly dramatic, it's borderline comedic. When Ogami defeats Benma, the last of the three deadly Hidari brothers, the warrior-monk delivers an extended internal monologue about the beauty of the cut across his neck. You can't help but laugh at how seriously the whole thing is played despite being absolutely ridiculous. Exposure to this level of

hyperviolence renders the rest of the world less grim by comparison.

Perhaps it's a simple matter of desensitization. That would, I imagine, be the claim of concerned critics. But despite finding escape in *Lone Wolf and Cub*, I do not find myself less empathetic about death. Rather, I think it takes away some of the fear that I feel towards the subject. It gives us an opportunity to find humor, even beauty, in a version of violence that is contained to the silver screen. When we join father and son on "the demon path to Hell", we tacitly acknowledge that we are actually capable of handling death being at the forefront of our media consumption. We take the unknown, the uncontrollable, the fear-inducing, and revel in it as a flamboyant spectacle. The surrealness of the film's violence means that it is safe for us to laugh at death, something that many would find hard to do in real life. In that sense, *Lone Wolf and Cub* gives us a measure of control back over that inescapable terminus that plagues us all.

Like so many films in the broad world of "exploitation" cinema, *Lone Wolf and Cub* takes the taboo and turns it into something consumable. While at its core it might be predicated on the idea of using the shock value of violence to sell tickets, it achieves more than its intended goal. I think the sense of catharsis that *Shogun Assassin* and its progenitors provide is what keeps drawing people back to it. It is true that there are a thousand movies depicting extreme violence. Few elevate it to the level of absurd art that *Lone Wolf and Cub* attains. As the dying Benma so aptly says, "Your technique... is perfect." In a world that feels increasingly chaotic, there's never been a better time to grab your sword and baby cart and find some solace on the Demon Path in Hell.

I'll see you there.



SHARKSPLOITATION

A Bite-Sized History

by Micah Lara
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One thing's for sure.
It wasn't a floating chainsaw"

- Ron Hamer, *The Last Shark* (1981)

Out of every subgenre associated with exploitation films, none strike as much terror into the hearts of beachgoers everywhere as killer shark movies. "Sharksploitation" films, as they've been dubbed, detail everything people find terrifying about these deep sea predators. Cinema has often incorrectly depicted sharks as these mindless, bloodthirsty killers who hunt down any person foolish enough to take a dip in their territory. While humanity's fear of sharks may feel somewhat instinctual, the actual history of sharks in cinema paints a very different picture.



When people think of sharks in movies, the earliest and best example that usually enters people's minds is, and forever will be, *Jaws* (1975). As the original blockbuster, *Jaws'* popularity is often cited as the major reason sharks are represented in film the way they are now. However, the history of Sharksploitation goes beyond Spielberg. F.W. Murneau's *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931) had one of the first shark attack scenes in movie history, though the shark was shown as some monster. As time went

on however, sharks did begin to grow negative connotations in movies. Films like *Thunderball* (1965) had sharks as the people-devouring pets of the evil mastermind Emilio Largo. This shift in the view of sharks was due in part to real life shark attacks, such as the sinking of the U.S.S Indianapolis in 1945. Real life events affected the perception of sharks, though they never really entered the scope of horror until the 70s. Until then, sharks were simply dangerous obstacles in adventure movies. What ultimately brought that to a halt was *Shark!* (1969). Originally filmed as "Caine", there was an unfortunate accident involving one of the stunt divers Jose Marco was killed by a shark that broke through the underwater set's protective netting. In place of mourning, the filmmakers decided to actually use real footage of the attack and change the title of the film. And thus, a full 6 years before *Jaws*, sharksploitation was born.



From the popularity of *Jaws*, the sharksploitation genre grew and thrived. Other filmmakers tried building off the success by releasing similar movies with different animals. Perhaps the most famous of which being *Piranha*. Italy had their own *Jaws* ripoff with *The Last Shark* (1981). It follows a very similar story as *Jaws*, just replacing the 4th of July celebrations with a windsurfing competition, which I'm sure the filmmakers believed was a huge spectator sport in the states. The movie was marketed in the U.S. as "Jaws 3", before we knew what the real Jaws 3 would actually be. By the end of this era, audiences had grown somewhat tired of shark movies. *Jaws: The Revenge* had left moviegoers in the late 80s with a bad taste and sharksploitation as a genre went dormant for a couple of years. That is until 1999, the greatest year of cinema, brought life back to the water with *Deep Blue Sea*.



Deep Blue Sea reached out to a new generation of moviegoers who grew up on *Jaws* from their parents, but with a special twist. These sharks were genetically modified to be bigger and meaner as a result of the hubris of man. Now there was an actual reason for sharks to be behaving as monstrous as they do in sharksploitation. The stakes were higher, the sharks were deadlier, and the safety of the shore was no longer an option. In this postmodern *Jaws* era, sharks could go almost wherever they pleased because they didn't have the shackles of realism. There were land sharks, snow sharks, ghost sharks, sharks with tentacles, sharks with two heads, prehistoric sharks, robot sharks, and even sharks that soared the skies in a tornado.

There exists now a balance in sharksploitation movies. These low budget silly shark movies continue to be made, but there seem to be just as many "realistic" shark movies that garner more popularity from general audiences due to their perceived realism. Films like *The Shallows* and *47 Meters Down* have stories based in reality in order to strike fear into the hearts of audiences. These sharks are still being exploited by their perceived threat to humans

and acting like a monster, rather than an animal. It's not reality, it's what the audience thinks is reality. Maybe the best sharksploitation movie to come out in recent years is probably *The Meg* because it takes from both worlds of blockbuster fantasy and decent filmmaking. Is it a good movie? Debatable. Did I have fun watching Jason Statham fight a 75 foot long prehistoric shark? Hell yeah! Hardly any exploitation film has a basis in reality, but they're still engaging to watch with their larger than life scope of the world.



The future of sharksploitation is still uncertain. As I have presented, the longstanding history of the genre has swayed with current events and audience trends, so there's always some surprise lurking as to what will come next. Currently in theaters (as I type this in late June), is the film *Dangerous Animals* about a serial killer who tortures his victims by feeding them to wild sharks in the open ocean. Total exploitation film plot. The big difference of this film though is there isn't a malicious nature about the sharks. The film is about the beauty of nature being exploited by man for his own entertainment. There's a possibility this film could be a sign of the times changing for sharksploitation yet again, maybe changing who or what the real exploitation comes from. Whatever the case may be, the history of sharksploitation continues to build its future.



For more information on Sharksploitation movies, I also recommend the documentary *Sharksploitation*. It served as a fantastic guide to writing this article.

"Trash" Collector

An Interview With See It On 16mm's Michael Aguirre

Conducted by Jesse Camacho

Michael Aguirre is a film collector and programmer in the SoCal region, whose touring film project, See It On 16mm, is keeping the art of film projection alive one screening at a time. In this age of digital cameras and DCP (Digital Cinema Package) projectors, Aguirre hauls his equipment from theater to theater, projecting everything from classic films like *Paper Moon* and *It's a Wonderful Life* to films from the nether regions of the cinematic world, which might have never seen the light of day (or the inside of a dark movie theater in this case) were it not for the absolute treasure that is analog 16mm film. Aguirre shares his experience as a programmer and his run-ins with the world of exploitation cinema.



Q// How did you first get into projecting 16mm film, especially here at The Frida Cinema and other independent cinemas?

MA// I have been collecting and doing film projection for the last 8 years now, and I started to work with theater when the pandemic was starting to settle down. Theaters started opening back up again, and I was able to build relationships with a lot of the independent theaters and programmers. I started at The Frida because Trevor Dillon, lead programmer, came over to my house during the pandemic, and we watched *Death Wish* (1974) and *Rolling Thunder* (1977) in my backyard at the time. One thing led to another, and a month or two later, I started projecting 16mm film prints at the Frida for member screenings. Then, eventually, they became public screenings. I think I have been projecting at The Frida for over 4 years now, this upcoming December, and it has been pretty awesome.

Q// This edition of the zine is dedicated to exploitation films, and having seen the films you have programmed and your work with TrashMex, I want to assume that you are familiar with this genre. If so, are there any formative experiences with this genre in your moviegoing life?

MA// Exploitation films are great. You're either in, or in the way. They are not for everyone, but if you are a weirdo, goon, or mutant like the rest of us into this deprived cinema, it's a blast! With Trash-Mex (Armando Hernandez), we have screened some movies at this point that have made audience members walk out of the theater. Hell, I walked out of *El Violador Infernal*. Just got overwhelmed and too stimulated lol. Watch it if you dare. It's offensive, boundary-stepping, and just pure Mexican exploitation. I have also hosted 16mm exploitation marathons with my buddy Ciro Nieli. We just hosted one a couple of months ago now which went over really well with the audience. People are still talking about *The Suckling*. Exploitation cinema is basically my bread and butter. I am actually very naive when it comes to classic cinema or popular titles. Luckily, my girlfriend Hope has been helping fill those gaps in classic cinema by having me sit down to watch a lot of what I have glazed over most of my life. It has been a real hoot.

Q// How would you personally define "exploitation" cinema and what qualities do you look for when picking such a film to project for an audience?

MA// Exploitation films to me are basically non-Hollywood films with subject matter that is usually not favored. haha. But, I also consider films like *The Passion Of The Christ* an exploitation film. That one really screwed me up when I was a kid growing up Christian with my mom in her little weird cult stuff. But exploitation films should focus on a taboo subject and just ride it to the edge of the mountain. Usually they'll touch on social anxieties and be reflective of that time period.

Q// Are there any sub-genres within exploitation cinema that you feel are underappreciated?

MA// I am really big on blaxploitation films. It's actually what I try to lean towards collecting wise these days. I just got a holy grail print recently, and I'm super excited to take it on tour in the upcoming months. Blaxploitation doesn't get played much in theaters, and it's just that single era of film the 70's that put black actors in the spotlight and made them the heroes. I mean you've had stuff like Duane Jones in *Night Of The Living Dead* (1968) but this era really shined in the 70's with this genre of film. One of my favorite directors of all time, Jamaa Fanaka, came out of Los Angeles during the black rebellion era towards the late 70's with classics like *Penitentiary* (1979).

Q// I want to ask about your experience being the person introducing these films to people. What would you say is the audience reaction to these films compared to the more arthouse or mainstream films you have programmed?

MA// Oh yeah, totally different crowd that comes out to the [mainstream] stuff than the exploitation stuff. Personally, I noticed the exploitation stuff is not well attended compared to more mainstream. This was evident during the Universal Monsters marathon that sold out at The Frida, and the 90 who attended the last Exploitation horror marathon. I love the exploitation stuff, and honestly I do prefer those more, because it's fun to provide that type of cinema that isn't usually getting played, let alone on film. I love hearing when a movie is so shocking that people still talk about it months later at other shows.

Q// Exploitation cinema has always had a controversial reputation, how do you go about presenting these films to audiences? Do you ever feel a responsibility to sort of provide context for these films?

MA// Hell, if we're about to dive into something weird on the screen, I just remind people you bought the ticket for the ride haha. No topic is off the table for me. Some meaner than others, some more nudity than others, some have topics we shove under the rug, and just outright offensive. You gotta peep behind the curtain and shadows sometimes to see an alternate world of cinema, and I hope to continue bringing stuff like that to the big screen on film. I mean, I just screened a film called *The Suckling* during the exploitation marathon that deals with abortion, and it's the movie everyone still mentions and brings up to me.

Q// Are there any post-screening reactions from audience members that have stuck with you throughout the years of doing this?

MA// Yeah, *The Suckling* being one of them because of the absurdity and taboo topic of abortion, and also screened some stuff there were prohibited rights for that I cannot name. But those who attended the *WTF WEDNESDAY* screenings at The Frida know what I'm talking about, and that movie left a sour taste in some attendees mouths with racial slurs, incest, and other taboo topics that aren't one table for folks to even think of. It's fun! Life is short, and it's all not Hollywood glitz and glamour. Life is rough and ugly sometimes.

Q// What would you say are the unique challenges and rewards of projecting films in 16mm, having done this for so many years.

MA// Prints are going. Getting old. Have been ran thousands of times at this point. So there's visible wear and tear, and edits in some spots from past projectionists. It's also very expensive to collect film prints, so if you don't have deep pockets or connections, it's a hard thing to pull off, people don't realize, especially as an independent. I work with theaters, but I'm the one who programs the titles, obtains the print, fully inspect, haul equipment around since I tour, hours upon hours in projection booths alone (but thankful these past couple of years having my girlfriend Hope up there with me helping if there's an issue, or enjoying a game of Scrabble in between movies), and also doing the actual projection! This isn't digital. Analog is hard. But when you love the feel and visual of it, it's a complete labor of love that I wouldn't trade for anything else. I'd rather see an emulsion line down a movie or scratch than a digital pixelation or stutter. That's just me, but I know a lot of people feel the same. Especially those coming out for this type of film that is being projected.

Q// What do you hope audiences get out of seeing films on the big screen in their original 16mm format?

MA// Original cuts! This is the way the director wanted you to see it. There's no digital altering, there's no cleaning up image and colors, and the way it is, is the way you'll see it. You can see a print at The Frida here, and there's probably another projectionist with the same title but with different edits. It's this organic thing, there's no two similar prints with some titles since projectionists used to edit and chop prints to accommodate their community they were projecting for.

Q// To close, what would you say are some of your favorite exploitation films or directors in the genre? What would you consider "essential viewing" for someone new to this side of cinema? Are there any films you dream of screening on 16mm?

MA// Jack Hill movies, Jamaa Fanaka, anything with the actor David Hess, who is my favorite exploitation actor (*The Last House on the Left*, *The House on the Edge of the Park*), Russ Meyer films in general. A true American director. A dream film to project is actually one I will be touring over the next few months which is my personal 16mm LPP (low fade) of one of the pivotal blaxploitation films. So, get ready to get your ass kicked by Pam Grier in *Coffy* on a big screen near you!



Find tickets and event info at <https://linktr.ee/seeiton16mm> or on Instagram @seeiton16mm



What would forever change idol culture comes in the form of a handshake. Marketed as the idols you can meet, AKB48 ushered in a revolution to the idol experience, where it was no longer about the actual music itself, though the group definitely has some absolute bangers within their discography, and it was instead about being able to interact with the idols directly, who performed daily in their own theater in Akihabara alongside holding handshake events, where fans can directly interact with the idols in a way that had never been done quite before that has since become the norm across the board in the industry. While best known for their work on the small screen, ranging from their iconic variety series *AKBingo!*, of which a segment involving members playing a game where they were connected by a plastic tube in which they had to blow a cockroach into the other's mouth, which was featured on *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, to high school delinquent series *Majisuka Gakuen* and the iconic *Tofu Pro Wrestling* program that involved actual wrestling promotion, they surprisingly only had one true feature film during their Golden Era (though Obayashi did direct a feature length version of one of their music videos), *The Suicide Song*, directed by the same director as the previous Onyanko Club movie and written by previously mentioned producer Yasushi Akimoto, whose credential in film within the same genre space comes from incidentally also having written the source novel for Takashi Miike's *One Missed Call*, which centered around an urban legend about a song that would cause suicidal tendencies as a natural thematic link between J-Horror and idols as an allegorical representation of the stress, anxiety, and pressure that comes in an increasingly cutthroat entertainment industry. Behind the relatively chaste artifice of the perfect idol image and experience belied the dark realities, whether it's the needlessly stringent dating prohibitions that would inevitably lead to scandal upon discovery, the handsaw attack that finally got management to take security more seriously at handshake events, the toxicity and waste of election campaigns that pitted members and fans against one another, or the assault case that essentially expedited the public relevance of a group waning in popularity. Though media discourse largely denigrated idol culture in a rather deleterious manner, like a phoenix out of ashes, idol culture continues on. AKB48's rival groups, the Sakamichi Series, have surpassed their

counterparts in the mainstream, though of course not without their own challenges, and the idol industry itself is having something of a boom with the worldwide viral sensation that is AiScReam, a subunit of the 2.5D idol multimedia project *Love Live!*, alongside the reactionary Harajuku style movement of the Kawaii Lab. groups against the K-Pop aesthetic and sensibility invading the Japanese music industry and youth culture. Of the girls impacted by the handsaw attack, Anna Iriyama later found success in telenovelas while on sabbatical in Mexico, while Rina Kawai became an A-list actor following her graduation from the group.



In the process of rebranding, AKB48 takes a shift away from its admittedly sweaty image in an attempt to replicate the success of their self-described rivals, appealing to more of a female audience. Though the handshake events are very much still a money maker in the post-COVID era for men trying to feel something real, the girls have since shifted their focus away from the more parasocial nature of the industry toward a sort of pseudo-influencer type of entity, with more of a focus on brand modeling, YouTube channels, and more aspirational icons—idols by another definition, not about the male wish fulfillment or about this amorphous concept of dreams, but of a role model for young girls to strive toward. *Girls Drive* is a representative film of the modern AKB48 that's self-aware of the idol industry and makes compelling commentary while not needlessly mulling on the past. There is the ridiculous yet relevant premise of a girl who calls into a radio show to express her disappointment over failing to start at a track meet due to the trauma of the disbandment of her favorite idol group, due to scandal no less, only to be ridiculed by the host, leading her to embark on a road trip with a few other girls for a revenge killing. Along the way they stop by and visit the fan of one of the girls for shelter only to realize he's a creepy stalker, all too common of a theme in this type of film, and amidst various other escapades, the road comedy serves as a healing process for each of the girls on their own personal journeys, whether it's getting over a bad breakup, coming to terms with your lack of success as an aspiring influencer, learning that revenge isn't the answer, or just developing meaningful friendships. The dark shadow of idol culture looms large over the industry as a whole, but it's taking new life in the form of female solidarity, empowerment, and friendship in a

largely male-controlled entertainment world, or at the very least that's exactly what they're attempting to sell. The continued discourse and reflection on idols is still an ongoing conversation, however, with the entire *Oshi no Ko* multimedia project being a direct repudiation of the industry and celebration of the culture, with the casting of Nogizaka46's Asuka Saito straddling the boundary of the image of a perfect idol persona she maintains in her personal life in contrast to the expectation imposed upon her in the live-action series and film *Oshi no Ko -The Final Act-*.

Outside of mainstream commercial efforts, the real dredges of the film industry where idol films thrived were in the horror genre, which was the perfect landscape for unestablished directors with no budget, reputation, or any real vision besides an undying desire to create films that are meant to be seen with inexperienced actors that had outside name recognition, the ideal formula for exploitation films. Horror anthologies and school ghost stories are the more common format, with AKB48 even doing one, but perhaps one of the more interesting subgenres emerged from the survival game trend, ostensibly ripoffs of *Battle Royale*, yet it's an incredible landscape for experimentation on high-level concepts with the Hello! Project films such as *Ousama Game*, which centered around commands sent through text messages that, if not fulfilled, resulted in gruesome punishments, as well as *Ring of Curse* starring the members of Buono!, which involved death curses in a script for a play in the school festival as revenge for school bullying. It's in genre film where many idols are very much able to establish a career for themselves before graduating, in a sense, to the mainstream commercial industry. Considered a once-in-a-thousand-year idol after her iconic photo went viral, Kanna Hashimoto had one of her first major lead roles in *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun: Graduation*, the spiritual sequel to the box office-topping idol film from Hiroko Yakushimaru, demonstrating how everything sort of comes full circle, before following a similar trajectory as an established actor in countless numbers of high-budget productions. Following a storied career as the unsurpassed eternal center of AKB48, Atsuko Maeda, though still largely misunderstood as a cinematic presence, became something of a muse to art house and international film festival darling Kiyoshi Kurosawa in his genre explorations beyond his typical horror space with starring vehicles in *Seventh Code* and *To the Ends of the Earth* that explored different dimensions of horror outside the usual genre trappings, as well as a feature in *Before We Vanish*, his sci-fi alien invasion film. Takashi Miike, the king of V-Cinema, Japan's direct-to-video industry, was also no stranger to the idol industry with his prior collaboration with Yasushi Akimoto on *One Missed Call*, but though largely known in the West for his iconic genre films *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer* as well as his countless yakuza films,

he has largely spent a non-insignificant portion of the latest part of his career producing temporary idol groups for the *Girls x Heroine* series, which revolved around magical girls fighting against enemies with a toy line produced by Takara Tomy with multiple television drama series and films directed by the man himself.)



If there doesn't appear to be a real through line in terms of idols in exploitation film, it's because there's no real strong canon or established framework, yet there appears to be a clear fascination in the parasocial dynamic of this manufactured and produced public figure that blurs the line between the fantasy and reality. There's a rich tapestry in how interconnected the entire ecosystem is from all the players involved, constantly collaborating with one another across mediums and forms, creating this complex web outside the typical channels of working relationships, where creatives and idols alike are drawn to one another not only for their perceived ability as actors but also for their public personas. With the performative aspect of idols that is deeply entrenched in the way they present themselves to the world, they are always acting, playing the role based on the expectation of how they want to be perceived, which makes for a perfect representation of this tension between artificiality and authenticity, as quite literally the object of exploitation on every level, both in terms of how they are used within the industry as well as how they leverage themselves for their own personal gain.



Justice for "Showgirls"
by Jen McLean

Photography by Alejandra Olmedo



SEX WORLD

by Baron Logan



Fascinating contradictions lie at the heart of the 1978 star studded blockbuster porn-parody film *Sexworld*. Sex-positivity and acceptance mix with hazy ideas of consent and a limited view of sexuality. The movie is messy, but the mess makes it endlessly interesting!

Sexworld is an adult film version of the famous Michael Crichton 1973 sci fi film *Westworld*. While Crichton's movie depicts a theme park that recreates historical time periods with robots (that people can, but don't have to, have sex with), *Sexworld* strips this entire premise down to its essence: having sex with humanoid robots. *Sexworld* is a luxurious retreat where paying customers can visit and indulge for a weekend in their inner-most desires.

There is inherent honesty and fun to this stripped down approach. Look up "Sexworld 1978 theme song" on YouTube. I think this jaunty and exciting tune sums up this vibe really well. Guests meet first with a specialist upon their arrival in *Sexworld*, and are encouraged to open up about their fantasies. It is a surprisingly touching and well acted sequence, as anxious visitors are encouraged to be honest about what they want in their (sex)lives. No judgement, no bad vibes, even some couples come together to work out their relationship problems. It's really positive and neat, and it is bizarre to watch such well acted and emotionally resonant scenes intercut with extremely graphic depictions of frequent and unrelenting intercourse.

Unfortunately, this isn't the only juxtaposition in the film. Along with all this positivity and acceptance are some unexplored and extremely questionable aspects of this premise. It's never entirely clear who these sex robots are, or even if they are robots or paid professionals. It's really heart warming to see the visitors explore and accept themselves so openly, but this sexual exploration is only possible because of an undefined servile class whose origins or intentions are unclear. This may seem like a weird thing to be concerned about in a pornographic film, but I think the premise and performances are strong enough to lend the premise emotional weight that warrants this kind of exploration. Who are these sex robots?!

Further, those guest's desires are pretty rooted in a very heteronormative look at society. We see one or two gay men describe their fantasies in their interviews with the specialists, but we never see this acted out. The only adult scenes we see are heterosexual, aside from some lesbian sequences that feel staged with a straight male audience in mind. The film keeps this straight male audience front and center, and I think that holds it back from some interesting places. Surely these are the people whose sexualities are most accepted within society. It would have been nice for *Seworld* to be a place for all people of the LGBT+ community to explore and learn more about themselves!

So what we end up with is a confusing film with a whole lot of opposites. Emotional performances smash cut with extreme closeups of genitalia of all kinds. A wonderful wide-open sex-positive approach that is undercut by a limited worldview. I think the rollercoaster of emotions and visual experiences is what makes the movie so interesting, but also frustrating. Give it a watch if this kind of insanity is your thing!



For the tenth issue of The Frida Zinema we present **Xploitation!** Highlighting films from the underbelly of cinema and the “bottom-feeder” artists who dared to exploit society’s biggest taboos and moral fears. Made with often ultra low-budgets, riddled with sex, drugs, violence, and crime, and starring actors that never stood a chance in the mainstream, these films were labelled as “trash” cinema upon their release and are still considered as such to this day. For June’s edition of the zine we present a few cases for this mode of filmmaking and viewing to decide whether or not many of these films are worthy of the statue of true cinema!

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