



The Frida Zinema

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Erotic Thrills

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"The Piano Teacher" by Haley Harmicar (@haleyharmicartaccount)

"Nosferatu" by Jen McLean (@jenni.flower)



The Celluloid Nightmares of Hisayasu Sato: Auteurism in Japanese Pink Films

by Brian Ly



I kind of regard Japanese pink film as the next frontier in terms of English-language auteur theory in world cinema, even if, in the grand scheme of things, the loosely linked movement that represents a genre of softcore pornography in Japan that began during a fallow period of its film industry due to the proliferation of television leading to an overall declining audience resulting in studios having to find a way to draw customers back to theaters was a largely mainstream and commercial one that actually made up a majority of film production at the time and was often well represented in the Japan Academy Film Prize and the yearly Kinema Junpo's Top 10 Lists. It is largely due to the rejection by Donald Ritchie of their relevance in the film canon that they had been regarded in the West as pure exploitation slop, and it's only more recently that pink film has had a reevaluation for what had previously been termed a lost generation of Japanese film (and in all fairness, porn studies in general has only become more legitimized recently) due to works like *Behind the Pink Curtain: The Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema* by Jasper Sharp of Midnight Eye as a direct repudiation, though of course

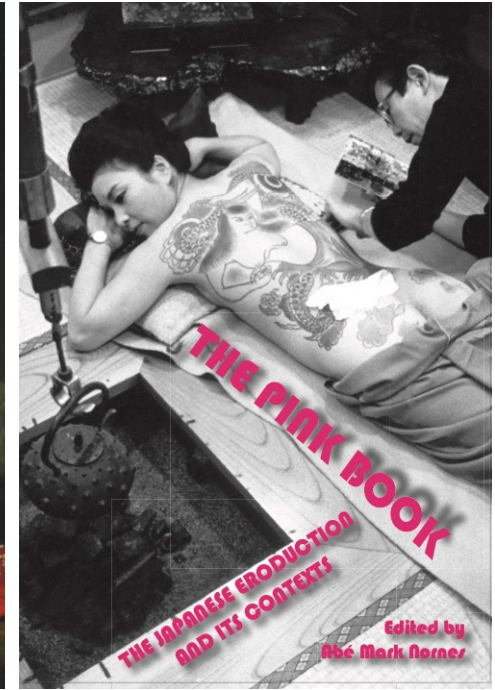
with the utmost respect, of the notion previously made by the aforementioned Donald Ritchie as well as *The Pink Book: The Japanese Eroticism and Its Context* by Markus Nornes, both great starting points that directly explore pink film as a genre in a more academic and film criticism context.

Porn tends to be a dirty word that has somewhat maligned films that are otherwise essentially softcore in nature and have little sexual content beyond what is depicted in most mainstream mature audience films, and in that regard, pink films really are more at home with sex comedies and erotic thrillers given the inherent stricter nature of Japanese censorship as well as the fact that the sex being depicted was largely simulated, at least at this juncture, though that isn't to say there weren't exceptions, such as Shochiku studio director turned New Wave darling Nagisa Oshima including some hardcore unsimulated sex scenes in his film *In the Realm of the Senses*. Even in the evolution of the genre and in its darkest exploits, it largely remained at the same level of sexual content, a marked distinction from the later hardcore JAVs that have come to define the reputation of Japanese porn in the public consciousness, analogically



similar to how sexploitation, even at its most lurid, was a marked distance from what is generally regarded as porn today.

It can be said that the environment for pink film to thrive was already foreshadowed throughout the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema, from the hormonal and sexually charged energy of juvenile delinquents in the Sun Tribe films to the more overtly and explicit eroticism in films of the Japanese New Wave, with notable films such as Yasuzo Masumura's *Blind Beast*, Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes*, and Tetsuji Takechi's *Black Snow*, the last of which actually spurred a whole Hays Code-like trial with Eirin, the Japanese film ratings board, which set the legal precedent by which pink films were able to flourish. In *Politics, Porn, and Protest: Japanese Avant-Garde Cinema* in the 1960s and 1970s, author Isolde Standish explores the natural transition into pink film in the later period



of the Japanese New Wave, where the inherently political nature of censorship in film intersected with the experimentation of modes of visual storytelling. Before it became the domain of exploitation film, porn was quite literally a form of protest.

Bridging the Japanese New Wave and pink film was director Koji Wakamatsu, who essentially quit the studio system and formed his own production company to make arthouse films that directly concerned more sexual themes and contexts and were sexually explicit in nature. The discourse on artistic merit and importance in the overall film canon gets a bit more hazy from here on, as the ecosystem is largely defined by journeymen directors who are forced to churn out films quickly on lower budget adhering to certain expectations on number of sex scenes with little regard to script, acting, or cinematography, which honestly forces directors to become more

creative and have a natural hunger to inject their artistic vision in any way possible, and though not necessarily the most popular definition of auteur theory it certainly fits the preoccupations of the Cahiers du Cinéma types and would be proven by history when Japan won its first Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film with *Departures*, directed by Yojiro Takita, who got his start in the Japanese film industry with numerous entries in the *Molester Train* series, or when *Shall We Dance?*, perhaps best known the West due to the remake starring Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez, became the most awarded film in the Japanese Film Academy Prize from director Masayuki Suo, who also swept a number of rewards a few years prior with *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't* and started out his film career with his directorial debut in a little film called *Abnormal Family*, a pink film parody of Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. Even the experts in these studies haven't quite charted out the important directors and works of what was the most prolific period of pink film, and it's only these directors who had achieved mainstream success following their start, not unlike the similar career trajectories of the New Hollywood auteurs that got their start working for Roger Corman, as well as the rare critically acclaimed directors and Kinema Junpo darlings like Tatsuhiro Kumashiro, who has had numerous films named in the film journal's annual Top 10 List throughout the 70s, or similarly recognized one-off films like the first entry in the *Female Prisoner Scorpion* series, *Female Prisoner Scorpion: #701*, starring Meiko Kaji, also known for the similarly influential *Lady Snowblood* series, both of which have been described as influences on Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, that have stood the test of time. Though there are fairly outlined categories between pink films, arthouse films, and mainstream films, it's also evident that Japanese films can also span multiple categories and often do, and it's not uncommon for directors to work across all of these spaces throughout their careers.

Fast forward a decade, and as pink film shifts from the big screen to home video (you can see a trend of how pink film very much tracks with advancements

in technology and modes of viewing experiences), a new demarcation known as V-Cinema was born. Those more familiar with Japanese cult cinema may be aware that it's in this space of direct-to-video, lower-budget, niche, and genre filmmaking that many of the most respected auteurs who are regulars on the film festival circuit got their start, including but not limited to Takashi Miike, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and Shunji Iwai. This was also the territory of perhaps the most well-known pink film director in the West, Hisayasu Sato, one of The Four Heavenly Kings of Pink (not to be confused with The Three Pillars of Pink from the 80s or The Seven Lucky Gods of Pink in the 21st century), who has become something of a Letterboxd meme due to the gorgeously cursed cover art of his films as well as the sheer outlandishness of some of the titles of his films, most notably *Lolita: Vibrator Torture*, which he preferred to be known as *Secret Garden*, an artifact from the naming scheme of pink films, which could often translate to rather outlandish and literal or even exaggerated to the point of silliness for the purpose of drawing an audience. Clearly it worked.

Despite the supposed luridness of his works, Sato has found a modern audience who came for the wild sex romps, extreme taboo, and subversive acts, which don't get me wrong, absolutely exist in his works though perhaps not to the level one may expect, but ultimately stayed for his art house sensibility in his deep attention to cinematography even in restricted shoot parameters that gives it a rather voyeuristic and vulnerable quality, a general sincerity in his filmmaking, and a sort of melancholic tenderness in his works as he explores male loneliness, the experience of women in patriarchal society, and the human condition in relation to analog technology, all the while filming scenes of bestiality, incest, rape, and forcible object penetration, even going as far as to feature a cameo by literal cannibal and murderer Issei Sagawa, who was something of a minor celebrity on the variety circuit at the time, yet that certainly didn't make his appearance on film any less discomforting.

If he sounds like an awful person, I'm making no attempts to justify or defend his actions, but there's a certain intentionality and cerebral quality in his thematic explorations. Despite the attempts by pink film production companies to market his films as empty, steamy sex romps, Sato was more concerned with exploring the sexual transgressions as a manifestation of the human experience from a sociopolitical perspective rather than pure exploitation. Much like Wakamatsu before him, who himself was more motivated by and largely fueled by political rage, there's a clear desire to use subversive imagery and themes not for pure shock value but as a way to directly confront social norms, the status quo, and the dichotomy between the rigidity of upstanding Japanese values as well as the latent sexual perversion that has come to define a not uncommon perception that's the manifestation of an unbalanced society, in his illustration of the disenfranchised. In direct contrast to the New Wave directors, who felt restricted by the studio system yet not dissimilar to how they sought out a greater creative propulsion, Sato instead finds himself energized by the fast pace of the pink film industry, where he finds his creativity overflowing amidst all the constrained parameters.



From a thematic standpoint, he's a rather chameleonic director who, while exclusively working in the pink film space, spanned a number of themes, genres, and demographics, which, to be fair, wasn't necessarily a unique quality to the inherently journeymen nature of the industry, but perhaps what makes the works of Sato immediately stand out is that his films could be roughly categorized in several distinct spaces, including but not limited to body horror, S&M, bestiality, and gay films, demonstrating a certain level of sincere interest in these particular subcultures and fetish spaces within the larger genre. While there's no real clear entry point into his filmography, as he's a director that hasn't particularly been canonized besides his recognition within the industry, his films that have best translated to the intrigue of a Western exploitation audience are those in the genre space, particularly horror and thriller, though he's absolutely been known to make some rather tender romances and meditative dramas.

Probably the first film that many may incidentally encounter when first getting acquainted with the films of Hisayasu Sato is *Splatter: Naked Blood*, which is probably his most accessible work from the perspective of shock cinema and genre film. As a film with markedly higher production value compared to his largely more lo-fi body of work, you're introduced to some of his more abject themes surrounding perversion, voyeurism, and fetish through the lens of a splatter gore fest. As you grapple with the juxtaposition of the special effects showcase with the lonely melancholy of sexual depravity, you begin to understand the duality between pleasure and pain. It's like *Hellraiser* except heightened to the next level of psychodrama gore.

Where you start to really go deep into the headspace of Hisayasu Sato is in *Celluloid Nightmares*, also known by its Japanese release title that can roughly be translated to *Abnormal: Ugly Abuse* or Sato's preferred title of *Rewind*, which aptly directly involves the video aesthetic and technology that he's come to be known for directly in the narrative of the film, which involves a plot similar to *Peeping Tom* about a serial killer who similarly records his victims at the moment of death with a video camera that has a hidden knife apparatus. The world of the film is hypersexualized, where the extreme violence in these produced snuff films becomes a source of pleasure, and incest is something that is casually mentioned as a kink. It sort of complicates the moral grounding of the diegetic space that blends into the glow of a CRTV that presents a heightened reality that feels like they exist in the same world where the programs broadcast in *Videodrome* were filmed. The boundary between sex and violence is blurred, where these gratuitous acts of sex on screen are anything but erotic, and it's instead the eroticism of vulnerability amidst extreme violence at the moment of death that becomes rather discomfoting.



You can't really approach the works of Hisayasu Sato without addressing the elephant in the room, or rather in the film *The Bedroom*, also known by its Japanese release title that can be roughly translated to *Promiscuous Wife: Disgraceful Torture* or Sato's preferred title of *An Aria on Gazes*, which features a cameo by the aforementioned cannibal. Whereas by nature sexploitation films exist for the gaze of an audience seeking sexual pleasure, and even to some degree his more violent films exist to cover that additional dimension of pleasure with the horror and erotic thriller elements, this film takes a more contemplative approach on sex and dissociation in love, as the sexual realities of most people in society have fundamentally changed from the more traditional expectation of the bedroom as a sacred place for a couple. If you're going to have an affair, at least have the common decency and respect for your partner to rent a hotel room instead of using the bed you share. You can't quite really understand the context by which this film exists without at least a rudimentary understanding of Japanese relationship norms, where prostitution has long been legalized and culturally accepted as long as there wasn't an emotional aspect that complicated the home life, the usual separation of church and state. This dichotomy has completely changed as the sexual norms have shifted. When you can just pop in a porn tape into your VCR and see some boobs on the proverbial boob tube rather than going to an adult theater to avoid your responsibilities in the middle of the workday or having to "work late" or "entertain clients," it's only natural that people's perception of sex would slowly warp, and clearly Sato was far ahead of the trend in terms of overall awareness and active discourse. As more of a light socioeconomic commentary, when the bed you share with your would-be partner is likely to also be the venue of casual encounters, affairs, and furious masturbation sessions to pornography, and a constant reminder of failed relationships throughout life, no longer is it really the place that you can clear your head and find some peace. When there's a certain

emotional numbness to the act of sex itself, exhibitionism arises as the next avenue of sexual pleasure, because it's through being perceived that you start to feel some sense of self, particularly when your existing relationship is not fulfilling. Still, this doesn't fill the void of a certain loneliness, but you don't really find yourself until you reconcile your own personal relationship with your identity as it pertains to sex and love, which are ultimately on your own terms and not determined by the expectations and norms of an admittedly regressive social standard.



The Hisayasu Sato rabbit hole really is an interesting one for anyone's journey in cinephilia, and though it goes rather deep in its own right, it really is only the starting point for a rich space in Japanese cinema that continues to be rather uncharted waters for many and an absolute treasure trove for creatives trying to make films in a period when there was limited opportunity outside of this rigid environment that required films to be made at a breakneck pace and include gratuitous sex scenes, yet it was in the margin of these works that boundless ideas and thematic concerns were truly able to flourish and burst at the seams even if they were otherwise not packaged as anything but disposable masturbation material for a primarily male audience looking to fulfill their sexual fantasies that weren't being satiated in their conservative home lives or perhaps were exhibited in one of the few

safe havens for closeted gay men to truly be themselves as pink film theaters gained a reputation as cruising spots that continue to this day even as the market continues to contract due to the convenience and availability of adult material on the internet. Still, the tradition lives on, with the annual Pink Grand Prix, which admittedly recently came to an end, being a celebration of new films that continue to be screened across the remaining pink film theaters in Japan, even if it was largely a non-competitive (for the company at least; directors still sought their own accolades and recognition) promotional exhibition by Okura Pictures, one of the few pink film companies that are still making films that premiere theatrically. Despite this, it's far from the last breath for pink films. So long as an audience remains, the production of new pink films will continue as it evolves and adapts to the times, and even as the industry winds down, they will continue to be screened until the final pink theater shuts its doors, and even then, one can only wonder what is in store for this long underappreciated film genre. Though still little more than a footnote in the history of Japanese cinema, one of the most celebrated and studied of world cinemas globally, pink film, much like many other previously maligned genre films, is slowly finding its audience and continued relevance not only as an interesting period in Japanese cinema history as a reflection of the economic and cultural situation of the time but also as works of art with distinct statements by their creators.



The Quiet Eroticism of *Antonio Banderas*

By Brian Ly



It goes without saying that Antonio Banderas has been a definitive sex icon for an entire generation of filmgoers, having solidified his reputation in the late 90s and early aughts as an iconic Latin lover, playing many iconic Mexican characters and despite being a white Hispanic man from Spain himself, was a great example of representation for normalizing the attraction to an alternative flavor of man, one that was a bit edgier and slightly more dangerous, and while this notion that someone seemingly ethnic would exhibit these qualities, the fact that he expanded the palate for many that would ultimately open the doors for more people of color is a great example of the positive impact he's had for the representation of Latino and Hispanic in Hollywood in general, even if he was admittedly the most sanitized version of it at the time for a leading man. Though he is perhaps best remembered for lending his sultry voice and swagger to *Puss in Boots* and the dad from *Spy Kids*, or *Zorro*, and other similar Mexican hero archetypes to an older crowd, he's also had quite an impressive body of work in the erotic thriller space, starting his career working with auteur Pedro Almodóvar and continuing to be a recurring collaborator as he's found opportunities in and out of Hollywood as well as in his home country of Spain. It's interesting to see how his persona has evolved and gone in all sorts of directions to truly solidify him as a relatively unsung, versatile sexual icon that truly has quite the impressive range in the diversity of his performances.

Shortly after discovering the young actor, Pedro Almodóvar would first cast


Antonio Banderas in his film debut as part of the ensemble of the screwball sex comedy *Labyrinth of Passion*, kicking off a decades-long collaboration between the two with roles that would continue pushing him to greater heights as an actor, propelling him into international stardom. Where we see the real beginnings of Banderas as a compelling sexual being is in his first lead role in an Almodóvar film, *Matador*, where he plays a meek young man, ostensibly inexperienced sexually, who begins to establish his sexual identity and asserts his masculinity when he rapes the girlfriend of his matador teacher, an act that perhaps brings him closer to a man that he looks up to. When confessing his crime to the police, he also claims responsibility for the murder of two women, as a sort of premonition of a vision he had of a murder done in the same manner, in an effort to overcome his own fear of blood. Despite his greatest efforts, they easily see through his facade. It is in this film that we see a young man who has yet to develop his own sexual persona, seeking the guidance of those more experienced than he, as well as faking it until he makes it, as a sort of bravado to compensate for his own inadequacy. He is constantly accused of being a homosexual as a sort of denigration of his masculinity, which leaves him feeling like he has to constantly prove himself even in the most drastic of ways. His screen presence at this time is defined by a certain innocence, with his doe-eyed expression and fresh face that can change to a deep, piercing gaze, demonstrating a certain level of control in spite of his general sense of vulnerability and caution.

In an ironic twist of events, Antonio Banderas plays a gay man in his next film with Almodóvar, *Law of Desire*. Not quite fully formed as the charming leading man he's come to be known as quite just yet, his innocence shifts towards a sort of deep sexual repression, having been raised in a conservative household, as he develops an obsession with the director he idolized after their first sexual encounter. It's a sort of natural evolution of his persona while largely working in the same space, demonstrating his range as an up-and-coming actor. We really see him take it to the next level with his breakout performance in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, as a psychiatric patient who kidnaps a former porn actress and asserts his control by physically subjugating her, initially with strong suggestions and threats of violence until he breaks out the handcuffs and ropes. It's not purely an act of physical dominance, however, as he demonstrates a certain tenderness to win her attraction, and it becomes a classical case of Stockholm Syndrome where the victim slowly falls in love with him. There's a certain allure in the duality displayed by Banderas, where you see his stern, piercing look and physicality exude a certain power and masculinity, yet his hands on a woman's body are with the utmost gentleness and care. His signature whisper becomes a hypnotic lullaby of its own, easing you into a certain degree of comfort, knowing that despite his ultimately nefarious behavior, he has no real intent on hurting you. His star power is put on full display in an absolutely captivating performance, and it's no surprise that he makes his transition to Hollywood as his visceral depravity is translated into the exotic foreigner.

While his stint in Hollywood is largely defined by more conventional leading man roles and relatively chaste even if sensual characters, at least in relative comparison compared to his Almodóvar films, he returns to his roots in Brian de Palma's *Femme Fatale*, where almost as a subversion and allusion to his role in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* he plays a paparazzo that is manipulated and framed to be the kidnapper of a woman that he is tasked with tailing, positing him in a rather peculiar arrangement where he loses a bit of control in the relationship dynamic, having to constantly play defensive and be on edge as he is forced to be more passive both circumstantially and sexually. Following a successful Hollywood career in family films and as a sort of stereotypical Latin lover archetype, Antonio Banderas reinvents himself in the next phase of his career with a reunion with Almodóvar in *The Skin I Live In* as he echoes some of their prior collaborations and is able to explore yet another dimension of his sexual

persona as an older man with more lines on his face and slight gray flecks in his hair as physical indicators of his progressing maturity. Here he plays a plastic surgeon with a marked shift in the balance of power from being usually around the same age as or younger than his female counterparts to older and in a natural position of both authority and responsibility, bestowing upon him an even greater power over his patients, in particular one he is holding captive for experimentation, not that that's anything new to him. While this feels like the classical evolution of the Banderas subversion, the film extends beyond the classic dynamic between the sexes into something much more viscerally abhorrent, true to its genre trappings of being a body horror, where the plastic surgeon endowed with the scalpel has the capability of changing the physical appearance of his victim, introducing yet another dimension of control and dominance where he is able to completely deprive them of their identity, agency, and entire sense of self through a combination of physical subjugation, psychoactive manipulation, and the sheer power of suggestion. This is where the quiet nature of Banderas shines the strongest, masking his truly horrific intentions as a sincere dedication to his craft and obsession over his lost love, where his trustworthy demeanor, soft expressions, and sense of authority all grant him a certain gravitas and ultimately power and control.

There's a certain versatility to Antonio Banderas as a sex icon, where he's really able to occupy any number of roles to fit a variety of different relationship dynamics. His sensuality is defined by a certain gentleness that is able to instantly escalate in intensity with his piercing eyes, where he exhibits a certain vulnerability in a quiet manner of control with his breathy, sultry voice. Most recently, Banderas plays against type in *Babygirl*, where he is the husband who is unable to fulfill the sexual fantasies of his wife, having never given her an orgasm throughout their entire marriage, leading her to find her sexual release elsewhere in the form of a young intern who satisfies her submission kink, essentially coming full circle from where he initially started with Almodóvar. Incidentally enough, you can see a parallel trajectory for costar Nicole Kidman since *Eyes Wide Shut*, herself still just as stunning as she was back then yet occupying a very different energy in her sense of control. This is certainly not the final evolution of Banderas, a performer constantly in transition who continues to reinvent himself as we anticipate the next phase of his career as he comfortably settles into his maturing image.



Cover art by Jesse Camacho
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The Frida Cinema is a gathering place for movie lovers of all kinds. The lobby is a place of film discussion and friendly gathering, a venue of its own where perspectives from all backgrounds are welcomed and engaged with. We have started the Frida Zinema to replicate this experience in printed form. We welcome all who love film to submit their artwork, writings, and thoughts, and to connect to other artists in a space of creativity and understanding. We love films, and we love people who love films. Please, share your thoughts and artwork, and enjoy the ones within.

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