V-Cinema: canons of Japanese film and the challenge of video

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5. Accidental Auteurs? – The Director in V-Cinema

Can a system of filmmaking generally regarded as vulgar, opportunistic, and mercantile leave room for authorship? This question has of course been answered many times over: our canons of cinema are populated with exceptional filmmakers who operated for much of their careers within commercial confines, whether it be Hollywood or the oligopoly of Japan's 'artistically reactionary' studio system. As David Bordwell succinctly states, in his formal analysis of Hong Kong action cinema: 'Commercial demands mold styles and forms, in both elite art and popular art. That a work of art is financed and marketed does not make it any less a work of art.' (Bordwell 2011: 4)

It could be said that V-Cinema became more vulgar, opportunistic, and mercantile with each passing year. It also became increasingly marginalized from the general film discourse. Initial critical notice of V-Cinema, as exemplified by the writings of Yamane Sadao, revolved around the fledgling industry's potential as a new form of "program picture," yet the prevalence of this analogy meant that commentators' enthusiasm tended to center on works by established directors, veterans from a past era of industrially made popular genre films. These filmmakers, including Ishii Teruo, Kudō Eiichi, and Hasebe Yasuharu, were active primarily during the first and second phases of V-Cinema and became far less prolific after the genre consolidation of 1993-94. From that point on, the pictures arguably became even more programmed, yet this development seemed to stifle what was at heart an auteurist interpretation of straight-to-video production employed by Japanese film

critics. Ironically, it was around this time, into the second half of the 1990s, that a number of lesser-known and younger directors than those mentioned, most of whom had until then operated off the critical establishment's radar, began to emerge from the confines of V-Cinema and into the festival circuit – a development that, as we saw in the previous chapter, resulted largely from the adoption of theatrical distribution as a promotional strategy for V-Cinema releases.

When it comes to the uses of auteurism in film discourse, therefore, V-Cinema paradoxically provides both a caution and an incentive. Which is to say that the problem does not lie in a focus on exceptional film directors per se, but in the parameters within which one chooses to search for them. Zahlten is quite correct in his assessment that the prominent position of auteurism in the historiography of Japanese cinema compromises those accounts by letting 'the largest part of actual production and consumption disappear' (2007: 3). His is the same objection that has characterized film studies' general attitude toward auteurism in the era of post-theory. As a counter-reaction, however, Zahlten attempts to minimize not only the role of the director within V-Cinema, but also, by emphasizing their slightness in numbers, the impact of the directors and other proponents of V-Cinema – such as J-horror – that went on to wider recognition. Throughout his account of the workings of the V-Cinema system, Zahlten stresses the conventions of a rigid production structure, an approach he supports by analyzing its liberalized labor system which leaves artistic talent economically vulnerable and seemingly subservient to the tight budgets and schedules,

and the demands for specific stars, genres, and plot structures imposed by the video makers. His observations are echoed in Ramon Lobato's analysis of American direct-to-video, where 'producers specialise in giving audiences what they already know they like (and nothing more).' (Lobato 2012: 25)

Yet, as we have already surmised, there are clear indications that the day-to-day business dealings in V-Cinema were often informal to such a degree as to leave significant leverage to add "something more", for those who recognized the opportunities. While it is undoubtedly the case that 'even today it is official policy in many companies to train employees from unrelated sections as producers, or favor new recruits with no formal film education, to ensure a "business perspective" rather than an "art perspective"' (Zahlten 2007: 323), the impact of this policy is tempered by the fact that many V-Cinema titles are not in-house productions: even Toei Video outsourced roughly half of its V-Cinema productions in a given year,[1] a percentage that could only have increased for smaller video packaging companies with fewer means at their disposal. And even those films produced within a company's own infrastructure were not by definition subservient to the directives of 'unimaginative bean counters': Chiba Yoshinori's stint at Gaga Communications answers fully to Zahlten's description of an in-house, company-trained producer (he started out in the company handling advertising and package design), yet he was a key figure in internationalizing V-Cinema, because he allowed directors creative leeway from

[1] Mes, interview with Shimoda Atsuyuki, Tokyo, March 2014

restrictions imposed from above or because he recognized loopholes in corporate guidelines. Certainly, Chiba is an exception, but in V-Cinema the exceptions have often been highly influential *outside* V-Cinema.

It was not only loopholes that Chiba could recognize; he also had an eye for creative talent. He is a producer who, when the film is in the can, likes to be able to sit down in the company screening room to watch a good movie – and then for everyone else (Japanese cinemagoers, festival programmers, foreign audiences, and foreign buyers) to enjoy it too, turning a healthy profit in the process. Though an exception among V-Cinema producers, Chiba was certainly not alone in this regard. Shimoda Atsuyuki is another example of a producer who valued the creative input of a director and was willing to bend the rules to accommodate it. His company Twins handled physical production of V-Cinema titles released primarily by KSS and Daiei, for which Shimoda hired such directors as Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Zeze Takahisa, and Aoyama Shinji, all of whom had previously distinguished themselves in other areas of filmmaking and habitually worked as writer/directors[2]:

> 'I would choose directors whose work I personally liked. Kurosawa Kiyoshi's case is probably the easiest to explain. He came up as an assistant director and was known as a talented filmmaker in the indie world from very early on. Also,

[2] Kurosawa had directed pink films, independent features, larger-budgeted horror films, and TV series; Zeze had made several pink films; Aoyama, a former assistant to Kurosawa on the latter's V-Cinema films, made the independent feature *Helpless* in between his own two V-Cinema works.

through his works he had the support of film fans. For a producer to want someone like him, a filmmaker from a very independent feature film background, to direct a *bideo eiga* was really a case of that producer's personal taste – at least that's what it was for me. The video maker would not understand why somebody who hadn't done *bideo eiga* before should be asked to work on such a project, so I would have to convince them, by devious means, if you will. I would talk to [lead actor] Aikawa Shō and describe Kurosawa Kiyoshi to him, what an excellent director he is and what possibilities could come out of collaboration. And once Aikawa said he was interested, I could go back to the video maker and tell them Aikawa only wants to work with Kurosawa. That is how I would sometimes ship projects.'[3]

Film director Aoyama Shinji notes that a number of the producers with whom he worked shared a comparable degree of artistic ambition, and consciously used the director-as-auteur as a means to upgrade V-Cinema productions with a theatrical release and a concurrent increase in a film's production budget. After two purely straight-to-video productions[4] and one theatrical feature,[5] all of which he wrote as well as directed, Aoyama next made several genre works produced or

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[3] Mes, Shimoda interview

[4] *Not In the Textbook!* (*Kyōkasho ni nai!*, 1994, released by Pink Pineapple) and *A Cop, a Bitch, and a Killer* (*Waga mune ni kyōki ari*, 1996, released by KSS) – both were produced by Twins.

[5] *Helpless* (1996, produced by the film division of satellite TV channel Wowow)

co-produced by companies active in V-Cinema,[6] films whose distribution patterns adhered to the model of a limited theatrical release followed by a video release on which the profit is made:

> 'What I think happened was that their producers had the ambition to make "films" and not V-Cinema. They had a desire to make films, so they turned those projects into Aoyama Shinji films in order to release them in theaters. I feel that maybe those producers had begun to look down on V-Cinema and they wanted to make proper theatrical films. Maybe that's one of the reasons why they wanted me, in order to have films that could be shown in theaters and satisfy their own desire to make genuine films.'[7]

Here too, the above cases could be considered exceptions to the rules – and one could even point to a degree of self-aggrandizement in Aoyama's statement – but in all cases the filmmakers in question would go on to mainstream success, festival recognition, and foreign distribution. Just as importantly, all the exceptions mentioned here proved to be profitable films for their investors. An art perspective and a business perspective need

[6] These are: *Two Punks* (*Chinpira*, 1996, co-produced by Taki Corporation), *Wild Life* (1997, co-produced by Video Champ), and *An Obsession* (*Tsumetai chi*, 1997, co-produced by Taki Corporation). Aoyama also wrote the screenplays for these, with the exception of *Two Punks*, which was based on a screenplay written in 1984 by the late actor Kaneko Shōji.

[7] Mes, interview with Aoyama Shinji, Tokyo, May 2013

not be at odds and can even be mutually beneficial. As David Bordwell states: 'Far from outlawing imaginative innovation, the System often encourages it. Products must be differentiated, and originality (as in the case of Hitchcock, Ford, and others) can be good business.' (2011: 11)

The hiring of filmmakers with established reputations as writer/directors already occurred much earlier in V-Cinema's history. Toei Video's release roster of 1991 includes films by, for example, Ikeda Toshiharu, Nagasaki Shunichi, and Sai Yōichi, who were by then all filmmakers with existing critical standing on the basis of their achievements as independent filmmakers – in contrast with the reliable taskmasters hired for their expertise in past forms of program picture production. Some producers considered the presence of a filmmaker with a proven track record as a writer/director as being particularly suited to the V-Cinema production model, since it enables the producer 'to see what the director wants to do with the film' in the early stages of a process in which time for preparation and production is limited.[8] Indeed, *Crime Hunter*, the Toei Video film that set so many paradigms for V-Cinema as a whole, was written as well as directed by Ōkawa Toshimichi.

Zahlten's assessment of the director's limited importance in V-Cinema is correct to the extent that they are rarely if ever among the sales points of any given film. The director's name is commonly only mentioned on the back of the video box in fine print, among and equal to the names of other crewmembers. Casting and genre formed the

[8] Mes, Shimoda interview

Figure 16: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself: The Hero*

two pillars upon which nearly every V-Cinema project rested. These two factors can, as Bordwell notes, reduce financial risk by providing more security over a film's commercial future – 'The average viewer's taste is made up principally of favorite genres and stars' (Bordwell 2011: 93). This situation may be a given, but it does not exclude creative freedom, even in V-Cinema. As a rule, once cast, genre, and script were in place, directors were left free to shoot the film without interference. In producer Shimoda's experience, 'casting and genre were the two most important elements for a new project. My thinking was that if one of these was solid, then we could be adventurous with the other element. [...] But we would never be able to take a chance on both.' A practical example is Kurosawa Kiyoshi's enduring collaboration with V-Cinema star Aikawa Shō, who played the lead in no less than ten V-Cinema productions directed by Kurosawa.[9] Kurosawa too points to Aikawa's presence and bankable star status as a guarantee of creative leeway on these projects:

[9] *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! – The Heist* (*Katte ni shiyagare!! Gōdatsu keikaku*); *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! – The Escape* (*Katte ni shiyagare!! Dashutsu keikaku*), both released in 1995 by KSS. *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! – The Loot* (*Katte ni shiyagare!! Ōgon keikaku*); *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! – The Gamble* (*Katte ni shiyagare!! Gyakuten keikaku*); *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! – The Nouveau Riche* (*Katte ni shiyagare!! Narikin keikaku*); *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! – The Hero* (*Katte ni shiyagare!! Eiyū keikaku*), all released in 1996 by KSS [Figure 17]. *The Revenge: A Visit From Fate* (*Fukushū unmei no hōmonsha*); *The Revenge: The Scar that Never Fades* (*Fukushū kienai shōkon*), both released in 1997 by KSS. *Serpent's Path* (*Hebi no michi*); *Eyes of the Spider* (*Kumo no hitomi*), both released in 1998 by Daiei. All these titles were produced by Twins.

‘At the time [Aikawa] was a brand unto himself; it wasn’t about the story or the character, it was about him. He was a genre in his own right: “Aikawa Shō-starring V-Cinema” was already a genre. That gave me an incredible freedom, because that was the fundamental element of the fiction I was creating. Aikawa himself turned out to be incredibly flexible and multifaceted. We would shoot scenes without written dialogue and have him improvise. I was able to experiment and try out many things with Aikawa and still remain real, because that was the breadth he had as a performer. And yet his brand remained intact, no matter what I threw at him.’[10]

Kurosawa and Shimoda’s practical experiences echo Bordwell’s argument about the liberating potential of conventions, which can form a structure in which a filmmaker can ‘exercise’ his or her talent: ‘When certain choices are imposed by tradition [...] then the remaining choices become all-important. Since

[10] Mes, interview with Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Tokyo, October 2012. Kurosawa’s first V-Cinema production was *Yakuza Taxi* (*893 Takushii*, 1994, released by KSS), which did not star Aikawa. The director admits that his first meetings with KSS executives during pre-production for this first film were quite contentious and revolved around genre, more particularly how to describe and depict yakuza characters: ‘I said, “What do you mean by ‘yakuza film’? I’ve never even met a yakuza in my life. Who are they? What do they do? What is their world like?” KSS explained to me that it is a world of *jingi*, people who live by a code of honor. So I replied that I was of the post-*Battles without Honor and Humanity* generation and that I thought that code is very superficial and there are no people that actually swear and live by it. So I told them I couldn’t make a film like that.’ (Ibid.)

no popular artwork is an exact duplicate of another, even the strictest conventions afford a zone of creative freedom.' (Bordwell 2011: 93) The term 'exercise' is highly applicable to the V-Cinema activities of many of the directors that would go on to wider international exposure. During their tenures shooting straight-to-video movies, directors such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi or Miike Takashi were given the opportunity to work on as many as four feature films per year, a rate of production that allowed them to hone their craft quickly, free from the reactions and expectations of the various actors in common film discourse, such as press, critics, programmers, and scholars. This way, they could "suddenly" emerge as new discoveries in the festival circuit, as in the case of Kurosawa with *Cure* (in Paris in 1997), or Miike with *Fudoh* (in Toronto in 1997) – and arguably again with *Audition* in Rotterdam in 2000.

I - J-Horror, Restraint, and Kurosawa Kiyoshi

V-Cinema launched more than just directors to wider acclaim and success: it also nurtured film styles and narrative structures – in short, genres – that would go on to greater things, well beyond the confines of the domestic video market. A particular case in point is the aesthetic form of the horror film that would eventually become known internationally as J-horror, whose stylistic and narrative parameters were shaped by the confines and conventions of V-Cinema's genre film production. As we will see, both film historians and many of the associated filmmakers acknowledge that J-horror's starting point was

the V-Cinema title *Scary True Stories* (*Hontō ni atta kowai hanashi*), a trilogy of short stories of ghosts and the supernatural written by Konaka Chiaki, directed by Tsuruta Norio, and released by Japan Home Video in 1991. This one-hour, very low-budget[11] feature contained '[many] of the thematic, iconic and stylistic attributes of what was later marketed under the term "J-Horror"' (Zahlten 2007: 494).

Zahlten (ibid: 334) points out that the mostly pubescent female protagonists of the stories formed an attempt to appeal to a different audience than the strictly male focus of first-phase V-Cinema productions. This marks *Scary True Stories* as a product of V-Cinema's second phase of genre and audience diversification, a reading further underpinned by its innovative approach to a genre that was at that point little seen in V-Cinema, the horror film. Whereas graphically explicit and violent scenes had characterized horror films in years prior to the emergence of V-Cinema,[12] *Scary True Stories* offered a restrained approach that emphasized 'atmospheric tension and an aesthetics of concealment' (ibid.), which contributed to its appeal to young, female

[11] It was shot in seven days for 7 million yen (US$ 51,581), according to its director, quoted in Zahlten and Kimata 2013.

[12] Exemplary for the earlier, explicit style of horror films are *Evil Dead Trap* (*Shiryō no wana*, 1985, dir: Ikeda Toshiharu) and its two sequels, as well as *Guts of a Virgin* (*Shojo no harawata*, 1986, dir: Komizu Kazuo), and the *Guinea Pig* series (1985-1990). The genre's formal change in V-Cinema, from splatter to suggestion, was not strictly speaking a rupture: Ikeda and Komizu would both go on to direct V-Cinema, in particular various episodes of Toei's *XX* series, while *Guinea Pig* would have a decisive impact on the J-horror style, as we will see.

viewers.[13] This switch in style was partly due to the 1989 criminal case that would become known as the "Otaku Murders", in which Miyazaki Tsutomu was sentenced to death for kidnapping and murdering four young girls between the ages of four and seven. The publicity surrounding Miyazaki's collection of horror videos created public pressure against explicit portrayals of violence in moving image media, particularly in animation and movies. Among this collection, and prominently featured in the subsequent press attention, were several entries in the *Guinea Pig* series of experimental, explicit splatter films, produced and released directly onto video by Japan Home Video during the second half of the 1980s.[14] Tsuruta Norio worked at JHV as a subtitle producer at the time, after having been active in 8-millimeter independent filmmaking as a student. His ascension to the position of director is another example of the informal nature of the V-Cinema business: after seeing a fellow employee, Muroga Atsushi, given the opportunity to direct a film,[15] Tsuruta managed to convince JHV's management to let him direct a horror film. Part of the reason why his employer allowed Tsuruta to mount a production in a genre that had given the

[13] This audience would remain connected to the spread of J-horror in later years: Wada-Marciano notes that female high school students greatly contributed to the theatrical success of *Ring* by spreading their enthusiasm for the film among their peers via cell phone messaging. (Wada-Marciano 2012: 44)

[14] On the Miyazaki Tsutomu case and the subsequent backlash against *otaku*, see: Kinsella 1998: 308-313 and Kamm 2015.

[15] *Blowback* (*Burōbakku mayōnaka no gyangutachi*, 1990), JHV's first V-Cinema release.

company a great deal of negative publicity, was precisely because 'atmospheric tension and an aesthetics of concealment' were unlikely to cause the same furor. Tsuruta claims he got the idea to do a horror piece about ghosts from conversations with video store employees, who pointed out that a 30-minute documentary on ghostly hauntings, *A Guide to Famous Haunted Places* (*Yūrei no meisho annai*, 1989, released by Bandai, no director credited) was very popular with customers. The audience for this, as well as for Tsuruta's *Scary True Stories*, was 'fairly young and mostly female. At the time video stores were very happy with [*Scary True Stories*] and usually it was placed in the same corner as animation and Disney films. There was no age restriction, as there was no gore or anything.' (Zahlten and Kimata 2013)[16]

In spite of its low-budget nature and the unusual placing in video stores, *Scary True Stories* caught the eye of several other filmmakers, one of whom was Kurosawa Kiyoshi, who was already a filmmaker with a solid critical reputation[17] and who had, at that

[16] The meager financial risk JHV incurred thanks to *Scary True Stories*' very low budget was arguably another motivation for the company to greenlight the project: it cost only one tenth of what Toei Video was spending on a single V-Cinema title at the time.

[17] After making a number of 8-mm shorts in his student days during the second half of the 1970s, Kurosawa emerged as a filmmaker by winning the Grand Prize at the Pia Film Festival for his self-financed 8-millimeter feature *Vertigo College* (*Shigarami gakuen*, 1981). Kurosawa then directed two pink films, the second of which was refused a release by its distributor Nikkatsu, allegedly on the grounds that it was not erotic enough. (Okubo 2000: 256, Sharp

point, directed several horror films to middling success: an episode of the omnibus horror film *Dangerous Stories* (*Abunai hanashi*, 1989) and the haunted-house feature *Sweet Home* (*Sūto hōmu*, 1989). The latter was intended by its producer Itami Jūzō as a high-profile blockbuster release,[18] but Kurosawa ended up disagreeing with Itami over the final cut and it was Itami's version that was eventually released theatrically by Toho, to underwhelming reactions from viewers and critics.[19] The 1992 release of Kurosawa's *The Guard from Underground* (*Jigoku no keibiin*) – another horror film, this time a variation on the slasher movie – was a far more modestly budgeted production than the relatively lavish *Sweet Home*.[20] Kurosawa Kiyoshi says he felt that *Scary True Stories* was an entirely different type of horror movie to those he had made in the past and that it 'had a great impact on me, in how they showed a new way of

2008: 238) Kurosawa bought back the film and, with the help of the filmmakers' collective The Directors Company, reworked it and released it as a non-pink film, *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* (*Doremifa musume no chi wa sawagu*, 1985).

[18] Kurosawa had been Itami's assistant director on *The Funeral* (*Osōshiki*, 1984). Itami had also appeared as an actor in *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl*.

[19] Mes, interview with Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Tokyo, September 2013

[20] The means allotted to *Sweet Home* had allowed for flying in Hollywood special effects artist Dick Smith, famous for his work on *The Exorcist* (1973, dir: William Friedkin). By contrast, Shinozaki Makoto describes *The Guard from Underground* as being made 'under really brutal production conditions because of the lack of money' (Mes 2001b).

creating fear in the audience. [...] For me it was a change in the way I worked.'[21]

The director acknowledges that his V-Cinema productions offered him room to experiment and develop, not only artistically or in terms of the breadth of genres,[22] but also as a scriptwriter (he wrote or co-wrote all his V-Cinema works), as well as in terms of shooting methods.[23] This experimentation finds perhaps

[21] Kurosawa feels that with his previous horror films, such as *Sweet Home*, 'I aimed to emulate the style of Hollywood filmmaking, at which I failed. I felt that there was a limit to what I could do as a filmmaker if all I aimed for was emulating Hollywood. The audience didn't really enjoy it as much as I had hoped and the same went for the press. So I was struggling to find out in which direction I could move forward.' (Mes, Kurosawa interview 2013)

[22] Kurosawa has said that his main motivation for accepting an offer to direct a V-Cinema production was his desire to make an action film – an ambition he felt V-Cinema might give him a chance to realize. (Mes, Kurosawa interview 2012) This demonstrates that, even some five years after *Crime Hunter*, V-Cinema was still closely associated with the action genre. The irony is only clear in retrospect: that this was precisely the moment when action films were becoming rarer among V-Cinema's output. *Yakuza Taxi* was a comedy, while the director's other V-Cinema production of that year, *Men of Rage* (*Jan otokotachi no gekijō*, 1994, released by Hero) was a sports drama about rival speed cyclists.

[23] 'Shooting that many films in that short amount of time greatly disciplined me as a filmmaker. I must say I was a fast shooter to begin with. Even when I was making 8-mm films, I was fast. But I did learn the technicality of maintaining a certain level of quality, even when you have a very fast-moving production. In addition to that – shooting a film is not just done by the director, it's the total ability of the crew and cast, but when it comes to writing, it is much more of an individual process. To have to deliver a script, so many scripts, in such a short amount of time, was great training for me, definitely. Even if there was more to be desired, you had to turn *something* in within two weeks. That was the first time in my life where I had to write something so fast.' (Mes, Kurosawa interview 2012)

its clearest expression and evolution in Kurosawa's works in the horror genre. In between the director's V-Cinema productions of 1994 through 1996 runs a seam of works that extend his earlier efforts in the horror genre by way of a stylistic rupture informed by *Scary True Stories*, and which deserve closer examination in light of the development of the J-horror style, in which Kurosawa played a significant role. This change is particularly noticeable in Kurosawa's contributions to the *Haunted School* (*Gakkō no kaidan*, 1994-2001) television series, which followed the *Scary True Stories* template of presenting a compendium of short stories about ghostly apparitions, in this case all taking place in and around schools, with teenagers as protagonists.

The years that followed the release of *Scary True Stories* witnessed the elaboration of the style from Tsuruta and Konaka's prototype, across V-Cinema, television productions, and theatrical films, by what Kinoshita Chika calls '[a] closely knit network of filmmakers and critics' (Kinoshita 2009: 104). Kinoshita sees the bonds between these creators as being close and interactive enough to refer to J-horror as a 'movement' (ibid.),[24] whose main proponents she identifies as: directors Tsuruta Norio, Nakata Hideo, and Kurosawa Kiyoshi; writers Takahashi Hiroshi and Konaka Chiaki; and producer Ichise Takashige.[25] She also takes some of these

[24] Since the term J-horror refers to a specific 'movement' in filmmaking, the moniker is preferable to the much more inclusive term 'Japanese horror'.

[25] An early production that elaborated on *Scary True Stories* is the short-lived TV series *Strange Summer Mystery: Real Scary Stories* (*Natsu no fushigi misuterī hontō ni atta kowai hanashi* – note the almost identical

filmmakers' theoretical writings on horror filmmaking aesthetics (especially those of Takahashi, Konaka, and Kurosawa[26]) into consideration as an integral part of what she terms the J-horror discourse. Her criteria are largely generational[27]: a notable omission in this lineup is the younger director Shimizu Takashi, a protégé of Kurosawa whose Toei V-Cinema title *Juon* / *The Grudge* (2000) was arguably one of the major catalysts that brought J-horror to an international stage. Nevertheless, the names she mentioned did indeed develop the J-horror aesthetic together, as active agents in a discourse, as well as practical collaborators.

All the directors and writers mentioned by Kinoshita worked on the *Haunted School*

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title) nationally broadcast by Asahi TV for a single season, from April to September 1992. This series is notable for being director Nakata Hideo's professional debut. He directed three segments, two of them written by Takahashi Hiroshi.

[26] For example: Konaka Chiaki, *Hora eiga no miryoku: fandamentaru hora sengen* [The fascination of horror films: A manifesto of fundamental horror]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003; Takahashi Hiroshi, *Eiga no ma* [The demon of the cinema]. Tokyo: Seidosha, 2004; Kurosawa Kiyoshi, *Kyofu no taidan: eiga no motto kowai hanashi* [Conversations on fear: more scary film stories]. Tokyo: Seidosha, 2008

[27] Kinoshita identifies a variety of influences and sources of fascination shared by these filmmakers, including the films of Richard Fleischer, Tobe Hooper, John Carpenter, and Mario Bava, horror comics by Koga Shinichi and Yamagishi Ryōko, and 'the best of international cinema that became available in art-house theaters within the bubble economy of the 1980s.' She also calls them avid cinephiles and notes their filmmaking activities as students as well as the fact that some of them took courses with film critics or scholars, 'such as Hasumi Shigehiko (Kurosawa at Rikkyo University, Nakata at the University of Tokyo) or Asanuma Keiji (Konaka at Seijo University).' (Kinoshita 2009: 105-106)

series, and Kurosawa recounts that it was producer Tanaka Takehiko of Kansai Television who initially brought him and Konaka,[28] and later Tsuruta, on board to discuss how best to approach making a horror series for television. Similar to production circumstances in V-Cinema, genre and target audience were already set, due to the time slot in which the series would be shown:

> 'Kansai TV for a long time had a 7-7.30 pm slot during which they would show various types of dramas, all basically geared toward children up to middle school age. This would include coming-of-age stories but also *Ultraman*, for example. But that slot was suffering from bad ratings, so Tanaka knew that this was going to be the last series for that particular time frame. Since it was always aimed at children, he had never been able to explore horror, but since he knew this was going to be the last program, he could do anything. Which is why he, with his love of horror films, said, "Let's do something horrific". So yes, the concept and audience were already in place.'[29]

[28] Konaka Chiaki (Tokyo, 1961) began his career as a scriptwriter with the 50-minute direct-to-video release *Psychic Vision: Jaganrei* (*Saikikku bijon jaganrei*, 1988, dir: Ishii Teruyoshi, released by Five Ways), which is sometimes discussed as a forerunner of the J-horror style. Its story revolves around a recording of ghosts captured on videotape, a trope that would come to form the central conceit of the *Ring* films.

[29] Mes, Kurosawa interview 2013

With many identical parameters (genre, audience, creators, storytelling format), *Haunted School* clearly functioned as a continuation of *Scary True Stories*.[30] The first series of episodes of *Haunted School* aired between January and March of 1994, and included three segments directed by Kurosawa.[31]

The crosspollination between V-Cinema, television, and theatrical films made by this 'closely knit network' continued in various productions throughout the latter half of the 1990s, such as *Door III* (1996), which was written by Konaka Chiaki and directed by Kurosawa Kiyoshi. Nominally a sequel to two films directed by Takahashi Banmei, *Door III* had no narrative or other textual relation with its predecessors, but instead became a vehicle for the writer and the director to further explore 'how horror films could be made and how to find new expressions of fear.'[32] The film was distributed theatrically and on video by Tokuma Japan Communications, the publishing house that was the parent company of Daiei and which by then had begun its own forays into V-

[30] *Scary True Stories* had received two V-Cinema sequels in the intervening years, also directed by Tsuruta and written by Konaka: *Scary True Stories: Second Night* (*Hontō ni atta kowai hanashi daini yoru*, 1991) and *New Scary True Stories: Ghost World* (*Shin hontō ni atta kowai hanashi yūgenkai*, 1992).

[31] The initial series was only broadcast on Kansai TV. Further series followed from 1996, which were nationally broadcast and included three more stories directed by Kurosawa. *Haunted School* also spawned several theatrical films (from 1995) and TV animation (from 1994).

[32] Mes, Kurosawa interview 2013

Cinema.[33] Kurosawa calls the film uneven and unconventional, due to the fact that the director continued the formal experiments of his work on *Haunted School* even though this was not a ghost story.[34] [Figure 18]

Kinoshita's argument for J-horror as an artistic movement and network is significant for the study of V-Cinema. As noted, the program picture analogy has been an influential framework for positioning V-Cinema within the continuity of post-World War 2 Japanese film historiography, particularly among Japanese film critics and historians, from Yamane Sadao's magazine writings of 1990 through Yomota Inuhiko's history of Japanese cinema in 2000.[35] Zahlten sees this analogy as deeply flawed: program picture production structures in earlier decades, he says, 'created legally or informally binding networks of labor relations', whereas V-Cinema business practices were strongly liberalized, with all members of cast and crew contracted 'on a per-project basis, with no further royalties, benefits or

[33] Another Tokuma V-Cinema release from this time is *Full Metal Yakuza* (*Fūru metaru gokudō*, 1997), directed by Miike Takashi.

[34] 'Konaka had already done a slew of horror films for TV and he was kind of bored of conventional ghost stories. I wanted to do a ghost story to achieve a maximum fear experience, but Konaka said "No, I'm bored with ghosts".' (Mes, Kurosawa interview 2013) The film nevertheless contains a scene of ghostly apparition that the director would restage several years later in *Pulse* (*Kairo*, 2001).

[35] As well as among the filmmakers themselves: Kurosawa, Shimoda, and Aoyama all likened V-Cinema to program pictures in the interviews conducted for this dissertation.

Figure 17: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Door III*

guarantees.' (Zahlten 2007: 325).[36] While the program picture analogy is, as noted earlier, not without its problems and V-Cinema's labor practices hardly contributed to its own longevity, Kinoshita's reading of J-horror as a movement provides an example of precisely the kind of 'informally binding network of labor relations' Zahlten sees as lacking. That this network stretched beyond the confines of V-Cinema does not rule against the latter: V-Cinema provided the conditions for the movement's birth as well as the means for its expansion.[37] Additionally, as Shimoda Atsuyuki has pointed out,[38] the adoption of a theatrical release model in V-Cinema officially turned video into a secondary release format, which obliged rights holders to pay filmmakers and actors an additional share upon a film's video release.

Following *Door III*, Kurosawa collaborated with another fixture of the J-horror movement, scriptwriter Takahashi Hiroshi, who would later pen the screenplay for *Ring* (*Ringu*, 1998, dir: Nakata Hideo). The result was the

[36] Lobato analyzes labor relations in DTV along similar lines, calling it 'a site of exploitation in more than one sense of the word.' (Lobato 2012: 24)

[37] With regards to V-Cinema labor practices, it should be noted here that it was extremely rare to find women as directors in V-Cinema. It was the horror genre that provided an exception, in the person of Satō Shimako, writer and director of *Eko Eko Azarak: Wizard of Darkness* (*Eko eko azaraku*, 1995) and *Eko Eko Azarak 2: Birth of the Wizard* (*Eko eko azaraku 2*, 1996, both released by Gaga Communications and produced by Chiba Yoshinori). Satō had studied filmmaking in London and made her directorial debut in England with *Tale of a Vampire*, a horror film starring Julian Sands, Suzanna Hamilton, and Kenneth Cranham, produced from Satō's screenplay by her former London Film School associate Simon Johnson.

[38] Mes, Shimoda interview

two-part V-Cinema production *The Revenge* (*Fukushū*, 1997, released by KSS), starring Aikawa Shō, the tale of a cop who witnessed the murder of his parents as a child, which has left him with a lifelong quest for vengeance but also with a fear of guns. *The Revenge* is not a horror film in itself, but does form a thematic overture of sorts to Kurosawa's other film of that year, *Cure*, the film that would prove to be the director's international breakthrough.[39] The tale of a police detective investigating a string of murders with an identical modus operandi yet committed by completely unrelated people, *Cure* betrays the influence of American serial killer movies such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991, dir: Jonathan Demme) and *Seven* (1995, dir: David Fincher) – if not on text or form, then at least in the ease with which the film was recognized by foreign gatekeepers: *Cure* premiered at the Tokyo International Film Festival in November of 1997 and was screened the same month at the Festival d'automne in Paris, followed by the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January. Several more festival screenings followed in 1998, including at the Toronto International Film Festival. As an explanation of why *Cure* formed his, arguably belated (it was his 18th feature film), breakthrough into the festival circuit, Kurosawa himself points at the contrast between foreign audiences' (and programmers') familiarity with the generic premise of a police detective's battle with a serial killer and their complete unfamiliarity with the "genre" of Aikawa Shō-starring V-Cinema. Yet *Cure* too is a product of the same production/distribution model that generated

[39] Kurosawa also directed a segment for the third season of the *Haunted School* TV series in 1997.

the director's collaborations with Aikawa Shō: though the actor does not appear in *Cure*, the film was nevertheless produced by Shimoda Atsuyuki at Twins for Daiei – the same team whose next project would be *Serpent's Path* and *Eyes of the Spider*, two films starring Aikawa and intended as the continuation of the story of *The Revenge* (and, like those films, shot back-to-back as a single production). *Cure* is therefore as much a proponent of V-Cinema as any of the feature films Kurosawa directed between 1995 and 1998.[40] The film also demonstrates the formal influence of the J-horror movement, 'the low-key production of atmospheric and psychological fear, rather than graphic gore' that Kinoshita describes as characteristic of the J-horror aesthetic.[41]

With *Cure*, Kurosawa Kiyoshi had "suddenly" arrived in the festival circuit: a filmmaker with two decades of filmmaking experience and a status akin to that of an auteur in his own country, he had nevertheless operated entirely outside the scope of foreign gatekeepers until that moment. The Tokyo International Film Festival selection helped the film tap into the existing infrastructure for the selection of Asian films and the programmers

[40] In Shimoda's words: 'We wanted to make *Cure* a theatrically released film, but nobody involved in the project had ever imagined in their wildest dreams that they would make their money back just on the theatrical release. We were counting on recouping mainly through the video release.' (Mes, Shimoda interview) Kurosawa notes that his film crew on *Cure* also consisted of the same people who worked on the V-Cinema films he made during this period, although *Cure* had 'a slightly higher budget'. (Mes, Kurosawa interview 2012)

[41] No ghosts appear in *Cure*, but Kurosawa's *Door III* had already demonstrated that the J-horror movement's output was not limited to ghost stories.

themselves had, apparently, previously not dug deeper.[42] This did not prove a hindrance to Kurosawa's prolonged presence in their network. The theatrical release strategy of V-Cinema had created a productive output of medium-budget genre works that made their profits on video but also existed in 35-mm prints that could be screened to festival programmers. The three leading European festivals selected three new Kurosawa films in the year 1999 alone: *License to Live* (*Ningen gokaku*) in Berlin in February, *Charisma* (*Karisuma*) in Cannes in May, and *Barren Illusion* (*Ōinaru genei*) in Venice in September.[43]

Film critic Tony Rayns categorizes these three films as: 'not belonging to any obvious genre' (*License to Live*), 'a bizarre eco-thriller' (*Charisma*), and 'an oblique and eccentric love story' (*Barren Illusion*): 'Varied in tone and theme as they are, all three of his 1999 films are marked by elliptical plotting and story construction, elements of symbolism and allegory, a preference for imagery over dialogue and a recourse to ambiguous, "open" endings.' (Rayns 1999: 44) Such a profusion of titles that were at once art films and genre movies marks out Kurosawa's individuality among the proponents of the J-horror

[42] Kurosawa considers *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself!! – The Hero* and *The Revenge* to be 'more extreme and more art house than *Cure*'. Mes, Kurosawa interview 2012

[43] The films were screened as part of the following sections, respectively: Forum, Directors' Fortnight, Out of Competition.

movement, whose works have on the whole been restricted to genre.[44] It also arguably helped to give credence to and pave the way – in other words, gather the necessary cultural capital – for the rise of J-horror internationally, with Nakata Hideo's *Ring* as the next turning point. Although the global spread of J-horror took place primarily in the market (i.e. through film sales and the distribution sector) rather than through the festival circuit,[45] its emergence was bolstered by the auteur Kurosawa's continued delivery of productions in the genre to festivals, such as *Séance* (*Kōrei*), selected for the Locarno International Film Festival in 2000, and *Pulse* (*Kairo*), screened in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2001.

Carol Clover's assessment that 'innovation trickles upward as often as downward' (Clover 1992: 5) certainly holds true for J-horror. From poor beginnings in the lowest budget spectrum of V-Cinema in the shape of *Scary True Stories*, the style was elaborated by a small group of artists within the confines of regional television, from where,

[44] Although Kurosawa sees genre as being central to his filmmaking: 'Which genre my film ultimately belongs in is up to the audience to decide when the film is finished, but certainly as a starting point I always start my next project considering which genre I would like to work in. So in that sense I am a genre director. Actually, I'm often misunderstood. I don't start with a philosophical or thematic approach. Instead I often start with a genre that's relatively easy to understand and then explore how I want to work in that genre. And that's how a theme or an approach develops. The genre is first.' (Mes 2001)

[45] Although festivals also play a crucial role in business transactions through their film markets, as de Valck points out.

through theatrical film and national broadcasting, it found a nationwide audience in the guise of *Haunted School*. From 1996 onward, this aesthetic and thematic approach to horror proliferated across moving image media, including such works as Kurosawa and Konaka's *Door III*, Nakata Hideo and Takahashi Hiroshi's theatrically released *Ghost Actress* (*Joyūrei*, 1996), and the further V-Cinema collaborations of Konaka and Tsuruta Norio, such as *Evil Ghost Story: Cursed Beauties* (*Akuryō kaidan norowareta bijotachi*, 1996, released by JHV) – as well as successive seasons of the *Haunted School* series.

The culmination of this stage, and catalyst for further developments in the genre that would take it from the national stage to a global scale, was *Ring* (*Ringu*, 1998), written by Takahashi Hiroshi and directed by Nakata Hideo. Based on a novel by Suzuki Kōji, it was produced by a consortium of companies without any ties to V-Cinema or past involvement in J-horror – although one member of this production committee, Ichise Takashige, had been the intermediary in the United States for Toei's V-America lineup and would emerge from his involvement with *Ring* as the most active facilitator of J-horror's expansion into a transnational phenomenon.[46] For its release in Japanese theaters in January 1998, distributor Asmik Ace revived the double-bill strategy that had characterized the release of program pictures under the studio system, pairing it with another adaptation of a Suzuki Kōji novel, *Spiral* (*Rasen*, 1998, dir: Iida Jōji), intended as the narrative continuation of

[46] Ichise was instrumental in the sale of remake rights for *Ring* and *Juon* to Hollywood producers.

Ring.[47] Its success led to *Ring* being released in other East Asian territories over the course of 1999, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, where the J-horror style gained transnational dimension: a Korean remake of *Ring*, titled *The Ring Virus* (*Ring*, 1999, dir: Kim Dong-bin) co-produced by Omega Project (one of the production partners on the Japanese *Ring*) and AFDF Korea, premiered in South Korean cinemas even several months before the local release of its Japanese model; other productions, themselves often international co-productions, also adopted the J-horror aesthetic, such as *The Eye* (*Gin gwai*, 2002, the Danny & Oxide Pang, a Hong Kong-Singaporean co-production) and the pan-Asian omnibus film *Three* (2002, dirs: Kim Jee-woon, Nonzee Nimibutr, Peter Chan).[48] These in turn generated their own sequels. Meanwhile, *Ring 2* (*Ringu 2*, 1999), also by the Nakata/Takahashi pair and narratively bypassing *Spiral*, was already in Japanese theaters, as were other films modeled on *Ring*, in hopes of capitalizing on its success, including *Tomie* (1999, dir: Oikawa Ataru), *Shikoku* (1999, dir: Nagasaki Shunichi), and *Embalming* (*EM Enbāmingu,* 1999, dir: Aoyama Shinji). The fantasy film festival short circuit was characteristically early to spot a trend, and in the latter half of 1999 *Ring* and

[47] On the similarities between J-horror distribution strategies and program pictures, see also Wada-Marciano 2009: 17-18.

[48] Robert Hyland describes how the Asian horror films adopted into the Asia Extreme canon were made after *Ring*'s success throughout East Asia and were strongly influenced by that film's iconography and atmosphere. (Hyland 2009: 201-202)

Ring 2 were shown together at the Fantasia Festival in Canada and the Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival in Spain.

From there, the case of *Ring* provides a deviation from the gatekeeping norm in that it was hardly embraced by the festival circuit. The canonization of J-horror, epitomized by Nakata's film, was largely market-led and its distribution took place primarily through the medium of DVD, which established its commercial viability as both a retail and rental format during the same period.[49] This would help explain why Nakata, unlike Kurosawa, always remained associated with J-horror in the eyes of foreign programmers, who ignored Nakata's works outside the genre and only occasionally welcomed him if he, willingly or not, returned to familiar territory, as with *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002, selected for Berlin's Panorama section) or *The Complex* (*Kuroyuri danchi*, 2014, selected for Rotterdam).[50] The wider dissemination of Nakata's work has also occurred mostly through the market: *Kaidan* (2007), for example, was released in France within two months of its Japanese premiere. *Ring* received a British theatrical release in August of 2000 by Tartan Films – by which it would help inspire the creation of the Asia Extreme brand – while the film's remake rights were sold to Hollywood studio Dreamworks that

[49] Wada-Marciano sees J-horror's emergence as 'a form of trans-media commodity, one that is based less on theatrical modes of exhibition than on new digital media.' (Wada-Marciano 2009: 16)

[50] The one exception, without follow-up, is *Last Scene* (*Rasutoshīn*, 2002), selected for Berlin's Panorama section in 2003.

same year. In early 2002, America's most prominent cinephile publication, *Film Comment*, ran a focus on "New Japanese Cinema", to which critic Alvin Lu contributed a primer on 'the Japanese horror new wave', in which he boasted that '*Ring* is to these films what *The Exorcist* was to American cinema's 1970s horror boom',[51] giving Nakata's film immediate iconic status as the spearhead of a phenomenon.

The next step in the transnational migration[52] and canonization of J-horror came with American remakes of a number of its proponents, starting with *The Ring* in October 2002, which 'helped Asian horror cinema earn global saliency' (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009: 1).[53] The success of the fully localized, yet aesthetically similar American remake of Nakata's film resulted in a clamoring for similar

[51] Lu, Alvin, "Horror Japanese-style", *Film Comment* 38, No. 1 (Jan-Feb. 2002)

[52] The issue of J-horror's Japaneseness versus its transnational effects (and pedigree) provides enough material for a separate study. The term "J-horror" appears to have come about in English discourse in a vernacular manner, between 2000-2002, as convenient shorthand for 'Japanese horror films', thus pinning the term down to a specific geographical origin. However, as Van Haute (2009) has pointed out, in preceding years several other comparable "J-" abbreviations, such as J-pop, J-League (Japan's national soccer league, launched in 1993) and *J-bungaku* (a term first used by *Bungei* magazine in 1998 to describe a supposedly "new" kind of Japanese literature), came into parlance in Japan and were used as marketing tools intentionally to infer a rupture with supposedly "traditional" Japanese approaches.

[53] *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski, starring Naomi Watts and released by Dreamworks SKG. According to imdb.com, it "[s]old more than 2 million DVD copies in the US alone in its first 24 hours of video release." (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0298130/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv [accessed December 14, 2014)

material among Hollywood studios that was comparable to the fever that had followed the initial success of *Ring* upon its Japanese release: remakes of *The Grudge* (2004, dir: Shimizu Takashi),[54] *Dark Water* (2005, dir: Walter Salles), and *Pulse* (2006, dir: Jim Sonzero) followed, in most cases accompanied by direct-to-DVD releases of their Japanese models and whatever else distributors (primarily British and American ones) could get their hands on, as long as it was Asian and featured, in the words of Tony Rayns, 'a spectral woman with long hair over her face' (quoted in Martin 2015: 163). Much of this was taking place within what would become the Asia Extreme discourse, whose reliance on the DVD medium we have already noted. The wider dissemination of Asian horror cinema is inseparable from Asia Extreme, yet the latter, in its marketing strategies promising excess and violent transgressive spectacle, was also peculiarly at odds with the J-horror aesthetic. Examining the initial Western reactions to the Japanese horror films of the late 1990s, specifically Nakata's *Ring*, reveals that the later Asia Extreme discourse minimized formal and generic differences as well as cultural ones by recontextualizing them into 'exotic and dangerous cinematic thrills'. In his study of the British critical reception of *Ring*, Daniel Martin notes that critics who praised *Ring* often placed the film within an existing tradition of

[54] In his *Film Comment* article, Lu wrote about Shimizu's first V-Cinema version of *Juon* in hyperbolic terms: 'This low-budget, nightmarishly relentless wonder about a cursed apartment rivals the immortal *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for the title of Most Frightening Movie Ever Made' – which helped bring this obscure direct-to-video production to the notice of American film producers searching for their own *Ring*.

horror fiction. Yet, before the creation of an 'extreme' category closely tied to Asian cinema, they looked for mostly British and American paradigms, including the literary tradition of British ghost stories and the then-recent American films *The Blair Witch Project* (1999, dir: Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999, dir: M. Night Shyamalan). Citing Gregory A. Waller's research on American made-for-television horror, Martin argues that *Ring* was interpreted as belonging to a 'restrained tradition' in horror film and criticism, 'an aesthetic of restraint and suggestion [which] foregoes "excessive exposure to crudity and violence".' (Martin 2009: 36) The initial reception and categorization of *Ring* was therefore diametrically opposed to the reaction of 'outrageous shock' that prompted Tartan's Hamish McAlpine to launch the Asia Extreme label and market it accordingly.

Martin points out that the opposition between restraint and explicitness are 'crucial moves within the game of distinction' (ibid. 39). With Asia Extreme, however, Tartan sought to erase this opposition, just as its marketing and promotional tactics could be said to have run counter to the assertions of Jeffrey Sconce and Kristin Thompson. Gary Needham observed in 2006 that '[m]any of the films, such as *Ring* [...], could hardly be thought of as extreme in the terms that the distributors want us to imagine'. (Needham 2006: 9) Yet so successful was the "repackaging" effect of the Asia Extreme discourse, that three years later, Choi and Wada-Marciano (2009: 5) chose their words more carefully by suggesting that '[s]ome of the subtle differences in Asian horror and extreme cinema are discernable to the

attuned viewers with cultural knowledge, but might be erased when they are exported and lumped together under a homogeneous category "Asia Extreme".' Ironically, without being aware of it, the British critics' initial reactions to *Ring* were quite correct in their tendency to position the film (and, by extension, J-horror) within a binary of restraint versus explicitness. Yet this aspect, as well as the films' domestic context of a theoretically underpinned movement of filmmaking inspired by a low-budget, straight-to-video release that was aimed at a female audience and positioned in video stores alongside children's films, were all lost in the recontextualization of Asia Extreme's 'generic discourse of violent exploitation, masculinity and female disempowerment'. (Rawle 2009: 182) [55]

There has been no shortage of English-language scholarship on J-horror in

[55] If we were to frame the Asia Extreme discourse as a dominant ideology, then the J-horror style, seemingly so integral to it, can be read in accordance with Comolli and Narboni's "category E", albeit in a rather inverted way: 'films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner [...] there is a noticeable gap, a dislocation, between the starting point and the finished product.' (Comolli and Narboni 1977: 32) Kurosawa's existing auteur status, accrued as cultural capital on the festival circuit, placed him in a similarly ambiguous situation as Kim Ki-duk within the Asia Extreme discourse, straddling art and genre cinema. Tartan included Kurosawa's *Doppelgänger* (*Dopperugengā*, 2004) in its Asia Extreme roster, but released his *Bright Future* (*Akarui mirai*, 2003), selected for the competition section in Cannes, under its art cinema-oriented Tartan Video label. It is worthy of note that *Bright Future* was first theatrically released in the U.K. and other European territories before the video release and therefore followed the "traditional" gatekeeping route. *Doppelgänger*, as part of the Asia Extreme discourse, went straight to DVD.

recent years,[56] but this has not necessarily done a better job of approaching the topic on its own terms than the Asia Extreme discourse did. Some of it exemplifies what Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto has called the 'interpretative machine', a gatekeeping mechanism of film studies by which 'even those who do not have command of necessary languages can study non-Western national cinemas, and these studies are justified in the name of cross-cultural analysis.' (Yoshimoto 2000: 36) When scholars present the episodic narrative structure of certain J-horror films, such as *Juon*, as 'disturb[ing] western conceptualisations of the spectatorial position as one of power and activity (Mulvey et al), which rely on the traditional subject/object dualism' (Balmain 2006), such interpretations entirely gloss over the fact that episodic narratives are a recurring formal characteristic of J-horror, inherited from the omnibus structure of *Scary True Stories* and the thirty-minute timeslots of the *Haunted School* broadcasts, carried on in the nature of numerous later J-horror films as straight-to-video (like *Juon*) or made-for-TV productions. To state that these episodic narratives 'disallow the spectator any position of power or potency over the events on the cinematic screen' (ibid.) is a failure to recognize that much of J-horror was not intended to play on the cinematic screen in the first place, but in

[56] In terms of monographs: Jay McRoy (ed.) (2005), *Japanese Horror Cinema*; Jay McRoy (2008), *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*; Colette Balmain (2009), *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*; Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano (2009), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*; Salvador Murguia, (ed.) (2016), *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Horror Films*.

the home, within easy reach of the remote control.[57] And even when a film was released theatrically, in many cases its future role as a rental videotape remained its commercial *raison d'être* as well as the way the majority of its audience experienced it.[58] J-horror may have contributed to bringing Japanese cinema back into English-language film scholarship, and some of this scholarship is undeniably perceptive and challenging,[59] but who benefits when film scholars still hang on to a reductive definition of cinema that fails to take three decades of movies-on-video (and several more decades of movies-on-TV) into account? As with the Asia Extreme discourse, an ignorant or willful erasure of facts results in a recontextualization that serves the interests of the gatekeeper, not an understanding of the films.

II – The Yakuza Film, Excess, and Miike Takashi

The yakuza film could be considered 'the most persistent and successful' genre in V-Cinema (Zahlten 2007: 347). Even in the first phase of

[57] Episodic narrative structures such as the omnibus film are, according to Wada-Marciano, 'even more suitable for the DVD medium since its chapter structure allows one to watch an individual segment or skip to another episode.' (Wada-Marciano 2009: 27) On the remote control's impact on spectatorship, see: Benson-Allott, 2015

[58] And/or the video format became a pivotal gambit in a film's narrative, as in the case of *Ring* and its many sequels, spin-offs, remakes, and variations.

[59] Choi and Wada-Marciano's *Horror to the Extreme* distinguishes itself in this crowd of J-horror studies.

V-Cinema, generically dominated by action films, yakuza characters were common features, often in the role of antagonists, such as in *Black Princess* from 1990. Early hit yakuza titles from Toei, particularly *Neo Chinpira* and *Like a Beast* (*Kemono no yō ni*, 1990, dir: Oka Yasutaka), set initial templates for forms the genre would take within V-Cinema and the yakuza film subsequently emerged victorious from the diversification experiments that took place from 1990 thru 1994. Dedicated focus on the genre by leading video makers including KSS and Museum[60] carried the yakuza movie through the latter half of the 1990s, and the genre would remain a mainstay well into the 2000s thanks to a streamlining of both the films' textual organization (narrative templates based on alleged "true" accounts of gang warfare and a pseudo-documentary formal rigidity) and production circumstances (shorter shooting schedules, lower budgets, and reduced crews often consisting of the same people familiar with such highly specialized circumstances).

Zahlten speculates that these 'straight' yakuza movies gave male audiences an escape into an imagined past, into a tradition of 'testosterone-charged' outlaw masculinity

[60] Formerly a purveyor of educational videos for classroom use, Museum entered the V-Cinema business in 1995. In addition to the common in-house and outsourced production, Museum differentiated itself from other V-Cinema video makers by buying up rights to existing films and handling distribution to rental stores itself instead of relying on wholesalers. See: http://all-in-ent.com/outline/ [accessed November 29, 2016] As Zahlten notes (2007: 353), these business practices gave Museum wider profit margins, thus helping it to gain solid ground at a time when the video market was in decline.

and codes of honor, at a time when the declining economy, the Great Hanshin Earthquake that hit the Kobe area in 1995, plus the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system by the Aum Shinrikyō doomsday cult that same year, combined to eat away at the social fiber. He contends that these straight yakuza films could not offer 'psychological verisimilitude regarding the perceived economic and social turbulence and unpredictability of the turn of the millennium' (Zahlten 2007: 353). Yet, his argument leaves a different strain of yakuza film productions out of the equation: during the same period, a handful of companies, including Daiei and Gaga Communications, bargained on a theatrical release strategy that saw their productions in the yakuza genre benefiting from increased means and fewer creative restrictions than those productions that aimed squarely at the shrinking video market. This different production mentality would open the door to a wider international diffusion of yakuza films by such directors as Mochizuki Rokurō and Miike Takashi, films whose protagonists existed largely on the margins of society and at the losing end of the post-Bubble economic spectrum. Both these directors have been likened to 'social scientists' (Stephens 2002: 40) for their depictions of the hand-to-mouth existences of the immigrants, petty grifters, drug pushers, pornographers, and hapless gamblers in such films as Mochizuki's *The Wicked Reporter* (*Gokudō kisha*, 1993-1997) series and Miike's *Black Society* (*Kuroshakai*, 1995 -1999) trilogy – all of which were produced and distributed by Daiei and have, unlike the 'straight' (and straight-to-video) yakuza films, played at international film festivals.

Miike Takashi did produce more than his fair share of 'straight' yakuza movies after he debuted as a director in 1991 with two V-Cinema features: the comedy *Eyecatch Junction* (*Toppū minipato tai! Aikyatchi jankushon*, 1991, released by Japan Home Video) [Figure 19], and the 'female action' movie *Lady Hunter* (*Redihantā koroshi no pureryūdo*, 1991, released by Shochiku Home Video). A former assistant director to Imamura Shōhei, Onchi Hideo, and Kuroki Kazuo, among others, Miike displays an industrious productivity comparable to Kurosawa Kiyoshi's later tenure in V-Cinema, with a minimum of two features per year and frequently more, even after the majority of his output was no longer V-Cinema.[61] V-Cinema's tendency toward serialized production is evident from a look at Miike's early filmography, with multiple installments of four different series listed for the period 1991-1996.[62] In terms of genres, his output during this same period conforms to the

[61] For example: three releases of Miike-directed films in 1993, four in 1995, and six in 1996.

[62] *We're Not Angels*, parts 1 and 2 (*Oretachi wa tenshi ja nai*; *Oretachi wa tenshi ja nai 2*, 1993, both released by KSS); *Bodyguard Kiba* parts 1, 2, and 3 (*Bodigādo Kiba*, 1993, released by KSS; *Bodigādo Kiba shūra no mokushiroku*, 1994, released by Hero; and *Bodigādo Kiba shūra no mokushiroku 2*, 1995, released by Hero); *The Third Yakuza* parts 1, 2, and 3 (*Daisan no gokudō*, 1995, released by NLP; *Shin daisan no gokudō boppatsu kansai gokudō uōzu*, 1996, released by Museum; and *Shin daisan no gokudō 2*, 1996, released by Museum); *Ambition without Honor*, part 1 and 2 (*Jingi naki yabō*, 1996; *Jingi naki yabō 2*, 1997, both released by Toei Video). Three other Miike titles of 1996, *Peanuts* (*Piinattsu rakkasei*, 1996, released by Pony Canyon), *The Way to Fight* (*Kenka no hanamichi*, 1996, released by KSS), and *Fudoh: The New Generation*, also gave way to multiple sequels, though these were not directed by Miike.

Figure 18: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Eyecatch Junction*

pattern apparent in V-Cinema's overall generic development, with mostly comedies and action movies during the first three years, gradually giving way to a predominance of yakuza films that include a first smattering of theatrically released titles from 1995 onward.[63]

V-Cinema directors have hailed from a great variety of backgrounds. What united them was their willingness to work, simply put, fast and cheap: to deliver a generically and narratively delineated product within a limited time schedule and on a limited budget, with no prospects of receiving royalties, residuals, or recognition. This profile fit some established directors accustomed to working in a program-picture capacity, such as the old hands of studio B-movies or directors working in television, but mostly these circumstances facilitated the arrival of newcomers such as Miike Takashi. It is no coincidence that many directors got their start in V-Cinema, since beginners would have been more willing to accept the terms. Based on his entry into the business and the generic output in his first five years of activity, Miike can be classified as a typical case of a V-Cinema director. He began to diverge from this template with notice from Japanese film critics for the first installment in the *Black Society* trilogy, *Shinjuku Triad Society*, the tale of a corrupt half-Chinese cop fighting an upstart transnational crime gang violently muscling in on yakuza turf in Tokyo, which Daiei released theatrically in August

[63] *The Third Yakuza* (released theatrically by Hero in January 1995) and *Shinjuku Triad Society* (*Shinjuku kuroshakai chaina mafia sensō*, 1995, released theatrically by Daiei in August 1995). Of *The Third Yakuza*, Miike says: '{N}obody paid attention to it. Even the critics ignored it. It opened miserably in one small theater.' (Mes 2003: 355)

1995.[64] The theatrical release model of V-Cinema gave Miike an entry into film discourse that had previously been closed off to him on account of being a novice director working in V-Cinema (it must be emphasized again that Yamane Sadao's early writings on V-Cinema, despite his recurring use of the term 'potential', revolved around filmmakers who had pre-established reputations and were arguably in their twilight years). The same release strategy also allowed the first international exposure for Miike's works in 1997, with the selection of the yakuza film *Fudoh: The New Generation* for the Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival and the Fantasia Festival. However, more than this early adoption by the fantasy short circuit, it was the same film's selection for the Toronto International Film Festival later that year that had a value-adding function, by allowing it and its director access to English-language film discourse: Time Magazine included *Fudoh* in its list of ten best films of 1997 on the basis of its Toronto screening, which in turn led to the director being invited in 1998 to participate in the Chrome Dragon project, set up by Francis Ford Coppola and Wayne Wang. Intended as a lineup of six

[64] It was released on a single screen in Tokyo, the now-defunct Shinjuku Cinepatos. Nevertheless, the film earned Miike a nomination as Best New Director from the Director's Guild of Japan. The difference in reception from *The Third Yakuza* is likely to have been due to, to paraphrase Shimoda Atsuyuki's feelings about the wider reception of Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Cure* (also released by Daiei), 'the difference between a video maker like [Hero] and a film studio like Daiei' (Mes, Shimoda interview 2013), meaning that by this point, when discourse on V-Cinema had all but vanished, film critics and industry luminaries were more favourably disposed toward the latter and regarded the former purely as V-Cinema and thus not worthy of their attention.

Asian-American co-productions, this project was halted after the first installment and Miike's intended participation fell through (Rayns 2000: 30; Van Haute 2002: 48). Here, the Toronto festival's Midnight Madness section – programmed by Colin Geddes and devoted primarily to genre films that can 'wake up' (Geddes, quoted in Gayne 2013) festivalgoers at the end of a full day's film viewing – functioned as a conduit, an intermediary between the fantasy short circuit and the world festival circuit with its value-adding and mediating functions.

Although *Fudoh* eventually received a North American VHS release in 1999, the failure of the Chrome Dragon venture might have stalled the momentum Miike gained from the Toronto screening, were it not for a parallel gatekeeping initiative occurring at the Vancouver International Film Festival, where Tony Rayns programmed *Shinjuku Triad Society* in the 1997 lineup of the festival's Dragons and Tigers section. This section, launched in 1994, is devoted to first and second features by Asian filmmakers, by which it embodies film festivals' function of "discovering" filmmakers. Strictly speaking, however, *Shinjuku Triad Society* was Miike Takashi's thirteenth feature, but the custom of not including direct-to-video releases in Japanese filmmakers' official filmographies (which are compiled on the basis of their theatrical release dates) helped recontextualize him as a "new discovery" for the festival circuit. A year later, Miike's steadfastly prolific output allowed Rayns to program a three-film focus on the filmmaker, consisting of *Rainy Dog* (*Gokudō kuroshakai reinīdoggu*, 1997), *The Bird People in China*

(*Chūgoku no chōjin*, 1998), and *Blues Harp* (*Burūsuhāpu*, 1998).[65]

Gatekeepers' initial notice of Miike was predicated on the violent and sexual excesses of two yakuza films: the comic book-style *Fudoh*, which tells of a violent clash of generations within a yakuza family and features infanticide by katana sword, a hermaphrodite sex scene, schoolteachers decapitated by pre-pubescent assassins, and blow darts shot from a vagina; and *Shinjuku Triad Society*, which contains scenes of police brutality, physical mutilation including eye gouging, multiple scenes featuring anal rape, as well as other portrayals of deviant sexuality. It is a now common, indeed almost trite, critical approach to regard Miike as a creator of excessively violent films, yet this is undeniably one aspect by which he set his works apart, not only within V-Cinema, but within the parameters of filmmaking in Japan, as well as those of world cinema more generally. The latter can be read from their selections as forms of "Midnight Madness" within the film festival circuit[66]; the former two contexts are illustrated by the circumstances of *Fudoh*'s theatrical release: Chiba Yoshinori's decision to release the film on cinema screens, instead of giving it the direct-to-video distribution originally intended, meant that the film needed to be screened to the national film ratings

[65] Rayns also included *The Bird People in China* in his selections for the London Film Festival that same year.

[66] 'I sense that people at foreign festivals expect something violent or radical from my films, some kind of extreme entertainment that's different from everything else playing there.' (Mes 2003: 370)

board Eirin.[67] Chiba recalls that the Eirin members present at the screening were 'furious' for showing them such an outrageous film (Chiba, quoted in Johnson 2012). *Fudoh* was subsequently released in Japanese theaters with a rating restricting it to viewers aged 18 or over.

But excess is a relative term; something can only be excessive compared to a norm. Depictions of graphic violence and transgressive sexuality can be perceived as going beyond what is required for the plot, the characterizations, or the genre. For a better understanding of what allowed Miike's films to emerge from the great mass of V-Cinema yakuza movies, however, it is constructive to not only focus on their violent and sexual aspects, but to regard his work within the wider scope of Kristin Thompson's definition of the term "excess" within film studies, which does not refer to depictions of violence or sexuality specifically but to questions of film form more generally. If we apply this to V-Cinema's approach to form and narrative, then the norm becomes Yoshida Tatsu's concept of a 'film that will not be fast-forwarded': a film without lulls and valleys, without calm moments, a film whose narrative structure is propelled by the overriding principle of speed. Even when the running times of V-Cinema films began to conform to those of theatrical features, shortly after the release of *Crime Hunter*, the formal and narrative arrangement of the films continued to follow the logic of 'highly dramatic conflict structures, with clear delineations of

[67] Eirin is short for Eiga Kanri Iinkai, the Administration Commission for Motion Picture Code of Ethics. It is the film industry's self-censoring body, installed in 1949 to supply theatrically released films with an age rating.

the main character and his nemesis, and a narrative leading squarely to the resulting finale.' (Zahlten 2007: 324-325) If we take this model to represent the norm in V-Cinema, then it is not violent and erotic spectacle that represents excess – for these are quite common ingredients of V-Cinema, promised and emphasized on countless video boxes, even if rarely delivered with as much aplomb as in a Miike film – rather, it is those quieter, more deliberate moments of drama and characterization, the lulls and valleys, that become excessive and that set a film apart from the mass of straight-to-video works.

Gatekeepers' first contact with Miike through *Fudoh* and *Shinjuku Triad Society* was immediately followed by such films as *The Bird People in China* and *Rainy Dog*, two films characterized by languid pacing, long takes, and the ambiguities of their melancholy characters. The former deals with a Japanese businessman sent deep into rural China to locate a rich seam of jade, who, once at his destination, becomes fascinated by a local legend about people capable of flying. Tony Rayns described it as an 'adult fairytale' (Rayns 2000: 31). *Rainy Dog* concerns a Japanese gangster exiled in Taipei who makes a living as an assassin for a local mob boss. Early in the story, a former one-night-stand reappears after several years and leaves him with a pre-teen boy who she claims is his son. After she departs, just as abruptly as she came, Miike inserts a scene of the woman bursting into tears as she drives off in the back of a taxi. This moment could be read as excessive, certainly by V-Cinema standards, since this character does not reappear and thus has no further stake in the drama that unfolds. Such characterizations and dramatic

asides arguably were at least as important a factor in what got Miike's films noticed by gatekeepers as their more lurid and violent aspects. Tony Rayns, in a May 2000 article on Miike for *Sight and Sound*, mentioned among the filmmaker's defining characteristics 'a nonconformist approach to film grammar and narrative structure' in which 'the classical Japanese virtues of modesty, emotional restraint and self-denial [are] all present and correct to some degree in everything he makes' (Rayns 2000: 30). Aaron Gerow observes that 'excessive editing distances [Miike] from art cinema just as the long takes distinguish him from many pop postmodern works.' (Gerow 2006: 73)

The case of *Audition* offers an illuminating example of how excess in Miike Takashi's films, and the dialectic between the violence and the valleys, contributed to wider recognition for and sustained discourse on this filmmaker. His 32nd feature, the horror film *Audition* was atypical within Miike's generic output, dominated as this was by yakuza movies. Yet this atypicality arguably contributed to the film's impact on spectators. It would prove to be Miike's definitive international breakthrough, but although the film had its world premiere in Vancouver in 1999, the real turning point came three months later, at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January 2000. Nevertheless, Tony Rayns had been the driving force there too: Rotterdam's festival director at the time was Simon Field, former film programmer at London's ICA, and responsible alongside Rayns for championing the films of Tsukamoto Shinya and Kitano Takeshi in the UK. Rotterdam, like Vancouver had done in 1998, showed three Miike films in 2000: *Audition*,

plus the yakuza films *Dead or Alive* (*Deddo oa araibu hanzaisha*, 1999) and *Ley Lines* (*Nihon kuroshakai*, 1999).[68] These were programmed as part of a larger selection of recent Japanese films, meant to commemorate the 400th anniversary of ties between The Netherlands and Japan. This larger framework contributed to centering media attention and discourse on the Japanese film selection to begin with, but Miike Takashi was 'the discovery that set the festival on its ears' (Romney 2000). Several incidents surrounding the screenings of *Audition* in particular were widely reported and repeated in the press: the many audience members who prematurely exited the theater during the climactic torture scene have since become part of the film's legend, particularly one spectator who spotted the director in attendance and told him 'You're sick!' before leaving the room (see Romney 2000; James 2000; Miike recounts the incident in his autobiography, Miike 2003: 260).[69] Spectatorship influenced discourse. In addition to the media attention these episodes generated, *Audition* also won two prizes during the festival's award ceremony: the FIPRESCI prize from the international film critics and the KNF prize from the Circle of Dutch Film Critics,

[68] *Dead or Alive* was the first film that paired top V-Cinema stars Aikawa Shō and Takeuchi Riki, playing cop and gangster respectively. It had premiered at the Tokyo International Film Festival, where it attracted a good deal of attention. Tony Rayns called it the festival's 'only home-grown sensation' (Catalogue IFFR 2000: 269).

[69] Luk Van Haute also mentions the incident in Van Haute 2002: 46 – with the added authority that comes from having been the interpreter who had to translate the woman's execration to the director at the time.

confirming the film's artistry in addition to its shock value.

Audition's passage through Rotterdam created not only critical discourse, but also a good many additional festival screenings and distribution deals, making it a fine example of the mediating and value-adding functions of the third-phase film festival, as defined by de Valck. The Rotterdam experience mediated the film into a *succès de scandale*: discourse around *Audition*, during any of the many festival screenings and theatrical releases that followed, invariably revolved around the film's violent finale, its physical effect on spectators, and how this final scene contrasts with the slow build-up of the seemingly innocuous romantic drama that precedes it. For roughly an hour, *Audition* plays like 'a gentle tale about a middle-aged TV exec who searches for the girl of his dreams' (Romney 2000), shot in a 'deliberate style' (Eisner 1999) with which festival audiences weaned on world art cinema would have been familiar enough. This placidness, however, was 'a lethally poised Venus flytrap', a 'brazenly deceitful narrative [that] doesn't pull the rug out so much as spring one trapdoor after another' (Lim 2001), until a 'gruesome and nightmarish' (Mitchell 2001) 'Grand Guignol' finale (James 2000) that is 'one of the most extreme closing scenes in years' (Lebbing 2000[70]) and was 'responsible for throngs of shaken filmgoers staggering out of theaters' (Mitchell 2001).

Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Nick James summed up the film's attention-grabbing Rotterdam run by noting that 'nothing succeeds like excess' (James 2000). Indeed, nearly every review of the film echoed, in clear

[70] My translation from the Dutch.

or implied terms, that *Audition*'s finale was 'excessive' (ibid.) and 'extreme' (Bradshaw 2001).[71] Such qualifications quickly became part of the 'Miike myth' (Azoury 2002[72]) thanks to further films selected by gatekeepers that delivered on the promise of such excess, titles such as *Dead or Alive*,[73] *Visitor Q* (*Bijitā Q*, 2001), and *Ichi the Killer* (*Koroshiya Ichi*, 2001), which featured 'incest, bestiality, and overeating' (ibid.). Excess was therefore clearly a factor in the international diffusion and reception of Miike's works. [Figure 20]

While there has been some discussion as to what genre the film belongs in, *Audition* can be ascribed to the horror genre according to formal criteria as well as its production context. Media reports of the physical responses that multiple viewers displayed to *Audition* place the film squarely in the horror bracket as defined among Linda Williams's 'body genres' (see: Williams 1991). The valley of the film's cautiously paced first hour

[71] Alexander Walker, film critic of British tabloid *The Evening Standard* displayed what Chuck Kleinhans refers to as 'cross-cultural disgust' (Kleinhans 2009), when he called *Audition* 'the grimmest exploitation of sadistic violence I have seen in months' (Walker 2001). Walker's dismissive comment about 'the Far East cinema's fixation on physical pain [...] being presented in art-house terms' in the same review foreshadows Manohla Dargis's 2005 diatribe on 'extreme cinema', referred to in chapter 4, as well as the Asia Extreme discourse and its inherent problems.

[72] My translation from the French.

[73] Miike's penchant for excessive finales was also apparent in *Dead or Alive*, whose climax is set up in meta-fictional terms: 'This is the final scene', are the last words Takeuchi Riki's character speaks before the violent confrontation with his nemesis that will involve hand grenades, a rocket launcher, and a nuclear explosion that blows up planet Earth.

Figure 19: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Dead or Alive*

contributes to the sensory impact of the subsequent climactic violence: within the international festival context, spectators already familiar with such valleys experienced the violence as excessive, because they expected the film to lead them into quite a different direction. When we approach *Audition* from within its industrial context, we must regard it in relation to J-horror. Here the balance shifts, yet excess remains the discerning factor: in its relation to J-horror too, the film stood out for digressing from the expected norm. *Audition* was made in 1999, the same year as many other projects hoping to benefit from *Ring*'s momentum. Two of the partner companies in what was a Japanese-Korean co-production were also involved with the *Ring* cycle,[74] and *Audition* was set up as a horror movie to follow in the footsteps of Nakata Hideo's film, but also to consciously deviate from the J-horror template: it demonstrates a conspicuous lack of both supernatural narrative elements and ingredients that would appeal to teenage spectators. Miike was chosen as a director because he was not associated with the horror genre: he had been active predominantly in yakuza films and had occasionally reached a wider mainstream audience, as with the theatrical films *Andromedia* (*Andoromedia*, 1998), an SF film that was a vehicle for an all-girl pop combo, and *White-Collar Worker Kintaro* (*Sararīman Kintarō*, 1999), an adaptation of a popular manga about a heroic

[74] Omega Project and AFDF Korea co-produced *The Ring Virus*. Omega Project was also a production partner on *Ring.*

corporate worker who is also a single father.[75] The dialectic of violence and valleys in Miike's work provided the producers of *Audition* with the means of setting the film apart, with both aspects exceeding J-horror norms: it almost refuses to be a horror film at first, but when it finally shows its true colors, it also rejects the aesthetics of concealment that were characteristic of the genre.

Due to the timing of their releases, *Audition* often played at foreign festivals alongside *Ring* and other Japanese horror titles – including J-horror style works such as *Shikoku*, but also Tsukamoto Shinya's carnivalesque Edogawa Rampo adaptation *Gemini* (*Sōseiji*, 1999). This happened in Vancouver, Rotterdam, and London, and created an association between quite divergent works that inspired the later marketing tactics of the Asia Extreme brand but that also, ironically, helped solidify an image of Miike as a maker of horror films – witness his later participation in the American series of made-for-TV features *Masters of Horror* (2006). This tendency runs counter to critics' initial attempts to position Miike as a filmmaker within world cinema in the immediate wake of *Audition*'s first festival screenings, which adhered to Peter Verstraten's observations about the function of the auteur within contemporary festival discourse, that of a guide or beacon for positioning newly discovered filmmakers: 'new talent X resembles director Y in terms of thematic preoccupations, but works in a style

[75] Idem for the choice of scriptwriter to adapt Murakami Ryū source novel *Audition*: Tengan Daisuke, who was best known for penning the script of his father Imamura Shōhei's Palme d'or winner *The Eel*. See Mes 2013: 71.

similar to director Z.' (Verstraten 2008: 563)[76] Ken Eisner's October 1999 review of *Audition* in *Variety*, after the Vancouver premiere, refers to Kitano Takeshi twice, for the film's 'outrageousness', but also for its 'exquisite' camerawork.[77] Rayns, in *Sight and Sound* in May 2000, compared Miike to Rainer Werner Fassbinder for his productivity and to Joseph H. Lewis for his approach to making genre movies 'with the generic elements left on autopilot while the director busies himself with form, rhythm, texture and the implications of the characters' sexual pathologies' (Rayns 2000: 30). Romney's report on Rotterdam 2000 for *The Guardian* concluded that *Audition* 'mix[es] the tawdriness of *Fatal Attraction* with a flavour of Buñuel and Polanski at their most ruthless.' (Romney 2000)

Aaron Gerow, however, argues that Miike's cinema resisted such convenient comparisons from the outset:

> 'While Miike does not undermine those categories [for fixing and conceptualizing films], one can imagine him speaking like one of his characters: "I am like X but not like X; like Y but not like Y," where X and Y can be a variety of fundamental binaries, including long takes and montage, home and homelessness, the global and the local, and the artistic and the popular. When we try to impose any of these on him, he turns and runs, fleeing forever'.

[76] My translation from the Dutch.

[77] As Eisner emphasizes, *Audition*'s director of photography Yamamoto Hideo also worked on Kitano's *Fireworks*. (Eisner 1999)

(Gerow 2009: 41)

Miike set himself apart within world cinema by refusing the categorization that is part of festival mediation: he was a newcomer, yet he already had dozens of films under his belt; he made excessively violent films, but also delivered adult fairytales; the majority of his output consisted of yakuza films, yet he broke through with a horror film – a horror film that led its spectators to mistake it for an innocuous romantic drama and that furthermore deviated from the J-horror template before the world at large had even recognized that such a template properly existed. What eventually saw Miike become a fixture of the A-list festivals was his sheer versatility, his adeptness at a wide variety of genres – a quality arguably instilled in him through his years working as a director-for-hire in V-Cinema – as witnessed by the selections of programmers at Cannes, Berlin, and Venice: the surrealistic "yakuza horror" *Gozu* (Cannes Director's Fortnight, 2003); the expressionistically styled homoerotic prison drama *Big Bang Love: Juvenile A* (Berlin Panorama, 2006); the English-spoken *chanbara*-western hybrid *Sukiyaki Western Django*, (Venice competition, 2008); the samurai epic *13 Assassins* (*Jūsannin no shikaku*, Venice competition, 2010); and the contemporary action film *Shield of Straw* (Cannes competition, 2013).[78]

[78] Both *Gozu* and *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A* were V-Cinema productions. The former was a Toei V-Cinema release, the latter was produced by Maki Hisao, producer and often also writer of close to a dozen straight-to-video Miike titles, ranging from 1992's *A Human Murder Weapon* (*Ningen kyōki*, released by Maxam) to 2007's *Detective Story* (*Tantei monogatari*, released by Museum).

According to Gerow, Miike's work 'ultimately challenges our tendencies to locate cinema in categories of style, politics and nation' (ibid. 26). Such pluriformity also entails a profound transnationalism in Miike's works, expressed in the numerous international co-productions with parties from Korea or Hong Kong or France; in the location shooting in countries as diverse as China, Italy, Kenya, and the U.S.A.; and in the characters inhabiting a 'polygot cosmos' of 'Brazilian disc jockeys, Russian travel agents, [and] Taiwanese drug tyrants' (Stephens 2002: 40), who frequently and without discernible reason speak or understand each other's mother tongues, but who are nevertheless 'caught in the liminal spaces between nations' (Gerow 2009: 40).[79] Their transnationalism places Miike's films in a position of rupture with the yakuza film tradition: as a genre, the yakuza film has been consistently preoccupied with Japaneseness, through its depiction of traditions, rituals, codes, and iconography of a social group, the members of organized crime syndicates, who 'cast themselves as the moral descendants of Japan's noble warriors, the last upholders of the nation's traditional values.' (Kaplan 2003: xviii) Miike's transnational works thereby also redefine notions of Japaneseness into one devoid of stability, even the stability connected to a belief in exceptionalism within Asia: businessman Wada in *The Bird People in China* discovers that the roots of the Japanese people may lie deep in rural southwest China. Tony Rayns argues that the Japanese

[79] For an analysis of how transnationalism in Miike's films expresses itself in rootless characters, see: Gerow 2009: 26-30

characters in Miike's films, bound by those 'classical Japanese virtues of modesty, emotional restraint and self-denial' find 'liberating excess [...] in neighbouring Asian cultures' (Rayns 2000: 30), but, as Aaron Gerow emphasizes, even the Japanese characters in Miike's films suffer from rootlessness, an inability to find a home or an identity in place or nation – as embodied in such exiled characters as the Japanese protagonists of *Rainy Dog*, *The Bird People in China*, and *The Guys from Paradise* (*Tengoku kara kita otokotachi*, 2001). Gerow (2009: 38) cautions us not to conflate the limiting rootlessness in (and of) Miike's films with a liberating borderlessness – the very borderlessness that also characterized the early V-Cinema in which Miike debuted and to which his films provide a striking counterpoint.

Conclusion

A focus on exceptional directors in film studies need not be at odds with an understanding of the realities of industrial filmmaking, of gatekeeping and selection processes, or of spectatorship and the shaping of discourse. Indeed, these concerns, which have played such a central role in film studies over the last two decades, can greatly enhance the argument for what makes a director exceptional – and vice versa. V-Cinema affords us an opportunity to reconcile, and reconnect, the two approaches.

The conditions under which Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Miike Takashi worked in V-Cinema provide important clues as to how and why these two filmmakers could come to hold such a prominent position in international film discourse. Retracing the steps in their

emergence from the confines of direct-to-video filmmaking into the world festival circuit and subsequently into international distribution puts pay to the notion that this process is one ruled largely by randomness or 'vagaries', as Phillips and Stringer assume. On the contrary, these two cases highlight a number of the factors and stakes at work in the creation of the "world cinema auteur" within the gatekeeping process of discovery, discourse, and nurturing through repeated selection and commercial distribution. This procedure is only vague to the extent that certain circumstances needed to be right for these filmmakers to be able to travel the entire distance: firstly, a 35-mm print and perhaps a venerable studio like Daiei to lend credibility; next, a gatekeeping infrastructure encompassing enterprising producers, well-connected intermediaries, and keen programmers; thirdly, in the specific cases of Kurosawa and Miike, their own prolific and diverse output that made sustained interest and discourse possible, while the explosive growth of DVD provided a concurrent market hungry for precisely their kind of serialized, genre-based filmmaking.

Attributing all this simply to luck and fortuitous timing would be to ignore the crucial role of considered selection by all the actors in the gatekeeping network. Other filmmakers, such as Nakata Hideo, Mochizuki Rokurō, or Nagasaki Shunichi, also operated within, and benefited from, the same set of circumstances, but in spite of being at one point "discovered" by gatekeepers, they did not attain a similarly prominent and enduring standing, leaving them stranded along the road toward canonization. If vagaries are at all involved in the procedure, they lie in the criteria for selection: why festival programmers never showed much interest in

Nakata's work outside J-horror, or why they seemed to lose all interest in Mochizuki's films after their "discovery" of Miike's. To reason that this happened simply because those films were not as "good" as the ones that were selected would be to bestow absolute objective power upon the programmer's choices – which would be akin to arguing that every festival selection every year consists exclusively of masterpieces – and, more importantly in the context that concerns us here, it would mean ignoring the stakes involved in gatekeeping and 'the business of making new authors' (Elsaesser 2005: 99).

Kurosawa's and Miike's continuously higher rates of productivity, as compared to their colleagues, consistently offered programmers a wider choice of films, thereby making it likely that at least one would find favor and end up traveling the festival circuit every year, while this same productivity also increased prospects for a future retrospective.[80] This allowed festivals to assume the nurturing role in a more sustained fashion than with, for example, Mochizuki or Nagasaki, whose "discovery" happened in the shape of a career retrospective (Rotterdam 1998 and 2006, respectively), but whose subsequent outputs were much lower than those of Kurosawa or Miike. If a retrospective is, as Elsaesser argues, the confirmation of a filmmaker's auteur status, the cases of Mochizuki and Nagasaki seem to suggest that beginning a filmmaker's international exposure with a retrospective might actually be more of

[80] In 1999, mini-retrospectives of Kurosawa Kiyoshi's films took place at festivals in Hong Kong, Edinburgh, Toronto, and Paris. The first extensive retrospective of Miike Takashi's works happened in 2006 at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, Italy.

an obstacle than an acceleration on the road to canonization.

Textual factors played a role in Kurosawa's and Miike's rise to international prominence as well, characterized by the paradoxically opposing formal approaches of restraint and excess. These grew out of production circumstances in V-Cinema and are, to an extent, also present in the films of other directors (restraint in Nakata's J-horror films, excess in Mochizuki's yakuza movies). Yet, hand-in-hand with Kurosawa and Miike's particular eccentricities they coalesced into displays of formal innovation and stylistic boldness, thematic preoccupations and narrative idiosyncrasies that consistently nourished gatekeeping and discourse. And despite their initial identification with specific genres, these two filmmakers' subsequent confirmations as mainstays at the festival circuit's A-list events occurred mostly as a result of the diversity of their output, meaning that the qualities that set them apart were individual and not generic.

The above properties of Kurosawa's and Miike's works furthermore made them eminently suited to commodification within establishing patterns in international film distribution, particularly the rapidly growing DVD market – patterns that their films helped shape. Seen from the widest vantage point, it seems almost logical that works intended primarily to fill domestic video store shelves should, at the end of the long and arduous gatekeeping process, eventually find such a comfortable spot on similar shelves the world over. The symmetry of the starting point and the final destination seems almost too perfect, certainly not something achieved by way of vagary. It is true that at both ends we find a

demand for marketable genre commodities, with just the right degree of acknowledgement that 'originality can be good business'. However, what elevates the works of a particular filmmaker from within their domestic industrial context and what distinguishes them within the framework of international festivals and distribution can diverge significantly, leading in some instances to a split reception. Miike's complex handling of different forms of excess is a case in point: *Audition*'s lengthy scenes of mature romantic drama would have made it unaccustomed viewing for the youthful J-horror demographic, yet those same scenes found a familiarized audience in the festival spectator. The international distribution market itself also consciously used split reception in marketing different titles from one director, which allowed distributors to more easily commodify the divergent generic natures of a director's works.

The films of Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Miike Takashi therefore encompassed possibilities for a wide range of uses on the part, and in the interest, of gatekeepers. This potential in all cases springs from the creative leeway that these filmmakers recognized and seized, within V-Cinema and without. Neither director is 'a frustrated aesthete who is forced to slum it in "disreputable" genres' (Rayns 1998: 230); instead they embrace what serialized commercial genre filmmaking has to offer them, consistently working from within an industrial context to create idiosyncratic works that caught, and held, the interest of gatekeepers and spectators alike.