

“PARADISE? TO ME IT’S TOO NOISY”:
PRECARITY, ALIENATION, AND INVISIBLE VIOLENCE IN THE PINK CINEMA OF
HISAYASU SATŌ

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Abstract:

This is a full-length study centered on the career of Japanese Film Director Hisayasu Satō, in which I argue that his films were representative of the social issues that plagued Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, specifically as such issues affect Japan's youth population. I also make the argument that, though Satō worked primarily within the genre of pink cinema (softcore erotic cinema), his work can be placed within a variety of other cinematic traditions as well, such as those of body horror and postmodern science fiction. Far from being a limiting factor in his work, Satō's pink films used physicality to depict a wide spectrum of emotional and social issues, from social alienation to state violence to depression and collective trauma. His utilization of other genre styles, such as that of science fiction, served to sharpen his social commentary and reinvigorate the landscape of Japanese pink cinema by rearticulating what such films could be in terms of content. There are a number of factors, such as confusing and abrasive film titles, as well as some genuine instances of extremity that have helped keep Satō's films away from the mainstream. This, however, is exactly where he appears to want his films to be.

Introduction: Setting the Scene

*On a normal day at a Japanese high school, a day no different than any other, a young couple enjoy a private moment on the school's rooftop. The boyfriend films his love interest with good-humored fascination as she flirts with him coyly, her laughter reaching his ears behind the camera's unflinching lens. The scene is interrupted when a gang of male students waltz up to them, their faces masked and their identities impossible for even the interrogative lens of the boyfriend's camera to discern. He holds onto the camera as he is beaten to the ground and kicked into a semi-unconscious state. His girlfriend is forced to the ground as the gang tear off her clothes and proceed to rape her, her screams penetrating the recording device as it is clutched in her wounded love's arms. As the rape proceeds, the boyfriend bears witness and attempts to cover his eyes. However, a few moments later he turns to camera towards his girl and begins to film her being assaulted. The girl's gaze meets the camera's eye and doesn't leave it. -From *Hidden Video Report: Dark Shot!* (1991)*

*A young computer salesman downloads a mysterious software that is marked on his computer by a red rose icon. After downloading the software, he begins receiving emails with the phrase "invitation to rape" in the subject line. These emails contain the personal and residential information of various women, and he begins to spend his nights raping and (sometimes) killing these women by finding them at the addresses noted in the emails. During the day he enjoys a seemingly normal, innocent romance with his college-aged girlfriend. Little does he know that she has psychic powers, and is using her powers to view his nighttime excursions telepathically. Little does he know that she developed the computer program he's been using to satiate his dark desires. -From *Continuous OL Rape: Prey* (1990)*

*A young woman who lives in the desert surrounding a major metropolitan city of Japan bids her son farewell as she heads off to a new day's work. She straps her goggles on, kicks her motorcycle into first gear, and gazes with cold wonder at the landscape before her, both the barrenness of the desert and the crowded emptiness of the city a short distance away. She kicks off and rides toward the city, her son watching her speed away with amusement etched onto his youthful face. As his mother rides, a chemical sprays across all the ground she covers. She eyes the city, hoping to spray all the streets and expose the chemical to the air and to the people who reside there. The chemical being sprayed is a drug called MySon, a drug which causes the people exposed to it to commit suicide in violent and disturbing ways. She smiles, knowing that only by bringing about the apocalypse can she save the world. -From *Naked Blood* (1996)*

The three films described above, *Hidden Video Report: Dark Shot!* (1991), *Continuous Office Lady Rape: Prey* (1990), and *Naked Blood* (1996) are films directed by legendary Japanese exploitation director Satō Hisayasu. All three films represent the zenith of Satō's film career, a journey that began in 1985 and, by the coming of the 21st century, had yielded over seventy polarizing and controversial works. Satō's films star perverts, voyeurs, sadistic schoolgirls, and lots of video cameras. Most of his films prominently feature rape and torture as key plot points, and all of his films are filled to the brim with anxiety, depression, and the tension caused by repressed desire. His films were among the most controversial and debated films of the *pinku eiga* (pink film) genre, and his notoriety peaked in 1992 when he had Sagawa Issei, the reviled Japanese cannibal, guest star in one of his films as someone who derives sexual pleasure from caressing women's skin while wearing a gas mask. Satō was one of the four *pinku shitennou*, a group of filmmakers whose moniker most commonly translates to the "Four Devils"

(although this is actually a popular mistranslation) of Pink.¹ He was also, most assuredly, a director whose films cut deep into the chest of Japanese society and revealed its slowly rotting heart.

In the late 80s and early 90s a variety of social issues plagued Japan. The bursting of Japan's bubble economy resulted in a decade long depression that it took Japan a long time to recover from, and many of the recession's effects can still be seen today. The recession effectively ended Japan's famed "lifetime employment system," and over the course of the 1990s the suicide rate for middle aged males saw a noticeable uptick. As much as 25% of the suicides were attributable to economic anxiety.² Suicides had, by the end of the 1990s, hit over 30,000 annually, and poverty rates and unemployment both increased at an alarming speed. Perhaps most telling is that the rate of irregular workers increased greatly after the bubble burst, climbing from about 18% of the workforce in 1990 to over 35% by 2011. Because of the increasingly harsh economic circumstances and lack of financial security, especially for young people entering the job market, the 1990s has commonly been termed Japan's "Lost Decade."³

This terminology directly implies that something important about Japanese life was lost during this time. Perhaps it was a kind of general trust in the economic and governmental structures of Japan that was lost, as the citizenry realized that these institutions were weaker and less capable than they had taken for granted. The general public became greatly disillusioned during the Lost Decade, disillusioned and angry enough to unseat Japan's right-wing Liberal

¹ Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain: The Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema*, 2nd Edition, (Surrey: FAB Press, 2014), 249.

² Kenneth Henshall, *A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower*, 2nd Edition, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 174-175.

³ Carl Cassegård, *Youth Movements, Trauma, and Alternative Space in Japan*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 28.

Democratic Party (LDP) for a time. Although, when the change in electoral attitudes and a non-LDP majority in the Diet didn't bring about a redemptive end to economic precarity, many Japanese came to accept that the problems they were facing were deep rooted and unlikely to be solved.⁴ To many scholars of Japan, the existence of pink/erotic cinema may not initially appear to have ongoing social relevance or artistic merit. Such an assessment, however, is overly simplistic, and falls apart when considering directors like Satō and his contemporaries. The pink films of Satō Hisayasu visually represented and commented upon issues which plagued Japan's youth population during an era of heightened precarity and depressiveness. By doing so, while also incorporating expansive film traditions that were popular at the time, such as body horror and postmodern science fiction, Satō managed to reinvigorate pink cinema and reaffirm its artistic potentialities.

A Brief History of Pink Cinema

The history of pink cinema (*pinku eiga*) is difficult to delineate in its entirety due to the amount of early films in the genre that remain lost or inaccessible. The scholarly consensus is that Kobayashi Satōru's 1961 film, *Flesh Market*, is the first true pink film to have ever been made. However, the film received extremely limited distribution, having been exclusively shown in adult theatres at the time. As one of the first Japanese films to show bare breasts, it was skirting the line of what was publicly acceptable, particularly as the Japanese film industry was coming off the period of stringent censorship that was enforced during U.S. occupation. Nudity in Japanese films became increasingly normalized throughout the 1960s, as pink films began to be produced and viewed by the Japanese public. In particular, Suzuki Seijun's 1964 film, *Gate of*

⁴ Henshall, *A History*, 178.

Flesh, became one of the first instances of nudity being depicted in a mainstream film release (Suzuki's film was produced by *Nikkatsu*, a mainstream film company in Japan).⁵

The buildup to pink cinema's genesis in the 1960s can be seen as a continuous process of changes within the Japanese film industry, particularly from the end of U.S. occupation in 1952. A string of films aimed at Japan's youth, such as *Nikkatsu's* 1956 release, *Season in the Sun*, began showing increasingly more female skin. These films, while not nearly as extreme as even the earliest pink films, were quite a bit racier than those being made a decade prior. Nakahira Kou's *Crazed Fruit*, an immensely popular 1956 *Nikkatsu* production, paved the way for a string of films aimed at Japan's youth that would similarly feature swimsuit-clad women. *Eirin*, the Japanese film censorship board, responded accordingly to these assertions of youthful sexuality by introducing the *seijin* (adult) category for films.⁶ Film censorship in Japan has a long history, and one of the important elements that distinguished Japanese pornography from other sex films was the inability of film directors (up until the mid-1990s) to depict genitals onscreen. Article 175 of the Japanese Criminal Code, a public hygiene law, outlawed the audio/visual depiction of obscenity. In the film industry, this code was translated as outlawing filmic depictions of genitalia and pubic hair.⁷ As such, pink cinema is explicitly soft-core in nature, and the instances of nudity are generally limited to the buttocks and upper torsos of the actors.

One of the difficulties in describing the history of pink cinema is that different critics and scholars define the term in different ways. Jack Hunter, for instance, defines *pinku eiga* as

⁵ Thomas and Yuko Mihara Weisser, *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia: The Sex Films*, (Miami: Vital Books Inc., 1998), 22.

⁶ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 32-33.

⁷ Weisser, *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*, 21.

merely “the line of sexploitation movies” developed in Japan during the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ Thomas and Yuko Mihara Weisser give a similar definition, suggesting that the term can apply to all “movies which feature an abundance of scantily clad actresses.”⁹ These definitions seek to define the pink genre broadly so as to include a variety of different film formats, particularly films released by mainstream production companies such as *Nikkatsu*’s Roman Porno (abbreviation of “Romantic Porn”) and Pinky Violence genres, both of which contain enough sexuality and nudity that they would certainly fall into *Eirin*’s “*seijin*” category. Film critic Jasper Sharp, however, offers a more specific definition. According to Sharp, pink cinema specifically refers to films that were independently produced, shot on 35mm film, contained an abundance of nudity and sex, and ran for about an hour in terms of duration. These films were also typically made by at least semi-professional crew members and actors.¹⁰ In this study I use the definition offered by Sharp, for a few main reasons. For one, the specificities drawn by Sharp in regards to *pinku eiga*’s format are important to understanding their status as notoriously low-budget titles produced by filmmakers to serve as foot-in-the-door type projects. In particular, however, I wish to highlight the distinction between independent productions and those made by mainstream companies (like *Nikkatsu*) because independent studios have a kind of populist ethos about them that suits very well the style of many pink auteurs, and especially the style of Satō Hisayasu. It is especially worth drawing a distinction between Roman Porno films, which were often more conventional in their content and directorial styles, and the independent pink films which were oftentimes more innovative. Roman Porno films contain enough similarities to pink cinema, notably their status as hour-long 35mm projects, to make them worthy of mention in this

⁸ Jack Hunter, *Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema*, (Britain: Creation Books International, 1998), 7.

⁹ Weisser, *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*, 20.

¹⁰ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 9.

study. It is, however, difficult to imagine a filmmaker as distinctively abrasive as Satō working for a mainstream production company. Some of Satō's films were actually distributed by *Nikkatsu*, but his status as an individualist hoping to shock audiences wouldn't have produced films that could be so easily written off as comedic, historical, or conventionally horrific (comedy, historical drama, and B-Movie horror being three Roman Porno archetypes).

It is important to understand, when describing the birth of pink cinema in the 1960s, that cinema in Japan has always been viewed as more than just a medium of entertainment. When first describing Thomas Edison's Kinetograph, an early motion picture display machine, one article in a Fukuoka daily newspaper presented the headline "Pictures Give a Speech." Scholar Aaron Gerow notes that this headline, without specifying that it is the people within the pictures who are doing the speaking, "focuses attention on technology itself as an enunciative subject."¹¹ Thus, film has long been viewed by the Japanese public as a means to communicate social ideas, and it is likely for this reason that censorship was so pervasive throughout the early history of the medium in Japan. This inherent belief in the ability of images and film to be outspoken had a vast impact on early pink cinema, specifically within the politically charged works of director Wakamatsu Kōji.

A discussion of Wakamatsu Kōji is obligatory whenever discussing the relevance of *pinku eiga* as an art form. Not only would his films inspire many later directors (Satō and co. included), but his style laid the very foundation for independent pink cinema in many ways. For the scope of this study, there are two of Wakamatsu's innovations that are particularly noteworthy: His tendency to make the most of low budgets, and his propensity towards

¹¹ Aaron Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation, and Spectatorship, 1895-1925*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2010), 41.

radicalism in both content and message. When Wakamatsu Productions, the indie film company, was first formed, they didn't have an abundance of capital. Wakamatsu began his career in television, and so entered the film marketplace in a standard enough manner.¹² His directorial debut was a short film titled *Sweet Trap*, released in 1963, and this is where Wakamatsu began to cut his teeth as a film director. He signed a contract with *Nikkatsu* and, within two years, had helmed 20 films for the behemoth company.¹³

After forming his own company to fully express his radical views, he began making extremely low budget films that combined ultraviolence with avant-garde imagery and radical leftist politics. His films were often shot for under one million yen (roughly \$5,000 at the time), and as such he made the most of "all-location shooting, natural light, and single takes."¹⁴ An additional benefit of all-location shooting, besides being cheap and easy to do, is that it can give films a sort of thematic consistency. In Wakamatsu's notorious 1969 film, *Go, Go, Second Time Virgin*, the entire film was shot on the rooftop of the Wakamatsu Pro office building.¹⁵ This location, as it overlooks a crowded city street and is a completely isolated space, gives off a foreboding sense of loneliness throughout the film. The portentous nature of the setting is fully realized when, at the end of the film, the two lead characters commit suicide by jumping to the street below. A similar effect can be seen throughout many of Wakamatsu's works, notably *The Embryo Hunts in Secret* (which takes place in a single apartment room) and *Violated Angels* (which takes place in a single dormitory). Wakamatsu has noted in interviews his proclivity for such decisions, stating that: "I don't know why. But I enjoy creating drama within a limited

¹² Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 51.

¹³ David Desser, *Eros plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁵ Hunter, *Eros in Hell*, 51.

space.”¹⁶ This less-is-more philosophy of filming had a major impact on independent *pinku eiga* for decades to come, and such direct influence is immediately apparent in many of Satō’s films. *Lolita Vibrator Torture*, *Uniform Virgin: The Prey*, and *Exciting Eros: Hot Skin*, are just a few of the examples where Satō limits himself to either one or two main sets, and where the limited feeling of such sets is used to create an intimate space within the films. *Pinku eiga*, a genre that focuses on acts of simulated sex, is perhaps very well suited to such a style of filming. However, it is specifically the use of limited spaces to enhance the emotions and themes depicted on screen that characterizes this design choice as a Wakamatsu innovation.

The second of Wakamatsu’s great innovations, one which influenced many filmmakers both within and outside the realm of independent pink cinema, was the uncompromising radicalism he presented on screen. Wakamatsu’s militant communist views led to many unforgettable scenarios, such as the plot of *The Embryo Hunts in Secret*, where a slimy capitalist kidnaps one of his female workers and subjects her to acts of torture and humiliation as she squirms feebly, being tied to the bed in the man’s apartment. In addition to his plotlines which depicted such direct proletarian pain, he also worked hard to both promote and criticize the broader leftist movement. The story of Wakamatsu’s most propagandistic film, *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War*, gives the impression that, for all his outer toughness, Wakamatsu could be surprisingly sensitive and moralistic. The story goes: Wakamatsu and his lifelong comrade and fellow director Adachi Masao were invited to go to the 1971 Cannes film festival. However, Adachi suggested that they go visit the Red Army members (among them Shigenobu Fusako and Okamoto Kōzō) who had fled to Lebanon to fight alongside the PFLP. The two of them went to Beirut and did guerilla warfare training for two weeks, before beginning the

¹⁶ Ibid., 53.

documentary film and interviewing those associated with the PFLP. One of those Wakamatsu met in Beirut was a young Palestinian boy who was dedicated to fighting for his freedom as a guerilla. The boy had a pendant around his neck, and he told Wakamatsu that someday, when they were a free people, someone would return the pendant to his hometown. The radical director's response showed a kind of sincerity and conviction that, it seems to me, is shared by Satō Hisayasu:

Then it hit me: in two days, I would be home in my country, but these people are fighting for their home. I suddenly felt I would be wrong to try to make money off of this. My duty was to try to spread the word about their story.¹⁷

As a result of this interaction, Wakamatsu and Adachi primarily played the film on university campuses in Japan in order to help agitate. Wakamatsu was not, however, a shill for any movement toting hammer & sickle flags. His 1972 film, *Ecstasy of the Angels*, was a film about a revolutionary group that fell apart due to internal strife. The film critiques the tendency of leftist movements to splinter apart over sectarian differences, and remains particularly relevant considering that it was released the month following the famous *Asama-Sansō* incident, wherein members of Japan's United Red Army had taken a stand against the police in a mountain lodge after systematically torturing and killing those within their own ranks.

In summation, Wakamatsu's propensity towards subversion and social resistance can be seen as a harbinger of later creativity within the *pinku eiga* movement. Satō's films are well known for their ability to alienate both underground and mainstream audiences, and this ability, combined with low-budget brilliance and filmic radicalism, were the relics of Wakamatsu's legacy that made their way into the later auteur's ethos. Wakamatsu turned to more commercial

¹⁷Chris Desjardins, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film*, (London: I.B. Tauris and Co Ltd, 2005), 185-186.

films later in his life and, when asked why he did so in a 1999 interview, he made a comment about how mainstream success is impossible with pink cinema:

Movies can't really be called 'pink' if they're being accepted by the general public. They've always got to be guerilla. Pink films are about putting it out there in the public's face and smashing people's minds!¹⁸

The *pinku eiga* landscape was a weird place in the late 80s and early 90s. AV (Japanese Adult Video, ie. hardcore pornography) was beginning to blossom and, with the rise of softcore V-cinema films, people no longer needed to go to dimly lit, back-alley pink cinemas to get their fix. As scholar Alexander Zahlten points out, pink cinema began in the 60s as a type of film with inherently radical potential, both in terms of bucking censorship and displaying unconventional social narratives. From the mid-1970s onward, however, pink cinema became a conventional and mass-produced format, and thus began the genre's "petrification."¹⁹ In spite of the genre's arguable fall from grace and the emergence of hardcore AV as competition, pink films continued to be produced. In fact, the ratio of pink films to mainstream productions actually increased in the 1990s. The genre underwent a kind of second "renaissance," and the auteurs leading this post-Roman Porno rebirth were known as the Four Devils of Pink²⁰. The four devils were Satō Toshiki, Zeze Takahisa, Sano Kazuhiro, and Satō Hisayasu. Jasper Sharp attributes their linked success to two main factors. The first was that they were in the same place at the same time (in Tokyo), and thus the management at *Kokuei* (an independent *pinku* production company) marketed their films together. *Kokuei* even held a special screening in Tokyo that all four directors attended at one point. Satō Toshiki once compared the four directors to ramen chefs. He claimed that, though each may have been making products of the same general kind, they each

¹⁸ Ibid., 187.

¹⁹ Alexander Zahlten, *The End of Japanese Cinema: Industrial Genres, National Times, and Media Ecologies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 64.

²⁰ Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 249.

had a distinctive style that made their output unique. The second element of their success was their skill as innovative filmmakers. Sharp makes the case that, in comparison to many who were churning out soulless, uninteresting pink films, the Four Devils “were making real movies, shot on 35mm with technically proficient crews.”²¹ Sharp asserts that each director had relative freedom regarding the films they were making, so long as they kept in the standard number of sex scenes and didn’t much exceed an hour in runtime. Considering the bizarre and innovative content contained within Satō’s films, this background information makes good sense. The directors often felt like they had a great deal of control, with Zeze once remarking that “if [pink films are] disappearing anyway, then we can get away with doing whatever we want.” They did indeed do as they wished, and the resulting films polarized many standard *pinku* audiences. Surely, the idea of a salaryman entering a pink cinema on his lunchbreak and catching a screening of *Lolita Vibrator Torture* is funny in a kind of twisted way, but it also speaks to the power and uniqueness of the films the Four Devils were making. As Sharp puts it:

What the Four Devil’s essentially did was exploit the cinematic and narrative possibilities of the sequences bridging the scenes of bare flesh and coitus, adding their own mix of politics, philosophizing, meta-textual experimentation and social commentary to the mix – so much so that the sex scenes seemed like an afterthought and the films could easily stand on their own merits if they were removed.²²

Satō’s reputation is the most “diabolical” of the four, according to Sharp. Satō began working in the film industry in 1981 for *Shishi* Productions, and became involved as a *pinku* director after working on several of *Shishi*’s sets and making some successful short films. He became involved in *pinku eiga* due to practical concerns, as it was the easiest way for new directors to enter the filmic arena due to low production costs and ease of filming. Sharp successfully identifies the themes in Satō’s films as being closer to that of the horror genre than

²¹ Ibid., pp. 250.

²² Ibid., pp. 251.

other pink efforts, as Satō tended to focus on “inner-city dystopias” and starred the “rogue elements” of society.²³ Satō has often confirmed his affinity for those at the margins of society, and it is precisely this reason why he made films focusing on lonely young men, indecisive and frustrated women, and members of sexual minorities who had long been denied validity by the Japanese government. Satō’s affinity for the perspectives of the voiceless puts him in the same “guerilla” tradition as Wakamatsu, although the postmodern setting of his films gave them meaning for a new generation of those who struggled against society and governmental authority.

Satō’s Friends and Nomenclature

A full understanding of Satō’s work must follow a brief understanding of his frequent collaborators, such as Itō Kiyomi and Yumeno Shiro. Itō Kiyomi is a Japanese actress who starred as the heroine in many of Satō’s most well-known films, such as *Promiscuous Wife* and *Disgraceful Torture*. Itō began acting in *pinku eiga* when she was 22 and, although not much is known about her and her personal life, Satō has opened up on his personal relationship with her in interviews. Itō was working in the costume department of a Japanese theater company, along with other part time jobs, before her entry into pink cinema. Satō first met her when he was working as assistant director on a pink-comedy under director Umezawa Kaoru, which was when Itō auditioned for a lead role. “I saw this dull quiet looking girl walk into the café we were casting in,” Satō recalled. Both he and Umezawa laughed about how unsuitable Itō was for a comedy, but they later featured her in a few S&M films, before Satō began his directorial career

²³ Ibid., pp. 265-266

and casted her with great consistency. Asked about if Itō was the greatest actress, Satō had the following to say:

Well, she's not the sexiest actress... So I didn't like to use her because she was sexy, but because she has individuality and a strong personality. She's very different to others and not in the mainstream... Technically she isn't the greatest actress or anything, but she adds something extra to what I wanted to portray.²⁴

This casting decision, then, is a perfect illustration of how Satō's work is distinct from other pink directors. He completely abrogates the type of decisions that would accompany a standard erotic picture (as many pink films were marketed based on their starlets) and chooses Itō due to the different and individualist aura she possessed. Jasper Sharp notes that Itō possessed a "smouldering and somewhat dangerous sexuality," which made her appealing to Satō and well fitted to his work. "She proved particularly adept at playing guarded, secretive characters with a slightly unpredictable, unhinged quality," Sharp writes.²⁵ A good example of this can be seen in Itō's supporting role as a high school teacher in *Exciting Eros Hot Skin* (1986). In the film Itō plays the part of a supposedly upstanding, normal citizen, who turns out to be a spiteful pervert. She ends up engaging in a sex act on the school rood with one of her students (played by Hiboshi Mamiko) before squirting vaginal blood onto the young girl as an act of maliciousness. Itō's non-traditional looks, being both short and small chested, combined with her willingness to endure Satō's extreme demands and her penchant for playing sly, underhanded characters, make her the most memorable Satō heroine and a cornerstone of his stylistic practices in the 80s and 90s.

²⁴ iskander80, "Hisayasu Satō Interview ½," *Dailymotion*, June 12, 2008, video, 14:40, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5r5ca>

²⁵ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 265.



Itō Kiyomi in *Promiscuous Wife Disgraceful Torture*. ©Kokuei/Shintoho

Yumeno Shiro was another important player in Satō's films. He was an acclaimed *pinku eiga* screenwriter who did the majority of the screenplays for Satō's classic works, sometimes under pseudonyms such as Besho Toro.²⁶ Jasper Sharp notes that Yumeno's scripts "represent some of the pink genre's most intricate, tightly-plotted, and sophisticated" plotlines, oftentimes incorporating film-noir and crime thriller elements into the films.²⁷ There isn't a great deal more to know about Yumeno Shiro, but the point worth taking away is that Satō and his work often featured some of the industry's best, brightest, and most distinct. Whether using interesting and unconventional actors such as Itō Kiyomi and Itō Takeshi (the male lead in *Lolita Vibrator Torture*, who later became a very famous *pinku eiga* star), working with contemporaries such as Zeze Takahisa, working with up-and-coming directors such as Imaoka Shinji and Tajiri Yūji, or working with Yumeno to create scripts and plots that were unconventional and blended in other genre styles, Satō's filmmaking practices remained both confrontational and deeply personal.

One of the major goals of this study is to clear up the record on the nomenclature of Satō's film catalog, for this is initially a subject of confusion for many people, and previous writings on Satō have oftentimes only mucked up the waters. The most common way his nomenclature has been described previously, such as in the works by the Weissers and Sharp, is

²⁶ iskander80, "Interview Hisayasu Satō 1/3," *Dailymotion*, September 25, 2008, video, 12:05, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6vio8>

²⁷ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 265.

as possessing two different titles for each film. According to Sharp, each one of the films has both an original release title and a unique “director’s title.”²⁸ While not technically incorrect, this terminology makes it appear as if the “director’s title” is the title preferred by Satō, which is incorrect. Satō himself described the different titles in the following manner: Each film has an original screenplay title. Some of these titles are just crude descriptions of the content, while some are chosen because he is in the process of finalizing the title. However, these original screenplay titles tend to be quite abrasive or sensational, and thus Satō creates separate titles for “public consumption.”²⁹ To give an example, Satō’s 1986 film possessed the original screenplay title of “Lolita Vibrator Torture.” This title is quite sensational, and so a different title, “The Secret Garden,” was chosen for public consumption. In Sharp’s terminology, the original release title would be “Lolita Vibrator Torture” while the director’s title would be “The Secret Garden.” This is misleading, however, because the sanitized titles are often the ones designed for public release, while the more sensational titles are the one’s Satō prefers. However, the nomenclature was not consistent across all of his films. Some of the films were able to be publicly released with their original screenplay titles while other’s bore the sanitized titles. For the purposes of this study, I am choosing to use English translations of the original screenplay titles, as the perverse nature of many of the titles seems most appropriate to describe the bizarre and fascinating worlds that Satō creates.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 263-264.

²⁹ iskander80, “Interview Hisayasu Satō 1/3,” *Dailymotion*, September 25, 2008, video, 12:05,

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6vio8>

³⁰ **Explanatory note:** One of the films discussed at length in this study, *Continuous OL Rape: Prey (1990)*, has been widely mistranslated. All of the previous books on *pinku eiga*, as well as IMDB, list the original title of this work as *Hanra Honban: Joshidaisei Bokou-hen*, or “Naked Action: College Girl Rape Edition,” if translated directly to English. I know this is incorrect because, when the VHS tape is put in, the title that appears on the screen in Japanese is *Renzoku OL Reipu Ejiki*, which roughly translates to English as “Continuous OL Rape: Prey.” This correct title is the one used throughout this study, with *Continuous OL Rape* being used as shorthand. A complete list of the films discussed in this study (with their different titles) can be found in Appendix 1.

Lost Youth and Economic Precarity

When considering Satō's cinema as a site of social struggle, identifying both his subjects and their reality is an important first step. The director's films almost all focus on young people, often high school age characters who are unconventional and in possession of dark thoughts. A tempting explanation for this focus on Japan's youth population is the simple fact that, in the realm of sex cinema, youthful bodies are always the most mainstream and appealing models to depict. However, there is something far more portentous about Satō's depiction of youth than that of many other exploitation directors. Wakamatsu, for instance, nearly always depicted characters who were adults in both age and maturity. Even the truly youthful subjects Wakamatsu chose to focus on, such as the two lead characters in *Go, Go, Second Time Virgin*, were surprisingly mature and self-aware for their ages. It can be said that Wakamatsu's characters are primarily vehicles he uses to display his social views rather than people to be related to, and as such the young people in his films don't possess nearly the restlessness or uncertainty of Satō's characters. Satō's girls and boys always appear to be in some state of emotional trepidation, as if the world around them will lash out and consume them at any moment, and they don't know how to cope. This effect is almost certainly intentional, and there are many fine examples of such characterization in Satō's filmography. That being said, it isn't enough to merely identify Satō's favorite character types and their everyman struggles. It is equally important to note, regarding the history of *pinku eiga* as a medium, that Satō's films inspired many up and comers, including Sano Kazuhiro, a fellow Pink Devil, to pick up cameras and begin telling their own stories. Satō himself has admitted to sneaking into theaters as a young man to see the films of pink auteurs like Wakamatsu,³¹ and yet many college age students

³¹Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 266.

were watching Satō's films in theaters and becoming entranced in much the same way. Award winning new-age pink director Tajiri Yūji (who began to work for *Kokuei* in the 90s, and was an assistant on several Satō films) acknowledged Satō's work as being unique and transformative. According to Tajiri: "One day I saw *Lolita Vibrator Torture* by Hisayasu Satō, and was fascinated by this film, which was completely different from anything I had seen before."³² Films such as *Lolita Vibrator Torture* and others were alienating to traditional middle-aged *pinku eiga* appreciators, and so it is interesting that such films gained popularity among young people and especially among aspiring filmmakers. This effect, in some sense, can be seen as immortalizing Satō's status as a modern-day Wakamatsu, as Wakamatsu's films were only truly appreciated by both young students and disgruntled laborers. Of course, one darkly comedic difference between the two directors was that Satō's films were often shown alongside more commercial films as accompanying features to complete the ticket,³³ thus proving to be nasty shockers for many Japanese audiences.

The reality faced by young people in Satō's films is one of bleakness, as the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a seemingly prosperous Japan undergo a major economic collapse. The resulting Lost Decade of the 1990s was a time defined by economic precarity and widespread uncertainty regarding both the future of Japan and the efficacy of its social systems.

The young characters in Satō's *Lolita Vibrator Torture* (1987) are searching for human connection in a world that is deeply lacking. The lead character, a young high school girl played by Kimura Sayaka, drifts through life without any close friends. One of the opening scenes is a shot where she is walking home from a restaurant with two other girls she recently met, and the

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 315.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 265.

two girls make ludicrous and inane remarks while openly admitting to being confused by Kimura's character. They ask her about a song she was singing, about a canary that forgot how to sing, before dismissing the song as unintelligible. The scene proves a powerful exposition of the "lack of communication in cities,"³⁴ a theme Satō himself has described as being central to his body of work. Kimura's character is a lonely girl who returns home to an empty house, as her father is always away on business due to the demanding corporate work structures that defined economic life in 1980s Japan. Her song, about an apparently worthless and uninteresting canary, is a somber reflection of her own life, and her inability to move forward with a sense of agency. "Shall I discard the canary on the mountain behind me?" she muses to herself. As she sings, she is shown walking in a series of photographs, moving forward by herself against a crowd coming in the opposite direction (towards the camera lens). The image of individuals moving against the grain is one Satō uses in several of his films, but in *Lolita Vibrator Torture* the song about feeling worthless and wanting to give up adds a dimension of tragedy to the image, as if the song were a paean to all of Japan's disaffected youth and their struggles. Since the film was released in 1987, before the deep recession that beset Japan after 1989, the economic element of the film is less emphasized than the themes of social alienation. However, the absence of Kimura's father, a symbol of the personal sacrifices that the 1980s' order of economic growth demanded, helps to define the sense of loneliness within the story. Kimura's character has very few people she can turn to, and thus wanders aimlessly until she finally finds companionship within the realm of ultraviolence. The lead male character, a photographer turned sadistic murderer who kidnaps girls and tortures them in an abandoned shipping container, is shown to be just as lost

³⁴ Miguel Patrício, "Hisayasu Satō on 'The Bedroom,'" *YouTube*, [May 19, 2016, video, 5:09](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaisTfFU-TY), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaisTfFU-TY>

within the sea of Japan's major cities as Kimura's character. They find a deep connection with one another through violent assault, as Kimura becomes the photographer's accomplice in his murderous exploits.

In addition to depicting the social alienation and economic precarity that affected Japan's youth in the leadup to and aftermath of the bubble economy's bursting, Satō also proposes that these problems should be thought of in a new way. In particular, the characters in both *Lolita Vibrator Torture* and *Hidden Video Report: Dark Shot!* are afflicted with a deep sense of trauma, and through depicting trauma onscreen Satō accosts audiences and forces them to think about the implications that social problems as broad as these have on the mental and physical health of young people. Scholar Carl Cassegård has proposed that many young people experienced "collective trauma" during the recession period, meaning a trauma that has "caused an irreparable damage to a group's identity or self image." Although Satō's films are profoundly individualistic, and he does represent individual trauma in a variety of ways, his cinema also meets Cassegård's standard for depicting collective trauma because the problems afflicting the youth in his films result in "a weakening or disintegration of the social ties that hold the group together."³⁵ Japanese critics have referred to this aspect of Satō's work as "discommunication."³⁶ In *Lolita Vibrator Torture*, for instance, the female lead is never able to make significant connections with anyone other than the photographer/murderer character in the film, someone who is just as prone to violence and sadism as she is. Nor is the restless photographer ever able to get a normal job, because society has condemned these characters and weakened their very ability to construct social ties with the people around them. The mixing of individual and

³⁵ Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 15.

³⁶ Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, pp. 266.

collective trauma in *Lolita Vibrator Torture* can be seen in the infamous torture scenes, where Satō uses a stroboscopic camera technique to convey a sense of horror. The stroboscopic effect involves use of a “flashing stills camera”³⁷ to create an intentionally psychedelic and intrusive scenario on-screen. The trauma on-screen is individualistic, and yet the detachment felt by the characters is indicative of the alienation and lack of direction felt by young people in an ever-changing world.



Individual and collective trauma mix in *Lolita Vibrator Torture* (1987). ©Nikkatsu Corporation

Hidden Video Report came out in 1991, and depicts the scenario of economic precarity in a way that synthesizes *pinku eiga* with film noir. The male lead is a videographer, who spends his time sneaking around at night and illegally videotaping people having sex, either by crouching behind trees or outside of bedroom windows (or other spots that invite voyeuristic activity). He then provides the tapes to a friend who edits and sells them, making the two a profit by clearly violating privacy laws. The character’s economic desperation can be seen not only in the unconventional and illegal components of such an activity, but also in how it is essentially project-based, a form of part time labor and income. In this sense, the videographer becomes a freeter (part-time worker) as well as a criminal, pushing him to the furthest margins of society, the space Satō loves to explore most. In the darkness that exists on society’s outside, the people

³⁷ Ibid., 269.

trapped there remain outsiders looking in, a phenomenon wonderfully symbolized in *Hidden Video Report* by the fact that the videographer's work literally requires him to be hidden in darkness, looking towards the light through his camera. Of course, the sexual nature of the videographer's work is heavily informed by the confines of pink cinema that Satō works within. That being said, the act of shining a spotlight on the plight of non-standard laborers, regardless of the kind of work, was incredibly powerful in 1991. This is especially true coming off the traditional erotic cinema of the 1980s, which was focused primarily on entertainment value. Satō's propensity towards depicting realistic economic and social issues in his films helped to breathe new life into a genre that was in dire existential straits by the time the economic bubble popped. The economic desperation of freeters in Japan was severe, and remains a noteworthy social problem. It was estimated in 2004 that freeters aged 20-24, a demographic that increased dramatically after Japan went into recession, made nearly four times less than regularly employed workers, even though freeters often worked longer hours.³⁸

The videographer in *Hidden Video Report* eventually discovers a young girl who walks around at night, sleeps with random men, and then slashes across their eyes with a long knife, blinding them. As he continues to follow her and investigate, it is learned that the girl's roommate was the victim of a brutal gang rape atop a high school rooftop, an act of violation that her boyfriend filmed through his video camera. It appears as if the wandering girl is out to revenge her roommates' assault on all the men in the city by blinding them, metaphorically striking against the lens that recorded and replayed her roommate's assault.

³⁸ Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 28-29.



The “freeter detective” checks his camera within the dark of night in *Hidden Video Report* (1991).
©Kokuei/Shintoho

The shift from the 1980s to the 1990s, from the landscape of economic growth to the post-bubble economy, had a direct impact on Satō’s filmmaking that can be seen almost immediately. Satō’s 1980s output, with *Lolita Vibrator Torture* as a representative work, focused on those left behind by economic prosperity and attempted to visualize their pain. The “collective trauma” depicted in such works can be seen as the trauma of being different, of society chugging past you and resulting in a loss of one’s place. In Japan’s Lost Decade, however, such a feeling was far more widespread, and the growing distrust in social institutions afflicted a large segment of the populace. As if feeling the shift on an almost instinctual level, Satō’s films from the 1990s onward depict collective trauma in more direct and inventive ways. In *Hidden Video Report*, for instance, such trauma is depicted through a direct visual metaphor, that of trauma being passed from one young person to another via psychological transference. By the film’s end, the audience learns that the victim of the brutal rooftop assault, the wandering girl’s roommate (played by Itō Kiyomi), sleeps in the same bed as the young knife wielder. While they lay together, the nightmares and trauma of Itō’s character are transferred to the vengeful girl as a result of their close proximity, both physically and emotionally. The victims of trauma, Satō suggests, are quite literally the collective, as the pain of one person emanates outwards in a ripple effect. Both the vengeful girl and the men she harms are victims of such trauma, and the pain does not lessen regardless of one’s individual choice. The vengeful girl gets up every day and leaves the house, while Itō Kiyomi’s character stays inside and refuses to ever

face the world. Ultimately, however, it doesn't matter, because the pain remains systemically embedded in the social fabric, afflicting those who struggle outwardly as much as those who run away from the truth. In *Hidden Video Report*, this trauma is compared by one of the characters to the transference of noise when a videotape is left nearby a loud television or speaker. He says:

The same kind of thing [noise transference] happens between people. In other words, the severe psychological trauma of one dear to you spreads when you're in close contact with them for a long period of time. In this case, the affected person isn't conscious of it at all, so it's even harder to deal with.

The symbolism here is direct and powerful. For, just as the true nature of society's rot is difficult to consciously understand, even despite the growing anxiety of people during Japan's Lost Decade, so do Satō's youthful characters find themselves lost in time and burdened with conditions they cannot comprehend. For Satō, the trauma of social violence and displacement is a problem afflicting individuals first and foremost, but one that has a ripple effect and proceeds to mark the collective in multifaceted ways. When viewed in such a way, the opening scene of the film, that described at the beginning of this study, takes on a new and innovative meaning. When the boy films his girlfriends' assault and the shot switches to that taken from his video camera, the audience is voyeuristically experiencing trauma just as the characters do. Satō, by incorporating elements such as the direct perspective of camera lenses within the film's universe, transfers the trauma to audiences just as his characters do to each other. When attempting to understand why precisely Satō's films were so influential amongst young *pinku eiga* directors, perhaps the answer is a simple one: That he understood the difficulties faced by Japan's youth population, and attempted to depict such harsh realities in every facet of his work. His 1990s output was stunningly representative of Japan's Lost Decade in terms of content, and the stylistic elements he pioneered, such as a focus on fourth-wall breaking scenes and realistic character interactions, changed the landscape of pink cinema forever. Contemporary analysis, even that

which is critical of the perceived “excess” contained within Satō’s work, at least acknowledges that his films address real concerns within modern Japanese society. The Weissers, for instance, offer the following admission on the same page where they refer to Satō’s work as often being “atrocious as entertainment”: “In his most eloquent films, Satō’s characters first appear to be crazy {society’s misfits} but in a grander sense they are pure and innocent... As a result, his movies more accurately depict the reality of everyday life.”³⁹



The unwavering eye of the camera films traumatic reality in *Hidden Video Report* (1991). ©Kokuei/Shintoho

Satō as a Diabolical Artist (and unexpected Feminist?)

Any study of Satō would be incomplete without directly addressing the metaphorical elephant behind the pink curtain: Namely, it is necessary to discuss the incredibly bizarre and abrasive nature of Satō’s filmography, particularly in regards to his embrace of taboo subject matter and repeated depictions of sexual violence. Whenever anyone who isn’t familiar with pink cinema looks up Satō’s filmography, they will be greeted with a list of titles that sound like snuff films, and even many who are well versed within the genre may find themselves shocked by how unrepentantly in-your-face his films often are. Take, for instance, Satō’s 1986 film, *Uniform Virgin: The Prey*. *Uniform Virgin* is essentially an hour-long sequence of brutal rape scenes committed against high school girls (girls played by adult actresses of course), and many

³⁹ Weisser, *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*, 463.

struggle to find genuine meaning or direction within the violence. Film critic and indie director Dave Jackson, in a review of the film on Letterboxd.com, describes it as a “foul and relentless” project that is closer to AV than *pinku eiga*.⁴⁰ Similarly, Thomas and Yuko Weisser have criticized Satō’s films in their study of *pinku eiga*, labelling them as oftentimes nothing more than “atrocious as entertainment.”⁴¹ Not taboo enough? One can always turn to another 1986 effort, *Exciting Eros: Hot Skin*, that features fictional depictions of ephebophilia and incestuous rape. By the time the 1990s rolled around, Satō was no less aggressive in his subversions. His 1990 film *Horse and Woman and Dog* strikes a nerve for many due to on-screen depictions of bestiality. Perhaps most notorious, however, is his 1992 film *Promiscuous Wife: Disgraceful Torture*, which features prominently a cameo appearance by cannibal-turned-celebrity Sagawa Issei. For many dipping their toes into Satō’s filmography, these examples may come off as demented depictions of misogyny that don’t merit artistic evaluation. However, there is another way of looking at Satō’s bizarreness that helps to situate it within both the broader tradition of *pinku eiga*, and the culture of Japan in the 80s and 90s.

Firstly, it is worth looking at how sexual violence is generally presented in pink cinema and how Satō’s films differ from such commonplace depictions. To make this section easy to follow, I will state two of my conclusions up front, and then spend some time using film examples to bolster my assertions. Ultimately, there are two important points to understand about Satō’s use of sexual violence and male-on-female voyeurism in his movies:

⁴⁰ Dave Jackson, “Uniform Virgin: The Prey,” *Letterboxd.com*, July 26, 2019, <https://letterboxd.com/phantasmes/film/uniform-virgin-the-prey/>

⁴¹ Weisser, *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*, 463.

1. Satō's use of rape as a device for social commentary is informed by the confines of the *pinku eiga* genre, as Japanese sex films almost always feature rape and all pink cinema projects must contain a fair number of sex scenes.
2. In contrast to standard depictions of rape in pink cinema, where the female body is eroticized for the pleasure of the male audience, Satō's films often subvert the male gaze by giving the female subjects agency and power. It is also the case that sex tends to be de-eroticized in his work, with the horror elements being what is primarily emphasized.

Japanese sex cinema, especially *Nikkatsu's* Roman Porno genre, has a long history of depicting rape fantasies for male pleasure. One excellent example is Hasebe Yasuharu's 1976 film, *Rape! (Okasu!)*. In said film, Hasebe's leading lady (played wonderfully by Yashiro Natsuko) is brutally assaulted by a man in an elevator. After being violated, she finds out she enjoys the precarity of being assaulted, and so actively puts herself in positions where she will be molested throughout the remainder of the film, hoping to experience similar excitement to the initial rape. Hasebe was a great filmmaker and, by the film's end, he does subvert traditional gender dynamics in a few interesting ways. However, the film is largely one extended rape fantasy, where an attractive woman is abused for the pleasure of the men around her. Although rape fantasies are harbored by both men and women, the way the camera pans over Yashiro's naked body signifies that the film is meant to be erotically pleasing to a standard male audience. This scenario, where rape is depicted as pleasurable fantasy, is one of the two most common images of rape in pink cinema and Roman Porno. The other popular image, one Hasebe also loves to use, is the depiction of rape as black comedy. Jokes focusing on rape are a common enough (albeit controversial) element of black comedy in many different countries, but Japanese pink cinema has a tendency to play rape comedically whilst also depicting it erotically. Case in

point, Hasebe's *Rape!* also plays sexual assault for the comedic effect. It does so by incorporating a sub-plot wherein the film's main rapist character repeatedly assaults women until he sees that one of his prospective victims is on a walk with her dog. Instead of raping her, he introduces himself politely and goes on a walk with her as they bond over their affection for dogs (humor by defying expectation). Even Wakamatsu Kōji, as filled with symbolism and social metaphor as his films were, wasn't averse to using rape as a comedic device. Both *Violated Angels* (1967) and *Serial Rapist* (1978) use sexual assault as a vehicle for black comedy, though neither film attempts eroticism.

This tendency to depict sexual assault and voyeurism as both erotic and comedic concepts has strong roots in Japanese popular culture. Anne Allison, in her discussion of the male gaze within Shonen manga, notes that there is often a tendency in manga and anime to prominently feature "male characters who adopt various strategies [such as rape]... to position the female, often unwillingly, as the object of their gaze."⁴² If such a tendency to eroticize the assault and/or coercion of women is even prevalent in comics aimed at young boys, then it's deep rootedness within pink cinema becomes easier to understand, as pink cinema entails a focus on such fantasies. When asked about his use of rape as a plot device, Satō himself had the following to say:

In my pink films, a rape scene means the destruction, communication and proof of existence of this distorted society. To me, Japan is society of maternity. We always have a desire to be approved by mother. Anyway the rape is just metaphor (if you do it in real life, it is criminal).⁴³

⁴² Anne Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan*, 1st Edition, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 31.

⁴³ Kier-La Janisse, "'Pink Devil' HISAYASU SATŌ talks about his irrepressible desires," *Spectacular Optical*, July 21, 2011, <http://www.spectacularoptical.ca/2011/07/pink-devil-hisayasu-satō-talks-about-his-irrepressible-desires/>

Therefore, Satō attributes his focus on rape to both the genre he is working in, as well as the nature of frayed communication in modern society. For, if one desires to be approved by maternal forces, yet maternity is repeatedly assaulted and destroyed, then social cohesion and well-being become increasingly difficult to achieve. This is certainly one of Satō's ideological preoccupations, and so it makes sense that rape could be used in his films to communicate it.

More interesting, perhaps, is assessing instances where the female subjects are empowered within Satō's filmography. One specific example of such empowerment occurs within the film *Pleasure Masturbation: New Wife Version*, about as close to a genuinely feminist pink film as it is possible to locate. The film falls roughly within the housewife subgenre of pink cinema, a type of film that became immensely popular from the early 70s onward.⁴⁴ Robin LeBlanc, in her study of Japanese housewives and the political dimensions of their lives, attempts to assess how Japanese housewives are perceived and constructed in public discourse. "Few scholars," LeBlanc writes, "have studied how Japanese citizens perceive their citizenship".⁴⁵ LeBlanc's study begins by assessing the role of women within liberal society, and identifying the problems/contradictions that arise when such a conception is seriously considered. For example, Lockean individualism proposes the image of a "radically free, self-sufficient individual,"⁴⁶ an ideal which is at odds with the real-world expectations placed on women in a gendered world. If society expects women to be relegated to the private, domestic sphere, and participate in the nurturing of children, then such radical freedom is not expanded equally to women. Regarding the identity of *shufu*, the Japanese term that translates imperfectly

⁴⁴ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 272.

⁴⁵ Robin LeBlanc, *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

to housewife, LeBlanc identifies that the concept of *shufu* need not only apply to what goes on in the home. Rather, *shufu* implies a kind of primacy given to the home in the lives of housewives, wherein even women who work part time and participate in society may be considered *shufu* because their actions are socially viewed as being centered towards the home.⁴⁷

The opening scene of *Pleasure Masturbation* strikes back against such a limited social view of housewives and femininity. An apron-clad *shufu* walks around an empty apartment and stares at a picture of her and her husband's wedding, only to angrily throw the apron off of herself, toss the picture aside, and engage in masturbation. The audience act as voyeurs, in typical Satō fashion, witnessing the sexual liberation of a woman who is obviously frustrated with her situation in life. A constant scene in the film, that is repeated several times throughout, involves the *shufu* going out to the balcony and masturbating there, with the Japanese skyline in clear view behind her as cars pass by. This can be seen as her way of exposing all of society, not just the voyeuristic audience, to her frustrations and desires. The kind of radical freedom that LeBlanc views as not being extended to female citizens is forcibly taken by the *shufu* in *Pleasure Masturbation*, when she asserts her frustration through sexual expression. Such a feminist concept of sexuality might not seem to go along with *pinku eiga*, especially films such as Satō's that focus so heavily on violence against women. However, it is important to understand that the sexual violence in Satō's worlds is metaphorical and indicative of broader forms of social violence. Realistically, the women in many of Satō's films are well rounded characters with agency and the ability to defy social standards. *Pleasure Masturbation* is an especially potent example of the extent to which Satō's films could be surprisingly feminist, because it was one of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

Satō's first collaborations with screenwriter Godai Kyōko, one of the few women writers involved in *pinku eiga*, who was incredibly prolific.

Apocalypse and Individuality

There is a long history in Japanese popular culture of representing apocalyptic visions. Scholar William Tsutsui has termed such popular works as “annihilation fantasies,”⁴⁸ depictions of apocalypse and destruction that have been popular in Japanese society since the end of the Second World War. The social impact of films like *Godzilla*, a story which carried particularly special significance in the aftermath of the real-life apocalypse that was the nuclear bombing of Japan, can still be seen today. In fact, if one considers the immense popularity of projects like Otomo Katsuhiro's *Akira* and Anno Hideaki's *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, it can easily be argued that the social significance of annihilation fantasy in popular culture has only been augmented over time.

Part of what characterizes this continual popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century, and what proves especially important for Satō's work, is the shift within Japanese science fiction from the modern to the postmodern. In the 1980s, Japanese sci-fi become more concerned with “seeking ideals in fictional settings”⁴⁹ than advocating or representing directly grand political changes. This same change, it can be said, also occurred within the realm of independent pink cinema. The films of the Four Pink Devils were no less avant-garde than the films of revolutionists like Wakamatsu Kōji and Adachi Masao, yet they were far less

⁴⁸ William Tsutsui, “Oh No, There Goes Tokyo: Recreational Apocalypse and the City in Postwar Japanese Popular Culture,” From *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, edited by Gyan Prakash, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 96.

⁴⁹ Motoko Tanaka, *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 81.

preoccupied with immediate social change. Wakamatsu Kōji's fervent desire to "exterminate a huge number of cops all at once"⁵⁰ was replaced with Satō's desire to depict and preserve marginalized individuals, not as images of what they should be in a post-capitalist society, but as they are. This preservation of the individual is brought up by Satō in more or less every interview he does, and at one point he even acknowledges the distinct differences between himself and Wakamatsu. When asked about the extreme violence in his films, Satō responded with the following statement:

Yes, in a way, you could say it reflects the anger I felt at the time, but the anger I express in my films is not very clear. With Wakamatsu, it's clear that it's the anger he feels against the political system, but what bothers me more is this invisible violence we experience every day, the individual being suppressed by the system, and this is the violence I'd like to express and which I feel angry against.⁵¹

Satō's libertarian impulse is on full display here, and is consistent with the social analysis being produced by many radicals in the latter half of the twentieth century. Karl Hess famously wrote that, as a result of their growing power, modern political states continuously feed "without restraint on the energy, the talents, the hopes, the fears, and the futures of the people."⁵² Thus, contained within Satō's films are images of struggling individuals, those whose minds and bodies are repeatedly mutilated, attempting to live their own lives.

Despite being a pink cinema director by trade, Satō's filmography can be broadly placed within the tradition of Japanese science fiction. Whether it's the psychic powers at play in *Continuous OL Rape*, the obsession with video cameras in *Hidden Report* and *White Uniform Virgin*, the merging of the human with the technical as in *Exciting Eros*, or the brazenly scientific

⁵⁰ Hunter, *Eros in Hell*, 55.

⁵¹ Virginie Sélavy, "INTERVIEW WITH HISAYASU SATŌ," *Electric Sheep: A Deviant View of Cinema*, 2010, <http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/2010/12/22/interview-with-hisayasu-satō/>

⁵² Karl Hess. "The Lawless State," 1969, Retrieved from <https://mises.org/library/lawless-state>

in *Naked Blood* (one of Satō's rare non-*pinku* projects), nearly all of his films can be placed within the broad spectrum of science fiction, and thus are perfectly suited to be assessed as apocalyptic narratives. Critic Tony Rayns has described Satō's films as being "minimalist sci-fi" and containing veiled allusions to classic Japanese literature, such as Kawabata Yasunari's work.⁵³ Satō's films often depict a kind of urban dystopia, where large corporate buildings tower over characters within a given frame. Many of Satō's filmic environs feel empty, in spite of the people and buildings that populate the cities in his worlds. This is because the environments are always depicted as being spatially and philosophically antagonistic to his characters, as the people he focuses on are the downtrodden and perverse elements of society who don't successfully cohabit with everyday life. Satō's libertarian impulse to sympathize with the down and out oftentimes masks a darker reality: That the agents motivated by darkness always exist in society's shadow. Tsutsui identifies Japanese visions of sci-fi as possessing a "nihilistic tone and profound pessimism"⁵⁴ when compared to many western films, and it is within this tradition of nihilism that we may instinctually desire to categorize much of Satō's work (though certain later works, such as *Naked Blood*, seem less prone to nihilism). His characters are only able to relate to one another and assert themselves through anti-social behavior and violent sadism, thus synthesizing the individualist ideal with the harshness of modern reality. It is important to note that, when discussing the apocalyptic themes within Satō's work, it is usually the "invisible violence," the social structures that relegate his characters' individualities to society's margins, that is apocalyptic. Thus, the apocalypse in films like *Continuous OL Rape* and *Hidden Report* is tangible as a nexus of social control that aggresses against individuals, rather than an actual mass-extinction apocalypse. However, it is the literal apocalypse of *Naked*

⁵³ Tony Rayns, "Japan: Sex and Beyond," *Sight and Sound*, 06, (1995), 28.

⁵⁴ Tsutsui, "Oh No, There Goes Tokyo," 99.

Blood that remains Satō's greatest directorial achievement, and stands as the zenith of his unique cinematic vision.

To many, Satō's focus on violence against individuals may not seem grand or dire enough to be described as "apocalyptic," and yet it is precisely through the process of torture and alienation that apocalypse is made real for his characters. The association of apocalyptic sci-fi with body horror has deep roots in the history of Japan's pop culture landscape, even going back to films like *Godzilla*. Japanologist Susan Napier has argued that many of the components that characterize the advances of Japanese capitalism, such as "technological, social, and cultural advancement," have become points of foci for sci-fi works which attempt to highlight the "darker side of modern Japanese society."⁵⁵ This includes works, which became popular from *Godzilla's* release onwards, that focus to some degree on malformed and violated human bodies (alongside modern advancements) as descriptors of dystopia. Take, as one of the earliest examples, the depiction of Godzilla's destructive power as a metaphor for radiation poisoning and other grave injuries in the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Igarashi Yoshikuni notes that Godzilla, as a destructive historical condition, ends up becoming "the agent that reunites"⁵⁶ many of the living with their dead relatives over the course of the film, with Godzilla's grand brutality evoking images of destroyed cityscapes and, more importantly, sickened and battered bodies. In fact, the idea that human bodies can convey greater meaning than just the basic proof of existence has deep roots in Japan's postwar art and literature, even

⁵⁵ Susan Napier, "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from *Godzilla* to *Akira*," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993), 329.

⁵⁶ Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 116.

beyond the realm of sci-fi cinema. Famed postwar novelist Tamura Taijiro developed what was often referred to as “literature of the flesh,” stating the following:

We believe in nothing other than our own bodies. The body is the truth. The pain of the body, desire of the body, anger of the body, ecstasy of the body, confusion of the body, sleep of the body—these are the only truths.⁵⁷

The expression of truth through the human body is a form of art that lends itself well to film, and especially well to pink cinema, wherein naked bodies tend to be prominent and recurring visuals.

The connection between Tamura’s work and the *pinku eiga* genre is far from tenuous, as

Nikkatsu’s 1964 adaptation of Tamura’s novel, *Gate of Flesh*, is often seen as one of the

forerunners of later pink cinema. Satō has been called a “literalist of the body” by film critic Jay

McRoy. According to McRoy:

Satō posits the body as an indiscrete, transformative, and immanent space that reveals the potential for imagining new economies of identity; his films explore both the abject dread and infinite possibility of the human body in a state of dissolution, contributing an important and unique perspective to familiar preoccupations in contemporary horror cinema.⁵⁸

McRoy specifically directs this idea at Satō’s *Naked Blood* film, yet the same could easily be said of Satō’s entire catalogue.

The “dissolution” of the body Satō depicts in his films is shown alongside technological progression, notably the growing prominence of handheld video cameras and computer programs within society, and as such his films can be seen as linking together the genre traditions of body horror and postmodern science fiction. One of the important elements that distinguished the work of Satō and his fellow Pink Devils from other exploitation directors of the time was their willingness to incorporate a variety of genres and filmmaking styles into their projects, thus

⁵⁷ Ibid., 55-56

⁵⁸ Jay McRoy, ““The Dream Has Not Ended Yet”: Splattered Bodies and the Durable Orgasm in Hisayasu Satō’s *Naked Blood*,” *The Spectator* 22, no. 2 (2002), 34.

renewing interest in the *pinku eiga* format. Satō Toshiki, for instance, often combines standard softcore erotica with slice-of-life scenes that wouldn't feel out of place in the Sundance lineup. Satō Hisayasu's diabolical reputation among the Pink Devils is partially indebted to his philosophy of art, as he believes that there should be no limit to what film audiences are able to experience on screen. His famed quotation, that he wishes to design a film "which has the influence to drive its audience mad, to make them commit murder,"⁵⁹ testifies to the idea that his films are designed to trigger strongly unconventional responses from moviegoers. Taking all of this into consideration, it makes a great deal of sense that Satō's influences would come from both body horror and sci-fi, as both genres, particularly in the 1980s, were associated with radical tech-infused fantasies. Take, for instance, the *Guinea Pig* film series that began releasing the same year as Satō's film debut. The first two *Guinea Pig* films are works of body horror that are presented (to film viewers) as found footage snuff films. For instance, the famously reviled *Guinea Pig: Flowers of Flesh and Blood* features an on-screen message referring to itself as a "semi-documentary" reenacting an actual instance of a woman being dismembered. Thus, from the beginning of the film both technological achievement (the invention of video tapes) and brutality against naked female bodies are depicted concurrently, as elements of film that work symbiotically to stimulate audiences. The *Guinea Pig* films were massively popular in Japan, managing to outperform many Hollywood productions at the time of their release.⁶⁰ According to McRoy: "[The *Guinea Pig* films] mobilize images of corporeal disintegration... as metaphors for shifting conceptions of corporeal, social, and national cohesion."⁶¹ Thus, works of body horror that used violence against individuals to represent greater social issues were popular at the

⁵⁹ Jack Hunter, *Eros in Hell*, 123.

⁶⁰ Jay McRoy, *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

time Satō began producing *pinku eiga*. Influence from this tradition of body horror is palpable in his films, as is the visceral, hard-boiled nature of much popular sci-fi of the time, such as *Akira*. As Tanaka Motoko has pointed out, *Akira* takes place in a post-apocalyptic dystopia where much of the plot centers around human mutation, such as the arm of main character Tetsuo.⁶² The bringing together of body horror and sci-fi to represent human ideals and challenge popular societal notions was in fashion during 1980s Japan, and no one depicted violent tech-fantasies with the ferocity of Satō Hisayasu.

Let us turn to the case of psychic voyeurism in *Continuous OL Rape*, one of Satō's greatest films. The main character is a young computer salesman who exists in a corporate dystopia, where people are increasingly alienated from one another, and where obedience and conformity to the laws of state-capitalism are demanded from all subjects. Two wonderfully shot and conceived scenes that occur early on in the film make the oppressive setting clear. In one still-shot the computer salesman is seen walking through a crowd, where the crowd is moving entirely away from the camera and he is walking toward the camera. In this poetic shot, we see the individuality of the man as being barely visible. He goes against the grain, struggling to make it through a sea of conformity, and his face is the only one we the audience are able to see, thus symbolizing that he is one of the few trying to preserve his ego amidst the weight of the collective. In another scene, we see him call his girlfriend on the phone, only for his call to be interrupted by a rude man who is obviously in a rush. Thus, even the inventions and conveniences that characterize modern life, such as phone booths and dial up, are oftentimes rendered oppressive and disaffecting by the corporatization of society. Philosopher Josiah Warren, in the mid-19th century, often wrote of how modern economic life was fast becoming

⁶² Motoko Tanaka, *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction*, 100.

the arena of “civilized cannibalism,”⁶³ signifying that the livelihoods of individuals were being consumed by the expansion of big business and capitalist profit. The gray *zaibatsu* buildings that dominate the postmodern cityscape of *Continuous OL Rape* cue us into the fact that, save conscious acts of self-preservation and revolt, there is no escape. No revolution can take such a social paradigm down, especially when the majority comply with blind complacency. The ideal of the individual trying to live in a harsh and brutal world is shown by the duality of the main male character’s life. At night, he downloads the addresses of random women from a computer program called “Rosebud,” disguises himself, and goes to assault the women and enact his repressed desire. In contrast, we see him exist during the daytime as a well-dressed computer salesman who enjoys a seemingly passionate, normal romance with his college-aged girlfriend. In the film’s longest sex scene (which is a staggering eight minutes) he makes love to his girlfriend in her apartment. The phrase “makes love” is used here because the sex scene and its aftermath perfectly represent the perverted and increasingly dystopic nature of the world Satō sets up. The sex scene between the young salesman and his girlfriend is one of the few scenes across Satō’s entire filmography that could accurately be described as “erotic.” The camera pans slowly across the two and uses a variety of softcore film techniques, such as upper torso shots and non-graphic genital stimulation, to emphasize pleasure rather than violence. In the next scene we see the salesman at his computer, waiting for the Rosebud program to send him more “invitations to rape” (the film’s direct vocabulary). He says to himself: “Consensual sex is so dull.” Thus, in the film’s society the young man is only able to express himself through acts of illegal violence and is moved to boredom by genuine intimacy. This is the type of personality

⁶³ Josiah Warren, *Equitable Commerce: A New Development of Principles for the Harmoneous Adjustment and Regulation of the Pecuniary, Intellectual, and Moral Intercourse of Mankind, proposed as Elements of New Society*, (Ohio: Amos E. Senter, 1849), Republished by (Miami: Hardpress, 2019), 13.

that only a truly ill society could produce, and the fact that technology-worship and violence pervade the man's life says a great deal about the environment he lives in. Life is rendered so gray, with all the alienated people and the towering symbols of corporatism, that organic social interactions seem to have disappeared. Even the comic relief interactions in the film, such as the computer salesman's interactions with his girlfriend's roommate, who constantly annoys him with flash photography, are portrayed as awkward and abnormal. The dystopian nature of the city in *Continuous OL Rape* is further emphasized by the fact that the only apparent alternative to violence and illegality, blending into the crowd and being subsumed by it, is an undesirable act that signifies defeat rather than perseverance. The "invisible violence" against individuals is demonstrated by the salesman's violent acts, acts which appear to be his way of fighting back against society, yet represent precisely the invisible violence that keeps himself and others down. If the violence in the film can be seen as a social product, then audiences are left to wonder what a freer, less systemically oppressive society would yield instead.

The film's main plot twist is that the college-aged girlfriend of the main character is the one who was sending him the "rape data" all along, and that she was using psychic powers to view the assaults through his mind, satisfying her own dark desires in the process. Perhaps the film's most powerful scene occurs when she expresses the truth to the main character, emphasizing the frayed nature of their relationship. "It makes me want to hurt others," she says, referring to her feelings of isolation. "I shouldn't have tested what desires lurk behind your kindness." Such statements, both within and without the context of the film, speak significantly about the effects of social alienation and depression, and how such inner conflicts are visibly manifest in real-world anti-social behavior. In a very real sense, the bleakness of Satō's films conveys a direct, fully emphasized depressiveness that many people feel and understand. Satō's

films may represent the ideal of individuality, but they do so precisely by showing how such individuality is warped and twisted into sadness and depravity in modern society. The film's sci-fi elements, including the girlfriend's telepathy, allow audiences to visualize the internal conflicts that drive people every day, conflicts that often lurk within people under a veneer of kindness and normality. The film takes a "fly-on-the-wall" approach to character study, which is to mean that the conversations presented between characters are meant to be observed as if they are innocuous, everyday conversations. Many films focusing on characters who commit depraved actions might include some form of "commentary" on their actions, perhaps having them be accosted by police and/or members of the society around them. This provides a kind of filmmaker's judgement or commentary, a distinct recognition that the characters are in the wrong. Satō's films, however, lack any such clear message. Characters never face any direct social ramifications for their actions, and there are no editorializing speeches where the film's messages are laid bare. Rather, Satō depicts the actions and interactions of characters impassively, and allows audiences to draw their own conclusions by feeling the character's emotions, exactly what his philosophy of art calls for. According to the British Film Institute's Joe Sieder, the "fly-on-the-wall" film technique is usually applied by documentarians and makers of reality TV, and is a technique characterized by "close and detailed observation and the quasi-invisibility of the recording team" in order to study individuals and institutions.⁶⁴ While the technique is less commonly applied to feature filmmakers, I would argue that Satō's films demonstrate a kind of scripted rendition of the technique. What is being captured in the films are mostly scripted moments, and yet they are depicted in such a way that they appear organic and not meticulously engineered to get one specific audience reaction. Satō's films use an oftentimes

⁶⁴ Joe Sieder, "Fly on the Wall' TV," *British Film Institute*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/698785/>

stark realism to draw attention to his personal commitments, such as the sanctity of individuals in opposition to institutions wielding social power. Jasper Sharp expresses at least slight agreement on this point, writing the following about the camera in Satō's projects: "The camera's fixed, unwavering stare forces us, the viewer, to partake in the outrages perpetrated onscreen as if our eyes were pinned open like Alex's from *A Clockwork Orange*..."⁶⁵ Not only does Satō force viewers to look at what's presented with wide open eyes, he also manages to show them viewpoints that wouldn't normally be seen. He does so, not just by depicting the viewpoints of people who are marginalized and existing on the outskirts of mainstream society, but by using the camera to explore and waver over the on-screen information in unconventional ways. According to Sharp: "[Satō] was intrigued by the ability of the camera to serve as an untrammelled eye, crawling into spaces where humans can't go, and to look at objects from impossible angles."⁶⁶ This creates a fly on the wall perspective in many cases, one that presents an image of reality that is distorted by scripting and different camera lenses, but retains a strong degree of realism and wavers over characters nonjudgmentally.

One of the reasons why Satō's films contain emotional realism, even amidst the sci-fi elements and extremities of terror they contain, is because of Satō's famed "guerilla shooting technique." This trick of the directorial trade is used rarely in films, though famous instances of similar techniques, such as Divine's famous strutting in John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, do come to mind. Essentially, this technique involves the camera crew shooting "on location" but without considering "expensive 'incidentals' like permits and barricades."⁶⁷ In other words, Satō films certain scenes in the real world, rather than on film sets, and doesn't alert anyone to the fact that

⁶⁵ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, pp. 266.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁶⁷ Weisser, *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*, 463.

a film is being made. It's somewhat difficult to ascertain exactly when he employs this technique, as the body of academic literature and production information on Satō is deeply lacking. However, the reactions of characters within the frame often manage to alert viewers to this technique, with one example being the final scenario of *Continuous OL Rape*. At the film's end the female lead, having used her psychic powers to experience acts of violation through her boyfriend's eyes, decides to program a computer game about their experiences and sell it to interested members of the public. The final shot shows her in the center of the screen, with a computer resting on the ground below her. She exposes herself and, with the computer below her and people walking past, begins to touch herself. "It'll sell," she says to no one in particular. What is striking about the final shot is that, much as in the scene where her boyfriend was shown walking against an unrelenting crowd, the woman's utterly strange activities don't seem to draw the attention of most passing by. All the businessmen and ladies, with the exception of a few who look on in disbelief, walk right by the woman without turning around. While it isn't possible to know for sure if this scene was an instance of guerilla shooting, the few genuinely confused looks the woman receives seem to imply that the scene was indeed shot on-location. If this is truly the case, then the result caught on film suggests that the lives of the populace are regimented to the point that even the act of individual perception begins to dull within each of them. One medium shot of the woman in particular, where a businessman can be seen briefly turning around and looking back at her, is almost unbearably funny within the broader context of the scene. So, assuming the guerilla technique was used, why? Why is the conclusion so unexpected and strange? Although it may not appear to be a fitting ending, there is actually much about the scene that is noteworthy. For instance, the scene is yet another prime example of Satō addressing the issue of "communication within cities," this time emphasizing the dual effect that

technology has on such social interactions. On the one hand, technology can be seen as a way of bringing people together. I've already established that intimate communication in Satō's storylines almost always involves violence, and so if the woman is truly as self-assured as she appears to be that her computer game about voyeurism and assault will sell, then it follows that an increasing number of people are engaging in such violent communication through technology. However, it is also the case that technology can result in further alienation, especially if technology is used for purposes of escapism rather than engagement. As she stands above the computer the woman is barely glanced at, almost as if she is cloaked within the anonymity that technology itself offers people. In fact, throughout the entirety of the film the woman was engaging in violent communication only voyeuristically, forming a connection with no one other than the man who consistently betrayed her trust by satiating his sadistic desires. Thus, the scene can be read as a commentary on how society's widespread adoption of technology is creating just as many problems as it solves. That so few people notice the woman seems to place even greater weight on the alienating effects of technology, thereby creating an ending as bleak as those Satō is most known for. *Continuous OL Rape* is not a particularly well-known film of Satō's, nor does it appear to be highly regarded by all who have seen it. However, in terms of depicting Satō's deeply held convictions about individualism, social isolation, and voyeuristic fulfillment within a postmodern sci-fi landscape, *Continuous OL Rape* holds its weight as one of the Pink Devil's most representative and enduring projects.



A bizarre ending occurs to little fanfare in *Continuous OL Rape: Prey* (1990). ©Media Top

Destruction and Rebirth in *Naked Blood*

Despite not being a pink film, it could perhaps be said that no film better encapsulates Satō's philosophy and approach to filmmaking than his 1996 magnum opus, *Naked Blood*. *Naked Blood* is a film infamous for scenes of graphic and shocking self-harm, and is also a film that is incredibly polarizing and difficult to categorize. Though *Naked Blood* is undoubtedly another work that falls within the traditions of postmodern sci-fi and body horror, it is also a deeply philosophical and reflective project. One of the most intriguing and gripping elements of the story is how it seems to defy the tropes of any established genre. The movie spins an entirely original and unconventional storyline, complete with interesting characters and gorgeous cinematography. *Naked Blood* largely abrogates such stereotypical Satō techniques as stroboscopic effects and guerilla shooting, resulting in a somewhat more straightforward style. For films where sexuality and horror play larger roles, the stroboscopic camera is effective and creates indelible images. For *Naked Blood*, however, consistent use of such a technique would have been inappropriate. The film retains Satō's use of grainy video camera footage and first-person lens viewing (depicting the act of looking through a camera lens on-screen directly) to maintain the investigative style possessed by other films such as *Hidden Video Report*.



An infamous scene of body horror in *Naked Blood*. ©K.K. Museum

The film focuses on a young scientist, Eiji, who continues his father's scientific work after his mysterious disappearance over a decade earlier. Eiji's father was interested in the concept of immortality, and so Eiji spends his free time secluded in his room, attempting to find a way to prolong human life. Eiji develops a drug, appropriately named "MySon," hoping that the drug will prevent human beings from feeling pain. The drug maximizes endorphin flow when someone is injured, thus overcoming the process of pain. However, as is obvious to anyone who knows anything about the human brain, such a "solution" has a fundamental flaw: Pain is a necessary signal that is transmitted to the brain. Pain signals us to stop and be careful, to reassess our actions. When pain is replaced with pleasure, harm becomes an addiction. Eiji gives the drug to three different women, and they pay the price for his folly.

The juxtaposition between pleasure and pain is a common theme throughout all of Satō's films, and *Naked Blood* takes this motif to the next level visually. Despite Satō's deservedly controversial directorial status, it must be noted that *Naked Blood* is by no means a mere exploitation film. Contrary to how the film is commonly portrayed, the extreme violence is mostly confined to the film's latter half, and occurs within the context of Eiji investigating the effect his drug has on each of the girls. Two of the girls, who have a particularly strong reaction to the drug, end up mutilating themselves nearly to death. The third girl, Rika, appears immune to MySon. The violence makes it easy to label *Naked Blood* as a classic of the body horror genre,

and probably more representative of pure body horror than any of his other films. Jay McRoy notes that in *Naked Blood* the “splattered bodies function as subjects for political/cultural inquiry,” through which Satō questions “the emergence of virtual technologies in late capitalist Japanese society.”⁶⁸

Technology is the medium that holds the plot of *Naked Blood* together. Eiji spends significant parts of the movie typing lab results on his computer in a dark room, and when he does go outside his only significant interactions involve stalking and filming the women whom he secretly drugged. Eiji’s mother watches old videos of herself with Eiji’s father, reconnecting with him through a movie camera, and introducing the audience to him the same way. The most intimate scenes in the film all involve technology and optical media, including the film’s one sex scene. Technology has the ability to connect us to one another, while also alienating us from each other, as explored previously by films such as *Continuous OL Rape*. The technoscape of *Naked Blood* is a setting where individual obsession and perverse desire are commodities that the audience is forced to consume.

All of these plot elements seem to point towards the apex of nihilism, and moviegoers who view the film primarily as a work of horror (the genre it is technically considered a part of) could almost be forgiven for writing the film off as just a well-made piece of cynical exploitation cinema. To label *Naked Blood* as such, however, wouldn’t be an entirely sufficient analysis, for the film is anything but hopeless. For instance, although the death and eventual apocalypse in the film are caused by human beings, the people involved never lose their precious individualities. Even in death, the gluttonous girl who received the drug enjoys the pleasure of food (by eating

⁶⁸ McRoy, “The Dream has Not Yet Ended,” 35.

parts of her body), the beauty queen who received the drug spends her final moments before her mirror (mutilating herself with piercings), Eiji's mother sees her lost husband once more in a vision, and Eiji himself dies basking in the technological progress he admired so much. In fact, even the nature of MySon and its implications are deeply individualistic. The drug's purpose is not to torture people, but to make them writhe in pleasure, pleasure itself being deeply individualistic and taking different forms depending on the person. Even though Eiji's drug ultimately results in the ignition of apocalypse, it only ever aggrandized the individual pursuits that defined its users in the short term. The final epic scene, where the young heroine (Rika) heads off on her motorcycle to spray MySon everywhere and begin a process of mass destruction, is unique due to how joyous and triumphant it feels. As she rides across the desert her young son (born of her and Eiji) films her riding away on a video camera. The birth and rearing of a child amidst the chaos represents rebirth, the establishment of a new social order where those who are able to survive MySon, those who can govern their passions without harming themselves or others, will be able to live free within the natural landscape. The barrenness of the desert environment, the place where the film begins as well as its endpoint, is really a blank canvas for creation upon which survivors shall christen the new world. The Malthusian elements in the film, such as references to the growing population and the unsustainability of such an arrangement, can be seen as deeply satirical rather than literal. In Japan, for instance, the birth rate has been steadily decreasing since the 1990s, with the 1997 birthrate being almost 2/3 lower than it was in the immediate postwar period.⁶⁹ What Satō's film actually seems to show is how worries over sustainability are less relevant in regards to

⁶⁹ Eriko Amaha, "Baby Blues," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 161 (29) (Jul 16, 1998): 13. <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/docview/208229497?accountid=8360>.

population, and more pertinent in regards to how our societies are destroying themselves from within. It is interesting to note that, although Eiji's mother is testing a new contraceptive to decrease the birth rate even further, Eiji's research and actions have the opposite intention. Eiji searches for eternal life in his scientific exploits, and by the film's end he manages to bring new life into the world by impregnating Rika, the heroine who destroys the world in order to save it. Thus, despite the apocalypse that occurs, there is also a strong positive current in the film, one which ultimately seeks to celebrate rebirth rather than glorify destruction.

The film's beginning and ending shots depict such rebirth as well. The film opens with the shot of a single cactus, towering over the barren desert that Rika and her child eventually seek refuge in. Just a few minutes later, as Eiji is shown riding across town on his bike, we see a couple of corporate skyscrapers above him, a shot common to Satō's cinema as I've previously described. The interesting element to this shot, however, is how visually similar the buildings are to the cactus. The different size of the buildings that rest above Eiji look like the arms of the cactus, and the camera tilts to give audiences a full glimpse of the buildings, as if to reaffirm their power in the city. The final shot, however, after Rika goes off to spray the population with MySon, is the same cactus that was shown at the beginning, resting silently over the desert landscape as the credits roll. This shows the immutability of nature, and its triumph over man's destructive tendencies. When the survivors of the apocalypse inherit the earth, they will continue to exist alongside nature, as nature is the force that remains powerful throughout the film's entire cycle.



The cactus symbolizes rebirth in *Naked Blood*, as well as the towering presence of nature. ©K.K. Museum



Nature even presides over Eiji and Rika as they have sex, thus directly equating nature with birth (since Rika is impregnated by this coupling). ©K.K. Museum

Satō's ultimate views on technology and modernization appear to be mixed. Judging purely off the theme of nature's supremacy in *Naked Blood*, one may wish to conclude that Satō is some sort of primitivist. However, considering that many of his previous films feature characters who express themselves and relate to others through technology to varying degrees, this conclusion seems a bit haphazard. Undoubtedly, Satō has many negative feelings about the fast-paced nature of modern society. The most infamous example of such negativity was his bold statement about how his life changed after moving to Tokyo: "Besides human relations, I felt the city itself was mad. That was my personal and subjective impression. To put it in an abstract way, I was raped by the city. Living in the city, I've been unable to get used to it ever since."⁷⁰ The madness and alienation in modern city life are what Satō's films perennially identify, and what *Naked Blood* rebels against. However, it cannot simply be said that Satō's sci-fi visions are

⁷⁰ Patrício, "Hisayasu Satō on 'The Bedroom,'" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaisTffU-TY>

anti-technology. In *Naked Blood* alone, technology directly facilitates the beginning of Eiji and Rika's relationship (they go on their first date when she catches him filming her), the ability of Eiji's mother to remember her missing husband, and even the eventual rebirth of humanity. For, were it not for technological progress and the advancements made by Eiji in medicine, a clean slate would never have even been achievable. It is not technology itself, but rather the utilization of technology by corporations and the governmental security state, that is depicted as the true social harm. This is illustrated in the scenario when Eiji and Rika meet for the first time. Eiji asks Rika to take him to a place she hates, and in the next shot they are shown standing within a public garden amidst beautiful flowers. Eiji confusedly asks why she hates the place so much, as to him it seems like paradise. "Paradise?" Rika muses. "To me its too noisy." Her dialogue shows that even the restorative power of nature and the social advancements made possible by technology are ultimately constrained and assaulted by the "invisible violence" of society. Nature itself is not sufficient to nourish men and women, if they continue to exist within precarious and constraining societies.

The film's denouement comes when Rika leaves to instigate apocalypse, as her son watches her ride towards the city. "The dream has not ended yet," her son mutters as he begins to film her trek towards the city with a video camera. The dream of technological progress is reclaimed at the end, as the society that regulates such progress is destroyed and the potential for new life rises from the ashes. Of course, the apocalyptic reset of society and the birth of Eiji and Rika's son are both elements within the film that signify the potential to start anew, but there was also an external factor regarding the film that signified such capacity. For Satō, *Naked Blood* was not an entirely original work. It is actually a remake of one of Satō's earlier pink films, *Genuine Rape*, which was released in 1987, nearly a decade earlier. Critics such as Jasper Sharp have

noted that the content of Satō's films, from about the mid-1990s onward, began to become mellower and less confrontational.⁷¹ Certainly *Naked Blood* is a high point of Satō's career in regards to both international recognition and cinematic achievement, yet the project itself was essentially the rebirth of a *pinku eiga* as a "normal" film. Moreover, when considering the last scene of the film, and the child's assertion that the dream is not over, there is a degree of uncertainty presented. If the dream is not over, and his mother will be back, then why is the child filming her as if they're saying goodbye? Additionally, the scene with Rika speeding away is the last one in the movie, minus the shot of the cactus as the credits roll and the movie's theme music drones on to the point of degenerating into warbly noise. Was the pink-tinged dream, perhaps, fading after a decade of genre-bending film projects?

Conclusion: Pink Cinema and the 21st Century

If the existence and extending relevance of pink cinema, the genre that Satō primarily worked in, was endangered in the 1990s, then it was even less certain by the time the 21st century came around. The few pink cinema theaters that remain in Japan receive dwindling audiences, mostly of salarymen on lunch breaks, and the equipment in the theaters isn't always maintained.⁷² Additionally, there have always been critics of pink movies. Writing of erotic film productions in the Japanese market, famous Japanologist Donald Richie refers to them disparagingly as "standardized product[s]" where experimentation is rare.⁷³ It is quite telling that, in Richie's bestselling guide to Japanese cinema, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, neither Satō nor his fellow Pink Devils are mentioned even passingly. Even today, there remain few (if

⁷¹ Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain*, 271.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 310.

⁷³ Donald Richie, *A Lateral View: Essays on Culture and Style in Contemporary Japan*, (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 1992), 159.

any) full-length academic studies on Satō Hisayasu and his contemporaries, despite their lasting influence on the landscape of *pinku eiga*, and despite the fact that over a hundred *pinku eiga* continue to be produced each year. Some of Japan's most famous and acclaimed directors, such as Sono Sion, got their start in the realm of pink cinema, and directors like Wakamatsu Kōji and Tanaka Noboru won international acclaim over their lives for their well-made films within the scope of erotic cinema. Yet, in spite of this, innovative directors like Satō Hisayasu, the other Pink Devils, and those influenced by them remain largely unnoticed and underappreciated by film critics and academics alike.

One of the goals of this study has been to illustrate that Satō Hisayasu's films, despite usually being *pinku eiga*, manage to tell stories of great social and artistic relevance within the confines of their genre. Satō's work, specifically his collaborations with writer Yumeno Shiro, incorporated non-traditional genres into the realm of pink cinema, with stylistic traces of film-noir, body horror, and sci-fi found all across the director's filmography. It is true that, since the close of the 1990s, Satō has largely moved away from *pinku eiga*. However, many of his later films, such as *Love & Loathing & Lulu & Ayano* (2010), remained focused on telling stories about the emotions felt and challenges faced by young people in contemporary Japanese society. *Pinku eiga* itself has changed a great deal, even since the 1990s, and yet many of the directors who would come to dominate the genre in the 21st century, such as Tajiri Yūji and Imaoka Shinji, were people Satō worked with and influenced to a substantial degree. It might be impossible to say that *pinku eiga* is as artistically relevant as it once was, but it certainly remains a fertile ground for creators to explore and place seeds upon. That being said, it is by no means impossible or unrealistic to say that Satō himself is one of the most prolific and inventive filmmakers of the past forty years, and someone whose projects continue to impress and surprise.

Satō's works depicted young people and the struggles they faced in a society defined by precarity and alienation. He created works of postmodern science fiction that reflected not only the state of various traditions of fiction at the time, but the ways in which such fictional traditions could be utilized to tell impactful stories that would stand the test of time. Thoughtful analysis of *pinku eiga* and specifically the work of the Four Pink Devils remains a field that has yet to be fully explored and assessed in serious academic writing. It is the hope of the author that this study will be an entry point from which greater conversations may be had, and new passions may be allowed to grow.

Appendix A: Relevant Film Titles

| Release Year | Original Japanese Title | Translated Original Title | Translated Release Title | Shorthand in Paper |
|--------------|--|---|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1986 | エキサイティング エロ 熱い肌 (<i>Ekisaitingu Ero Atsui Hada</i>) | Exciting Eros Hot Skin | Gimme Shelter | Exciting Eros |
| 1986 | 制服処女 ザ えじき (<i>Seifuku Shojo za Ejiki</i>) | Uniform Virgin: The Prey | Explosion... | Uniform Virgin |
| 1987 | ロリータバイブ責め (<i>Roriita Baibu Zeme</i>) | Lolita Vibrator Torture | The Secret Garden | Lolita |
| 1990 | 連続OLレイプえじき (<i>Renzoku OL Reipu Ejiki</i>) | Continuous OL Rape: Prey | Psychic Rose | Continuous OL Rape |
| 1990 | 馬と女と犬 (<i>Uma to Onna to Inu</i>) | Horse and Woman and Dog | Poaching by the Water's Edge | N/A |
| 1991 | 盗撮レポート 陰写! (<i>Tousatsu Repooto Insha!</i>) | Hidden Video Report: Dark Shot! | Turtle Vision | Hidden Video Report |
| 1992 | 浮気妻 恥辱責め (<i>Uwakizuma: Chijoku-zeme</i>) | Promiscuous Wife: Disgraceful Torture | An Aria on Gazes/The Bedroom | N/A |
| 1993 | 快感ONANIE 新妻篇 (<i>Kaikan Onanie: Niizuma-hen</i>) | Pleasure Masturbation: New Wife Version | Light Sleep | Pleasure Masturbation |
| 1996 | 女虐/NAKED BLOOD (<i>Megyaku NAKED BLOOD</i>) | Splatter: Naked Blood | N/A | Naked Blood |
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