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Japanese Transnational Cinema: From Kurosawa to Asia Extreme and Studio Ghibli

Sono Sion: DVD Distribution and Marketing in the US and UK in the Shadow of Tartan

Knowledge of Japanese cinema varies from person to person depending on their location globally and their initiation into world cinemas. The more casual person, only vaguely aware of films from Japan, is likely to know of Kurosawa Akira, but not of the genres his films fall into. They might also be aware, now, of anime via Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli. It is also possible that they know of *Ringu* via the American remakes. Their knowledge probably does not extend further except for a rather generic understanding of the samurai film (*chanbara*) and the Asian “horror” films that have vastly out distributed other films from East Asia in the US and UK. Someone with an average awareness of Japanese cinema probably does not know the actual genre names (in Japanese), but they might recognize the names of directors such as Mizoguchi Kenji, Kitano Takeshi, Miike Takashi, Oshima Nagisa, Kon Satoshi, and Oshii Mamoru. They might even own a few DVDs or have a few ticket stubs in their collection, but next to the fan-boy or the art-house crowd they do not compare.

The western fan-boy (or girl) has plenty of genres to choose from, but the most prominent is the films popularized in the UK by Tartan Asia Extreme¹ and anime. Anime enjoys a rather mainstream acceptance in western culture with anime film titles regularly being selected as animated film contenders in the US Academy Awards. “Asia Extreme” is a fringe fan culture classified largely in terms of cult cinema as the violence and sex makes the films “inaccessible.” (Dew, 2007: 59-60) While there is not a legitimate definition of what constitutes “Asia Extreme” outside the branding of the film as dangerous and exotic, Adam Torel² defines it as “horror for the sake of it, or gore for the sake of being ‘extreme’ with no artistic merit.” (A. Torel 2011, e-mail, 17 December) However, due to Tartan’s savvy branding and developing of a niche market, “Asia Extreme” has become a catchall net for the majority of horror, suspense, and thrillers that come from Asia. While the goal of this paper is not intended as a criticism against Tartan or their marketing strategy, it does examine the possible role “Asia Extreme” plays in the distribution of Sono Sion’s films in the US and UK.

Sono Sion has only recently risen to international prominence with his ‘Hate’ trilogy including *Love Exposure* (*Ai no Mukidashi*), *Cold Fish* (*Tsumetai Nettaigyō*), and *Guilty of Romance* (*Koi no Tsumi*) seeing far greater involvement in film festivals. However, he has been on the radar in legal English subtitled films since *Suicide Club* (*Jisatsu Saakaru*) released by TLA Releasing in 2003 in the US. Starting with *Suicide Club* and ending with *Guilty of Romance*, his films have seen significant differences in distribution and marketing. For example, while the US had *Suicide Club* in 2003, the J-Horror film *Exte* was the UK’s first Sono film released in 2008. Different companies have handled Sono’s films, some aiming at the “Asia Extreme” audience, while other companies favor the art-house and international cinema crowd. While his films differ in content, all of his films released in North America and the United

¹ Tartan went out of business in 2008 and was acquired and renamed Palisades Tartan.

² Managing Director at Third Window Films

Kingdom feature adult levels of violence and sex. Even though high levels of violence and sex are typical of “Asia Extreme” titles, I contest that Sono’s films rise above the category presented by “Asia Extreme” and J-horror. Rather, I will conclude that he should be seen in world cinema beside renown directors such as Lars von Trier, David Cronenberg, and David Lynch.

Currently, not all of Sono’s films are available on DVD in the west. There is a difference in the availability even between the US and UK. Since 2003, six of Sono’s films have been released in the US, one in Canada, and five in the UK. As of now, *Guilty of Romance* is only available in the UK, *Hazard* is only available in Canada, and *Noriko’s Dinner Table* and *Strange Circus* are only available in the US. His releases in the United States follow a relatively straight timeline with the only exception being *Cold Fish*, released four months before *Love Exposure*. However, in the UK, *Suicide Club* was only just released in September 2011, two months ahead of Sono’s latest film *Guilty of Romance*. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus primarily on his films that were released in both the United States and the United Kingdom as a way of comparing the methods of distribution and marketing.

The Films:

His first film released with English subtitles in the west is *Suicide Club*. Initially released in Japan in 2002, it was released in the US via TLA Releasing in 2003, and released in the UK via Cine du Monde in 2011. *Suicide Club* is split into two parts separated by a bizarre music sequence. The first part follows the police investigation into a rash of suicides and the suspicion of an organized suicide cult, which started with fifty-four school girls jumping in front of a train. Unable to solve the suicides or prevent his wife and children from committing suicide, Detective Kuroda shoots himself to close out the first half. In between the first and second half is the abduction of The Bat, a hacker who featured in the first half as a secondary character. She and her companion are dragged into a bowling alley and forced to watch a man called Genesis and his cult cohorts commit acts of brutal rape, torture, and cruelty while performing a song. The second half follows a school girl Mitsuko as she successfully unravels the connection between the suicides and the J-Pop group of young adolescent girls known as ‘Dessert.’ She contributes her patch of skin to the rolls of skin found at the scene of each mass-suicide, but does not kill herself, having obtained an understanding of herself that the dead victims could not.

Needless to say, the film is quite graphically violent. The opening scene and Genesis “pleasure room” alone have entered internet history as bizarre “what-the-fuck” YouTube clips. Despite the flood of blood that makes Kubrick’s bloody elevator scene in *The Shining* look like a small stream, Sono delivers a fairly deep criticism of Japanese culture, much in the same way as Kurosawa Kiyoshi did in *Tokyo Sonata*. For example, not all of the suicides in the film’s narrative were connected to the bizarre ‘Dessert’ cult. Kuroda, for one, committed suicide after realizing he failed to connect with his family. In addition, the group of students who jumped off

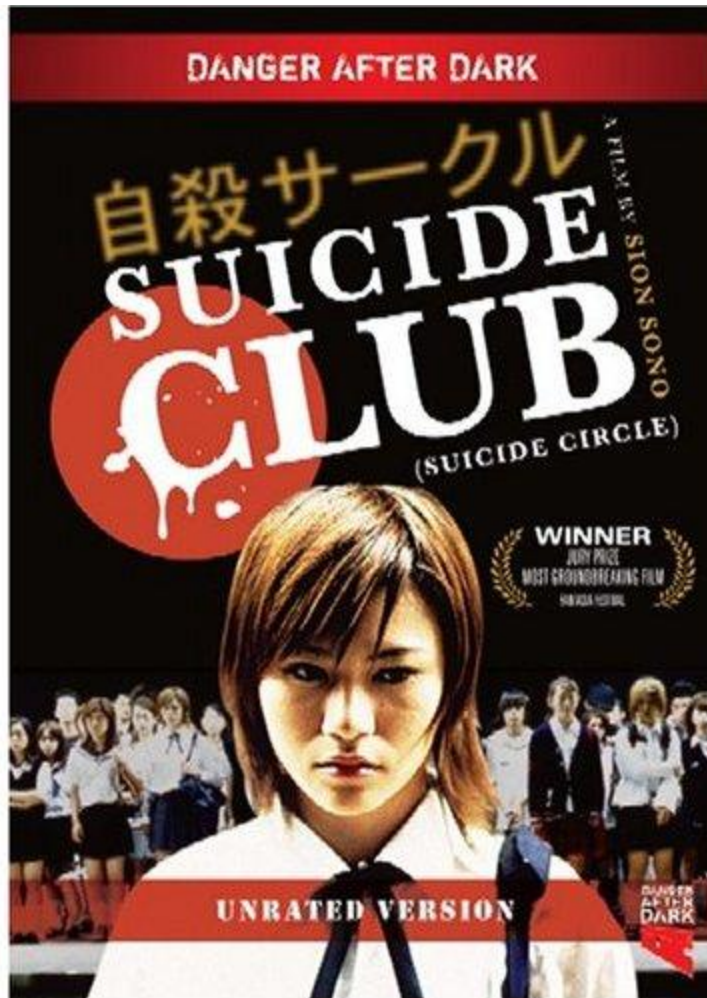
their school roof did so in copycat fashion as no bag with a roll of skin was found. By employing these three different uses of suicide in the film, Sono makes the mystery solvable but ineffective. Even though Mitsuko follows the clues to 'Dessert's' hideout and is lauded by the presumable orphans in the theater, the film only solves the conspiracy of suicides involving 'Dessert' and not the overall problem of suicides in the film.

The violence in the film caused considerable concern in the west. In the United States, TLA released both a cut version securing an "R" rating as well as an unrated version.³ Similarly, the UK version achieved an "18" rating and Andrew Kirkham, joint managing director for Cine du Monde, suggested that the subject matter made UK distributors "nervous." (2011, e-mail, December 28) This is not the first film from Asia to make distributors wary and nervous. *Battle Royale* is just seeing an official release in the US as the violence in the film was seen as poor taste following the growth of gun violence in US schools. Similarly, *OldBoy* faced similar criticism following the murder rampage at Virginia Tech. (Shin, 2009: 96) However, the delay in release could be location based.

Before the DVD release in 2003, *Suicide Club* was shown at three different international film festivals in North America and won "Most Groundbreaking Film" at Fant-Asia, based in Canada, in the summer of 2003. In addition, in April 2002 it was in the "Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema" where TLA is located. Since *Suicide Club* was screened only in Leeds and Scotland, outside of the main cinema hub of London, exposure to this film would have been limited. As Kirkham suggests, it is not until recently that Sono has emerged in general view in the UK. (2011, e-mail, December 28) Kirkham further suggests that it was "buried deep in Kadokawa's back catalogue under its Japanese title and so slipped from view." However, *Suicide Club* was released during the rise of Tartan Asia Extreme, but was obviously passed over. Hamish McAlpine was either unaware of the film's existence or he saw the film as something unmarketable under the developing "Asia Extreme" genre.

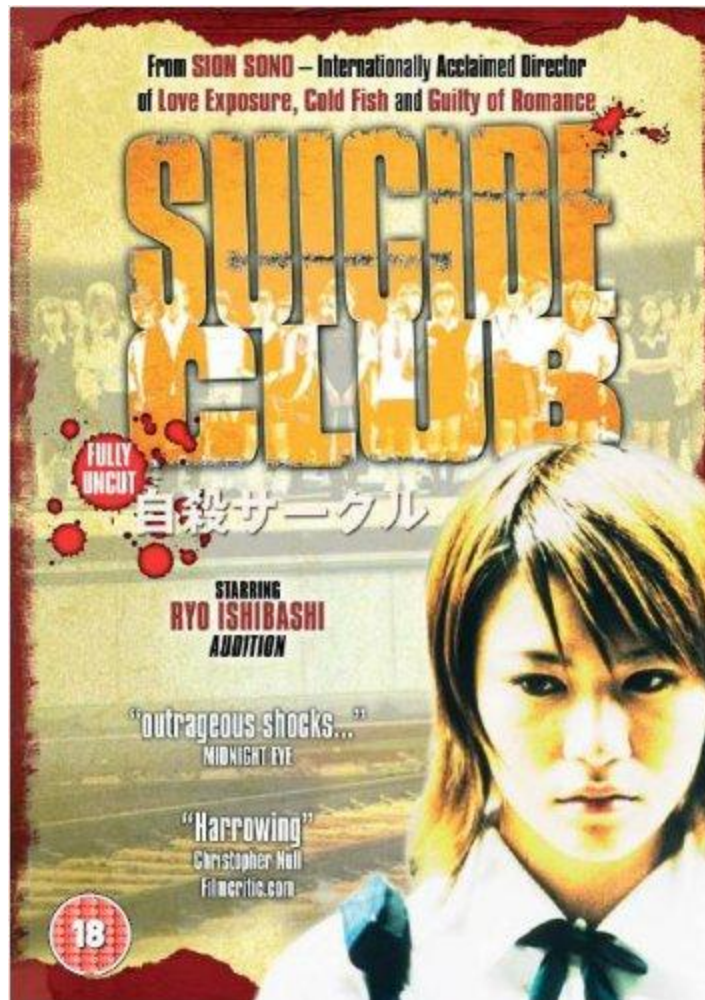
Marketing is a major observation point for discerning the intended audience and orientation. While marketing extends to a whole realm of advertising on the internet via ads, reviews, previews, and the like, the look of the DVD case says a lot about how a film is intended to be sold. Despite TLA releasing *Suicide Club* in their Danger After Dark collection of horror films, the only warning of the intended violence on the cover is the "unrated" ribbon on the bottom of the case. (Figure 1) TLA's DVD case has some level of "Asia Extremeness" to it with the Danger After Dark label and ribbon. The US cover features the title of the film in Japanese, the literal English translation in small font, and the English title. It also includes the Fant-Asia award. These separate strands work together to promote an international art house image over the image of the extreme subject matter.

³ "R" stands for "Restricted" which means no one under seventeen can see it without parents or guardians.



(Figure 1: DVD cover of *Suicide Club* from Amazon.com)

Cine du Monde markets *Suicide Club* slightly differently, but does not fully embrace the “Asia Extreme” type branding. Just as TLA did, Cine du Monde’s DVD cover contains both the English title and the Japanese title. They also position the film in the field of international art-house by identifying the film as from the “Internationally acclaimed director of *Love Exposure*, *Cold Fish*, and *Guilty of Romance*.” (Figure 2) Furthermore, while TLA’s release has the large ribbon declaring the film “unrated,” the UK version has a smaller mark as “uncut.” TLA promotes the art-house angle while Cine du Monde promotes the actor of Kuroda as “Ryo Ishibashi” from *Audition*, which is one of Tartan Asia Extreme’s initial successes in the UK. Additionally, Cine du Monde includes taglines from *Midnight Eye* and *FilmCritic.com* describing the film as containing “outrageous shocks” and as “harrowing.” This figures more into the discourse on “Asia Extreme” as challenging the audience to consume this piece of sadistic cinema. (Dew, 2007: 61)



(Figure 2: DVD Cover of *Suicide Club* from Amazon.co.uk)

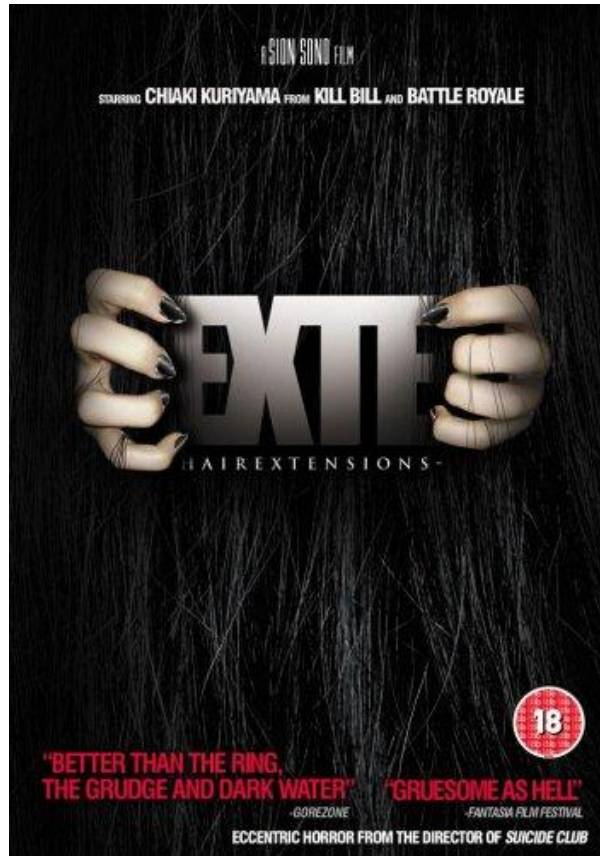
Sono's next film to be released in both the US and UK is *Exte* or *Hair Extensions* in July 2008, and it is the first film by Sono to be released in the UK.⁴ *Exte* is Sono's most atypical film, thematically aligned more with conventional J-Horror than his other works. The film is also linearly structured without significant breaks as in *Guilty of Romance*, *Suicide Club*, *Strange Circus*, and *Love Exposure*. *Exte* opens with the discovery of a dead girl, a victim of human organ trafficking in addition to hair for extensions. Yamazaki, a night watchman at the morgue, takes the body home when he discovers hair growing out of every opening on her body with the intention of selling the continuously growing hair to salons for hair extensions. The heroine of the film is Yuko who is an apprentice at a hair salon and the custodian of her young niece. Yamazaki develops an obsession with Yuko and her niece Mami for the quality of their hair. The hair extensions manifest the grudge the dead girl carries against society and start killing people. Yamazaki eventually abducts the pair after they are knocked unconscious by the extensions in Mami's hair. In the finale, Yamazaki is completely possessed by the hair and is killed by the

⁴ The US release is entitled *Hair Extensions* while the UK release is *Exte*.

dead girl when she sees him in a position reminiscent of her murderers. The film ends with Yuko accepting the responsibility of guardianship of Mami.

While *Exte* lacks the same level of social commentary as *Suicide Club*, the film is an interesting take on the genre of J-Horror featuring the typical grudge based entity of destruction. The main point of departure is the complete lack of electronic medium or family. She is a body with no name and her tormentors go unpunished. Everyone is an enemy because everyone is a stranger. Rather than mirroring the random pattern of death in typical J-Horror like *Ringu* and *Ju-on: The Grudge*, her targets are all participating in the society that created the market for human organ trafficking. Thus, Sono constructed the film with a reason for the random nature of the bodily destruction rather than simple unexplainable rage as seen in Sadako of *Ringu* and the family in *Ju-on*.

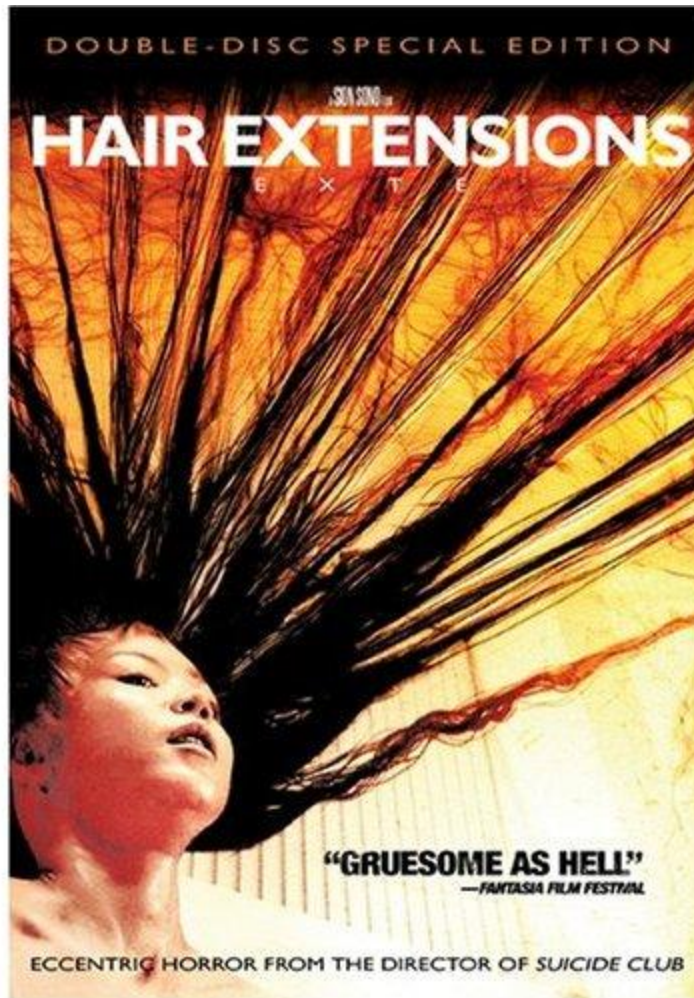
Exte was released in the UK mere weeks before the US via Revolver Entertainment. The DVD cover is a cascade of hair with two hands gripping the title. It is nearly all black, with the exception of the critic comments. The comments presented on the cover, in red, characterize the film as the best of J-Horror, better than *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and *Dark Water*, but this characterization is from Gorezone, obviously invoking the typifying violence of “Asia Extreme.” (Figure 3) The second comment is from FANTASIA Film Festival claiming the film is “gruesome as hell.” Even identifying Kuriyama Chiaki as from *Kill Bill* and *Battle Royale*, both films having significant currency in cult cinema, does not invoke an international art-house image. The only “from the director of” the case has is “eccentric horror from the director of *Suicide Club*.”



(Figure 3: DVD Cover of *Exte* from Amazon.co.uk)

The US version, released by Tokyo Shock, also shares the “Gruesome as hell” slogan.⁵ The largest difference between the two is the cover. While the UK cover is dark and “scary” rather than “horrific,” Tokyo Shock uses an image of one of the victims just before parts of her head go everywhere as her hair stretches her scalp and attaches to the corners of her ceiling. (Figure 4) This is far more “Asia Extreme” as it confronts the audience with the film’s violence before they can even pick it up and review the back. Thus, Tokyo Shock is marketing the violent nature of the film, whereas Revolver is taking a subtler approach of intrigue.

⁵ Tokyo Shock is a distributor with the larger corporation of Media Blasters.



(Figure 4: DVD Cover of *Hair Extensions* from Amazon.com)

Following the release of *Exte* in the US, we do not see another Sono film until the late summer of 2011. The UK, however, sees the release of *Love Exposure* by Third Window Films within six months of the Japanese release. *Love Exposure* is a thorough epic, running for 237 minutes. The film is split into chapters on two DVDs, following primarily the story of a teenage boy, Yu. His family is Catholic and the film follows Yu as he intentionally commits acts of voyeurism after mastering the martial arts of upskirt photography in order to have sins to confess to his father. Yu masquerades in town as a woman after losing a bet with his friends requiring him to kiss a girl he likes. After assisting a girl name Yoko, also a Catholic, who he sees as the embodiment of the Virgin Mary, in a fight against Zero Church members, he creates the identity of Miss Scorpion to express his feelings in drag. The plan backfires as Yoko develops feelings for Miss Scorpion rather than him. Yoko turns out to be Yu's soon to be step-sister as his father agrees to marry Yoko's step-mother. Much of the conflict Yu has with Yoko and his family is due to the mechanizations of Aya, a recruiter for Zero Church who wants to convert a good Catholic family. Eventually, Aya manages to win Yu's family by claiming to be the mystery

woman Miss Scorpion. In the end, Yu storms the headquarters of Zero Church to rescue Yoko, the only woman he ever love (or reacted to sexually).

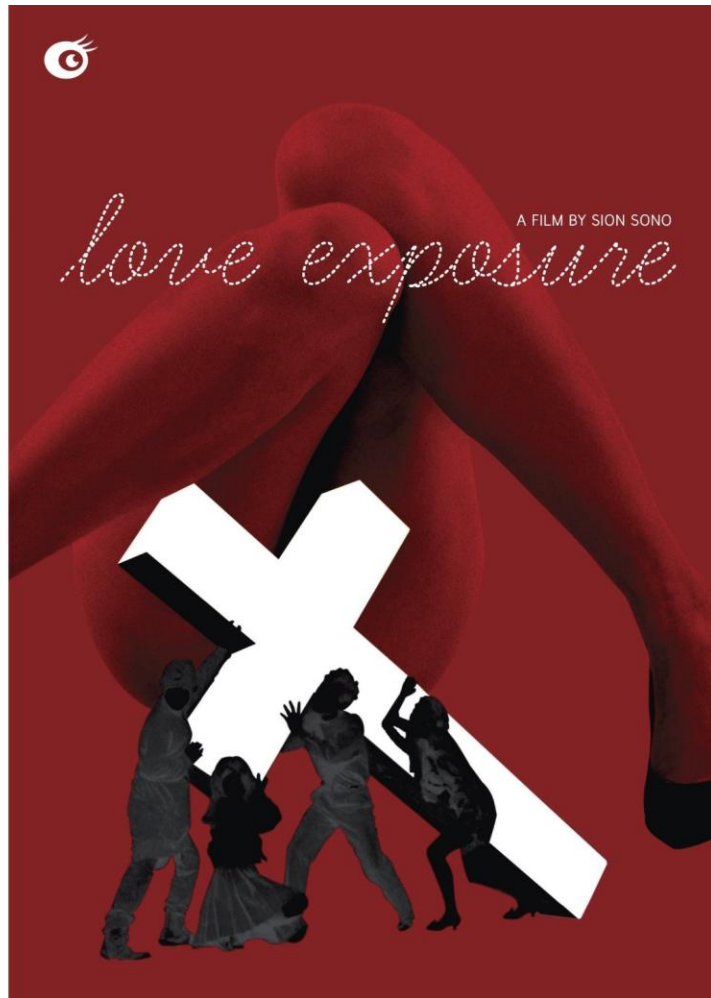
Despite the four hour length, *Love Exposure* only has brief scenes of violence, mostly limited to the cringe worthy scene when Aya impales herself on Yu's sword. The only points of contention with the film are its length and sexuality. While nudity is nearly non-existent, when Yu is around Yoko he develops a comically large tent in his pants and eventually works for a porn company at the command of Zero Church. By situating Catholicism in opposition to Zero Church, Sono is presenting different value systems side by side. This allows a comparison on the nature of lust, desire, love, and perversion. Rather than criticizing the Catholic church, which many films have done in the past, Catholicism cannot touch the complete control Zero holds over its members. Despite the bizarre premise of the film, it is by far the best received film of Sono's garnering many awards on its transnational trip through international film festivals. Yu's construction of his female persona Miss Scorpion is a clear nod to Ito Shunya and his *Sasori* series of exploitation films in the 70s.

Marketing of *Love Exposure* in the UK is completely art-house oriented. With a minimalist color scheme of red, white, and black, the presence of Aya's green bird stands out just as much as the commentary from TwitchFilm.net heralding it as the "film of the year." (Figure 5) There is no alignment with "Asia Extreme" despite the film being an "extreme" length as a four hour long film cut down from six hours. Interestingly enough, Third Window Films invokes *Exte* and *Suicide Club* despite the latter film not being available in the UK at the time of release. This suggests that regardless of *Suicide Club*'s status at the time, it was still widely known in the UK, or enough so to use as a marketing tool.

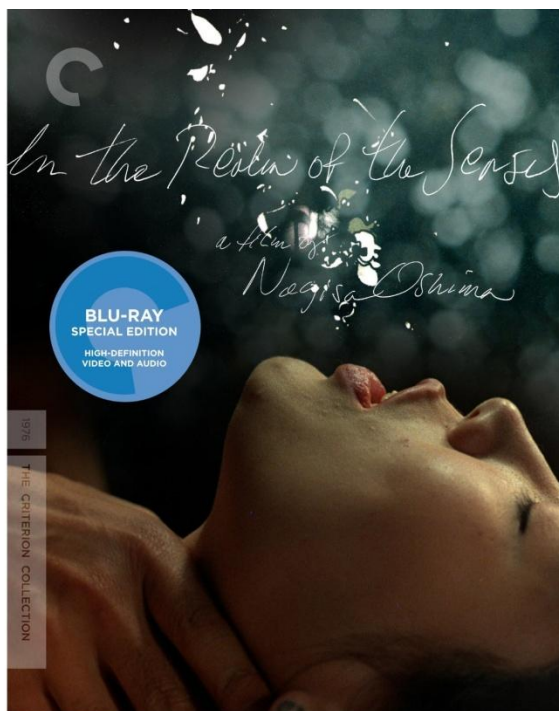


(Figure 5: DVD Cover of *Love Exposure* from Amazon.co.uk)

In the US, *Love Exposure* was not available until December 2011 via Olive Films. The case is even more minimal than the UK version with four figures in negative exposure holding up a large white cross to censor the crotch belonging to the legs above them. There are no international awards or critic's commentary, just simply "A Film By Sono Sion." (Figure 6) More than anything else, the cover resembles the aesthetics of the Criterion Collection. (Figure 7) This subverts the trend to build off of "Asia Extreme" branding as Criterion is made up of largely independent, foreign, and art-house theaters with particular importance to cinema. Olive Films quite deftly establishes *Love Exposure* as an important film worthy of not just fan-boy cult, but of the selective tastes of the privileged American cinema consumer.



(Figure 6: DVD Cover of *Love Exposure* from Amazon.com)



(Figure 7: Blu-Ray Cover of *In the Realm of the Senses* from Amazon.com)

The last film to be released in both the UK and the US is *Cold Fish*. *Cold Fish* follows the Syamoto family who run a tropical fish store and the fate that brought them in contact with a murderous husband and wife duo who run a larger and flashier tropical fish store. Yukio, the murderous husband, gradually wraps Nobuyuki up in his web of conspiracy through a series of actions that make him indebted to Yukio. Eventually, in order to protect his daughter and his new wife, the passive Nobuyuki has to help the Murata couple with murder and body disposal. After disposing of Yukio's long term lawyer, Yukio forces Nobuyuki to commit adultery with his wife. The violence and horror of Nobuyuki's experience causes him to finally fight back. He kills Yukio and seduces his wife to help him dispose of his body before then killing her while waiting for the cops to arrive. Nobuyuki then kills his wife and attempts to kill his daughter, his hopes of the perfect family squashed. In the end, he slits his own throat.

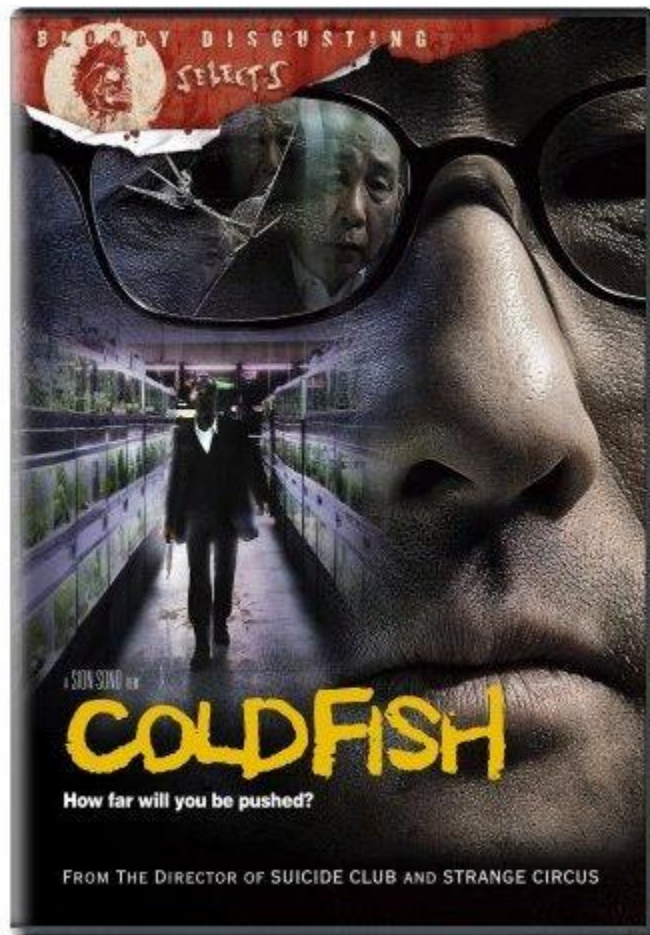
Cold Fish is just as narratively straight forward as *Exte*, tensions building as Nobuyuki becomes more and more in debt to Yukio's "generosity." The film features graphic sex and violence in a style similar to *Strange Circus*. Nobuyuki's masculinity is constantly smothered by Yukio's extroverted masculinity and his daughter's violence. As he is dragged past the standards of acceptable and legal behavior, he is led to a violent explosion of his repressed masculinity. While I hesitate to argue that Sono is presenting a warning on repressed masculinity, Nobuyuki clearly inhabits a queer space compared with Yukio who has rather violent consensual intercourse with Nobuyuki's wife and is surrounded by young attractive women. Nobuyuki loses his first wife, then loses his second wife and daughter to Yukio, and eventually explodes from his space as a marginalized queer figure.

Cold Fish was initially released in the west through Third Window Films in the UK in June 2011. Third Window Films practically fills up the DVD cover with commentary from critics including Bizarre, Total Film, Twitch, Empire, and Beyond Hollywood, characterizing the film as “dark,” “gory,” “punishing,” and “*Fight Club* with added dismemberment.” (Figure 8) Furthermore, they play up the “based on true events” thread of the film and challenges us to find out “what drives an ordinary man to murder?” In perhaps a strategic move, rather than include *Exte* and *Suicide Club* as *Love Exposure* did, Third Window simply identifies Sono as the director of *Love Exposure*, making *Cold Fish* purely attached to their label rather than the work of other distributors.

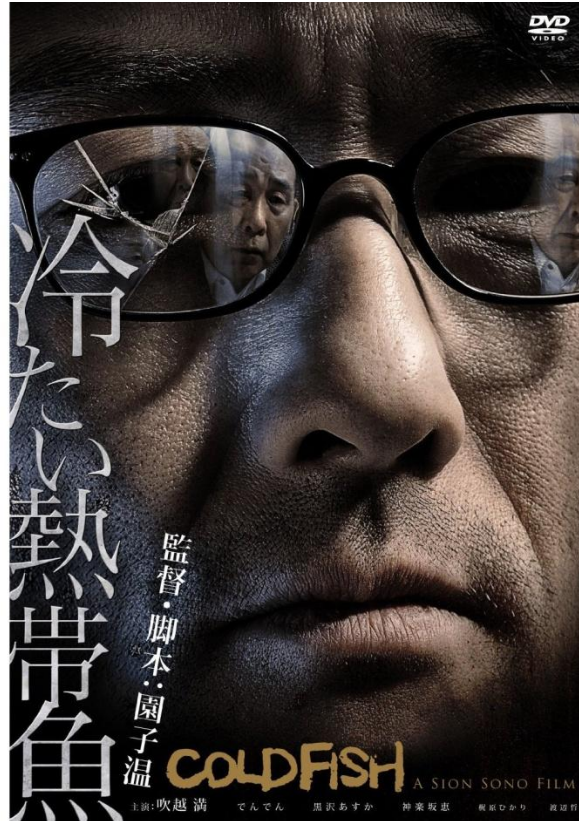


(Figure 8: DVD Cover of *Cold Fish* from Amazon.co.uk)

In a rather different frame, the US release in late summer 2011 by Bloody Disgusting, featured a modified version of the original Japanese DVD cover. (Figure 9 and 10) The only drawback to their DVD cover is the unfortunate connotations of their name suggesting both needlessly violent and “Asia Extreme.” They simulate a rip in the top left corner of the case, which is a fairly large branding, detracting from the rather tasteful cover. There are no critic responses as in the UK version and they choose to define Sono as the director of *Suicide Club* and *Strange Circus* rather than his other films such as *Exte*. This then contrasts with the strategy of Third Window Films’ release because Bloody Disgusting privileges TLA’s release over *Exte* or *Noriko’s Dinner Table*, which also provides a unique positioning of the film in comparison to TLA’s established history in cult and art-house film distribution.



(Figure 9: DVD Cover of *Cold Fish* from Amazon.com)



(Figure 10: DVD Cover of *Cold Fish* from Amazon.co.jp)

Distribution, Marketing, Reception

The distribution and marketing of Sono Sion in the west has not followed a coherently similar track. So far, only TLA Releasing's *Danger After Dark* and *Third Window Films* have distributed more than one film. Furthermore, the distributors are unconnected to large companies, mainly small independently operating groups, quite unlike the size and scope of Tartan. This creates the opportunity for many of these companies to operate not simply as distributors but also as positioned as fans and consumers. In my email communications with Adam Torel and Andrew Kirkham they both discussed their methods of distribution as personal preference. While they are positioned differently with different strategies, Torel with *Third Window Films* that focuses on a classical understanding of cult and camp, and Kirkham with *Cine du Monde* who focuses on films that have historically gone commercially unnoticed in the UK, they share certain views of 'Asia Extreme' and Sono, himself.

Torel vehemently opposes the branding of "Asia Extreme," which is relatively visible in the variety of films *Third Window Films* has distributed in addition to the construction of their

DVD covers. Furthermore, Torel is dismissive of closing the gap in distribution that exists between the US and the UK.

In this day and age of Amazon and internet buying it's too easy for people to buy dvds from all over the world and most people who buy cult or Asian films have all-region DVD players making it not cost-effective to release back-catalogue titles which already are available with English-subtitles on DVD elsewhere in the world, in the UK. We prefer to find back-catalogue titles which aren't available elsewhere and release them, such as maybe the very early works of Sono Sion or such. (A. Torel, 2011, e-mail, Dec 17)

Indeed, with the growth in ease of acquiring films legitimately (or illegitimately) beyond borders, the necessity of local distribution of films already released lessens. By strategically avoiding distributing films already available in the US or Canada, Third Window Films can focus less on recuperating lost profits from distributing old material and focus on new or unavailable material. So far, they have succeeded in pre-emptively distributing *Love Exposure* and *Cold Fish* before the United States, who had been the best source of Sono's films with English subtitles.

In opposing view, Kirkham has no problem with using the branding of "Asia Extreme" to boost sales. However, this opposing view is located in the difference in the market audience between Cine du Monde and Third Window Films. Kirkham characterizes the audience for *Suicide Club* as specifically "Asia Extreme" fans, but also intended for mainstream and anyone with an interest in Sono. (A. Kirkham, 2011, e-mail, Dec 28) His reasoning behind releasing *Suicide Club* in the UK nearly ten years after Japan and eight years after the US, is purely to embrace the non-cult audience as they would already have the TLA copy or downloaded it off the internet. Thus, the focus is primarily on making the film available to the curious outsider rather than the initiated fan-boy.

The intended demographic is another point of departure between the two companies. Torel is rather dismissive of marketing toward a specified audience, highlighting the desire for Third Window Films to create their own demographic. This will not be the first time a label created a demographic, Tartan created a new demographic with "Asia Extreme" as did Criterion Collection in the US and likely Artificial Eye in the UK. All of these distributors share a varied, non-genre specific catalogue. What Third Window and Criterion share is offering more than just the film. Criterion goes to extreme length to have informative booklets and bonus disc material making each package a rather involved process. While my collection of Third Window Films' DVDs including *Cold Fish*, *Love Exposure*, *Memories of Matsuko*, *Fish Story*, *Confessions*, and *Kamikaze Girls*, has yet to include informative pamphlets, the special features included on *Cold Fish* include an interview with a journalist on the crime case the film is based on, and two interviews with Yoshiki Takahashi, the scriptwriter.

These two incredibly differing viewpoints on strategy and marketing make any attempt to establish a universal argument on Sono Sion's involvement in the west. If just two companies have vastly different strategies and demographics, the inclusion of seven or eight more distributors would further destabilize any universalizing threads of theory? Even so, one point that Torel and Kirkham appear to agree on, one that I think other distributors would as well, is that Sono Sion is not a director of horror or "Asia Extreme." I do, however, disagree on Torel's characterization of "Japaneseness" in *Love Exposure*. While it is Japanese, I think Sono transcends typifying claims of "Japaneseness." *Love Exposure* is not a film Hollywood could not make because it "is so inherently 'Japanese'," but because of Sono's creativity and craft.

Conclusion

Aside from establishing Sono as distinctly not "Asia Extreme" not much more can be universally applicable. While he is mentioned briefly in academic accounts of J-Horror and "Asia Extreme" they all typify his films as similar to other J-Horror films. For example, in Jay McRoy's *Nightmare Japan* he unites *Suicide Club*, *Uzumaki*, and *Pulse*, as does Matt Hills in his contribution to *Japanese Horror Cinema* edited by McRoy. Nowhere do I see a discussion of Sono in a larger frame of art-house cinema. For example, why has there been no comparison between Sono's films and the works of Cronenberg or David Lynch? Perhaps the ones aligning Sono with genre horror and "Asia Extreme" are those of us discussing him in academic analyses of Asian horror. We are quick to criticize and analyze fan-boy culture in the field of Asian horror, but what we are not so concerned about is positioning the films in a greater field of world cinema that includes both films from the east and the west.

Acknowledgment:

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