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Female Convict Scorpion: Production Context, Gender Politics, and Cinematic Excesses
in a Japanese Women-in-Prison Film Series

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Abstract

This article focuses on *Female Convict Scorpion*, a Japanese women-in-prison film series (1972-1973), which exemplifies studio-produced exploitation cinema. The series is influenced by the contemporaneous *yakuza* cycle and its anti-authoritarian social realist agenda. Produced during a time of rapid political-economic-social change in the country, the *Female Convict Scorpion* series combines exploitative content—the display of nudity, violence, and sensational subjects—with an underlying feminist sensibility, a mixture that embraces the ambiguities of commercial genre cinema. Through close textual analysis, this research explains the contradictions in this women-in-prison series by 1) providing evidence of the female gaze and the subversive narrative tropes, which reveals the feminist subtext in these films, and 2) examining the stylistic and narrative effects of cinematic excesses. This article, thus, re-evaluates these popular genre films as in a time capsule, documenting the

significance of their expression of gender politics in 1970s Japan through the distinctive production context and presentation of cinematic excesses.

Keywords: women-in-prison films, 1970s Japan, exploitation, feminist film theory, cinematic excesses, gender politics

Introduction

The opening frame of *Joshū Sasori: Kemono Beya/Female Convict Scorpion*¹: *Beast Stable* (hereafter *Beast Stable* ; Itō Shunya², Toei, 1973) informs viewers that ‘both the prison in this story and all the characters are fiction. They bear no connection to reality whatsoever’. A dazzling sequence follows: a tracking shot in a Tokyo underground tunnel, showing fleeting glimpses of wanted posters with protagonist Matsu/Sasori (Scorpion, played by Kaji Meiko)’s mug shot lining the walls of the station and continuing into the city streets, her haunting gaze staring out of the image. Sasori then appears sitting among ordinary commuters in a subway train when two plain-clothed policemen find her. Violence erupts. The escaped convict stabs one officer in the neck, causing blood to gush from the wound; the other chases her and handcuffs her to himself. She jumps out of the train, promptly hacking off the officer’s arm as the door closes. Sasori is captured by a freeze-frame alongside the bright red title. She then runs through the underground station and onto the busy city streets. The camera follows her, sprinting, still cuffed to the cop’s severed forearm. The passers-by watch in horror; with clear defiance on her face, she ignores them. A profusion of editing techniques demonstrates the excessive stylistic devices: freeze frames, tracking shots,

¹ Alternative title: *Female Prisoner Scorpion*.

² The transliterations of Japanese names in this article use the convention of surname first, followed by given names.

negative images, slow-motion, dissolve and whitewashing. This serves as the intensified introduction of Sasori as a lone avenger who challenges male-dominated authorities.

Produced by Toei, *Beast Stable* is the third in the *Female Convict Scorpion* (1972-1973) series, a specimen of relatively low-budget filmmaking during a period of recession in the Japanese film industry caused by the advent of television. Cinema attendance had peaked in 1958; by 1970, 95% of households owned television sets (Desser, 1988, p.8). With the prevalence of television, cinema attendance figures dropped to less than a quarter of the 1958 figures. The Shochiku studio, famous for producing women's films and family drama, lost its top-grossing status in 1955-6 because the new generation of married, middle-class women preferred to stay at home and watch television. After Shintocho collapsed in 1961, the remaining five major studios—Shochiku, Toho, Toei, Nikkatsu, Daiei—developed various strategies. Instead of recapturing female cinemagoers, the bulk of the films released in Japan during the 1970s were 'pink movies, *roman porno*, and other marginal sex exploitation pictures' (Anderson & Richie, 1982, p.456; see also Sharp, 2008) aimed at the long-established urban, working-class male audience (Gerow, 2005). Pink films (*pinku eiga*) were soft-core movies produced mainly by independent companies and shown in specialist theatres (Nornes, 2014, pp.10-11; Arnold, 2015, p.3). In 1971, the bankrupt Nikkatsu studio launched the *roman porno* cycle of production, a brand loosely based on the French concept of *roman pornographique*, or erotic fiction in the tradition of the author Marquis de Sade and the French novel *The Story of O* (Réage, 1954). Roland Domenig (2014) argues that the distinction between major and independent studios regarding their involvement with pink films and relatively low-budget sexploitation movies is false. As many movie theatres offered double, triple and even quadruple bills to attract audiences, some studios increased their annual productions to meet that demand. Both Toei and Nikkatsu, however, would soon cut back on production, and Toei was the first of the major studios to commission independently

produced adult-oriented films (Kimata, 2014, p.48). The percentage of adult films in the total domestic film production rose from 3.8% in 1958 to 58.7% in 1973 (Cather, 2014, p.121). In this production context, Toei adapted the *Female Convict Scorpion* series from the popular manga of Shinohara Toru, which contains sex and violence. However, the series maintains a budget and quality that is above the contemporaneous pink movies. Ironically, Kaji Meiko had moved from Nikkatsu to Toei when the former switched to an exclusive focus on soft-core, and the actress did not want to be involved in the genre.

Acknowledging this specific production context, I place the current discussion in the field of research on exploitation cinema. Schaefer (1999, p.110) asserts that exploitation films could simultaneously arouse, entertain, and educate. David Church writes, 'exploitation film encompasses a mode of low-budget film-making that emphasises sensationalism, spectacle and direct appeals to the viewer's body' (2014, p.10). Exploitation films are diverse and complex in their subject matter; common characteristics, such as a proliferation of sex and violence, and bad acting, are likely because of the mode of production (Roche, 2015, p.1). As such, exploitation cinema can be defined in a variety of ways: as a genre, a style, a mode of production, and 'a sensibility, a set of politically convoluted viewing practices' (Church, 2014, pp.3-4). While these films cater to voyeuristic fantasies of the predominantly heterosexual male viewers, they can also express feminist outrage over sexual domination as a recurring theme and show images of women's revolting to end their oppression (Jenkins 2007, p.113). Because of these ambiguities, recent academic research on exploitation has reasserted the importance of these films in cinema history, especially for their potential to be politically transgressive and to provide counter-cultural genre pleasure (see, for example, Church, 2014). Exploitation can be seen as 'bad cinema', a term used by Jeffrey Sconce to refer to the innovative aspects of low-budget filmmaking through highlighting how the lack

of realism, technical/aesthetic failure and thematic experiments can inadvertently reveal many ‘cinematic possibilities’ (2019, p.667).

Sexploitation films are most analogous to the *Female Convict Scorpion* series; sexploitation exists ‘within a highly visible and public sphere of contest and debate over what constituted aesthetic and social value’ (Gorfinkel, 2017, p.10), and captures the concurrent social consciousness (p.18). ‘Sexploitation films were always about excess. They were about excessive desire that needed to be fulfilled. They were about excessive display—the skin, the sexual situations’ (Schaefer, 2003, p.43). Kristin Thompson’s theorisation of cinematic excess builds on the works of Stephen Heath, Roland Barthes, and the Russian Formalist approach to narrative as an interplay between plot and story, wherein plot refers to the events in the film and story is ‘the mental reconstruction by the spectator of these events’ in a chronological order (1977, p.54). Narrative excesses pertain to arbitrary elements of a film that are beyond the unity of plot and story, motivation, and narrative functions. Excesses in sexploitation cinema can therefore explain how it oscillates between ‘too much’ (exposed flesh, extended scenes of nudity) and ‘too little’ (lack of motivation and plausible characterisation) (Gorfinkel, 2012, p.83).

Employing feminist enquiries to discover contradiction and ambivalences in popular films (Mayne, 1984, p.63), this article focuses on the first three of the four films in the *Female Convict Scorpion* series: *Joshū Nana-maru-ichi Gō/Female Convict 701: Scorpion* (hereafter *701* ; Itō Shunya, Toei, 1972); *Joshū Sasori – Dai 41 Zakkyobō/Female Convict Scorpion: Jailhouse 41* (hereafter *Jailhouse 41*; Itō Shunya, Toei, 1972); and the aforementioned *Beast Stable*. The fourth film, *Joshū Sasori - 701 Gō Urami Bushi/Female Convict Scorpion: The Grudge Song* (hereafter *Grudge Song*; Toei, 1973) was directed by Hasabe Yasuharu, and does not share the stylistic choices of the first three films, most likely the result of the change of director. Given the early 1970s was a significant period of change

in Japanese film history, and the subversive and cinematic possibilities of sexploitation, this article addresses a central research question through this popular film series: what is the relationship between popular cinema and gender politics? To explain the contradictions and ambiguities in these films, this research employs close textual analysis to 1) provide evidence of the female gaze and the subversive narrative tropes, which reveals a feminist sensibility; and 2) examine the stylistic and narrative effects of cinematic excesses. This study of a women-in-prison film series, therefore, re-evaluates these popular genre films as a 'time capsule' (Gorfinkel, 2012, p.18), documenting the significance of their distinctive production context and collective expression of gender politics in 1970s Japan.

Japan of the 1970s and Media Representations

Japan's post-war reconstruction was successful to some extent, as it experienced a period of economic progress and internationalisation (known as *kokusaika*) in the mid-to-late 1960s, epitomised by the country's hosting of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. At the same time, numerous social problems, mostly affecting the socially marginalised, made Japan's citizens question the effectiveness of modernisation that was seen as a means of curbing the rise of militarism. Gerow (2005) argues that nations are created by the exclusion of those who do not fit, and, therefore, understanding the marginalised helps to illustrate the nature of the nation, and the 'contradictory logic of this exclusion' (p.405).

Anti-Vietnam War protests, student movements and New Left radicalism (Shigematsu, 2012a) in Japan were rife in the 1960s and 1970s, and they directed their critiques at the national institutions. The Japanese left, in particular, sought to confront the government for its support of US imperialism during the Cold War era. Women participated in these movements; however, they were quickly 'disillusioned with the malestream left's lack of awareness of gender issues' (Mackie, 2003, p.147). Women's liberation and feminist movements became some of the most

pertinent social movements in 1960s and 1970s Japan. While these movements in Japan were stimulated by its counterparts in the United States and Europe, they were more closely connected to domestic events (p.148). A key change was the granting of political and legal rights to women under the Post-war Constitution (1946), including the right to choose a marriage partner—a shift from the pre-modern system of arranged marriages—and equal pay. Traditionally, Japanese women hold a powerful position within the family and the domestic sphere. In their private familial role, women usually dominate the male members of the household, and they dedicate themselves to their families. As part of the economic progress of post-war Japan and the demand for additional labour, women increasingly entered the workforce. The traditional family structure, therefore, was changing in the 1970s: a growing number of single-person households, a rising divorce rate, and an ageing society (Ehara et al, 1993, p.58; Dommaraju and Jones, 2011).

In 1970, a new women's liberation movement (*ūman ribu*/Women's Lib) erupted in the country. The radical Women's Lib challenged the androcentrism of the political-social-economic system in Japanese society and advocated for women's independence and sexual autonomy (Shigematsu, 2012b; Welker, 2018). Significantly, Women's Lib viewed the family system as the basic unit of sex discrimination and the foundation of Japanese national imperialism (Shigematsu, 2012b, p.165). Other feminist groups in the 1970s, such as the Fighting Women group and the Women for Action, focused on women's liberation and achieving equal rights. Reproductive rights became a much-debated national issue after the war. Abortion under certain circumstances was legalised in the Eugenic Protection Law of 1948 (EPL), principally to curb population growth and, as the title suggests, the EPL reflected a 'repressive eugenic ideology' (Norgren, 2001, p.40). Medical and religious interests, and politicians, dominated subsequent discussions to revise the EPL from 1967 to 1974, among which was a strong anti-abortion sentiment. The proposal to remove the 'economic reasons clause' from access to legal abortion was a key

contention. Groups in the women's liberation movement (e.g. the Fighting Women group) opposed the revisions, claiming that women did not have a real choice without improvement of social conditions for families, and they critiqued the exclusion of women from the policy-making process. *Chupiren* (Alliance for Abortion and the Pill) was unique in its individualistic and rights-oriented stance (p.66). Nonetheless, the National Diet (the legislature of Japan) failed to have a dialogue with these groups, and debates about the EPL would continue until 1996 when it was revised as the Maternal Body Protection Law. Among the many related campaigns were anti-discrimination against unwed mothers and 'solidarity with women who killed their children (known as *kogoroshi onna*), which was a phenomenon that peaked in the early 1970s' (Shigematsu, 2012b, p.166). Women's Lib's most cohesive period of activism spanned 1970 to 1975 and, therefore, coincided with the production of the *Female Convict Scorpion* series. The storyline in *Beast Stable*, in particular, capitalised on the public interest in abortion rights.

The United Red Army (URA) incidents of 1972, nonetheless, crystallised a collective questioning of these radical movements. The URA formed in 1971, largely of the remaining members of the Japanese Red Army, a radical leftist group that began in the late 1960s. It was involved in a widely televised nine-day siege in February 1972. The Japanese state used the mass media to report on the URA's internal conflicts and murders of its own members in a violent purge, which attracted condemnation from across the political spectrum, and devastated Japanese leftist radicalism. By the end of the 1970s, *ribu* faded as a movement, although feminist activists, academics, artists and writers continued to discuss 'women's reproductive and sexual autonomy and various forms of discrimination' (Bullock, Kano and Welker, 2018, p.7).

The questioning of major social and political powers of early 1970s Japan provides insight into the zeitgeist of the period and counter-cultural views that were embraced by

many intellectuals and filmmakers. The emergence of Japan's New Wave—a cultural movement associated with visual artists, filmmakers and intellectuals in the 1950s—exposed collective concerns for pressing social problems (see de Vargas, 2018). Isolde Standish argues that many Japanese New Wave films are about the 're-negotiation of the binary, active/male-passive/female gender dichotomy' (2006, p.224), challenging the containment of women within the domestic sexual economy (p.225). These radical ideas are rarely shared by the popular media. Studies of 1970s news and television dramas in Japan revealed the passive and stereotypical roles assigned to women in the media (Muramatsu, 2002, p.72). For example, a 1974 study showed that televised soap operas and family dramas—targeting female audiences—conveyed the message that only women who stayed at home could be happy (p.73), and that the female audiences' reading of such media was 'a process of gender identity construction based on dichotomous gender divisions' (p.85).

Given the conservative gendered content of many media products, the filmmakers of the *Female Convict Scorpion* films stand out by expressing an awareness of progressive ideas about social problems in Japan. Hasabe Yasuharu, who directed Kaji Meiko in the fourth *Female Convict Scorpion* film, *Grudge Song*, and her breakthrough role in the *Nora Neko Rokku /Stray Cat Rock* series (1970, Nikkatsu), talked about how some of his films reference social problems of the time, including juvenile delinquency, discrimination against people of mixed heritage, and the sexual abuse of women, to address young audiences:

Japan, especially during the sixties and early seventies, had a lot of problems with student demonstrations and protests. [...] So, going for the most interesting social message at the time, the feeling of strife in the air as the seventies began, that's what we captured on film. We weren't trying to hit people over the head with messages but

rather to show what was going on in the background in the lives of many young people during that period. (quoted in Chris D, 2005, p.134)

Itō Shunya was born in 1937 and part of the ‘generation of the burnt-out ruins’ (*yakeatoha*), so named because their youth was spent in the final stages of the Second World War, thus, they experienced Japan’s defeat and the US-led occupation (Standish, 2011, p.1). Standish’s work (2011) on the avant-garde filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s proposes a generational consciousness among them. Itō was from the same generation, though his career trajectory was within commercial studio cinema. The major studios operated an apprentice system, and Itō entered Toei as an assistant director after studying literary aesthetics at the prestigious University of Tokyo. *Female Convict 701: Scorpion* was his directorial debut, for which he was awarded a Directors Guild of Japan New Directors Citation. Searching through Japanese entertainment news on Itō reveals that he is widely known for the social commentaries in his films; for example, the Directors Guild’s brief biography references *701* as an example of avant-garde visual expression and anti-authority stance.³ His concerns about Japan’s military history and post-war reconstruction have led him to make several films dealing with that often-controversial subject. *Pride: The Fateful Moment (Puraido: unmei no toki*, Toei, 1998) discusses the International Military Tribunal of 1946-48, and offers a sympathetic view of wartime prime minister Tojo Hideki, which caused an international controversy for its revisionism. His most recent work, *The Independence of Japan (Nihon dokuritsu*, Nihon Dokuritsu Production Committee, 2020) returns to this historical period and narrates the negotiation with the Allied Forces over Japan’s constitution and disarmament.

³ <https://www.dgj.or.jp/members/?id=58>; see also <https://hochi.news/articles/20201219-OHT1T50027.html>. Both in Japanese, accessed 7 September 2021.

Kaji made a conscious decision not to retire, get married and become a stay-at-home parent, the typical career trajectory for actresses in Japan.⁴ Instead, she has remained unmarried, and is still active as an actress and singer today. Neither Itō nor Kaji explicitly claimed an interest in feminism; however, it can be argued that the *Female Convict Scorpion* series expresses a feminist sensibility, constitutive of interrelated themes, including women's subjectivity, and challenges to the gender hierarchy.⁵ For these reasons, the empowerment trope of the series presents a valuable means to discuss the political-economic-social changes, and the positions of women in Japanese society in the early 1970s.

The Scorpion in Japanese Genre Cinema

The prison in the *Female Convict Scorpion* films is a site for a power struggle between the women inmates and the guards, manifested as public spectacles. Through the series, Sasori develops as a career criminal in revolt against the oppression of the prison regime. These films draw their influences from the Japanese *yakuza* (gangster) genre, famed for its critical anti-authority stance and aimed at the same working-class male target audience. The women-in-prison films in question offer similar narrative functions and the heroines of the series, especially the main character Sasori, are social outcasts, much like their counterparts in the *yakuza* films.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Toei set the trend of producing idealised gangster films (Yomota, 2019); the first example of the *ninkyō yakuza* genre (films that deal with chivalry) was credited to Sawashima Tadashi's *Jinsei gekijō: Hishakaku/Theatre of Life: Hishakaku* (1963). Popular prison-escape films such as *The Man from Abashiri Jail* series (*Abashiri Bangaichi*, dir. Ishii Teruo, Toei, beginning in 1965) belong to a subgenre of *ninkyō yakuza*.

⁴ <https://mi-mollet.com/articles/-/30327?layout=b> (in Japanese). Accessed 7 September 2021.

⁵ My assertion is drawn from Rosalind Gill (2007)'s writing on 'postfeminist sensibility', which is made up of a series of interrelated themes such as self-surveillance and consumerism.

That Itō served as an assistant director to Ishii may account for the resemblance between the traditional genre with male protagonists and the *Female Convict Scorpion* series that uses many of the conventions found in the prison-escape films and a new type of *yakuza* genre—*jitsuroku* (true record)—films. The *jitsuroku* films typically feature the criminal career progression of anti-heroes who are against authority, mainstream society, and state institutions, and expose a critical lens on the political and social events in Japan. The best example was Fukasaku Kinji's 1973 *Jingi Naki Tatakai/Battles Without Honor and Humanity* (hereafter *Battles*, Toei). *Battles* opens with the atomic bomb's detonation before presenting black and white haunting images of post-war occupation by the American military and social unrest, which form a backdrop to the title and opening sequence. This direct reference to Japan's defeat and the uneasy coexistence with American influences and social problems implies that criminal gangs were a natural result of post-war political oppression and lawlessness in Japan, highlighting the concerns for the impact of modernisation on the marginalised in society (see Gerow, 2005).

The opening of *Battles* cites a manuscript by a real-life *yakuza* that was written in prison and various crime reports as a bid to assert social realism. The film takes place in Hiroshima in 1946, a reminder of the greatest national humiliation—the A-bomb—which, alongside the real-life footage, stresses its importance as a social commentary on the disorder and violence of the country. Such conflicts among street gangs metaphorise how people must fend for themselves in this lawless society because of the breakdown of a collective social vision that resulted from the war and the occupation by the Allied Forces. The protagonist, small-time gang boss Hirono Shozo (Sugawara Bunta), helps a woman escape gang rape by the American occupying forces in broad daylight on the busy streets. Lawkeepers (the American military), conversely, are portrayed as raping buffoons, while the gangsters are merely fighting for survival and 'honour and humanity', as the title suggests. Avenging a

friend by killing a rival gangster, Hirono ends up in jail. He finds himself in isolation after a prison riot, where he meets fellow prisoner Wakasugi Hiroshi (Umemiya Tatsuo), the successor to the Doi gang. They become sworn brothers marked by a ceremony where they drink each other's blood, and Hirono helps Wakasugi escape prison. While not 'men-in-prison' films, this *yakuza* series employs the jail setting and meeting of the protagonists there as the catalyst for their criminal careers. The narrative depicts the futility of the gang wars as the *yakuza* organisations modernise, ignoring traditional ethical codes and colluding with corrupt local officials. The film's anti-hero Hirono fails to keep up with the new criminal organisation and, instead, descends into a life of gang warfare, unable to extricate himself due to an outdated sense of honour. This film was commercially produced and was a critical success in Japan, winning best film, best actor (Sugawara), and best screenplay at the 1974 Kinema Junpo, the most prestigious film award ceremony in Japan. This success helped spark four sequels, forming a series (1973-1974) that is collectively known as *The Yakuza Papers*.

Typically, the protagonists of *yakuza* films, as in *Battles*, are hardened during their jail terms through meeting other like-minded criminals. These films centre on how the prison regime transforms inmates to be even more anti-authority, rendering them unable to cope with a changed society after their periods of incarceration. The *Female Convict Scorpion* films in question are, therefore, the equivalents to the contemporaneous *yakuza* cycle and its questioning of state institutions, especially the role of the patriarchy in sustaining these institutions. In *Female Convict Scorpion*, the male characters are mostly authoritarian figures, both outside of the prison and within. As Sasori's criminal career progresses through the films, she takes on not only a personal vengeance but also transforms into a force against the patriarchal hierarchy. The nudity in the series becomes almost secondary to Sasori's journey; in the first film, Kaji's breast is momentarily exposed. As the series progresses, other actresses take over as the focal point in sexual scenes. While retaining characteristics of

exploitation cinema (that is, some nudity), the studio-produced series also differentiates from contemporaneous adult-oriented sex films by the quality of the storytelling and characterisation. The categories used by the industry for the series suggest they are, in fact, seen as genre films, such as ‘action, adventure/suspense, mystery.’⁶

Much of the 90-minute narrative of *Beast Stable* is about Sasori’s exploits after her escape from prison, during which she avenges the women who have been wronged by a prostitution ring and those marginalised in society, most notably sex worker Yuki (Watanabe Yayoi) who helps her adjust to life outside of prison. Later, Yuki terminates her pregnancy (the result of incest). Sasori’s rage heightens after she witnesses another sex worker who is forced to abort her baby and dies in the process. She declares she is possessed by the soul of the dead girl. These storylines directly respond to the previously mentioned public discourse about women’s reproductive rights, and the feminist concerns for unwed mothers and women who killed their children (see Shigematsu, 2012b). Sasori only briefly returns to the prison at the end of the film to torment a rival female gang boss who is complicit in the harming of other women. Having tried to reintegrate herself into society by becoming a machinist but failing to live an ordinary and law-abiding life, Sasori once again goes underground—symbolically in the city’s sewage system—a subversive position allowing her to hide from and challenge the authorities, and fight social injustices.

The female prisoners’ experiences in these films are allegories of the disintegration of traditional Japanese family. These films never reveal Sasori’s family background, although the backstory shows she was betrayed by a lover, resulting in her wrongful conviction as an innocent young woman. For the prisoners, there is no resolution and absorption back into heteronormative domesticity; in fact, they invariably fail to achieve the feminine ideal of

⁶ See eiga.com, Toei’s on-demand channel, moviewalker.jp. These genres are given on wowow.co.jp. All in Japanese.

‘good wife and wise mother’ (Bullock et al, 2010, p.2). These women, such as the protagonist Matsu, can only respond to their alienation from traditional gender roles through desperate criminal acts and revenge. Unlike the familial setting of soap operas and television drama series with which women audiences often identify (Muramatsu, 2002), the verisimilitude of these films is decidedly that of a male-dominated world. Sasori’s criminal career is an act of trespassing in this male-dominated space; it represents a rejection of traditional gender roles for women. That said, the *Female Convict Scorpion* series focuses on the protagonist’s plight as an individual’s trajectory, rather than a collective feminist response. At the end of the films, Sasori is usually depicted dressed in her trademark wide-brimmed hat and long black coat, walking away by herself—a lone force fighting for justice in a male-dominated public sphere.

The contradictions of female empowerment and the exploitation elements are inherent within the main tropes of the *Female Convict Scorpion* series; its anti-authority stance is thematically close to the *yakuza* films while it follows the specific aesthetic and narrative conventions of exploitation films. In the following section, this analysis turns to explain these ambiguities and the ways these films harbour a feminist subtext.

Feminist Sensibility and Ambiguities in the Series

The *Female Convict Scorpion* series exploits the women-in-prison setting to include elements that appeal to urban male audiences: the display of the female body, police and prison guards’ brutality, physical and psychological violence, and a prominent revenge plot. The male-dominated institutions of the state and legal systems are predicated on a hierarchy of gender difference and the film series offers a strong underlying critique of these national institutions by subverting the inherent patriarchal power that undergirds them. Conversely, in presenting sadistic and masochistic rituals against women in the typical penal settings, these films are also ambiguous in their veiled support for women’s fight against oppression. Kaji,

for example, recognised that at the time, Japanese films were often given sensational titles to draw audiences into the theatre even when a film was about social problems (Chris D, 2005, p.67). The presentation of empowered female protagonists in politically salient exploitation films that primarily targeted young heterosexual male audiences is not uncommon (see Bouclin, 2009, p.22; Benson-Allott, 2015). Nonetheless, Cook (2005, p.61) asserts that while some exploitation films celebrate the popular understanding of feminism and reverse the sexual roles by depicting hyper-aggressive women, they do not offer more subtle questioning of gender politics. Carol Clover's seminal work describes the final girl in horror films as an excessive and demonic 'victim-hero'; 'Feminism [...] has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge' (2015, p.4). Japanese feminist critic Saito Ayako writes in regard to the director Kōji Wakamatsu, who began his career in pink films, 'women's bodies in the work of Wakamatsu [...] are frequently put on screen simply to provide a blank canvas on which to paint vivid pictures of social contradictions' (cited in Furuhata, 2014, p.158). Rebecca Stringer (2011) asserts that while female vigilantes in films offer critiques of rape culture and support women's empowerment, these films are limited as feminist texts because they fail to challenge conservative social ideologies (p.274). In other words, these films focus on the female protagonists' individual struggles rather than any collective political action. The status of the lone avenger is confirmed by the lyrics of the theme song in the third instalment, *Urami Bushi* ('The Grudge Song'), which Itō penned with Kaji in mind. The song includes lines such as:

When you cry, he will make you cry even more

Women's tears become my grudge song

Women's life belongs to this grudge

These by no means indicate feminist intent, but, rather, focus on one woman's 'grudge' and revenge-seeking against men's oppression, beginning with Sasori's back story. After being used by her boyfriend, Sasori is wrongly convicted, then humiliated and sexually violated by the ubiquitous sadistic and abusive male partners and prison guards. The series follows the development of her prison career through violent, wrathful revenge on these men. The male characters in these films are, as a whole, despicable, with no redeeming features. In *Jailhouse 41*, three men from a tour bus gang-rape one of the escaped prisoners and kill her 'for fun'. Another 'war-hero' on the bus relishes his wartime exploits (the raping and killing of Chinese women) only to be subjected to a humiliating ritual by the female convicts. Later in the film, Sasori encourages the prison guards to open fire on the tour bus, thereby killing these men.

A degree of solidarity among marginalised women can be seen in the *Female Convict Scorpion* series, further evidencing my previously asserted feminist sensibility. Sasori and the other main character of *Beast Stable*, Yuki, conform to the two stereotypes of women-in-prison films: first, the rebellious woman (Sasori), whose fighting skills and leadership experience helps to galvanise the women's resistance; the other, the tormented victim (Yuki) who needs nurturing by the female rebel and who will become the focus of the community's moral outrage against the authorities. In *Beast Stable*, a frame of the rising sun (the national symbol of Japan) dominates the setting of the story: the postwar ghetto of Tokyo. After the title and the theme song *Urami Bushi*, we zoom in to one of the ramshackle huts, where Yuki is having sex with her brother, who has brain damage as a result of an industrial accident. The brother and sister are forgotten victims of the Second World War and Japan's economic recovery. Yuki harbours Sasori and is present in many of the film's nude scenes. She is a sex worker with a heart of gold who is forced to work the streets to support herself and her brother. As Yuki has sex with her brother, the audience sees what she focuses on through an overhead-and-reverse shot. While her brother is on top of her, she gazes at a gecko on the

ceiling, desperately trying not to emotionally engage in this incestuous relationship. The siblings exist on the margins of society—the aftermath of the war—as Japan underwent economic progress. Sasori and Yuki, rather than the male characters, provide the dominant gaze in this film. The contrast between Kaji and Watanabe’s performances critically highlights the ‘gendered labor’ within the ‘melodramatic hyperboles’ of sexploitation cinema (Gorfinkel, 2012, pp.79-81). Yuki’s productive labour, exploited here by her male clients and only remaining relative, allegorises the often-devalued performance labour of actresses in low-budget movie productions. Later in the narrative, the police authority forces Yuki to rat out Sasori, but she remains loyal to her friend and forewarns her, leading to the Scorpion’s miraculous escape through a blazing fire, unharmed.

The Female Convict Scorpion films also offer strong criticisms of patriarchal state institutions and the brutal and morally bankrupt men who run them. The first of the series begins with the hoisting of the Japanese flag, as the prison chief Goda is about to receive a recommendation. Sasori’s escape from prison ‘in broad daylight’ disrupts this celebration of the state’s promotion of a man who turns out to be utterly corrupt. The powerful national institutions —especially police and prisons—are, in fact, responsible for creating the hardened female convict since Matsu in the series is forced into such a criminal career by male oppressors from these institutions. In *701*, Matsu explains how she was an ordinary happy woman until she fell in love with rogue cop Sugimi (Natsuyagi Isao). She loses her virginity to him, symbolised by the drop of blood on the white sheet that also resembles the rising sun of the Japanese flag. Sasori’s betrayal by Sugimi becomes a metaphor for the fall of the nation with this not-so-subtle reference to the national symbol. Matsu’s failed attempt at stabbing Sugimi on the steps of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Headquarters results in her first jail term in a prison that is brutally run by male guards. Sugimi and the Japanese mafia arrange for Matsu to be murdered in prison; yet, this attempt fails and, instead, triggers

Matsu's determination to seek revenge. In a plot typical of the series, the female avenger Sasori hunts down the men who have wronged her in the past and eliminates them one by one. The mafia hide out in a corporate building with a large banner bearing the ironic slogan 'the beautiful soul and harmony of Japan'. The bent cop Sugimi, the organised crime syndicate and the corporate power merge into one public enemy. After escaping from jail, Sasori kills the *yakuza* responsible for her gang rape, including a mafia boss who dies hanging alongside this banner. The protracted killing of Sugimi is tense, with him eventually also dying in front of the Japanese flag. These direct attacks on the national *and* patriarchal powers—all dishonest men representing organisations, from the *yakuza* to the police, and ultimately the failure of the nation to protect its innocents—deliver a strong political message.

Grudge Song departs from this unambiguous condemnation of the powerful male-dominated institutions in that the protagonist Kudo (Tamura Masakazu), who harbours Sasori, is a torture victim of the police after he took part in an unnamed student revolutionary group. Kudo is portrayed as the weak link because he betrayed his fellow activists. Unlike the loyal Yuki, Kudo gives Matsu up under interrogation, which leads to her arrest by the police. She escapes once more, then tracks down and kills Kudo. The storyline of police brutalities and the 'weakness' of the protesters were likely a response to the aforementioned URA incident of 1972.

Laura Mulvey's seminal article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), considers classical Hollywood cinema and suggests that there are two forms of male gaze (voyeurism and narcissism) in these Hollywood narratives, in which female stars function as the loci of sexual desire. Male protagonists investigate and track down the women and then, finally, reinforce authority and control over them within a heterosexual framework with which male spectators can identify. This analytical framework neither allows for the

existence of female subjectivity within the narratives nor explains the viewing pleasures for female spectators. Mary Ann Doane builds on Mulvey's theorisation by stating that 'the potential for illusory mastery of the signifier [...] is not accessible to the female spectator' and 'the massive reading, writing, and filming of the female body [...] constructs and maintains a hierarchy along the lines of a sexual difference assumed as natural' (1988, pp.216-217). In the *Scorpion* series, when out of prison uniform, Sasori wears army fatigue jackets and pants, without obvious make-up. She provides neither conventional visual pleasure as embodiment of femininity, nor sexual spectacle for the male gaze (Stacey, 1994, pp.28-29). The centrality of the female gaze in the *Female Convict Scorpion* series further problematises the foundation of male spectatorship, as the gaze does not eroticise but instead actively performs different functions. In *Beast Stable*, Sasori's gaze is so powerful that her stares are enough to drive the rival female gang leader mad. Since Sasori in the original comic talks in a 'perpetual stream of obscenities' (Sharp, 2001), Kaji agreed with director Itō's strategic suggestion that she speak as little as possible, so her characterisation of Matsu was expressed visually rather than verbally. Sasori utters only five words in *Jailhouse 41*. As Sasori has so little dialogue, Kaji's performance focuses on facial expressions, predominately using her eyes—a powerful technique that exaggerates and elevates the female gaze and deconstructs the notion of the male gaze in this film series. Through the violent and vengeful encounters between the prisoners and the male characters in the series, the protagonists, especially Sasori, are able to subvert the naturalised gender hierarchy. In Doane's book on femme fatales and spectatorship, she suggests the possibility of women moving between masculinity and femininity, whereby a woman can look 'as if she were a man with the phallic power of the gaze' (1991, p.77). Similarly, Miranda Sherwin's article on several films that feature femmes fatales demonstrates the shifting boundaries between gender binarism, exposing gender as performative and the deconstruction of controlling male gaze (2008,

p.182). In this series, Sasori is masculinised—usurping the power of the gaze and taking on gender traits traditionally associated with men while directing her vengeful actions back on the male characters—while rarely evoking erotic desire for her.

Led by Sasori, the female characters in the series inflict excessive violence onto the male authoritative figures as punishment for the men's role as inappropriate transgressors. Many of these brutal acts are directed at symbols of male power, such as the genitals (a reminder of the fear of castration) and the eyes (the male gaze). In *Beast Stable*, while Sasori escapes the attention of male gangsters and the police, she threatens with her powerful eyes, glowering out from the copious wanted posters on the walls, attacking the state institutions that try to restrain her. Goda, the prison chief must hide behind dark glasses for much of the second film of the series after a female prisoner, haunted by Sasori's powerful gaze, stabs him in the eye with a piece of broken glass. At the end of *Jailhouse 41*, Sasori fatally wounds Goda. His false eye falls out and, through this surrogate and now impotent gaze, we see the fantasy of free and happy female prisoners running down the highway towards a brighter future. In the same film, another prison officer is murdered by the escapees and impaled through his genitals. At the beginning of *Beast Stable*, as recounted at article's start, Sasori severs a policeman's forearm, symbolically disabling his power. Later, she breaks the cuffs that connect her to the cop's arm, where it follows that a dog picks up the severed limb and chews it like a bone, signifying Sasori's derision of the male authority.

The *Female Convict Scorpion* series was introduced in Japan as a genre aimed at the urban male audience; nevertheless, this conceals an underlying subtext in response to the rapid social change, expressing a covert feminist sensibility. The series spearheaded contemporaneous female revenge films that shared the same target audience and feminist sensibility, including Toho's *Shurayuki-hime/Lady Snowblood* series (Tohiya Fujita, 1973-74, also starring Kaji Meiko) and Suzuki Norifumi's *Furyō anego den: Inoshika o-Chō/Sex*

and Fury (1973, Toei). The violations against women and the women's reactions provide fodder for understanding the social and political meanings of the *Female Convict Scorpion* films in the Japanese context. Sasori's violent revenge maims the men to protect herself and other vulnerable women. These films, therefore, serve as examples of film narratives in which the strong female avenger, women's mutual support and plot development challenge state and legal institutions as male-dominated organisations and corruptible national symbols. Sasori's anti-authoritarian activities delineate how the films in this series deconstruct binarism in the cinematic gaze. These films, hence, demonstrate a popular feminist discourse shared by the filmmakers. This compelling ideological leaning of the films appears contradictory with the commercial aim of exploitation cinema to present nudity and sex scenes for principally heterosexual male viewers. The following discussion turns to how the cinematic excesses of exploitation cinema serve to mask this inherent contradiction.

Power in Cinematic Excesses

Shinohara's original graphic novel offers an urban fantasy of erotic and violent content. Regarding its adaptation, Itō conveyed how he 'could not stand the mundane realism of Toei's genre films at that time.'⁷ Instead, inspired by Shinohara's graphic depiction, he wanted to see how the rage of one woman could challenge the nation through attacking its symbols, including the Japanese flag and national anthem. This article begins by describing the excessive violence and the use of numerous cinematic techniques in the opening sequence of *Beast Stable*. In fact, the *Female Convict Scorpion* series exemplifies the possibilities of low-budget filmmaking through two kinds of excess. First, the excessive physical and sexual violence described in the previous section relates to the narrative progression and

⁷ <http://www.cinematoday.jp/new/N0015383> (in Japanese). Accessed 7 September 2021. Itō spoke at the screening of *701* at the San Sebastian International Film Festival in 2008.

characterisation of the women prisoners, especially Sasori. Second, the excess of aesthetic style interrupts any social realism in the narrative. Arguably, the excesses shield moral messages, so as not to directly preach to the audiences. This section focuses on the cinematic techniques and their relationship to the narrative functions of the first kind of excess, especially in the way these films harbour a feminist sensibility.

The series embraces the excesses in sexploitation by containing tropes such as gratuitous sex scenes (sometimes between women—catering to the fantasy of male audiences), physical and sexual violence, rapes, the ubiquitous shower room brawls, and depictions of abortion, many of which do not contribute to a coherent narrative. These films symbolically refuse the male gaze and replace it with a viable feminine vision, expressing a subversion of patriarchal power by low-cost yet fantastical cinematic techniques. With the limited budget, tight schedule, and standards laid down for studio-produced sexploitation films, aspiring directors like Itō often played with whatever technical ploys they could find and achieved stylised *mise-en-scène* by experimenting with colours, editing, camera work, sounds, and costumes. Itō's foray into the fantastic form begins with a shower scene in *701* in which a rival prisoner, Masaki, goes mad. Amidst psychedelic lighting and in theatrical make-up, she runs through a formation of naked prisoners in pursuit of Matsu. In the same film, the prolonged digging-as-punishment sequence (the prisoners in matching tie-dyed blue-and-white uniforms excavating a large pit) is also full of dizzying, swooping camera work and sound effects, which heightens the unreality of the event. There are scenes in *Jailhouse 41* in which the prisoners and the male guards descend into carnivalesque madness as Sasori looks on, captured by frantic circular camera movements, sound effects alternating between manic laughter and silence, filtered between cold and hot colours, as the film weaves together excessive style and its revenge trope. Confirmed by Kaji herself, these stylistic decisions were conscious on the part of the production team and director as the series needed

to maintain the audiences' interest and therefore gimmicky elements were numerous (cited in Chris D, 2005, p.69). Itō's surrealist leanings become stronger and stronger through the series' three instalments. In *Beast Stable*, after witnessing a sex worker's death caused by a forced abortion, Sasori's gesture of slicing across her eyes with a scalpel shows her determination to seek revenge for the female victims of injustices. This represents a visual reminder of the violent erasure of the female gaze and is likely a nod to the opening of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's 1929 surrealist short *Un Chien Andalou*. It is a deliberate *aesthetic* choice, narrativizing the escalating sense of betrayal and vengeance that consumes Sasori.

A sequence in *Jailhouse 41* highlights the tactic of showing the women's lives in fantastical terms. Seven female convicts escape the prison. They arrive in an abandoned village and meet a ghostly old woman or witch. As they rest in a hut, two of the prisoners engage in lesbian sex in the background, prompting no reaction from the rest of the group. The film cuts to a surreal sequence that the old woman might have instigated. Behind seven flames, the seven escaped prisoners in white kimonos sit in a row, while the old woman floats above them, shrouded in a purple hue. A male singer, accompanied by only the sound of *shamisen* (a three-string instrument), narrates how 'women commit crimes because of men'. One by one, we learn of the crimes of the prisoners, all due to 'love, hate, and jealousy'. The theatrical staging of the scene resembles the *roukyoku* (also called *naniwabushi*), a form of storytelling developed around the mid-19th century that combines narration (*tanka*) with singing (*fushi*) to the accompaniment of *shamisen*. After the stories have been told in this traditional way, the old woman dies or disappears amidst a windstorm of autumn leaves, passing her knife onto Sasori as the entire landscape turns wintry. Sasori uses this same knife as a weapon in her vengeful violence against the male characters. While conforming to the

generic convention of the women confessing to their crimes, these scenes in *Jailhouse 41* demonstrate the particularly inventive aesthetic excess in the series.

The gender sensibility in *Female Convict Scorpion* explains the transgressive ethos against the hierarchy of male dominance and state and legal institutions in Japan at that time. This popular feminist discourse, however, appears contradictory to a genre that appeals primarily to male heterosexual audiences. The numerous hyperbolic and surreal sequences turn the harsh reality of prison life into titillating entertainment and, hence, lessen the potential impact of these films as direct social commentary. This discussion explains how the narrative and stylistic excesses veil the subversion presented in the series, absorbing highly charged feminist politics in graphic violence and fantasy-fueling sexual elements. As such, the negotiations of the gender hierarchy through elements that seem redundant are in fact vital, foregrounding and expanding the cinematic possibilities of these popular genre films.

Concluding Remarks

The *Female Convict Scorpion* series is influenced by the contemporaneous *yakuza* cycle and its anti-authoritarian, social realist agenda, drawing attention to the country's post-war reconstruction and growing feminist sensibility. These genre films frame the empowerment of women in specific social and political contexts and the lives of those that have been marginalised by the country's modernisation. Sasori comes from the underworld and becomes a female avenger and the archenemy of corrupt legal authorities, including the police, prison guards, and politicians who are stand-ins for the entrenched male-dominated national institutions.

While these women-in-prison films offer visual pleasures to male audiences through nudity, they showcase a powerful female gaze. The revenge of the female protagonists in these women-in-prison films serves to punish the male perpetrators and challenge the patriarchal hierarchy while simultaneously easing any guilt-by-viewing by the prominence of

cinematic excesses that render any direct attack on the normative gender hierarchy as merely fantastic. The excesses, when combined with the on-screen deeds of the victim-hero, make the representation of women in these films open to viewing pleasures for male and potentially female audiences. Being hyperbolic, excessive, and highly stylised, these studio-produced movies present many of the women prisoners' subversive acts as unrealistic, extra-narrative fantasies that do not, in one director's words, 'hit people over the head' with their social messages yet contain powerful subversive potential to critique the gender hierarchy in Japan. For these reasons, the *Female Convict Scorpion* films are both entertainment and political films, which exemplify an extraordinary time of Japanese genre filmmaking and document the contemporaneous gender politics in the country.

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