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ORGIES OF EDO

残酷・異常・虐待物語 元禄女系図
Zankoku ijo gyakutai monogatari - genroku onna keizu

Original release date: 1 January 1969
94 minutes

CREW

Directed by **Teruo Ishii**
Screenplay by **Masahiro Kakefuda, Teruo Ishii**
Produced by **Shigeru Okada, Kanji Amai**
Director of photography **Sadaji Yoshida**
Lighting by **Haruo Nakayama**
Audio recording by **Yoshitake Watabe**
Production design by **Takatoshi Suzuki**
Music by **Masao Yagi**
Edited by **Tadao Kanda**
Assistant director **Misao Arai**

CAST

Gentatsu **Teruo Yoshida**
Oito / Itoharu **Masumi Tachibana**
Hanji **Toyozo Yamamoto**
Kinu **Kei Kayama**
Rich man **Kichijiro Ueda**
Yaegaki **Carousel Maki**
Oshino **Toshiko Sawa (aka Junko Toda)**
Osei **Yoko Minamikaze**
Ochise **Mitsuko Aoi**
Chokichi **Akira Ishihama**
One-eyed man **Ken Sawaaki**
Black man **Jim M. Hughes**
Omitsu **Miki Obana**
Okon **Yukie Kagawa**
Lord **Asao Koike**
Yumioka **Michiko Ai**
Fujishima **Michi Tanaka**
Kogiku **Reiko Mikasa**
Butoh dancer **Tatsumi Hijikata**



KALEIDOSCOPE FRENZY HAVING FUN WITH TERUO ISHII'S TORTURE FILMS

By Tom Mes

Cinematic erotica has long played a sizeable role in the history of Japanese film, particularly after the so-called Golden Age of the 1950s had come to a close and formerly unassailable film studios were frantically looking for ways to keep their heads above water.

Initially the genre of erotic films was the exclusive domain of smaller independent production outfits, who hoped to corner a market to which the major studios would not cater. The commercial success of these "pink" films, however, quickly drew the attention of the established industry. When the increasing success of television in the latter half of the 1960s began to seriously erode profits in theatrical film releasing, the majors began to act as distributors for these indie "eroductions" ("erotic productions"), as they were initially referred to, releasing them through their nationwide networks of film theatres and bringing them to an even greater potential audience.

From there, it was but a small step toward in-house studio production of erotic films. Toei and Nikkatsu embraced the genre's potential most wholeheartedly, but few of the majors remained unaffected. Even Shochiku, home of Yasujiro Ozu, got in on the act, albeit by setting up a separate company to avoid tainting its image as a purveyor of genteel, status-quo affirming home drama. Toei's 1968 release *Shogun's Joy of Torture* (*Tokugawa onna keibatsushi*) is generally seen as the first pink film produced by a major studio and the start of studio-mandated sex film production in Japan. Predating competitor Nikkatsu's more famous switch to its Roman Porno line by three years, Toei's blood-and-boobs spectacle in period (un)dress formed the starting point of what was initially called Toei Porno, but would much later receive the retroactive moniker Pinky Violence.



Tortures of Edo, Spirit of Taisho

The easiest thing for Toei to have done at this juncture would have been to call in a seasoned pink filmmaker, but the studio was accustomed to creating a recognizable house style for every genre it produced, from the rosy-cheeked musical *jidaigeki* of the late 1950s that starred singing sensation Hibari Misora to the stone-faced “chivalrous” yakuza films headlined by Ken Takakura that the company cranked out during the latter half of the 1960s. Toei was clearly intent on doing the same for its new in-house brand of sex romps, even though Teruo Ishii, the director eventually chosen for the job, had been more at home making contemporary gang and action pictures. The change in course heralded a new era for the studio as well as a new period in the director’s career, one in which Ishii’s films began to reflect his own colourful and style-sensitive personality.

Teruo Ishii’s films, particularly from this point onward, exemplify popular genre cinema at its most shamelessly enjoyable: colourful and action-packed, frequently silly but never less than thoroughly entertaining. In them, he channels the spirit of the Taisho period (1912-1925) in which he was born – the brief flowering of a free-spirited zest for life under the influence of modernism and democracy. The era’s taste for *ero guro nansensu* (erotic grotesque nonsense) would leave a lasting impact on Japan’s arts and culture, in spite of the brutal suppression it underwent in the politically reactionary climate of the subsequent Showa period, better known across the world as the reign of Emperor Hirohito.

Orgies of Edo is the third of what would eventually grow into a string of eight sex-and-torture films that Teruo Ishii directed for Toei, nearly all set in the Edo period (1600-1868), during which the Tokugawa dynasty of shoguns ruled Japan from a new capital city in the East that would much later be renamed Tokyo. Each of these films follows the narrative template set by *Shogun’s Joy of Torture*: a compendium of three tangentially connected stories that always culminate in a climactic torture scene. With their heavy doses of ritualised fetishism, the films exude the aura of – and sometimes directly reference – the more outré works of literary heavyweights Junichiro Tanizaki, Edogawa Rampo and Ryunosuke Akutagawa, all Taisho-era writers *par excellence*. Prostitution, tattooing, bondage and confinement are recurring items on the menu; supple women’s bodies are lovingly filmed and mercilessly flogged; close-ups create a kaleidoscope of ecstatic facial expressions and the kimono fashions form almost a fetish ingredient in their own right. The latter is on particular display in the series’ episodes that take place in the Edo pleasure district of Yoshiwara, as is the case with *Orgies of Edo*’s opening story, which starts with an elaborately accoutred *oiran* (elite courtesan) parading the Yoshiwara with a colourful entourage of caretakers and apprentices.

Floggings and Flames

This first story in *Orgies of Edo*’s triptych follows a plot that is common enough in Japanese period cinema: the downfall of a woman from respectability to prostitution – a narrative most famously exemplified by one of the nation’s acknowledged cinematic masterpieces: Kenji Mizoguchi’s *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku ichidai onna*, 1952). In Ishii’s film, a naïve merchant girl is deceived into first indebting and subsequently prostituting herself for the sake of the young man she has fallen in love with, a conniving rake with underworld ties who is as cunning as he is handsome. Following the mould of Ishii’s torture films, however, things do not end well for either of them, as they are strung up for a thorough thrashing. While the narrative holds few surprises for anyone versed in the history of Japanese film or stage drama, the fateful downward spiral remains an effective narrative contraption for its very inescapability: once this infernal machine has been set into motion, the conclusion is inevitable.

The second story, and arguably the film’s highlight, concerns a noble lady of mesmerising beauty who seeks sexual gratification by submitting herself to the rough handlings of a series of unsightly strangers. The first of these are a pair of carnivalesque midgets: after she has achieved climax through their fondling, she subjects the pair to a merciless whipping. Her kink finds its origins in the traumatic rape, abduction and subsequent prolonged mistreatment she suffered at the hands of a lecherous miscreant – as well as in the punishment she meted out on the rapist after her rescue. The lady’s long-suffering male servant is forced to endure the dual role of procurer and voyeur, when he is obviously smitten with her. To obtain her love rather than her scorn, he finally resorts to drastic measures. This is the section of the film in which the Edogawa Rampo influence resonates most persistently, specifically of his SM-heavy novel *Beast in the Shadows* (*Inju*, 1928), but there is also a generous hint of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932) to add further spice to the proceedings.

In the film’s third and most ostentatious tale, a sadistic lord (veteran Toei heavy Asao Koike) revels in making grandiose displays of his cruelty, as we discover when he sacrifices a bevy of young women to a horde of mad bulls with flaming horns. Another of his subjects receives the full-body Goldfinger treatment, before she is locked inside a mirrored room to experience a synesthetic amplification of her agony. The episode culminates in a maelstrom of typical Ishii madness, with a scene that is as jaw-droppingly inspired as it is shoddily executed.



It is true that Ishii's pictures can on occasion look rather slapdash and/or contain abundant lapses of logic. However, previous Arrow Video releases of his films – the oneiric and grotesque Edogawa Rampo potpourri *Horrors of Malformed Men* (*Kyofu kikei ningen*, 1969) and the gobsmackingly wonderful Meiko Kaji vehicle *Blind Woman's Curse* (*Kaidan nobori ryu*, 1970) – have already demonstrated that these characteristics form no obstacle to the viewer's intense delight. On the contrary, such eccentricities only contribute to an overall otherworldliness that is equal parts Tiffany-shaded camp and tightly compacted, sexed-up Lewis Carroll. Indeed, the old-world decadence that is so characteristic of Ishii's style goes a long way toward defusing even his most potentially offensive torture sequences, turning them into exercises in whimsical extravagance instead of displays of off-putting brutality. A description of the vices that unfold in *Orgies of Edo* makes the film sound far more offensive than it actually turns out to be upon viewing. The film is very much the product of not only a different era but a highly specific and idiosyncratic sensibility.

The aesthetics of cruelty

Orgies of Edo's title sequence offers a hint of how broad a range of influences helped shape Ishii's unique sensibility: in a customized *butoh* dance performance, one of that art form's pioneers, Tatsumi Hijikata, slithers his way from out of an upright display case whose compartments are inhabited by an assortment of human oddities. The wild-eyed, shaggy-haired and bearded Hijikata would appear again in *Horrors of Malformed Men* and *Blind Woman's Curse* and was a fixture of the countercultural scene of 1960s and '70s Tokyo, where radical experiments in theatre led to the rise of such spearhead figures as Shuij Terayama and Juro Kara. Through the blurring of boundaries between art forms, cross-fertilization with cinema was common, noticeable not only in the self-consciously artistic films of the Japanese New Wave, which achieved new heights during this period, but also in the popular genre cinema of that time.

As absolute independents, the luminaries of this *angura* (underground) theatre movement were largely free to toy with social taboos, from gender to incest to the Emperor system. In the process, they borrowed heavily from the tradition of artistically expressed cruelty known as *zankoku no bi*, a term derived from the kabuki theatre's many scenes of protracted glorious death, which would in turn inspire painters such as Seiū Ito and novelists including the aforementioned Taisho threesome of Tanizaki, Rampo and Akutagawa. Through their mediation, this aesthetics of cruelty came to inform the *ero guro nansensu* style so typical of the Taisho culture, which was in turn revived during the tolerant moral climate of the 1960s by writers, comic book artists, painters and playwrights, as well as by filmmakers such as Teruo Ishii. While most of these artists tended to favour the erotic and grotesque

elements of the style, Ishii was one of the few whose works also gratefully partook in an abundance of *nansensu*, making him one of the few true heirs to the culture of the Taisho era.

Let us enter now the lurid sideshow cabinet of this custodian of a long aesthetic tradition, mister Teruo Ishii. It will be an experience at once silly and sexy, cruel and enthralling, haphazard and phantasmagorical. If you have any postmodern cynicism or irony on you, please check them at the door and cross the threshold for an escapade into the curious and the uncanny. None shall remain unaffected.

Tom Mes is the author of books on Japanese filmmakers Takashi Miike and Shinya Tsukamoto. He also wrote the Arrow Books publication Unchained Melody: The Films of Meiko Kaji. He teaches Japanese cinema at Leiden University in the Netherlands and is the co-founder of MidnightEye.com.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Orgies of Edo is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono sound.

The film was scanned and restored from the original film and audio elements by Toei Company LTD, Japan. 2K scanning was done on a Golden Eye scanner and colour grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve. Picture restoration was performed using MTI Correct and PF Clean. Some instances of picture and audio damage remain in this presentation, in keeping with the condition of these materials.

Toei Company, LTD:
Naoki Shinozaki

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Kevin Lambert** and **Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni** and **Alan Simmons**

Blu-ray Authoring and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artist **Matt Griffin**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agron, Andrew Kirkham, Sigrid Larsen, Patrick Maccias, Tom Mes, Leroy Moore,
James Plumb, Jasper Sharp, Naoki Shinozaki, Toei Company, Marc Walkow





AV175 / FCD1822