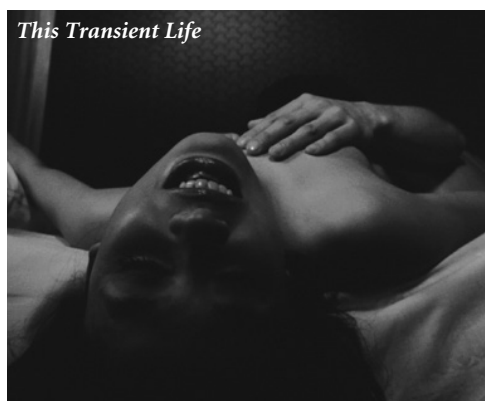


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This Transient Life



Mandara

Reckless Abandon

BY MICHAEL JOSHUA ROWIN

★ Akio Jissôji: The Buddhist Trilogy

This Transient Life, 1970; *Mandara*, 1971; *Poem*, 1972; Arrow Films

THERE'S NO MISTAKING THE BUTTON-PUSHING intentions of a "Buddhist Trilogy" that deals with incest, rape, and severe asceticism, but the unlikeliness of these three films comes from the background of director Akio Jissôji. A brilliant fantasist who modeled his work on Méliès, Jissôji had directed pop-art television series such as the original *Ultraman* (1966-67), becoming notorious for his unconventional style and storytelling. That show's proto-*Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* amalgam of goofy monsters and whiz-bang action hardly portends *This Transient Life* (1970), a disturbing slow-burn exercise in erotic blasphemy. *This Transient Life* and the rest of the trilogy were written by Toshirô Ishidô, whose narratively distinct yet thematically linked scripts explore human perversities as well as the familial and religious systems that attempt to curtail or else justify them. Having befriended the better-known Japanese New Wave legend Nagisa Ôshima and become part of the experimental Art Theatre Guild, Jissôji was the perfect director to realize Ishidô's ideas.

In *This Transient Life* a businessman's son defies Buddhist tradition and his own heritage by renouncing God and taking up with his own sister. Resisting sensationalism, Jissôji depicts the son's amorality as an existential and social crisis by composing tense black-and-white widescreen shots and orchestrating flights into out-and-out surrealism. Such details carry over into *Mandara* (1971), which follows a couple's entrancement by a sinister cult that holds rape at the center of its sadistic philosophy. Just as *This Transient Life* critiques the

drive to forestall death by engaging in acts that defy the universal order, so does *Mandara* question sects that claim transcendence from the everyday by wielding power and control over others.

Power structures come under fire in *Poem* (1972), in which Jun, an illegitimate son, maintains the family estate with greater care than his legitimate yet Westernized half-siblings, who only value sexual perversity and greed, can muster. Yet *Poem* doesn't glamorize blind adherence to tradition, either. Jissôji and Ishidô reveal Jun's servility as ultimately masochistic and futile—an extension of Buddhism's perceived tendency toward self-abnegation that is represented by off-kilter compositions, visceral close-ups, and startling lighting schemes. (At times Jissôji achieves jarring strobe effects by flashing light directly into the camera lens.) In all three films, characters are caught between material and sensual excess or else religious oblivion, possessing little knowledge or experience of Buddhism's "middle way" of moderation and serenity. But that seems the point: by gravitating toward cinematic extremes Jissôji and Ishidô cast light on Buddhism's corruption in the hands of modern man, who only understands extremes.

The generous Arrow Films Blu-rays help viewers navigate such intense territory with crisp transfers of the trilogy films as well as Jissôji's related follow-up, *It Was a Faint Dream* (1974), about a 13th-century concubine who becomes a Buddhist nun and pledges her life to celibacy; introductions and commentary by Japanese New Wave scholar David Desser; and liner notes by critics Anton Bitel and Tom Mes.

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WISH LIST THE LAST WOMAN

Perhaps Marco Ferreri's films (save a couple of canonized classics) have been so rarely revived in U.S. repertory houses or released on streaming platforms and Region 1 video because his work remains legitimately shocking to our fragile sensibilities. Case in point: his riotous 1976 carnal satire *The Last Woman*, starring Gérard Depardieu as Gérard, a fed-up factory worker whose wife has left him and their infant son in the name of finding herself. But



this is no proto-*Kramer vs. Kramer* male weepie: when Gérard woos little Pierrot's nursery schoolteacher, he drugs his crying child so as not to distract from love-making. An entirely different breed of blue-collar beefcake from Depardieu's *Loulou* four years later, Gérard is a self-absorbed, phallic creature of appetite, a cog in the capitalist wheel who's shriveling away in a high-rise suburban wasteland. In essence, he's the modern man, and Ferreri's devastating comedy of emasculation cuts him down to size. This is a film decades ahead of its time, and—finally—perfect for ours.—C. Mason Wells