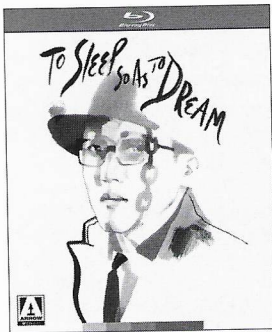


TO SLEEP SO AS TO DREAM

Directed by Kaizo Hayashi
(1986) Arrow Video Blu-ray



To Sleep So as to Dream is a film about cinema, most specifically Japanese cinema, and should appeal to audiences interested in those subjects. Mainstream audiences, on the other hand, may be puzzled or perturbed by the formal aspects of the picture as well as the oblique narrative, but these viewers are unlikely to stumble across director Kaizo Hayashi's work in any case. This is a shame, because the film is certainly well worth seeking out.

In an indeterminate time in the recent past, private detective Uotsuka and his assistant Kobayashi are hired as intermediaries between the family of the kidnaped Bellflower and her abductors. The criminals provide cryptic clues to the location where the ransom can be paid; Uotsuka and Kobayashi find themselves stymied at every turn by the criminals.

This premise seems straightforward, but *To Sleep So as to Dream* is anything but. The film's plot also involves a silent film entitled "The Eternal Mystery," which features ninja Black Mask attempting to rescue a princess from her captors. But that was 50 years ago . . . or was it? Hayashi alternates various realities: Uotsuka's quest, the silent film, and the various intersections between the two.

Hayashi's film pays covert and overt homage to Japanese cinema, Japanese culture, and world cinema. The kidnap gang is "M. Pathé & Co.," an obvious reference to the Pathé company that dominated world cinema in its earliest days. "The Eternal Mystery" is a *jidai geki* (period film), and it's presented by a *benshi* (a live narrator or "explainer") There are clear textual and stylistic references to *Sunset Boulevard* and *Modern Times*, among other, Western films.

Non-film performing arts also play a part. Early in the film, we see a *kamishibai* in action: these were itinerant performers who told stories on the street, illustrated by a series of drawings displayed in a miniature "theatre" box. The first images shown are from "The Eternal Mystery," but when this tale comes to an abrupt end—which foreshadows the eventual *denouement* of *To Sleep So as to Dream*—the performer quickly switches to drawings of the famous "Golden Bat" (*Ogon Bat*), a superhero character later immortalized in feature films, anime, and manga. "The Electric House," an early cinema, also features acrobats, a ventriloquist, a man on a tightrope, a knife thrower, etc.

To Sleep So as to Dream was shot in black-and-white on 16mm and released in 1986, where it achieved considerable success on the film festival circuit. The Blu-ray looks superb—the disc includes "The Restoration of *To Sleep So as to Dream*" (6:17), although this doesn't really go into detail on the actual restoration process (no "before and after" images, for instance). While there's little actual dialogue (most of the film is *Modern Times*-style, i.e., inter-titles for normal dialogue, human voices heard only via digetic mechanical devices, i.e., tape recordings, or in conjunction with a film, i.e., the *benshi*), the film does have music and sound effects, and the sound quality is fine.

There are a number of extras on this Blu-ray release from Arrow Video. In addition to a 2000 audio commentary by director Kaizo Hayashi and actor Shiro Sano (in Japanese, with English sub-titles), there is a new, English-language audio commentary by Japanese film experts Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp. The Hayashi/Sano commentary is interesting and provides considerable insight into the film's production and the director's vision. Mes and Sharp's commentary is excellent: both men are extremely knowledgeable and work well together. This is another instance of an embarrassment of riches—the film should really be seen on its own first, and then the viewer has to decide which commentary to watch...or both? Perhaps take a few days off between them? At 83 minutes, watching three iterations of *To Sleep So as to Dream* would require just over 4 hours.

But the commentaries are only part of the package Arrow has put together. There is a small (15 images) image gallery, two trailers (the original and an English-language trailer for the restoration, basically the same except the restored trailer has English text), and 5 video extras. Lead actor Shiro Sano is interviewed in "How Many Eggs?" (28:49), in Japanese with English sub-titles, and director Kaizo Hayashi appears in the aforementioned "The Restoration of *To Sleep So as to Dream*" (6:17). "Fragments from Japan's Lost Silent Heyday" contains two scenes (2:40 total) from silent Japanese cinema without any real context or explanation.

The other two video extras feature *benshi* Midori Sawato, one of the new generation keeping the *benshi* tradition alive. "Talking Silents: *Benshi* Midori Sawato Talks," deals with Japanese silent cinema and the *benshi* tradition (18:13, in Japanese with English sub-titles). "The Eternal Mystery" is the film-within-a-film in *To Sleep So as to Dream*, and it's repeated here, with *benshi* narration by Midori Sawato, to give viewers an idea of the art of Japanese "film explaining."

To Sleep So as to Dream is a fascinating film and the Arrow Video Blu-ray presentation is very fine overall.

David Wilt



Long before there was *A Serbian Film*, there was . . . well . . . *this* Serbian film, which also utilized elements of violence and horror as a vehicle to satirize and criticize the national character of its day, but which did so in a manner rather more—dare I say—whimsical? Late night 80s cable viewers in the U.S. may have imagined they were dreaming when this bizarre item showed up on the Movie Channel in the wee hours (this was a Cannon pick-up clearly sold under "if you want our Bronson and Norris movies you also have to run this" terms) but once it was hosted by none other than Joe

Bob Briggs on the same outlet, the *Strangler vs. Strangler* cult became a reality; and said cult has been waiting more than long enough for the film to make its Stateside digital bow courtesy of Mondo Macabro.

According to an off-screen narrator, the Belgrade of the 1980s found itself longing to be identified as a genuine world "metropolis." But according to the rules set forth by the narrator, it couldn't achieve this status on the basis of population or infrastructure alone: it needed to attract the right sort of criminal activity in order to qualify. Specifically, a notorious serial killer would serve as Belgrade's requisite distinction, and as our story opens Pera (aka "Peter," played by Tasko Nacic) stands ready to fill the bill. Pera, a whiny, corpulent mama's boy, perpetually earns said mama's wrath and corporal punishment for returning home empty-handed day after day of selling fresh carnations (he tends to immediately spend his earnings on cream-cakes at the local bakery). And all it takes for Pera to "snap" is for a would-be-customer to tell him to his face that she *hates* carnations. Soon the "Belgrade Strangler" becomes national news, and the neurotic (actually this term could apply to just about anybody in the cast of characters) Inspector Strahinjic (Nikola Simic) finds himself on the case. But that's only the beginning. A young musician by the name of Srđan/Sergio (real-life Serbian rocker Spiri Kopicl), living dysfunctionally at home with his father and his young bombshell of a stepmother, abruptly announces that he has formed a psychic link with the Strangler. Sergio and his band then go on to dominate the radio and cause even more national consternation with a controversial song designed as a tribute to said mystery killer. Will the Strangler risk exposure and try to sell his carnations at Sergio's live Friday the 13th concert? And will Sergio's newfound fame and the tricky relationships he forms as a result with popular radio host Sofia (Sonia Savic) help keep his own newly murderous impulses at bay? It only gets more insane from there . . .

The English-dubbed version of *Strangler vs. Strangler* foisted off on cable by Cannon certainly retained enough of the film's bizarre nature to make like-minded fans take notice, but it skimmed mightily when it came to the translation of such elements as the credits, the plentiful inter-titles, and the lyrics to the notorious "Baby, Baby" song. Mondo Macabro fills in even the gap perfectly with its annotated rendition of the English version ("Here comes the kiss!"), but of course also provides the option of viewing the film in its original Serbian with English subtitles. American viewers (at least those who would be drawn to this film to begin with) will have no trouble recognizing the various touchstones of their own slasher film culture from *Psycho* onward, but might find themselves harder pressed to recognize how *Strangler* specifically relates to the Belgrade of its day, let alone how and why it was deliberately designed to provoke and anger the critical film community. An indulgent feature length commentary by author/historian Dejan Ognjanovic and filmmaker Igor Stanojevic supplies this information in detail, but many patrons may prefer to go straight to the source with a half-hour video segment featuring director/co-writer Slobodan Sijan, who gained his first significant Stateside attention with this, his fourth feature film. On the course of a pleasant chat, Sijan walks us through the planning and shooting of *Strangler* and its eventual reception at American film festivals, and, of course, The Movie Channel (where Sijan encountered the film for the first time) while visiting the U.S. and was surprised to hear the English dub he'd never supervised or approved). And among other noteworthy observations, Sijan reminds viewers that while the film wasn't seen in America prior to the 90s, it was actually filmed in 1984, so the use of a severed ear as an important prop was in no way a tribute to David Lynch's lone Quentin Tarantino), as many naturally assumed!

As noted, long-time *Strangler vs. Strangler* fans need no urging and have probably already ordered the disc. Those newcomers seeking something unusual, provocative and compulsively watchable are hereby steered.

Shane M. Dallma