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CAST

Eiji Funakoshi Michio, the sculptor Mako Midori Aki, the model Noriko Sengoku Michio's mother

CREW

Directed by **Yasuzō Masumura** Screenplay by **Yoshio Shirasaka** From the original story by **Rampo Edogawa** Produced by **Hiroaki Fujii and Kazumasa Nakano** Edited by **Tatsuji Nakashizu** Director of Photography **Setsuo Kobayashi** Music by **Hikaru Hayashi** Art Direction by **Shigeo Mano**

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also known as *The Warehouse* Mōjū 盲獣 Original Release Date: 25 January 1969

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BLIND BEAST: A PERVERSE CINEMA OF THE BODY

by Virginie Sélavy

This essay contains spoilers and is best read after watching the film.

ne of the most remarkable directors of postwar Japan, Yasuzō Masumura made a cinema of astonishing intensity focused on desire and a complex idea of perversity. In Masumura's world, perversity may apply not simply to the individual, but also to the state, the social structure and the ideologies that underpin them. A student of law during the wartime, Masumura was part of a generation of cultural figures who had directly experienced the disastrous effects of Japan's nationalistic doctrine and aggressive promotion of collective identity. Many of his films depict individuals at odds with the national or corporate entity they are relentlessly forced to conform with. What casts those individuals out of social norms is some form of excessive desire. This desire can be erotic as in Seisaku's Wife (Seisaku no tsuma, 1965) and Red Angel (Akai tenshi, 1966), creative as in Black Test Car (Kuro no tesuto kā, 1962), or a combination of the two as in Manii (1964) and Irezumi (1966). In those films, the perversity of deviant individual desire is pitted against the ingrained perversity of the oppressive, hypocritical social order. The outcome is never straightforward: although collective perversity is always excoriated, individual perversity in Masumura's cinema is a double-edged sword, often simultaneously emboldening and degrading, liberating and destructive.

Those themes find their most spectacular expression in *Blind Beast*. Released in 1969, Masumura's feverish chamber piece brings together creative and erotic desire into a supremely perverse tale of art and sadomasochism. Based on a story by Edogawa Rampo that was first published in the early 1930s, *Blind Beast* centers on the aberrant passion that develops between Michio, a blind sculptor, and Aki, the beautiful model he kidnaps. The outlandish sexual extremes depicted in the film are typical of the *ero-guro* (erotic-grotesque) style developed by Rampo. But the condensation of the original story and its visual treatment purposefully shift the focus on to the central theme of Masumura's cinema: the uncontrollable force of desire and the transgression of boundaries to which it leads. Offering the deepest exploration of the correlation between artistic and sexual desire to be found in Masumura's work, *Blind Beast* creates a carnal space of creation cut off from society which nonetheless offers a devastating response to the outside world.

From its very first images, *Blind Beast* ushers us straight into an artistic space: monochrome photographs of female nudes in attitudes of subjection or constricted by chains are first on the screen. These elegantly edgy photographs are hanging in a gallery as part of an exhibition titled "Les fleurs du mal—Réhabilitation par mon sexe." Although these photographs are attributed to "Mr. Yamana" in the narrative, this was filmed at a 1968 exhibition by underground photographer Akira Suzuki (his name appears underneath the exhibition title at the gallery entrance). Mako Midori, the actress who plays Aki in the film, was one of Suzuki's models for these photographs. With this disorientating multi-layered opening, *Blind Beast* introduces its hinterland of art and bondage, hinting at their intimate interconnection, and blurring the line between film world and artistic space, real or imagined.

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Blind Beast consists of little else but artistic space: Suzuki's exhibition serves as a prelude to Michio's studio, in which most of the story is set. The film has little interest for anything that takes place outside of that space. Only the bare minimum



is kept from Rampo's story in order to set up the central dramatic situation: a brief scene shows Michio, posing as a masseur, abducting Aki with the help of his mother to the warehouse where he lives. Over the course of the film, only a few shots of the warehouse's exterior momentarily take us outside of Michio's suffocating studio. Nested in the isolated warehouse, the studio is an astounding cave-like room, nightmarish and enthralling in equal measure. Out of the rounded walls protrude giant casts of body parts, eyes, lips, noses, breasts, and limbs. In the middle of the room lie two colossal figures. The irregular, soft organic shape of the studio does not seem to make architectural sense within the hard-edged structure that encases it: it is not a realistic space, but rather the space of obsessive desire.

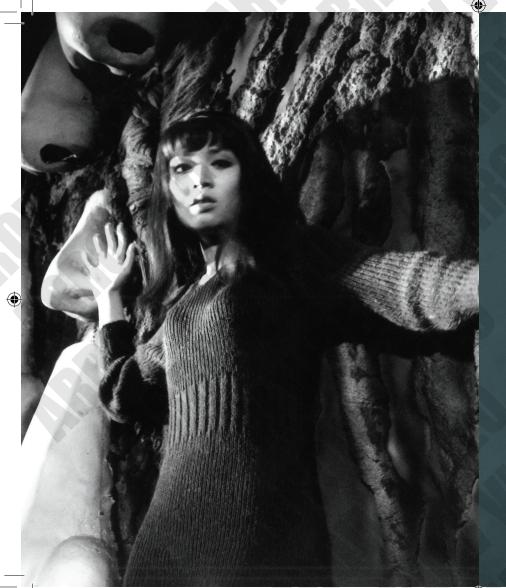
Within these confines, the sado-masochistic relationship that develops between Michio and Aki is as much artistic as it is erotic. Initially, Michio's intentions are not avowedly sexual. Despite insistently fondling Aki's breasts in the massage scene, Michio's desire for her is passionately aesthetic: he wants to sculpt Aki's body to create a new art of touch, and he plans to release her once his project is completed. There is a certain naivety about him, even as he abducts and coerces in the name of art. As in many Masumura films, the central character's intense passion, born of despair and loneliness, and leading him down an inexorably tragic course, is observed with understanding. It is only later that his subjugation of Aki becomes sexual: after a catastrophically failed escape attempt, he rapes her. This shift establishes a parallel between lust and creative urge: both are forms of desire, and as such, both are inherently violent as they seek to forcefully mould an external object to their designs.

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The imbalanced interaction between male subject and female object of creativeerotic desire only turns into a mutually shared passion when Aki begins to understand Michio's artistic project. From the beginning he has tried to explain to her his wish to create a new art of touch. Initially dismissive of his ideas and horrified by his sculptures, she comes to appreciate them as her senses are awakened differently in the dark room. This is central to her change of heart: she accepts his touch, both as his model and as his lover, because she becomes convinced by his ideas on art. Her disgust turns to affection once he has finished his sculpture of her. The sadomasochistic relationship that develops between them is therefore an aesthetic relationship for her too. Throughout the film, she too is guided by a desire to make great art: she mentions repeatedly that she only accepted to pose nude for "Mr. Yamana" because of her admiration for his talent. For Aki as much as for Michio, the sensual quest that they embark upon together is inextricably artistic and erotic.

From the moment she begins to enjoy, rather than suffer, Michio's contact, Aki takes the lead: she becomes not only a full participant in the artistic-erotic project, but she begins to direct it onto uncharted territory. Michio's new art of touch does not seem that innovative: after all, is that not what sculpture is? The piece he creates, modelled on Aki, is hardly ground-breaking. But what he is achingly pleading for is a different kind of sensual, tactile art, and it is Aki, once she has understood his ambition, who leads him to realise it. As Aki pushes Michio to cross more erotic lines, experimenting with cutting, biting, and whipping each other, the artistic project becomes internalised. It is Aki who now takes Michio on an untravelled aesthetic path: their erotic-creative quest culminates not in the completion of Michio's sculpture, but in an excess of sensory bliss. The climax of their search for a new artform breaks with the traditional conception of what an artwork is: here it is not an external object, but an ecstatic internal experience. That sensorial extreme not only supersedes the sculpture, but seems to cause its destruction, marking the end of a process that abolishes the demarcation between subject and object, between model, creator and creation.

The rejection of artistic conventions corresponds to the transgression of erotic as well as moral boundaries: the turning point in their relationship is marked by a double infraction to moral laws. When Michio accidentally kills his mother after



Aki's botched escape attempt, he crosses a line from which he cannot come back. Matricide smashes any remaining moral restraints within him. It is as a direct result of his mother's death that he rapes Aki, as he makes clear: in his view, he has already committed the worst crime, therefore there is nothing stopping him from committing more wrongdoings any longer. For Aki, who is a virgin, the rape is her first sexual experience. Admittedly, the idea that she discovers her true masochistic desires after being assaulted is extremely dubious and is the sort of ill-advised trope commonly found in the period's male-dominated cinema. However, while noting the questionable nature of that scene, within the context of the film that violation signals the breaking through of Aki's own barriers, literally and symbolically. The killing-rape sequence marks the point where Michio and Aki both cross an irreversible line in their trajectory of transgression.

It is the isolation of Michio's studio that allows the breaching of norms to take place: physically isolated from society, it is also morally located outside of social rules. Aki and Michio's aesthetic quest leads them to cross one final line that takes them beyond socialised, civilised humanity. In their world of darkness and touch, completely absorbed in each other, Aki notes that they are regressing to primitive, lower forms of life, their fingertips becoming as sensitive as insects' antennas, their amorphous sensorial existence like that of amoeba or jellyfish. This regression to the animal state releases them from the norms that regulate human society; free to act on their impulses in total liberty, they experience a blissful sensorial intensity beyond the reach of other people. At the same time, as they sink inexorably into "a dark, dank death" while the body of Michio's mother slowly decomposes in the next room, this regression is also a debasement, a descent into the obscene squalor of instinctive life forms, a degeneration from human to beast.

Michio and Aki's transgression of all boundaries therefore leads to a contradictory kind of liberation, which is a degradation as well as an imprisonment. In this, the

film fulfils the Baudelairian promise of Suzuki's photographic exhibition, announced in its borrowed title: "Les fleurs du mal" declares the oxymoronic intention of finding beauty in evil, in the deviant, the immoderate, the sordid, the hideous, and the repulsive. Following Baudelaire and Suzuki on this path, *Blind Beast*, like its characters, rejects conventional norms of beauty, pleasure and morality to find liberty in destructive, debasing excess. Aki and Michio's liberation is paradoxical also because it is only made possible by strict confinement. Their sado-masochistic relationship is a complex dynamic of bondage and liberation. When Michio sequesters Aki, he does not realize that in doing so he has created his own prison. Each incident further tightens the ties that bind them together until neither can be disentangled, but it is in this fatal and inextricable attachment that they find ultimate release. In *Blind Beast*, as in *Seisaku's Wife, Manji*, or *Red Angel*, the intensity of desire hacks a breach into social and moral norms that allows individual liberation. But humans, and the structures and strictures they create, are such, that only a perverse, ambivalent kind of liberation is possible.

Seisaku's Wife, Manji, Red Angel, Irezumi, and *Black Test Car* considered the possibility of such a perverse liberation against the pressures of Japan's feudal society, oppressive conformism, nationalistic ideology or cut-throat corporate culture. In contrast, *Blind Beast* operates an outright retreat from the outside world: there are no social interactions, no street scenes, no rival companies, no fighting armies. In *Blind Beast*, there is strictly nothing but the body: for the most part, Aki and Michio's bodies, nestled among the studio's landscape of flesh, limbs and organs. The whole focus of the film is on exquisite, excruciating bodily sensations, on caresses, bruises, lacerations, compressions, and embraces. With *Blind Beast*, Masumura delivers a sort of cinema of the body that echoes the postwar literature of the body (*nikutai bungaku*), led by Taijirō Tamura. A WWII veteran, Tamura contrasted the individual body and the national body: for him, flesh was the antidote to Japan's deleterious war-time ideology, the carnal a form of resistance to

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dangerous dogma. "Only the body is real. The body's weariness, the body's desires, the body's anger, the body's intoxications, the body's confusion, the body's fatigue - only these are real," wrote Tamura, expressing the profound and despairing distrust of those who had seen first-hand the ravages of militaristic rhetoric, traditionalist values, and authoritarian rule. In light of this, the focus on the physical in *Blind Beast*, particularly considering Masumura's earlier, more explicitly critical films, reads as a tacit rejection of Japanese society and its toxic values.

Coming at the end of a decade where mass protest movements failed to make any meaningful gains against the Japanese authorities, *Blind Beast* is in tune with the period's disillusioned mood. A similar despair would fuel another sado-masochistic *huis-clos* seven years later. With *In the Realm of the Senses*, Nagisa Ōshima, whose cinema was strongly influenced by Masumura, signalled the significance of his characters' erotic confinement more clearly: a brief, but eloquent scene suggests it is a withdrawal from an increasingly militaristic society. In *Blind Beast*, there is no such overt indication, but through its radical negation of anything but the body, the film marks a retreat from Japanese society that is no less potent for being silent. At the end of a decade that buried the possibility of change, all that can be opposed to the incurable perversity of the Japanese state is the singular perversity of two lone bodies.

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YASUZO MASUMURA FILMOGRAPHY

增村保造 25 August 1924-23 November 1986

1958

The Precipice ● 氷壁 ● Hyōheki ● Daiei, 18 March 1958

Giants and Toys • a.k.a. The Build-Up • 巨人と玩具 • Kyojin to gangu • Daiei, 22 June 1958

The Lowest Man • a.k.a. Fearless Man, A Daring Man • 不敵な男 • Futeki na otoko • Daiei, 7 September 1958

Undutiful Street • a.k.a. Disobedience • 親不幸通り • Oyafukō dōri • Daiei, 14 December 1958

1959

The Most Valuable Madam • a.k.a. The Most Distinguished Wife • 最高殊勲夫人 • Saikō shukun fujin • Daiei, 10 February 1959

The Cast-Off • a.k.a. Overflow, Inundation, Flood • 氾濫 • Hanran • Daiei, 13 May 1959

Beauty the Enemy • a.k.a. Beauty Is Guilty, So Beautiful It's a Sin • 美貌に罪あり • Bibō ni tsumi ari • Daiei, 12 August 1959

Across Darkness • 闇を横切れ • Yami o yokogire • Daiei, 1 December 1959

1960

A Woman's Testament • 女経 • Jokyō • Daiei, 14 January 1960 • Note: Three-part omnibus film, with Masumura directing the first installment The Woman Who Wants to Bite Ears (Mimi o kamitagaru onna) and Kon Ichikawa and Kōzaburō Yoshimura directing the second and third.

Afraid to Die • a.k.a. A Man Blown by the Wind • からっ風野郎 • Karakkaze yarō • Daiei, 23 March 1960

The Woman Who Touched the Legs • 足にさわった女 • Ashi ni sawatta onna • Daiei, 24 August 1960

Princess Yang Kwei Fei (dir. Kenji Mizoguchi) • 母情 • Yōkihi • Daiei / Shaw Brothers, 3 May 1955

As Assistant Director (selected works)

Street of Shame (dir. Kenji Mizoguchi) ● 赤線地帯 ● Akasen chitai ● Daiei, 18 March 1956

Punishment Room (dir. Kon Ichikawa) • 処刑の部屋 • Shokei no heya • Daiei, 28 June 1956

Nihonbashi (dir. Kon Ichikawa) • 日本橋 • Daiei, 1 October 1956

The Crowded Streetcar (dir. Kon Ichikawa) ● a.k.a. A Full-Up Train ● 満員電車 ● Manin densha ● Daiei, 27 March 1957

As Director

1957

Kisses • くちづけ • Kuchizuke • Daiei, 23 July 1957

The Blue Sky Maiden • 青空娘 • Aozora musume • Daiei, 8 October 1957

Warm Current • 暖流 • Danryū • Daiei, 1 December 1957

A False Student • 偽大学生 • Nise daigakusei • Daiei, 8 October 1960

1961

Desperate to Love • a.k.a. Love and Life • 恋にいのちを • Koi ni inochi o • Daiei, 27 January 1961

A Lustful Man ● a.k.a. The Life of an Amorous Man, All for Love, The Man Who Loved Love ● 好色一代男 ● Kōshoku ichidai otoko ● Daiei, 21 March 1961

> A Wife Confesses • 妻は告白する • Tsuma wa kokuhaku suru • Daiei, 29 October 1961

> The Burdened Sisters • a.k.a. Just for Kicks • うるさい妹たち • Urusai imōtotachi • Daiei, 17 December 1961

1962

Stolen Pleasure • a.k.a. Indulgence • 爛 • Tadare • Daiei, 14 December 1962 Black Test Car • 黒の試走車 • Kuro no tesuto kā • Daiei, 1 July 1962 Life of a Woman • 女の一生 • Onna no isshō • Daiei, 18 November 1962

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1963

The Black Report ● a.k.a. Black Statement Book ● 黒の報告書 ● Kuro no hōkokusho ● Daiei, 13 January 1963

When Women Lie ● a.k.a. Lies ● 噓 ● Uso ● Daiei, 31 March 1963 ● Note: Three-part omnibus film, with Masumura directing the first instalment Playgirl (Purēgāru) and Kōzaburō Yoshimura and Teinosuke Kinugasa directing the second and third.

Band of Pure-Hearted Hoodlums • a.k.a. Hooligans, Pure Thoughts • ぐれん隊純情派 • Gurentai junjyōha • Daiei, 27 July 1963



1964

Modern Fraud Story: Cheat • 現代インチキ物語 騙し屋 • Gendai inchiki monogatari: Damashiya • Daiei, 19 January 1964

With My Husband's Consent • a.k.a. The Husband Witnessed, Love and Greed • 「女の小箱」より 夫が見た • 'Onna no kobako' yori: Otto ga mita • Daiei, 15 February 1964

Manji • a.k.a. All Mixed Up, Swastika • 卍 • Daiei, 25 July 1964

Super-Express ● a.k.a. Black Express ● 黒の超特急 ● Kuro no chōtokkyū ● Daiei, 31 October 1964

1965

Hoodlum Soldier • 兵隊やくざ • Heitai yakuza • Daiei, 13 March 1965

Seisaku's Wife • 清作の妻 • Seisaku no tsuma • Daiei, 25 June 1965

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1966

Irezumi • 刺青 • Daiei, 15 January 1966

Nakano Spy School ● a.k.a. The School of Spies ● 陸軍中野学校 ● Rikugun Nakano gakkō ● Daiei, 4 June 1966

Red Angel • 赤い天使 • Akai tenshi • Daiei, 1 October 1966

1967

Two Wives • 妻二人 • Tsuma futari • Daiei, 15 April 1967

A Fool's Love • a.k.a. Naomi, Love for an Idiot • 痴人の愛 • Chijin no ai • Daiei, 29 July 1967 The Wife of Seishu Hanaoka • 華岡青洲の妻 • Hanaoka Seishū no tsuma • Daiei, 20 October 1967

1968

Evil Trio • a.k.a. The Great Villains, The Most Corrupted, The Big Bastard • 大悪党 • Dai akutō • Daiei, 24 February 1968

The Sex Check ● a.k.a. Sex Check: The Second Sex ● セックス・チェック 第二の性 ● Sekkusu chekku: Daini no sei ● Daiei, 1 June 1968

> The House of Wooden Blocks • a.k.a. A Building Blocks Box • 積木の箱 • Tsumiki no hako • Daiei, 30 October 1968

One Day at Summer's End
● a.k.a. They Made Love
● 濡れた二人 ● Nureta futari ● Daiei, 30 November 1968

1969

Blind Beast • a.k.a. The Warehouse • 盲獣 • Mōjū • Daiei, 25 January 1969

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A Thousand Cranes • 千羽鶴 • Senbazuru • Daiei, 19 April 1969

Vixen • 女体 • Jotai • Daiei, 18 October 1969

1970

Electric Jellyfish • a.k.a. Electric Medusa, Play It Cool • でんきくらげ • Denki kurage • Daiei, 1 May 1970

Ode to the Yakuza • a.k.a. Yakuza Masterpiece, Song of the Yakuza • やくざ絶唱 • Yakuza zesshō • Daiei, 11 July 1970

The Hot Little Girl • a.k.a. Poisonous Jellyfish, The Skin Game • しびれくらげ • Shibire kurage • Daiei, 3 October 1970 Games • a.k.a. Play • 遊び • Asobi • Daiei, 4 September 1971

1972

New Hoodlum Soldier Story: Firing Line • 新兵隊やくざ 火線 • Shin heitai yakuza: Kasen • Katsu Pro (distr. Toho), 22 April 1972

Music • 音楽 • Ongaku • Kōdō-sha/ATG, 11 November 1972

1973

Hanzo the Razor: The Snare • a.k.a. Razor 2: The Snare • 御用牙 かみそり半蔵地獄責め, • Goyōkiba: Kamisori Hanzō jigoku zeme • Katsu Pro (distr. Toho), 11 August 1973

1974

Akumyo: Notorious Dragon • a.k.a. Bad Reputation: Turf Wars • 悪名 縄張荒らし • Akumyō: Shima arashi • Katsu Pro (distr. Toho), 24 April 1974

1975

Mainline to Terror ● a.k.a. Hardened Arteries, Artery Island, Pulsating Island ● 動脈列島 ● Dōmyaku rettō ● Tokyo Eiga (distr. Toho), 6 September 1975

1976

Lullaby of the Earth • 大地の子守唄 • Daichi no komoriuta • Kōdō-sha/Kimura Pro (distr. Shochiku), 12 June 1976

1978

Double Suicide of Sonezaki ◆ a.k.a. The Love Suicides at Sonezaki ● 曽根崎心中 ● Sonezaki shinjū ● Kōdō-sha/Kimura Pro (distr. Toho), 29 April 1978

1980

The Garden of Eden • a.k.a. *Giardino dell' Eden* • エデンの園 • Nisshin shōji / Orso Oriental Corporation (distr. Herald Films), 13 December 1980

1982

For My Daughter's 7th Birthday • この子の七つのお祝に • Kono ko no nanatsu no oiwai ni • Shochiku / Kadokawa Haruki Corporation, 9 October 1982

Television (Selected works)

Detective at Dawn ● 夜明けの刑事 ● Yoake no keiji ● TBS, 2 Oct 1974–23 Mar 1977 ● Masumura directed episodes 1 & 43 (first broadcast 8 Oct 1975)

> Red Shock ● 赤い衝撃 ● Akai shōgeki ● TBS, 5 Nov 1976–27 May 1977, 29 episodes ● Eps. 1 & 10

Red Rapids • 赤い激流 • Akai gekiryū • TBS / Daiei TV, 3 June–26 Nov 1977, 26 eps [season 1] and 23 June–15 Dec 1978, 26 episodes [season 2] • Eps. 1, 2, 12 & 20 [season 1] & eps. 1, 2 and 26 [season 2]

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I Was Watching a Butterfly of Primary Colors: The Smell of Death • 原色の蝶は見ていた・死の匂い • Genshoku no chō wa mite ita: Shi no nioi • Asahi TV, 19 Aug 1978 • Standalone drama for Saturday Night at the Theater (Doyō waido gekijō)

Red Storm ● 赤い嵐 ● Akai arashi ● TBS / Daiei TV, 30 Nov 1979–28 Mar 1980, 18 episodes ● Eps. 1 & 2

Red Death Line ● 赤い死線 ● Akai shisen ● TBS / Daiei TV, 7 and 14 Nov 1980, 2 episodes ● Credited as director alongside Toshiaki Kunihara and Isamu Aitsuki Pure Song ● 青い絶唱 ● Aoi zesshō ● TBS / Daiei TV, 21 Nov 1980–27 Mar 1981, 18 episodes ● Eps. 1, 9 & 18

Sunflower Song • ひまわりの歌 • Himawari no uta • TBS / Daiei TV, 13 Nov 1981–28 May 1982, 27 episodes • Eps. 1, 2, 8 & 27

The Casebook of Detective Mother Complex • マザコン刑事の事件簿 (1983年、フジテレビ・木曜ファミリーワイド) • Mazacon keiji no jikenbo • Fuji • Standalone drama for Thursday Family Wide (Mokuyō famirī waido)

Seicho Matsumoto Special: Black Gospel • 松本清張スペシャル・黒い福音 • Matsumoto Seichō supesharu: Kuroi fukuin • TBS, 26 Nov 1984 • Standalone drama adapted from a novel by the crime writer Seichō Matsumoto, with a screenplay by Kaneto Shindō

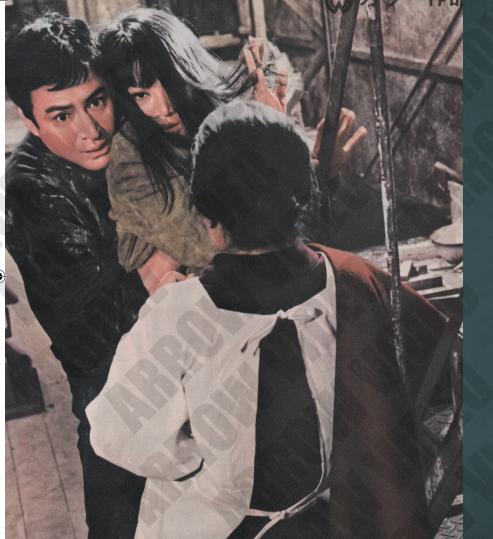
Screenplays for other directors (select)

Seventeen-year-old Wolf (dir. Yoshio Inoue) ● 十七才の狼 ● Jūnana-sai no ōkami ● Daiei, 5 June 1964 ● (co-written with Seiji Hoshikawa)

A Certain Killer (dir. Issei Mori) • ある殺し屋 • Aru koroshiya • Daiei, 29 April 1967 • (co-written with Yoshihiro Ishimatsu)

Just for You (dir. Yoshio Inoue) • a.k.a. Cute Devil: Just for You • 可愛い悪魔 いいものあげる • Kawai akuma: limono ageru • Daiei, 29 April 1967 • (co-written with Kenji Yasumoto)

Hanzo the Razor: Who's Got the Gold? (dir. Yoshio Inoue) • 御用牙 鬼の半蔵やわ肌小判 • Goyōkiba: Oni no Hanzō yawahada koban • Daiei, 9 February 1974



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Blind Beast is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono sound. The High-Definition master was produced and supplied by Kadokawa, with additional grading by Arrow Films at R3Store Studios, London.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

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