





CONTENTS

- 4 **Film Credits**
- 11 **A Love Story Both Sickening and Sweet: Shinjuku Triad Society (2016)**
by Samm Deighan
- 21 **Cities of Sadness: Rainy Dog (2016)**
by Tony Rayns
- 31 **We've Gotta Get Out of This Place: Ley Lines (2016)**
by Stephen Sarrazin
- 38 **About the Transfers**

SHINJUKU TRIAD SOCIETY

新宿黒社会 チャイナマフィア戦争

Shinjuku kuroshakai - Chaina mafia senso

Original release date: 26th August 1995

102 minutes

Directed by **Takashi Miike**

Produced by **Tetsuya Ikeda, Ken Takeuchi, Tsutomu Tsuchikawa, Toshiki Kimura**

Written by **Ichiro Fujita**

Director of Photography **Naosuke Imaizumi**

Lighting by **Masaaki Sakurai**

Audio Recording by **Yukiya Sato**

Production Design by **Tatsuo Ozeki**

Music by **Atelier Selah**

Edited by **Yasushi Shimamura**

Assistant Director **Hideyuki Yamamoto**

Tatsuhito Kiriya: **Kippei Shiina**

Wang: **Tomorrow Taguchi**

Karino: **Takeshi Caesar**

Ritsuko: **Eri Yu**

Police Captain Matsuzaki: **Sei Hiraizumi**

Boss Uchida: **Ren Osugi**

Yoshihito Kiriya: **Shinsuke Izutsu**

Ko: **Tatsuya Irie**

Zhou: **Kazuhiro Masuko**

Ishizaka: **Masahiro Sudo**

Shimada: **Sabu**



RAINY DOG

極道黒社会

Gokudo kuroshakai

Original release date: 28th June 1997

95 minutes

Directed by **Takashi Miike**

Produced by **Tetsuya Ikeda, Ken Takeuchi, Tsutomu Tsuchikawa,**

Toshiki Kimura, Chang Hwa-kun

Written by **Seigo Inoue**

Director of Photography **Li Yi-hsu**

Lighting by **Hsieh Wen-hsing**

Audio Recording by **Kazuyoshi Kawashima**

Production Design by **Cheng Hung-ching**

Music by **Sound Kids**

Edited by **Yasushi Shimamura**

Assistant Director **Masashi Minami**

Yuji: **Show Aikawa**

Yuji's pursuer: **Tomorrow Taguchi**

Ku Feng: **Gao Mingjun**

Lily: **Chen Xianmei**

Ah Chen: **He Jianxian**

Hou: **Li Lijun**

Lee: **Zhang Shi**

Ku Chiping: **Billy Ching Sau-yat**

Doze Niu

Vicky Wei

Blackie Ko Shouliang

Zhang Liwei



LEY LINES

日本黒社会
Nihon kuroshakai

Original release date: 22nd May 1999
105 minutes

Directed by **Takashi Miike**
Produced by **Tsutomu Tsuchikawa, Toshiki Kimura**
Written by **Ichiro Ryu**
Director of Photography **Naosuke Imaizumi**
Lighting by **Seichi Shiraishi**
Audio Recording by **Yukiya Sato**
Production Design by **Akira Ishige**
Music by **Koji Endo**
Edited by **Yasushi Shimamura**
Assistant Director **Ken Suenaga**

Ryuichi: **Kazuki Kitamura**
Shunrei: **Michisuke Kashiwaya**
Chan: **Tomorowo Taguchi**
Anita: **Dan Li**
Ikeda: **Show Aikawa**
Wong: **Naoto Takenaka**
Scrapyard owner: **Ren Osugi**
Barbie: **Samuel Pop Aning**
Anita's pimp: **Oh Far-long**
Passport official: **Koji Tsukamoto**
Cop: **Shun Sugata**
Sadistic client: **Yozaburo Ito**
Advisor in noodle shop: **Tetsu Watanabe**
Captain on dock: **Takeshi Caesar**





A LOVE STORY BOTH SICKENING AND SWEET: SHINJUKU TRIAD SOCIETY

by Samm Deighan

After working a few years in the straight-to-video market, Takashi Miike's first movie made specifically for theatrical release, *Shinjuku Triad Society: China Mafia War* (*Shinjuku kuroshakai: Chaina mafia senso*, 1995), set the stage for a prolific, subversive career with its emphasis on two key themes that recur throughout the director's films: the focus on an outcast antihero as protagonist and the use of perverse, often violent sexuality. Known as a provocateur with a penchant for transgressive, often shocking cinema, Miike uses both of these themes to challenge traditional Japanese notions of masculinity, family, and individual identity. In *Shinjuku Triad Society*, a typical or even deviant expressions of gender and sexuality function as ways for Miike to define his characters and, in particular, to establish them as outcasts, fundamentally set apart from traditional Japanese society.

Miike built on yakuza film conventions, which rely heavily on typical notions of Japanese masculinity, to show how his characters subvert those notions, and many of his protagonists (and antagonists) rest somewhere between the heroic *ronin* type popularized by *chanbara* films in the '50s and the antiheroes at the forefront of yakuza films of the '60s. This type of protagonist began to appear even earlier in Japanese cinema, emerging in some form by the '20s. In *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, Donald Richie wrote, "the popular image of the young masterless samurai (*ronin*) as an intrepid but suffering rebel quickly became established. This type has been identified as the *tateyaku*, a term taken from kabuki to characterize idealized samurai, warriors who are not only victorious in fights but also sagacious men, with strong wills and a determination to persevere. This new hero, however, was also often dispossessed. Though brave and occasionally victorious, he had begun to doubt the idealized code of conduct which had created him".¹

This led to the emergence of the full-blown antihero within the *chanbara* films of the '50s and '60s and the yakuza films of the '60s and '70s. Richie wrote, "the hero's role grew to encompass not only samurai and *ronin*, but also itinerant gamblers (presumed the early ancestor of the present day *yakuza*, Japanese organized gangsters) and

¹ Richie, pp. 65-66.



the various hoodlums who loitered outside society”.² Yakuza films grew out of the earlier *chanbara* subgenre and focused on young men struggling to find a place inside rigid social systems with complex moral codes that relied on notions of self-denial and sacrifice.

In Paul Schrader’s “Yakuza-eiga: A Primer” — which he wrote while scripting Sydney Pollack’s *The Yakuza* (1975) — he explained, “The yakuza protagonist is stripped of the moral security of the samurai. The total war he wages against his enemies is less important than the moral conflict he must fight on the battleground of his own conscience. Invariably, the *yakuza-eiga* protagonist is a man (or woman) of high moral principles trapped in a web of circumstances which compromise them. He attempts to pursue both duty and humanity but finds them drawing increasingly apart. In the end he must choose between duty and humanity, a decision that can only be made in a bath of blood.” These are the predecessors of Miike’s protagonists who sit at the crossroads of cultural, sexual, and economic identity, and despite *Shinjuku Triad Society’s* subversive trappings, it doesn’t so much represent a radical departure from previous yakuza films as an extreme progression that began with these earlier titles.

Even the intertwined themes of sex and violence are present in these formative films, albeit in comparatively subdued forms. For example, Masahiro Shinoda’s nihilistic *Pale Flower* (*Kawaita hana*, 1964) follows a destructive romantic relationship to its inevitably violent conclusion, while in Seijun Suzuki’s *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967), the protagonist has a sexual fetish related to the smell of cooking rice and an obsessive, abusive love triangle is central to the plot. And in several ways, *Shinjuku Triad Society* can be seen as the evolution of themes presented throughout Kinji Fukasaku’s *jitsuroku eiga* (yakuza films allegedly based on true stories) from the ‘70s, like *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* (*Jingi naki tatakai*, 1973), a film that utterly destroyed the heroic traits of its yakuza protagonists — as if to suggest that the postwar world is a place literally without honor, as the title suggests — and Fukasaku revealed his protagonists to be little more than common criminals, drug addicts, or rapists.

While the ‘80s is considered something of a period of drought for Japanese crime films, Miike was one of the directors who helped shape the re-emergence of the genre in the early ‘90s through this new vision of outsiders and otherness, and his directorial style provides an important contrast to someone like Takeshi Kitano’s more heroic

² Richie, p. 66.



depictions of masculinity. The sort of honorable outlaw characters favored by most yakuza films are utterly absent and Miike’s protagonists — culminating in films like *Dead or Alive* (1999) and *Ichi the Killer* (*Koroshiya ichi*, 2001) — are often ruthlessly depraved. These qualities are even present in *Shinjuku Triad Society’s* somewhat heroic, half-Japanese, half-Chinese cop Kiriya (Kippei Shiina), who has two parallel, interrelated aims. He’s determined to take down Wang (Tomorrowo Taguchi), the Taiwanese leader of a local triad, the Dragon’s Claw Gang, and uncover his mysterious connection to a Taiwanese hospital; he also wants to rescue his estranged brother from a life of organized crime at Wang’s side.

But despite his familial motivations, Kiriya is himself a contradiction. The bribes he accepts from a local yakuza chapter — to give to his elderly parents — represent the least of his sins and he’s responsible for as much, if not more on-screen depravity than Wang. In the first English-language book on the director, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*, Tom Mes wrote that sex is “on the whole unpleasant, forced and violent” in Miike’s films, and that these scenes “don’t tend to be very titillating or erotic. [They] do not exist to arouse the audience, but to define the characters and the lives they lead”.³ This is overwhelmingly the case with Kiriya, whose good deeds to his parents and self-sacrificing, heroic actions on behalf of his brother are balanced by rape and degradation.

His interrogation methods are particularly brutal; he allows a male suspect who refuses to talk to be anally raped by another police officer. He also forces prostitute and Dragon’s Claw member Ritsuko (Eri Yu) to undergo an invasive strip search (where she defiantly says, “you shouldn’t play with my asshole” to a female officer, mid-anal cavity examination), and then bashes her across the face with a metal chair when she attempts to sexually humiliate him during the interrogation. Later, he uses her to pass on a message to Wang by handcuffing and then anally raping her, telling her, “I’ll use the back door, because I don’t want to go where Karino’s [Wang’s second-in-command, played by Takeshi Caesar] been.”

To further complicate matters, despite this treatment, Ritsuko later rescues Kiriya after he’s been beaten nearly to death by the yakuza and imprisoned by Wang. She tells him that she’s saving him because he’s the only person who has been able to make her orgasm while not high. A rape victim expressing sexual interest in her rapist is problematic at best, but Miike presents

³ Mes, p. 32.



their relationship at face value; their connection is not one of love or even attraction, and it's indicative of the controversial relationships found throughout Miike's films. While cult cinema in general and crime films in particular are no stranger to troubling depictions of rape and rape victims, Miike's approach is wholly his own. The sex scenes in the film — mostly rape, though there is a brief glimpse at consensual sex between Ritsuko and Karino — are never about erotic desire, but are about power and there is something strangely equalizing about them. Unusually, more men are raped or sexually humiliated in the film than women and they are repeatedly, aggressively shown to be subject to the same laws of submission and humiliation as Ritsuko, the only prominent female character.

And it is through these kinds of sexual encounters that a parallel is drawn between Kiriya and Wang. But while Kiriya's only actual sex scene is an act of anal rape, Wang's homosexual relationship with a teenage drug dealer and prostitute named Zhou (Kazuhiro Masuko) is perhaps equally violent and complicated but is given curious emphasis by Miike. The film's opening voice-over narration, which accompanies shots of Zhou, naked in bed, declares that this is "a love story that's both sickening and sweet." This refers to the relationship between Wang and Zhou, though it is given relatively little attention in the film's overall running time. It's established in these early scenes that Zhou, Wang, and other members of the Dragon's Claw Gang are openly gay (possibly including Kiriya's brother).

Notably, Kiriya and his brother and Wang and his triad are not only sexual, but also cultural outcasts; his half-Japanese, half-Chinese identity prevents Kiriya from being fully accepted by either nation, while Wang is exiled to Japan and can never return to Taiwan because he murdered his father when he was a teenager. The fact that they exist in the margins between Japanese, Chinese, and Taiwanese culture is symbolized by the film's titular location: the underworld of Shinjuku, a section of Tokyo known for its red light district, seedy bars, and crime. In Miike's film, this is a place where outcasts — all of whom Miike portrays sympathetically, despite their often horrific crimes — come together to create power out of powerlessness, to forge new families, and even to create new worlds, or at least to die trying.

And this is actually Wang's greatest sin: trying to pervert or break out of conventional organized crime structures. Aside from a few key acts, such as when he rips out the eyeball of a madame trying to cheat the triad out of its percentage, much of Wang's inherent violence is suggested rather than openly shown. Miike hints at his



true nature with a handful of brilliant scenes, the most whimsical of which involves Wang's posturing to threaten a local triad boss with whom he is supposed to act more traditionally deferential. Wang doesn't threaten the gang in the standard display of muscle; instead, he opens his overcoat and exposes himself to the other men in an act of blatant disrespect and hilarious defiance.

And Wang is not just involved in the drug trade or sex trafficking (though he does profit from these); his real business is the black market trade of organ selling — namely children's organs, the reason he has founded a hospital in Taiwan — foreshadowing Miike's reliance on "body horror" and the grotesque. The literal selling of flesh is accompanied by gory sequences, like throat slitting with plentiful arterial spray, that would become characteristic of his films, and while most yakuza movies reference *yubitsume*, the ritual apology that involves the offending party cutting off his own little finger, Miike raises the stakes to an ultraviolent level and instead demands eyeballs and internal organs.

Even the film's climax, which features a face off between Kiriya and Wang in the latter's bedroom, with a terrified, maimed Zhou cowering in the corner, is outlandishly gory and has an oddly-charged sexual tension to it. There is an intimacy between the two men that isn't displayed in any of the film's earlier scenes of sex or violence. Though Kiriya shoots Wang several times, he refuses to die. They struggle, up against a wall, and Wang almost strangles Kiriya to death. In his defense, Kiriya smashes a bottle of liquor over Wang's head and then thrusts the shattered handle in his neck. This finally kills Wang, though not until after he manages to crawl over to Zhou and touch his lover's hand in forgiveness for previous abuse that left the boy's feet bloodied and broken. But the exaggerated blood spray is evocative of the throat slitting in the beginning of the film, when Zhou kills a police officer for no reason, suggesting that in this world of perverse sex, complicated family bonds, and uncertain notions of masculine identity, everything comes full circle.

Samm Deighan is the Associate Editor of Diabolique magazine and co-hosts the Daughters of Darkness podcast. She's contributed writing to Fangoria, Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s, and video labels Arrow Films and Mondo Macabro, among others, and is currently writing a book on WWII and cult cinema.







CITIES OF SADNESS: RAINY DOG

by Tony Rayns

The main impulse behind Miike Takashi's 'Black Society Trilogy' is to mash together the worlds of Japanese and Chinese gangsters, yakuza and triads. The Japanese titles of the films make this pretty explicit in a way that's intended to give Japanese audiences at least a slight jolt. The first film's title, *Shinjuku kuroshakai*, literally means "Shinjuku Triad Society," which implies (accurately) that Chinese gangsters are operating in the heart of Tokyo. The Japanese title for *Rainy Dog* (1997), *Gokudo kuroshakai*, means "Yakuza Triad Society" ("gokudo" is a synonym for "yakuza") and sounds like a deliberate paradox. And the title for *Ley Lines* (1999), *Nihon (or Nippon) kuroshakai*, means "Japan Triad Society," which could mean simply a Chinese gang in Japan but also hints that the country could be a huge criminal enterprise. We should also note that "Kuroshakai" is the Japanese reading of the Chinese written characters "Heise Hui" – literally "black society." This is the Chinese name for triad gangs; it refers to the colour of their banners. Like other Japanese, Miike enjoys the metaphorical resonances of calling gangsters "black."

There had been plenty of earlier attempts to bring together Japanese and Chinese pop-culture as East Asia recovered from the traumas of the Pacific War, from Shaw Brothers importing Japanese directors and cinematographers to work in its Hong Kong studios to the idea of matching Katsu Shintaro's Zatoichi against Wang Yu's one-armed swordsman, but Miike was after something more subversive. To understand what, we need to sketch what life is like in Japan for most Japanese.

At the end of WWII in 1945 the Allies, headed by General MacArthur's occupation army, imposed 'democracy' on the defeated Japan. But Japan remains an insular society and culture which clings in many ways to an age-old sense of itself as somehow apart and different, and it imposes a high degree of conformity on its citizens. The fact that the same right-wing party has been in government almost continuously since the Americans let Japan return to ruling itself – and the fact that successive ministers and prime ministers still routinely pussyfoot around the question of war guilt, sometimes denying it altogether – suggest that Japanese democracy is not rooted very deeply. And the fact that large bookshops throughout the country still have sections labelled

¹ At the author's request, Japanese and Chinese names in this essay are given in their traditional form, with surname first.



'Nihonjinron' – serving up hundreds of volumes devoted to 'proving' that Japanese brains are wired differently from the rest of humanity – suggests why foreigners so often feel isolated and alienated in Japan, and why Japanese tend to feel isolated and alienated when they're abroad. The late writer and film critic Donald Richie, who spent much of his life living in Japan and had many Japanese friends and lovers, put it perfectly when he observed that foreigners are always "smilingly excluded."

Obviously the anarchic strain in Japanese pop-culture which the rest of the world finds so exciting and enjoyable functions as a kind of release valve for average Japanese as they struggle with hundreds of social constraints and steel themselves to keep private any non-consensus views they might hold. Miike Takashi is nobody's idea of a political activist, but his entertainments go further than most in gleefully exploding that Japanese status quo. This was particularly true in his early years, when he was relatively young and fearless, and the 'Black Society Trilogy' staked out much of his battleground.

There's no direct continuity from *Shinjuku Triad Society* (1995) to *Rainy Dog* (except for the presence of actor Taguchi Tomorowo in both, playing entirely different roles), and the second film kind-of reverses the first. In place of a Chinese triad gang trading drugs and human transplant organs in Tokyo, it offers a lone Japanese yakuza holed up in a suburb in Taiwan. (The setting is probably Taipei – that's where the Taguchi character says he is – but there are no recognisable landmarks and it could be any large town on the island.) In place of an anti-hero Japanese cop who's in denial about his own Chinese ethnicity, it offers a protagonist who is living out what most Japanese regard as a nightmare: he's alone in a foreign country. Isolated from the start (is there any more alienating work than hauling pig carcasses for a market butcher?), he's explicitly cut off from his *gumi* in Japan – his yakuza group and his social circle – when he takes a phone call telling him that his boss has been killed and that he's been expelled from the gang; his girlfriend in Japan has been snatched away by the caller, just to rub salt in the wound.

Genre convention tells us that Yuji (Aikawa Show) is in exile because he's on the run from the police in Japan, presumably for having murdered someone from a rival gang. His unnamed nemesis, played by Taguchi Tomorowo, no doubt comes from the rival gang and has followed him to Taiwan to exact revenge. It's also a convention in such stories that fugitives in exile are placed in the care of 'friends' abroad, which explains why Yuji's main source of income is carrying out hits for a Taiwan triad godfather.



He performs the hits with impersonal efficiency and callous disregard for collateral damage (the first victim we see is gunned down in a cheap restaurant while he eats with his wife and child), and it's inevitable that he will eventually provoke retaliatory action. Miike gives the genre conventions a characteristic twist when the first man to track Yuji down turns out to be a victim's gay lover, motivated as much by grief as by 'brotherly' obligation.

Miike gives the genre another spin when he shows Yuji accumulating a couple of dependents, a Chinese surrogate family, not unlike the way that the outlaw Josey Wales once did. It's not unusual for a lonely, taciturn Japanese hitman to take up with a prostitute who becomes his soul-mate, but the arrival of Ah Chen, the mute boy who may or may not be Yuji's son, adds an unexpected dimension to the plot. It's admirable that Miike handles these developments with a complete lack of sentimentality. He even refuses to sentimentalise details which another film would have expressly designed to trigger tears, such as Ah Chen, coldly left outside in the rain by Yuji, adopting a stray dog which is even wetter and hungrier than he is.

Most directors would have shown their protagonist slowly warming to his dependents and then used his attachment to them to make him vulnerable, but Miike again twists the cliché. Yuji and the prostitute Lily (Chen Xianmei) do become soul-mates, but their bond is grounded in their shared desire to leave Taiwan rather than in any great sexual-emotional compatibility. Lily, not Yuji, is the one who develops quasi-parental feelings for Ah Chen (He Jianxian). It's Lily's sideline as a beautician which ultimately leads the vengeful triads to Yuji, but when trouble arrives on their doorstep Yuji simply sends the woman and boy off to the station to keep them out of danger. His strategy doesn't save them, but it effectively prevents the triads from using their safety as a bargaining chip.

Few Japanese directors would have been as eager as Miike was to plunge into the adventure of shooting an entire feature abroad. He was emboldened, clearly, by having shot one sequence of *Shinjuku Triad Society* in Taiwan, but the crucial factor was the production company's long acquaintance with Taiwanese independent producer Chang Hwa-Kun (*pinyin* transliteration: Zhang Huakun), who had recently ended a twelve-year collaboration with the director Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Chang began working with Hou in 1981, on a couple of vehicles for the Hong Kong pop-star Kenny Bee, and they stayed together until Hou made *The Puppetmaster* (*Xi Meng Rensheng*, 1993), a film about the early life of traditional puppeteer Li Tianlu, most of it in the years when



Taiwan was a Japanese colony. This was the decade, of course, when Hou's ambition took him from making modest indie features to winning the Golden Lion in Venice for *A City of Sadness* (*Beiqing Chengshi*, 1989), and Chang weathered at least one bankruptcy to keep Hou on track.

Chang, now retired from the film industry, was a colourful character who had lived and worked in Japan and, crucially, spoke fluent Japanese. He was always rumoured to have good connections with the underworld in both Japan and Taiwan. Aside from having years of experience in marshalling Chinese film crews and dealing with Taiwan's bureaucrats to secure location permissions, he knew pretty much everyone in Taiwan's film circle. When he signed up to co-produce *Rainy Dog* he was instrumental in assembling the Chinese cast, which includes quite a few faces familiar from the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang. For instance, the gay triad gangster who wears blue shades and tracks down Yuji is played by Zhang Shi, one of the "boys from Fengkuei" in Hou's breakthrough film of that name in 1983; he went on to appear in several mainland Chinese movies, including Huang Jianxin's *The Wooden Man's Bride* (*Yan Shen*, 1994) and Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (*Fengyue*, 1996) and later worked regularly with Taiwan director He Ping. Chang Hwa-Kun followed his collaboration with Miike by teaming up with director Chen Yiwen, a former assistant to Edward Yang, notably on the gangster movie *A Chance to Die* (*Xiang Si Chen Xianzai*, 1999), which features Japanese yakuza in Taiwan and stars Gao Mingjun – the vengeful brother Ku Feng in *Rainy Dog*.

Spoiler alert: it's the Taiwan connection which seeds the most original and surprising scene in *Rainy Dog*. Ku Feng finally confronts Yuji in a back-alley and threatens to shoot the boy Ah Chen, assuming, probably wrongly, that this will force Yuji to drop his gun. The scene then takes an unexpected turn. The boy is a mute who hasn't uttered a word since he first appeared on screen, although his face has registered his horror at discovering that his supposed father is a cold-blooded hitman. At this moment of crisis, the boy manages to let out a loud cry – which momentarily distracts Ku Feng and paves the way for the film's remarkable closing dialogue. This is a bold reference to the climactic scene in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A City of Sadness*, also produced by Chang Hwa-Kun. That film's protagonist is a deaf-mute (played by Tony Leung) who is caught up in the massacre of unarmed demonstrators by KMT police and soldiers in 1947. When he's challenged by armed officers on a train, he's unable to speak to defend himself but manages to voice a guttural cry – which saves his life.

We know from such films as *Izo* (2004) and *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A* (*Shijuroku-oku-nen no koi*, 2006) that Miike is a closet case: a director who harbours a 'secret' impulse to go beyond genre to sometimes make art films. Amusingly, both *Izo* and *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A* have been known to enrage audiences of Miike fans, despite containing their fair shares of violence and splatter alongside the philosophy. Was the reference to *A City of Sadness* in *Rainy Dog* an early sign of his latent tendency to take a generic confrontation to a higher level? The film's closing dialogue suggests that it was.

Tony Rayns is a London-based filmmaker, critic and festival programmer with a special interest in the cinemas of East Asia. He was awarded the Kawakita Prize in 2004 for services to Japanese cinema.







WE'VE GOTTA GET OUT OF THIS PLACE: LEY LINES

by Stephen Sarrazin

From the start it feels familiar, reminiscent, and done all wrong. Children walking on a dirt road, school bags on their backs, such as those encountered in Yasujiro Ozu's *Good Morning (Ohayo, 1959)*. But the saturated green and orange colors, the 8mm memories, and the abusive language reveal that this is not Kamakura. Two young boys, brothers Ryuichi and Shunrei, are castigated for being Chinese, and left stranded on the side of the road, inevitably defiant. Cut to the now grown-up Ryuichi (Kazuki Kitamura) denied a passport because he's never followed Japanese rules; he already has a record, and this will be his ticket out. His brother (Michisuke Kashiwaya) and their childhood friend Chan (Tomorrowo Taguchi) fatefully tag along, the promise of Tokyo contained in the gestures of a schoolgirl removing her standard white socks and putting on a loose-fitting pair that were ubiquitous at the end of the nineties.

The opening of *Ley Lines (Nihon kuroshakai, 1999)*, the third installment of Takashi Miike's "Black Society Trilogy", sets an odyssean pattern for a series of connected and converging sequences that lead on a quest for exile to Brazil, each one a trigger that questions whether the characters are looking for the means to flee or to be chased away. In Miike's land of marginals, there is little difference between the two options. The train takes the three of them to Tokyo, to Shinjuku, in whose labyrinthine alleys unfolds a tale of migrant politics and exclusion, predatory sexual encounters, and criminal ambition that turns those who survive and surpass into kingmakers.

The alleys open onto a set of breaches, black holes that engulf the characters, the light and any sense of hope, along with Miike's camera, which hovers between his usual frenetic moves and resigned static shots. *Ley Lines* is a story of elimination at every corner, a story that shows how Ryuichi walked alone and how he would have preferred not to. In that respect, it functions as a more modest variation on the typical yakuza tale than his *Dead or Alive* series (1999-2002), yet remains deceptively ambitious and always unapologetic.

Three Shinjuku encounters mark the trio's journey, as they discover different facets of urban crime before attempting to make their way out. The first one introduces us

to Anita (Dan Li), a Chinese prostitute who plies her trade above a restaurant, or in Kabuki-cho's love hotels. She makes fast work of lifting the brothers' wallets. The next one takes place at the bottom, in an underground toilet where Ryuichi encounters Barbie, a Ghanaian in suit and tie peddling illegal 'energy' drinks. He guides them to lowly gangster Ikeda (Miike regular Show Aikawa), who makes the stuff in a small apartment. Finally, there is Wong the money lender (Naoto Takenaka), the only character in the film who is allowed eccentricities afforded to power: here, slurping his noodles in silence, and listening to folk tales from Shanghai, told in Chinese, as he lays on a bed in a candlelit room.

Miike then goes on to put Ikeda, Anita and Wong in each other's way, so that Ryuichi can witness the alluring void that lies at the core of Kabuki-cho and its mythologies. Anita's pimp turns on her and beats her after she complains about the S&M session a trick has put her through. She then limps along the Shinjuku shop facades, shot guerilla style, until Shunrei rescues her, hoping to get their wallets back (he's not had much success selling the drinks), and by doing so finds sanctuary for all of them.

Ryuichi sits down with Wong to talk money. Takaneke, who possesses one of the great voices of Japanese cinema, asks him where he wants to go, then melliflously explains that there are those, from China, who come to Japan to work like dogs, and those who turn to crime. "I have money, women, cars...do you think there's a better place than this?" he asks. Ryuichi inquires where he ranks amongst the Shinjuku triads and gets beaten to a pulp for being disrespectful.

And while in Anita's warm arms, Shunrei, all in orange filters, hears the psychic alarm that points the way to his brother. Carrying Ryuichi back with Chan, he lets Anita tend to them all. A playful scene on her building's rooftop, akin to Takeshi Kitano's 'Okinawa respite' in *Sonatine* (1993), but without the beach, is the only moment in the film which provides a distracting but unfamiliar view from above. Soon after, following Chan's clumsy fall, they're back on the streets down below.

Ryuichi shares his brother's psychic gift, as he discovers after setting into motion a plan for revenge that goes awry, while Miike relishes every morally festering detail of the foes betraying each other. Ryuichi asks Barbie to find a gun for him then uses it to rob Wong and arrange passage on a freighter to Brazil. Barbie sets up Ryuichi, Ikeda gives up Barbie, Ikeda gets a taste of his own product, Chan gets shot, and the

brothers and Anita go back to the village from the opening of the film, to give Chan mother's his share of the take.

Miike continues with the elimination of characters until only two are left. Wong locates the brothers, and Shunrei goes quickly – Ryuichi's sibling radar finds the pieces. He flees to the port with Anita in tow, where Wong is waiting. In the end, the couple's victory functions more as an allegory for their desire to leave Japan than simply a happy ending. This sense of not belonging informs much of Miike's cinema; even under the neon Eldorado of Kabuki-cho's Teatro Milano, there is no solace. Much of Japanese cinema from the nineties is about broken promises and having no social role model to turn to. *Ley Lines*, shot in 1999, is one of the last examples of the theme of 'not belonging and yet having nowhere else to go' that haunted that decade, which is not to say that it went away afterwards, but was slowly removed for current inclusive narratives.

However, Miike's film crystallizes a set of themes dealing with foreignness within Japan, themes explored in other titles such as Yoichi Sai's *All Under the Moon* (*Tsuki wa dochi ni dete iru*, 1993), that looked at the Korean community, Masato Harada's *Kamikaze Taxi* (1995), his take on a Peruvian-Japanese returnee, and Shunji Iwai's epic 1996 *Swallowtail Butterfly* (*Suwaroteiru*), that focused on the Chinese, but expanded beyond Asia.

These are all films more akin to fables, which shed light on how heterogeneous Japan is, and how each community distinguishes itself from one another. They demonstrate this through their protagonists, from Sai's prudently aware taxi driver to Harada's quiet and resolved storm of a man, onto Iwai's happy-go-lucky impresario, whom fate benefits from becoming a counterfeiter, before the system takes it away from him, punishing him for dreaming too big. All of them live within a marginal social space, with easily-manageable narratives that examine the problems within, as well as trace the consequences of setting foot outside. And in the case of Miike, it's less about setting feet down than trampling with them. The most successful films of the nineties open breaches onto social darkness, making those years one of the bravest decades of Japanese cinema. Miike's films demonstrate the relevance of Jacques Rancière's theory of gaps, when he defines cinema as a system of breaches between things that have the same name without being part of the same body.¹

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Les Ecarts du Cinéma* (La Fabrique, 2001).



Ryuichi and Anita make it out of the film, on a row boat, and one might wonder if their plan still included Brazil. For in the sixteen years that have passed since *Ley Lines*, the issue of how to think of China and the Chinese communities within Japan has remained barely addressed.

The balance of economic and political power within the region has shifted, yet recent films hesitate to represent this. The media hints at 'tremors' as well within Kabuki-cho, Miike's former playground. The strip joints, the restaurants, the bars, the private social clubs are still there, in the shadow of immense new high rise structures set to take over. In the years ahead, the shot previously described of a half-dressed Anita stumbling through the throngs of shoppers (reminiscent of the punching bag scene in front of the Kinokuniya bookstore in Shuji Terayama's 1971 *Throw Away your Books, Rally in the Streets* [*Sho wo suteyo machi e deyo*]) will be implausible; those backstreets will have disappeared. These elements remain too sensitive for contemporary filmmakers to deal with, which makes *Ley Lines*, and Miike's early 2000's yakuza titles in general, a treasure trove of nostalgia, in the same way that the Toei and Nikkatsu films to which he owes so much were of their own respective eras and locations.

Stephen Sarrazin is a film and media art professor, critic and curator. He lectures on Japanese cinema at Paris 8 University, and has written for numerous publications in Europe and Japan, including HK Extreme Orient and Cahiers du Cinema. He is also co-editor in chief of the French publication Mondes du Cinema (editions Letmotif), He lives and works in Tokyo and Paris.





ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

Shinjuku Triad Society, *Rainy Dog* and *Ley Lines* are presented in their original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 2.0 stereo sound. The High Definition masters were made available for this release by Kadokawa Pictures.

ABOUT THE SUBTITLES

The “Black Society Trilogy” films were not only Takashi Miike’s first to be produced specifically for the Japanese theatrical market, they were also among his first productions to focus on one of his most commonly recurring themes. Characters who are of foreign origin or otherwise out of place among the mainstream of Japanese society propagate Miike’s films from this point on, and the “Black Society Trilogy” features Taiwanese and Chinese gangsters adrift in Tokyo, Japanese characters exiled to Taiwan, and Japan-born, mixed-race characters whose self-identity is fluctuating or uncertain. The languages used in the films also reflect this theme, with Mandarin, Taiwanese, English and various other dialects mixed in with the usual Japanese, often spoken by non-native characters. In order to more accurately reflect the polyglot nature of the films, Arrow Video’s subtitles for *Shinjuku Triad Society* and *Ley Lines* indicate the use of non-Japanese languages with brackets or braces. Since *Rainy Dog* is set in Taiwan and primarily in languages other than Japanese, the subtitles will indicate Japanese language dialogue with brackets.



PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and booklet produced by: **Marc Walkow**
Executive Producers: **Kevin Lambert**, **Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer: **James White**
Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**
QC: **Nora Mehenni**, **Marc Walkow**
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering: **David Mackenzie**
Subtitling: **IBF Digital**
Artist: **Chris Malbon**
Design: **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks to Alex Agran, Show Aikawa, Samm Deighan, Kat Ellinger, Kumi Fukuchi, Masaaki Hirota, Kosaku Horiwaki, Sonia Huang, Yasu Inoue, Fantasia Film Festival staff and supporters, Sigrid Larsen/IBF Digital, Jennifer Lui, Aiko Masubuchi, Tom Mes, Takashi Miike, Tony Rayns, Misako Saka, Stephen Sarrazin, Rieko Watanabe, Caren Wu, and Asako Suzuki, Masumi Handa & Tomoe Ishii/Kadokawa Pictures.

FURTHER VIEWING

Other Takashi Miike films on Blu-ray and DVD from Arrow Video include *Audition* and *The Happiness of the Katakuris*. Miike also appears in a new interview discussing his work in yakuza cinema, shot for Arrow Video’s *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* release. Watch for Miike’s *Dead or Alive* trilogy, coming soon from Arrow Video.





FCD1406 / AVD004