

As much created as a launching pad for popular singer Akiko Wada's film career as competition for Toei's *Delinquent Girl Boss* films, Nikkatsu's *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss* succeeded on two counts whilst failing its primary purpose. Although an immediate success under the guiding hand of director Yasuharu Hasebe (*Black Tight Killers*, 1966) and screenwriter Shuichi Nagahara (*A Colt is My Passport*, 1967), Wada's conflicting recording and touring schedule meant earliest designs to have her headline successive sequels were almost instantly scuttled. As luck would have it, audiences more than warmed to supporting actress Meiko Kaji (*Blind Woman's Curse*, 1970) and it was decided thereafter to push her to the forefront as the series leading star.

Within *Girl Boss* Hasebe and Nagahara set out the formula that of all the successive films in the series that would follow, with a three act narrative comprising character introduction in the first, plot point(s) and/or conflict in the second, and resolution in the third. It's a fairly simplistic structure but one that worked in the series favour since all were produced extremely quickly (with 21 day shooting schedules) and on low budgets. Whilst the surprisingly statuesque Wada dominates the screen when she's on it, her character feels much the outsider over her co-stars. However, her presence lends additional flair to the film with some catchy rock songs alongside other hit musicians of the era such as The Mops (misspelt "The Mobbs" in Arrow's subtitles). Watch out also for a hair-raising dune buggy and motorcycle chase through Tokyo's pedestrian thoroughfares and underground.

The second film in the series, *Wild Jumbo*, grafts a fairly conventional heist scenario onto the youth gang narrative giving encoring Kaji and Tatsuya Fuji (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976) more screen time than previously as well as introducing Japanese-speaking Taiwanese actress Bunjaku Han. It also marked the directorial debut of Toshiya Fujita (*Lady Snowblood*, 1973) in the series, who immediately differentiated himself from Hasebe with the notable use of an improvisational style and addition of light humor to proceedings. There is a genuine sense of playfulness about the second outing that carries the film through to its predictably grim, blood-soaked, finale. As already noted, there's a definite Peckinpah influence permeating *Jumbo's* final act and the conclusion unfolds akin to a mini-*Wild Bunch* (1969).

Hasebe returned for the third film, the salaciously titled *Sex Hunter*, which from its title readers familiar with the director's later *roman-porno* titles such as *Assault! Jack the Ripper* (1976) might expect to occupy the same cinematic page as those far more sexually violent works. However, since the film as scripted remained *Manhunt* right up until its release, that misguided notion is best dismissed at once. There are hints of the graphic sexual violence that would typify much of Hasebe's later adult fare, such as an implied "rape party" (that never really eventuates, unlike the sequence in *Girl Boss* where a female captive has her bust scorched with a blowtorch), but the overall aesthetic is more a replication of American and Spaghetti Westerns. At one point, just to reinforce the point, Rikiya Yasuoka (*Tampopo*, 1985) remarks how he feels like he's living out a Western.

By the time the fourth film, *Machine Animal*, came around, the series had shifted its tone dramatically and, had the subplot about the sale of a bucket of LSD been ejected, would comfortably been more suited towards a younger audience than the teenagers it was aimed at prior. The villains herein, headed by Eiji Go (*Tokyo Drifter*, 1966), are much more comical than their predecessors, as well as far less mean-spirited. It almost feels like afterthought that the necessity to kill off one or more of the major characters in the final act, as is the formula, has been forgotten over having a bit of fun. Final entry in the series, *Beat '71* (aka: *Crazy Rider '71*), rounds things out with the lightest tone of all, swapping out motorbikes for pushbikes, street gangs for hippies and climaxes on the grounds of an abandoned mine that's been redressed as a frontier town for use as a freestanding set by movie studios. It's an oddball left-turn, but a logical one once you realise the formula had run dry.

Although a long way from the kind of material that would attract exploitation hounds to Japanese cinema later in the decade (there's maybe a glimpse of a nipple or two and a splash of blood here and there over the five films), Nikkatsu's *Stray Cat Rock* series may not have ultimately been the box office success they had been hoping for but as a neon-lit window to another age it's invaluable. Bristling with colorful performances and fashions, experimental camerawork and editing, and set to some fabulous Japanese rock of its time, there's literally oodles of escapist fun to be had visiting and revisiting Hasebe and Fujita's films as a modern-day film buff with an eye for retro value. It goes without saying that the *Stray Cat Rock* films are a fantastic time capsule of Japanese genre cinema and pop culture at the advent of the seventies, as well as gloriously boisterous entertainment that simply shouldn't be missed at any cost.

Michael Thomason

THE STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL AND MISS OSBOURNE (AKA DR. JEKYLL ET LES FEMMES) Directed by Walerian Borowczyk (1981) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD combo

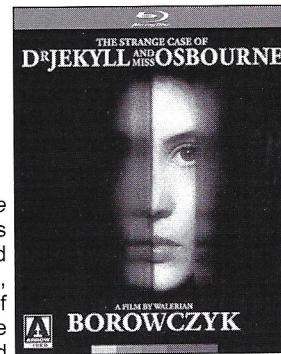
The origin of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is, in many ways, as uncanny as the novella itself. Inspired by a dream and written quickly during the course of a debilitating illness, Stevenson's first draft was met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm by his wife, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne. Stevenson, who complained that Stevenson had indulged in sensationalism rather than developing the allegory at the heart of the tale. After a violent argument, Stevenson finally conceded the point, burned the original manuscript, and, in another three days of feverish activity, produced the version we know today.

Director Walerian Borowczyk's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Miss Osbourne*, by incorporating Stevenson's wife (and thus the legend of the novella's creation) into the narrative proper, announces itself first and foremost as an exercise in intertextuality—that is, a text that can only be understood in reference to other texts. As the film unfolds, *Miss Osbourne* consistently radiates a self-reflexive awareness that it must not only contend with, but also account for, the myriad of literary, cinematic, pop-cultural, psychological, and philosophical texts that have been grafted onto Stevenson's slim novella, and that, to one degree or another, influence the viewer's reception of any new adaptation. But the film also operates as parody, pastiche, critique, and homage, not only in reference to Stevenson's novella and its numerous cinematic adaptations, but also with regard to the entire genre to which the story has long been consigned. Thus, *Miss Osbourne* more accurately proves to be an exercise in *bidirectional* intertextuality—dependent on the texts that precede it, but also exerting its own influence on viewers' perceptions of those previous texts. This bidirectional intertextuality must be taken into account when approaching the film's narrative, subtext, and meta-narrative (its awareness of itself as a film).

Borowczyk's adaptation takes place over the course of a single night, during an engagement party for the esteemed Dr. Jekyll (Udo Kier) and his fiancée, Fanny Osbourne (Marina Pierra). In addition to their mothers and staff (whose ethnicities are reflective of British colonialism), the party is attended by representatives from the pillars of Victorian society: commerce, science, religion, the military, and the law. Following a heated debate between Jekyll and his former mentor Dr. Lanyon (Eurohorror icon Howard Vernon) concerning the former's treatise on "transcendental medicine," the party is interrupted by the appearance of Jekyll's attorney, who makes them aware of a vicious assault on a child in the vicinity. The situation turns dire when a young female guest is soon found raped and sexually mutilated in an upstairs bedroom. All semblance of order collapses as the guests ineffectually try to fend off the fiend in their midst, while Fanny searches for Jekyll, who seems to vanish during the most inopportune moments.

Consistent with its dependence on intertextuality, the plot of *Miss Osbourne* is likely to prove confusing to viewers unfamiliar with Jekyll & Hyde as a broad cultural phenomenon. In keeping with Borowczyk's visual use of frames within frames, the narrative of *Miss Osbourne* is both an amplification and conflation of the dinner-party scenes and aborted engagement-party climaxes featured in the 1932 and 1941 cinematic adaptations starring Fredric March and Spencer Tracy, respectively. Both of those films, in turn, are themselves adaptations of the 1887 theatrical version penned by Thomas Russell Sullivan, the first to incorporate a fiancée for Jekyll and a low-born female victim for Hyde into the story. Only those familiar with the previous adaptations, for example, will understand that Borowczyk's narrative takes place at the point at which Jekyll has completely lost control of the transformation process, with Hyde—even when dormant—now exerting a will of his own. Intertextuality also proves instrumental to understanding some of the film's most bizarre and puzzling scenes, such as the disturbingly surreal sequence in which party guest General Carew (played with manic comedic intensity by Patrick Magee) is forced to watch his daughter inexplicably offer herself sexually to Hyde despite his vicious attacks upon the other guests. In Stevenson's novella, Carew plays a small part as Hyde's one and only murder victim, whose death portends the Doctor's eventual downfall. In the Sullivan play, Carew is elevated to the status of Jekyll's future father-in-law, who in the Barrymore silent version first introduces him to the fleshpots of Soho, but who, in the March and Tracy versions, is the prudish instrument of Victorian repression, cruelly and capriciously prolonging Jekyll's engagement and, consequently, the sexual frustration that drives him to unleash Hyde. Magee's Carew, though no longer Jekyll's future father-in-law, is an amalgamation of all of these versions, and to the actor's credit, a uniquely loathsome creation unto himself. In keeping with the notion of bidirectional intertextuality, the scene only makes sense when one understands by virtue of familiarity with the previous adaptations that the daughter's sexual abandon, as well as Carew's subsequent sadomasochistic punishment of her, are perversions born of years of intense sexual repression. At the same time, the grotesquely farcical tone of the scene serves as a dark parody of Jekyll's fiancée's self-destructive devotion to him (despite her father's objections) in the March and Tracy versions.

Bidirectional intertextuality is also instrumental to decoding the film's subtextual content, as well as its allusions to, and commentary on, the subtexts of the versions that precede it. For example, Borowczyk's staging of a passionate sex scene paired



with the sounds of an accelerating locomotive is an obvious homage to the overtly Freudian underpinnings of the March version, while the vicious rape of the virginal Victoria is a none-too-subtle reference to the Tracy version's pointed assault on Victorian hypocrisy. Borowczyk provides numerous visual and subtextual cues acknowledging the long-standing interpretation of the story as an examination of human duality—evidenced by his repeated use of mirror images, his evocation of the two versions of the novella, one destroyed and one retained, and his casting of different actors to portray Jekyll and Hyde. But the director also wisely acknowledges that Stevenson's original vision is far more complex than the traditional "good-evil" dichotomy that is traditionally projected onto the novella, as Stevenson's narrative makes clear that, while Hyde is unmitigatedly evil, Jekyll, who willingly and repeatedly transforms into his darker self, is far from unwaveringly virtuous. At one point in the film, Carew warns Fanny that her fiancé "is not as faithful as he seems." To fully grasp the import of his line, one must be aware that, in Stevenson's novella, Hyde is smaller and younger than Jekyll, as his darker nature has been languishing unfed for decades. While Borowczyk's Hyde (Gérard Zalcberg) also appears significantly more youthful and diminutive than his counterpart, there is one marked exception—the enormous pointed phallus suggesting that at least one aspect of Hyde's nature had been repeatedly indulged prior to separation.

Borowczyk's film isn't simply a subtextual homage to previous adaptations, however—it is also frequently a commentary upon them. For example, while previous film versions have unfortunately extended the theme of duality to include the misogynistic "Madonna/whore" dichotomy in its female characters, Borowczyk's Fanny is an unsettling fusion of both archetypes, making this the rare adaptation in which the female love interest is not simply acted upon, but exerts her own agency in a manner every bit as transcendently appalling as that of her male counterpart. Note also that while previous adaptations of the novella had depicted Hyde's deviance solely in terms of heterosexual sadomasochism, Borowczyk includes one instance of homosexual rape, directing viewers toward the gay subtext—intentional or not—that modern readers cannot help but notice in the Stevenson novella—only in part due to the almost unbelievably frequent appearance of words and phrases that have since come to connote homosexual orientation.

Miss Osbourne is not simply aware of itself as a Jekyll and Hyde film, its self-reflexivity also extends to an awareness of itself as a horror film. The casting of Udo Kier in the title role at once links Jekyll with Dracula and Frankenstein, while the film's setting and plot mechanics call to mind to both the classic "Old Dark House" murder mysteries and the emerging genre of the slasher film. Hyde's ritualistic donning of black gloves is consistent with the visual conventions of the *Giallo*, while the presence of Howard Vernon—Doctor Orloff himself, grounds the film in the tradition of Eurohorror. By falsely proclaiming, prior to release, that his screenplay resulted from his discovery of the legendary "lost version" of the story "destroyed by Stevenson's wife," Borowczyk employs the disingenuous "based on a true story" ballyhoo of 70s-era horror exploitation. Some of the most surreal aspects of the film stem from its employment of the more absurd horror film tropes, such as when women in dire peril are sedated into unconsciousness by their would-be protectors, or when a clumsily tossed bundle of arrows is enough to pierce an assailant's arm. The film is also historically self-reflexive, with an opening sequence seemingly culled from the fact that Richard Mansfield, the actor playing the lead in the Sullivan stage version, was briefly a suspect in the Jack the Ripper murders, and more broadly cinematically self-reflexive, with the aforementioned Magee scene queasily parodying his character's similarly horrific plight in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, and a finale that is easily recognizable as a hilariously perverse parody of the conclusion of *The Graduate*.

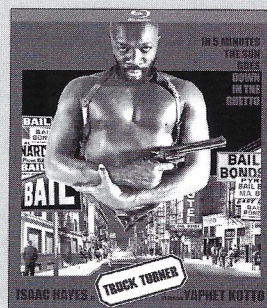
While there is no denying the film's achievement as an intertextual metanarrative, the film is unfortunately less successful when judged on its own terms. Those who praise the film often refer to it as "dreamlike," an adjective often used to describe films that are beautifully shot yet haphazardly scripted. At its best, *Miss Osbourne* resembles Stevenson's narrative refracted through a kaleidoscope of grotesque exaggeration. This is, after all, a film in which Jekyll doesn't imbibe his potion, but rather rolls nude in a bathtub full of it, moaning in agony and delight. Hyde is more than a monster; he is a sort of noxious vapor, infecting all of the characters with plague of destructive madness. The cinematography is often breathtaking, the actors deliver performances that are suitably unhinged without degenerating into camp, and the anachronistic electronic score by Bernard Parmegiani complements the action while grounding the film in a postmodern aesthetic. The climactic transformation scene, which employs no makeup or special effects, is an amazing achievement, and its execution is impossible to discern even when the scene is viewed in slow-motion. The ending is truly apocalyptic, the perfect visual representation of Jekyll's assertion in the novella that the very stars looked down upon Hyde in wonder as "the first creature of that sort that their unsleeping vigilance had yet disclosed to them." But for all this, the film ultimately proves to be a series of remarkable vignettes that never coalesces into a satisfying whole, as the film is rife with both narrative and subtextual contradictions and inconsistencies, proving itself more of a beautiful curio than an epiphany.

Although Arrow has put together an impressive package consistent with the importance of this release, little is offered to assist the sympathetic yet confused viewer searching for guidance in navigating the film's difficult terrain. Daniel Bird's liner notes are simply a catalogue of allusions that strangely never refer to Borowczyk's use of large portions of Stevenson's text. The film's commentary track, consisting of an archival interview with Borowczyk, and more recent ones with cinematographer Noel Very and the director's assistant, Michael Levy (who also plays Poole the butler in the film), is also problematic. Borowczyk's remarks are taken from an interview with writers from the French film magazine, *L'Écran fantastique*, and unfortunately tend toward the oblique due to his understandable fear of revealing too much prior to the film's release. Levy's enthusiastic rhapsodizing about Borowczyk's progressive political subtext seems woefully out of place given the material it's juxtaposed against—the most egregious example being the bizarre decision to pair his defense of 1970s-era eroticism as depicting a "new form of love" with what is arguably the most sexually exploitive scene in the film. Michael Brook deserves credit, however, for an enlightening and delightfully entertaining overview of Borowczyk's career. First-time viewers are strongly advised to forgo the poorly-dubbed English language version to which the disc defaults, even though it means being deprived of Magee's original vocal performance (which should be viewed soon after).

John-Paul Checkett

TRUCK TURNER

Directed by Jonathan Kaplan
(1974) Kino Lorber Blu-ray / DVD



Before changing gears to become primarily a director of big studio, women-centric dramas (pretty definitively cemented with Jodie Foster's Academy Award-winning turn in *The Accused*), Jonathan Kaplan began his career under Roger Corman and New World Pictures. An NYU grad recommended

to Corman by Martin Scorsese, Kaplan cranked out *Night Call Nurses* (1972) and *The Student Teachers* (1973)—low on budget, but high on enthusiasm—before catching a bigger break with *The Slams* (1973), for Gene Corman, Roger's brother, over at MGM.

Truck Turner, produced and initially released by AIP (then managed by Lawrence Gordon), falls in line with the Blaxploitation phenomenon—then in full swing.

Isaac Hayes, hot off of his Oscar win for the "Theme from Shaft," emerges as a successful if limited leading man; a bulldozer of a body type with the dangerous occupation of skip tracer. His girlfriend (Annazette Chase) is currently in jail for shoplifting, but out in a matter of days, yet that doesn't deter Truck from taking a particularly risky case involving a pimp whose capture could set off some sort of pimp war. (Famed character actor Dick Miller gets to shine in his one scene, as—what else—a feisty, conniving lawyer who doesn't want to shell out the big bucks to obtain the services of Mack Truck Turner.)

Along for the ride are Truck's partner-in-crime Jerry (Alan Weeks), plus a sinister syndicate role for a bored-looking Yaphet Kotto (who, according to Kaplan, only took it due to needing fast cash from an acrimonious divorce).

The juiciest part goes to Nichelle Nichols, Uhura from *Star Trek*. She's the den mother of a prostitution organization, a behind-the-scenes wheeler-dealer who gets all of the best lines, particularly when rattling off the rates of her "stable."

The soundtrack, as Kaplan discusses on the commentary, really predated the film. A script had already been written, another tough-guy crime film for the likes of a Lee Marvin or maybe an Ernest Borgnine, but when AIP scored Hayes and a soundtrack deal, all of that changed. Hayes contributes a boisterous soulful soundtrack, one that's lived on and has been re-contextualized in other works (most famously, *Kill Bill*).

Hayes managed to parlay the role into an acting career, most notably turning up numerous times on *The Rockford Files*, but also 1981's *Escape from New York*. Not bad for someone who previously was strictly a behind-the-scenes musician. Hayes had charisma.

The Kino Lorber Blu-ray provides about a comprehensive of a portfolio on *Truck Turner* as you could hope. First off, a commentary track with Kaplan and Elijah Drenner, the director of the essential doc *That Guy Dick Miller*. There's never a dull moment, with shooting locations, background players, production details all covered. (Personal favorite bit: Kaplan unexpectedly running into Walter Hill both interviewing for the same job when, in the 90s, MGM—then rights-bearers—proposed a *Truck Turner* 2.)

Also included is a seven minute segment from an April 2008 screening at L.A.'s New Beverly Theater, part of a film fest put on by director Joe Dante. (I was surprised to see this on the disc, as I had been in attendance that night.) A *Trailers from Hell* review by Ernest Dickerson, an extended theatrical trailer, and a radio spot (when *Truck Turner* double-billed with *Foxy Brown*) round out the disc.

Aaron Graham