Sailing a sea of gore to new horizons Japan spews forth a new wave of splatter movies

by Tom Mes

Japanese ghosts, anyone? Anyone? No hands raised? I figured as much.
'J-horror', that buzzword from the early years of the millennium, has died its second death, more permanent than the first one. Nothing more harmful for a ghost, even a longhaired one, than being ubiquitous.
Whither, then, the ever-evolving horror genre in Japan? For nearly two decades Sadako and her ilk reigned supreme. There was a brief resurgence of the elegant tradition of 'erotic-grotesque' (ero-guro) in the shape of Sion Sono's Strange Circus, Akio Jissoji's Rampo Noir and Takashi Miike's episodes of Three Extremes and Masters of Horror. But the opulent style associated with ero-guro is not a viable model for a film industry in crisis making do with dwindling budgets.

And then there was Machine Girl: cyborg schoolgirls in a bloodsoaked battle to the death with yakuza ninja villains. It was good old-fashioned Sam Raimi-style splatstick, soaked in gore and black humour, excessive, wild and crazy like in the good old days of Takashi Miike, the days of Full Metal Yakuza and especially Fudoh: The New Generation. And it didn't cost a cent.
The similarities between Noboru Iguchi's pivotal splatter opus and the more gleefully outlandish entries in Miike's mid-90s filmography are hardly coincidental. Machine Girl's producer, and the shepherd of the new wave of splatter, Yoshinori Chiba was also the man behind Fudoh, and if any director represents the journey from marginal madman to mainstream master it is the now respectable hit-maker Takashi Miike.
Although Machine Girl reshuffled the cards and launched the current wave of low-budget splatter sagas, others had kept the gore-soaked flag waving in the meantime. Ryuhei Kitamura's Versus had fanboys the world over frothing at the mouth at its everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to genre filmmaking, providing a pragmatic formula for effective low-budget genre moviemaking (zombies + swordfights + martial arts + guns). But while Kitamura's head swelled in the wake of his film's international success, his assistant Yudai Yamaguchi went off to deliver a series of bloody little flicks that took themselves far less seriously. With Battlefield Baseball and Meatball Machine, Yamaguchi put the final touches to the mould from which Machine Girl was subsequently cast.
However, while the precedents to the new movement of merry massacres are entirely Japanese, the interesting thing is that films like Tokyo Gore Police, Vampire Girl vs. Frankenstein Girl, Alien vs. Ninja, and Mutant Girls Squad are primarily aimed at the foreign (read: North-American and European) market. Not surprising, considering that all their models, in particular Fudoh and Versus, made more money overseas than they did in Japan. Like in the days of V-cinema (straight-to-video filmmaking), from which Takashi Miike and his Full Metal Yakuza and Fudoh originate, budgets and thereby investment risks are kept low. For festivals, the films are cheap to screen. For distributors, they are cheap to buy. Everybody wins.
Winning formulas inevitably get copied. Enter one-man cottage industry Takao Nakano, a veteran director/producer of low-budget sex 'n' splatter – a sort of Japanese Russ Meyer / Herschell Gordon Lewis hybrid. The man responsible for such epics as Exorsister and

Sumo Vixens now throws Big Tits Zombie (in 3D, naturally) into the gory mix. The film's distributor King Records is no stranger to exploitation flicks, either: it was previously responsible for Wild Zero, the vehicle for legendary garage rockers and B-movie fans Guitar Wolf, which featured zombies, UFOs and a transsexual love interest.

From the get-go, producer Yoshinori Chiba teamed up with US distributor Media Blasters in planning out his strategies. With the assistance of fellow producer Shinjiro Nishimura, himself a former assistant director of the inescapable Takashi Miike, he then set up the production outfit Sushi Typhoon as a subsidiary of Nikkatsu, Japan's oldest film studio. The rest is history, the making of which we, the audience, are very much a part.
Sushi Typhoon's roster is gradually expanding. In addition to in-house directors Noboru Iguchi and Yoshihiro Nishimura, and pals Yudai Yamaguchi and Tak Sakaguchi (both alumni of the Kitamura stable), the label has secured the collaboration of two formidable godfathers: Sion Sono, hot off the success of his widely praised Love Exposure, delivers the serial killer tale Cold Fish, which premiered this September at the Venice film festival; while Takashi Miike – also no stranger to top-tier film festivals – is merely waiting for a gap to open up in his busy schedule before he too directs his own entry. Their involvement signals that Sushi Typhoon's horizons may well lie beyond the sea of gleeful gore.

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