

## + **SPLINTERS (IX) Asian Cinema**

### In this edition:

*Appleseed, Ashura, Crying Fist, Ghost House, Gozu, Howl's Moving Castle, House Of Flying Daggers, Ju-On: The Grudge 2, Kamikaze Girls, Kung Fu Hustle, Low Life, Otakus In Love, Please Teach Me English, Survive Style 5+, Three... Extremes, Vital*

---

### **Appleseed (Shinji Aramaki, 2004)**

Quelle déception! Annoncé comme l'événement anime de ce début d'année, *Appleseed* est un double échec. Adapté d'un manga écrit il y a presque vingt ans, le récit est une ébauche simpliste de thèmes explorés depuis avec plus de succès dans *Ghost In The Shell*. Sur le plan technique, l'utilisation de la capture de mouvement, au lieu de permettre une meilleure animation des visages, ne sert qu'à imiter au plus près des chorégraphies déjà vues dans *The Matrix*. Il est triste de voir que le film des frères Wachowski, qui a su si bien utiliser les innovations de l'anime afin de produire des scènes innovatrices, est devenu source d'inspiration pour les animateurs japonais. Pensant innover, ce film regarde en fait en arrière.

-Bruno Dequen

### **Ashura (Yojiro Takita, 2005)**

*Ashura* is big, splendid, fantastical, sparkly, goth, kabuki-informed, myth-inspired, sword-fight driven, period extravaganza, at turns emotionally over-wrought and knowingly, comically cheesy. But of course it all comes

down to *Love*. The star-crossed lovers are that and then some; what's worse, they're demon-crossed. This is one of those films wherein the virgin—so troubled and pure, so gamine and sportive—can lick the blood from her about-to-be-lover's wound, and yet seem no less virginal. When, post-coitus, she transforms into a fearsome uber-demongoddess, she becomes determined to have her demon-slayer boyfriend killed for, well, for popping her cherry, basically. Will true cosmic love prevail?

-Jodi Ramer

### **Crying Fist (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2005)**

Young man vs. old boy. Simple and efficient narrative tells separate stories of two very different boxers (played by Ryoo Seung-bum and Choi Min-sik) before they clash in the ring. Boxing isn't really a popular sport in Korea, and the two boxers aren't fighting for huge fame, which makes their struggle all the more intimate. The outcome of the fight doesn't matter here, to the point where it could have been excluded; the carefully realized personal struggle and emotional investment in character is more than enough to satisfy the viewer.

-Owen Livermore

### **Crying Fist (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2005)**

A stirring, gritty tribute to the indomitable human spirit in the form of two down-on-their-luck boxers. I was biting my lip waiting to see the outcome of the final fight. But either way it might have gone would have been okay by me. I guess that indicates that a film has won your trust. And though I have tired of messy,

frenetic hand-held camera as stylistic shorthand for keepin' it real, *Crying Fist* ultimately convinced me that when it works, it still works.

-Jodi Ramer

### ***Ghost House* (Kim Sang-jin, 2004)**

Wish the program notes had indicated the film was a comedy. I was expecting to be terrorized—and I was, but not in the way I imagined. This movie is silliness times a million, and belaboured to the point of unwatchability. I heard some meager rewards come at the end, but I had to check myself out after twenty minutes. For hardcore Fantasia addicts only.

-Lys Woods

### ***Ghost House* (Kim Sang-jin, 2004)**

After reading the program notes, I wasn't ready for *Ghost House* to be a comedy; I was even less prepared for it to be, to my mind, no kind of comedy at all. That is to say, I did recognize tropes of what could be called humour, flailing gestures and tough guys simpering broadly and gobbling demonic couches and underwear thrown around willy-nilly. But I failed to note anything vaguely resembling funny. (For the sake of disclosure, I should note that I snuck out after a painful half hour or so. And yet I stand by my assessment. Not funny. Really lame and not funny.)

-Jodi Ramer

### ***Gozu* (Takashi Miike, 2003)**

Eat your heart out, David Lynch

-Andrea Ariano

### ***Howl's Moving Castle* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2005)**

Bien qu'il ne possède ni l'originalité, ni la profondeur thématique des dernières oeuvres de l'animateur japonais, je ne peux m'empêcher d'adorer ce film. Miyazaki est le seul animateur capable de me faire ressentir à nouveau ce sentiment de peur, d'émerveillement et de fascination que j'éprouvais lorsque, enfant, je passais mes nuits à rêver que je volais. Comme je l'avais remarqué avec *My Neighbor Totoro*, personne ne comprend mieux la complexité de l'imagination enfantine que Miyazaki.

-Bruno Dequen

### ***House Of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004)**

Zhang Yimou's *House Of Flying Daggers* has the requisite martial pyro-technics, cardboard cut-out romance and

a visual palette that dazzles. But Ziyi Zhang's Echo Dance sequence near the beginning of the film in which she demonstrates her background in professional dance and a preternatural ability to move and pose on the court floor is the only reason this film needs to be watched.

-Friedrich Mayr

### ***Ju-On: The Grudge 2* (Takashi Shimizu, 2003)**

If recent Japanese cinema has taught us one thing it's that the Ghostbusters could get rich in Asia. And poor Takashi Shimizu; by the time 2006 rolls around he'll have made seven versions of the same damn *Ju-On/Grudge* film, between various Asian and Hollywood versions. In this sequel to the Japanese theatrical edition, Shimizu breaks up the linear narrative, adds new characters and mines some genuine scares from the form, but essentially it's the usual ghost-curse stuff with pasty spirits, wacky stains and an unnerving soundtrack. Stick two forks in the subgenre and call Ray, Peter and Igon in the morning.

-Dave Alexander

### ***Kamikaze Girls* (Nakashima Tetsuya, 2003)**

Is it any wonder that the world is fascinated by the passions and preoccupations of the Japanese schoolgirl?

-Jodi Ramer

### ***Kamikaze Girls* (Nakashima Tetsuya, 2003)**

It's hard to believe that an anachronistic, rococo obsessed, boutique shopping, bonnet bearing teen who turns stubbornly away at the prospect of attempting any feat which might require the extension of manual energy would prove to be the symbol of the young independent woman, but in this film it works. *Kamikaze Girls* seems to acutely be aware of its audience prompting members to receptively ooohhhh and aaahhhh at the meticulous embroidery work of the protagonist, then cheer and applaud at the brightly brisk action sequences with the bike gang or the Baby boutique owner. I think my enjoyment of the film was only amplified by the colourful 700 others who shared the film at the July 14th Fantasia screening. (honest : there were girls present dressed up as characters from the film....and when the film let out into the foyer of Concordia University, I felt a slight twinge of jealousy)

-Lisa Fotheringham

***Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow, 2004)**

Stephen Chow, the kung fool master of CG-injected fantastic realism, follows the bombastic *Shaolin Soccer* with a period gangster tale that inevitably, gleefully disintegrates into a physics-smashing series of over-the-top chop-socky fisticuffs and epic slapstick. Unlikely heroes stand up to the Yakuza and their super villains, a needless romantic subplot blooms, singing and dancing just sort of happen, gravity loses ground to sight/fight/flight gags, and subtlety goes down for the count. Few contemporary filmmakers so joyfully push the limits of cinema's technological capabilities and genre conventions like writer-director-star Chow. Watch *Kung Fu Hustle* with a seatbelt and a smile.

-Dave Alexander

***Low Life* (Im Kwon-taek, 2004)**

Basically a revisiting of *Casino*, transplanted to Korea in the tumultuous decades post WWII. Despite many energetic and bracing scenes, the epic nature of the story—the sort-of rise and sort-of fall of a thug known to operate with a code of decency, set against the historical fluxes that alternately help and hinder him—suffers from the biopic syndrome of too much too glancingly touched upon. Uninspiring and somewhat stuffy.

-Jodi Ramer

***Otakus In Love* (Matsuo Suzuki, 2004)**

Visual imagination keeps this manga fare engaging. And the hipsters can take note: This is how we will be dressing in five years. Genre-manga follows its own logic and at a certain point you give in and just enjoy the fact that the Japanese are just so much cooler than us. They have gone all baroque and outrageous. By comparison, the measly epic aspirations of North American comic-book films seem deadly dull and stodgy. Best of all, take special note of the foaming ink-pot pre-code sex scene, then take your loved one out for some serious cosplay.

-Lys Woods

***Otakus In Love* (Matsuo Suzuki, 2004)**

Charmingly unhinged Japanese youths subject each other to their respective manga-based obsessions all the while sussing the other out as a potential sweetheart. The road is rocky—literally rock-laden, what with the anguished, artist-wannabe hero's misbegotten rocks-as-manga sculptural pieces, and ultimately his rock-art-inspired cosplay. The way is also rather too long. But

though it failed to move me much, the film makes clear that quirky Japanese losers are cuter and cooler than their American counterparts could ever be.

-Jodi Ramer

***Otakus In Love* (Matsuo Suzuki, 2004)**

Why can't Hollywood romantic comedies feature glitter, flying, and cosplay in such a provocative way as their Eastern counterparts? OK, maybe *Otakus In Love* didn't have as much flying and glitter as some of the others (which might be cause for my restless and anxious nature about seventy minutes into the film), but the success of cosplay in mediating the romantic relationship is enough to make the dandy that lies within many of us proud. While *Otakus In Love* was certainly not the most engaging piece programmed at the Fantasia Festival, the glimpse into the crevasses of manga culture were presented with a good amount of humour and had my friends and I talking "cosplay" for the remainder of the evening. Also...I must admit...I've never seen an ink carafe look so sexy.

-Lisa Fotheringham

***Please Teach Me English* (Kim Sang-su, 2003)**

A remarkably winning little number that is giddy and goofy in all the right ways. The ingénue is pretty but bespeckled. A common trope to be sure, however, unlike many an American teen-nerd-girl-gets-makeover genre flick, wherein the path from geek to chic is an insultingly short one ("ugly duckling" takes off glasses and lets down hair and VOILA! she's a stunner), this gal is truly an awkward dork—all the while that I was growing to love her I also wanted to smack some self-possession into her.

-Jodi Ramer

***Please Teach Me English* (Kim Sang-su, 2003)**

See this film for the lead actress, Na-yeong Lee. Her facial expressions and awkward demeanour are fantastic. The film is quirky and amusing, but evolves from the issue of the ever prevalent Anglicization of the globalized social fabric. The chosen English names of the male and female leads are Elvis and Candy. Need I say more?

-Lisa Fotheringham

***Survive Style 5+* (Gen Sekiguchi, 2004)**

Comparisons with Quentin Tarantino are unavoidable, but sort of moot. Japanese director Gen Sekiguchi's *Survival Style 5+* is more indebted to the insouciantly distilled prose and deadpan weirdness of Haruki Murakami (and the pop art visual antics of Seijun Suzuki) than to any patented Tarantino riffs. A former music video director, Sekiguchi is not only a slick visualist but manages, at moments, a compulsive emotional resonance that took Tarantino years to find. The various story strands are uneven, but in the best of them something complicated and slow burning creeps in: equal parts romantic despair, deep-rooted alienation, and the naïve but correct belief in glamour as a cure — the title begins to make sense.

-Lys Woods

***Survive Style 5+* (Gen Sekiguchi, 2004)**

Shopping list for hip, amusing yet totally messed-up film:

A bunch of sets that look like a rainbow threw up all over it

1 Man who thinks he's a bird

1/2 dozen small diversions in the story have no real purpose

1 Tadanobu Asano

1 Sonny Chiba

1 Vinnie Jones as bipolar hitman

1 Cake performing Gloria Gaynor disco hit "I Will Survive"

-Owen Livermore

***Three... Extremes* (2004)**

*Dumplings* (Fruit Chan)

inside, wrapped with utmost care

A red, crunchy death

Poisoned squirming souls

A rich woman licks her lips

*Cut* (Park Chanwook)

Oblivious, the successful man walks into the darkness.

He strains, tethered to the elegant orchestrated nightmare. Untied, slipping in blood he discovers he has lost something...

*Box* (Takashi Miike)

Snow drifts over time

Dream of silent jealousy

Suffocating warmth

-Owen Livermore

***Vital* (Shinya Tsukamoto, 2004)**

With *Vital*, the madman behind *Testuo* (1988) continues to move his neurotic obsessions with fractured personal relationships, repressed sexuality, and identity-destroying body horror away from the hyper-kinetic and into a quieter, more controlled realm. It's a no less disturbing landscape, though, when an amnesiac medical student thoroughly dissecting a corpse makes a horrifying connection between his autopsy and the accident that took both his memory and lover. A dramatic art film with a horror premise, *Vital* quickly transcends genre as it descends into some darkly dramatic, and ultimately surreal territory. Long live the new New Flesh!

-Dave Alexander