Post-Human Nightmares

Mark Player
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A man wakes up one morning to find himself slowly transforming into a living hybrid of meat and scrap metal; he dreams of being sodomised by a woman with a snakelike, strap-on phallus. Clandestine experiments of sensory depravation and mental torture unleash psychic powers in test subjects, prompting them to explode into showers of black pus or tear the flesh off each other's bodies in a sexual frenzy. Meanwhile, a hysterical cyborg sex-slave runs amok through busy streets whilst electrically charged demi-gods battle for supremacy on the rooftops above. This is cyberpunk, Japanese style : a brief filmmaking movement that erupted from the Japanese underground to garner international attention in the late 1980s.

The world of live-action Japanese cyberpunk is a twisted and strange one indeed; a far cry from the established notions of computer hackers, ubiquitous technologies and domineering conglomerates as found in the pages of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) - a pivotal cyberpunk text during the sub-genre's formation and recognition in the early eighties. From a cinematic standpoint, it perhaps owes more to the industrial gothic of David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1976) and the psycho-sexual body horror of early David Cronenberg than the rain-soaked metropolis of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), although Scott's neon infused tech-noir has been a major aesthetic touchstone for cyberpunk manga and anime institutions such as Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1982-90) and Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* (1989-).

In the Western world, cyberpunk was born out of the new wave science fiction literature of the sixties and seventies; authors such Harlan Ellison, J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick - whose novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) was the basis for *Blade Runner* - were key proponents in its inception, creating worlds that featured artificial life, social decay and technological dependency. The hard-boiled detective novels of Dashiell Hammett also proved influential with regards to the sub-genre's overall pessimistic stance. What came to be known as cyberpunk by the mid 1980s was thematically characterised by its exploration of the impact of high-technology on low-lives - people living in squalor; stacked on top of one another within an oppressive metropolis dominated by advanced technologies.

Live-action, Japanese cyberpunk on the other hand, is raw and primal by nature, and characterised by attitude rather than high-concept. A collision between flesh and metal, the sub-genre is an explosion of sex, violence, concrete and machinery; a small collection of pocket-sized universes that revel in post-human nightmares and teratological fetishes, powered by a boundaryless sense of invasiveness and violation. Imagery is abject, perverse and unpredictable and, like Cronenberg's work, bodily mutation through technological intervention is a major theme, as are dehumanisation, repression and sexuality. During the late eighties and early nineties, it was a sub-strain characterised largely by the early work of two directors; Shinya Tsukamoto and Shozin Fukui.

These directors made films that were short, sharp, bludgeoning and centred on corporeal horrors that saw the body invaded, infected and infused with technology. Tsukamoto's contributions are perhaps the most famous; *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989) and *Tetsuo II: The Body Hammer* (1992). Both films present the nightmarish situation of their protagonists (played by actor Tomorowo Taguchi in both) undergoing a bizarre metamorphosis that sees a humble salaryman turn from a human into a hybrid of flesh and scrap metal.

Although not as well known to western audiences, Fukui's work is also important. Stylistically similar to

Tsukamoto but sufficiently divergent so as not to be a mere copy, Fukui opened up the sub-genre's pallet by incorporating Cronenberg like scientific experiments that impact on the body through technological augmentation as evidenced in his contributions *Pinocchio v946* (1991) and *Rubber's Lover* (1996). These films focus on the venerability of the human mind and how such alteration can cause more than a physical change in appearance, but create a completely new mental state and thought processes that are beyond human.

Tsukamoto and Fukui eschewed many of conventions crystallised by Gibson's archetypal *Neuromancer*. There are no mega-conglomerates or incidences of virtual reality and the power struggle between high-technology versus low-quality of life is replaced by low-technology versus low-life. The technology in their vision of cyberpunk consisted of industrial scrap - *Tetsuo* - and makeshift laboratories built from crude and dated equipment - *Rubber's Lover* - lending a DIY aesthetic to their overall ethos. These were, after all, films made with little or no money and as a result, were not set in gargantuan, near-future metropolises but the present-day, real-life cyberpunk city of Tokyo, suggesting that anxieties over rapid modernity are not some far-off venture but something that should be worried about now. Both filmmakers also had a fixation with post-industrial landscapes; using scrap yards, boiler rooms, abandoned warehouses, compounds and factories as decaying playgrounds for their ideas.

However, this new and defiant take on the sub-genre did not come about overnight. There are many precursors to both Tsukamoto and Fukui's work that also need to be addressed. Some are quite well known to western audiences whilst others have yet to get the recognition that they deserve in helping to create one of the most fascinating and philosophical phases in contemporary Japanese cinema.

Emergence : Sogo Ishii, 8 mm and punk

Whilst the ideas of cyberpunk in the West were born out of literature, Japanese cyberpunk, it could be argued, was born out of music. During the late seventies and early eighties, Tokyo was enjoying an incredibly vibrant underground punk music scene. An ethos that later branched out into art and cinema thanks largely to one individual : Sogo Ishii.

Born in 1957, Ishii quickly built a reputation of being somewhat of a maverick and grew to be a prominent figure of the Tokyo underground filmmaking scene. Operating within the gathering rubble of a collapsing studio system, Ishii turned out a variety of zero-budget 8 mm film projects at a time when former international filmmaking heavyweights such as Akira Kurosawa were struggling to find financial investment.

PANIC HIGH SCHOOL CRAZY THUNDER ROAD

Early feature film efforts such as *Panic High School* (1978) and *Crazy Thunder Road* (1980) encapsulated the rebellion and anarchy associated with punk and went on to become highly influential in underground film circles. *Crazy Thunder Road* in particular pointed the way forward with its biker-gang punk aesthetic; a style that would be explored later in Otomo's highly influential *Akira*. Originally made as a university graduation project, it was picked up for distribution by major studio Toei, making Ishii the first of his generation to move from amateur filmmaking into the professional industry while still a university student [1].

After *Crazy Thunder Road*, Ishii made the frenetic short film *Shuffle* (1981) - interestingly, an unofficial adaptation of a Katsuhiro Otomo comic strip - as well as a slew of music and concert videos for a variety of Japanese punk bands. However, Toei soon returned, offering Ishii studio backing for his next feature film project. This new financial investment resulted in Ishii's most influential work to date; *Burst City* (1982), a film that encapsulated and epitomised his favourite subject matter : the punk movement.

From punk to cyberpunk : Burst City, Death Powder and Akira

No other film captured the intensity, pessimism, delinquency and the do-it-yourself bravado of Japan's punk movement like Ishii's *Burst City*; a bold, brash and anarchic time-capsule of early eighties zeitgeist. However, despite its overwhelming influence - not only did it shape the conventions of Japanese cyberpunk, but the future of contemporary Japanese cinema as a whole - *Burst City* remains largely unappreciated. It is frequently overshadowed by its higher profile, more internationally renowned followers : Tsukamoto, Takashi Miike and Takashi Kitano among others, all of whom are indebted to Ishii's work in some shape or form.

However, Ishii has always played the rebel : attending his filmmaking class at Nihon University only when he needed to borrow more equipment; dropping off the filmmaking radar for long stretches of time; making films of a commercially unviable length such as the 55-minute *Electric Dragon 80,000V* (2001) and challenging conventional moviegoers with his early punk films only then to challenge the fans of that work with calm, hypnotic efforts such as *Angel Dust* (1994) and *Labyrinth of Dreams* (1995). It is this ethos that drives *Burst City* ; steering it through the deserted Tokyo highways and barren industrial wastelands that make up its initial exposition and into the anarchic meltdown of its closing act.

The visual aesthetic of *Burst City* is an eclectic mix of punk, industrialisation and post-apocalyptic wasteland imagery reminiscent of the first two *Mad Max* films (1979 & 1981), with some science fiction trimmings; the futuristic cannons used by the Battle Police to disperse riots for instance. However, *Burst City* acts beyond the usual genre trappings. It has the immediacy and atmosphere of a documentary, chronicling both the people and the music, whilst using the surrounding dystopian backdrop as a metaphor for the anxiety, haplessness and alienation as experienced by Japan's youth at the time. This documentary feel is further enhanced by Ishii's groundbreaking use of camera. His highly dynamic, handheld, almost stream-of-consciousness style shots interwoven with equally aggressive, machinegun editing not only captures the energy and restlessness of the music - which is very prominent here - but would highly influence Tsukamoto and the execution of his work.

The film's industrialised environments - the abandoned warehouses and run-down boiler rooms where the biker gangs and punk bands reside - would become a key aspect for the Japanese cyberpunk look as well as depicting Tokyo as little more than a concrete slum. The notion of the metropolis as oppressive entity starts to become apparent here and it's interesting to note that this film was made in the same year as *Blade Runner*, which again, displays similar connotations [2].

Ishii's prior involvement with the punk movement allowed him to gather an impressive ensemble of real-life Japanese punk bands - *The Rockers*, *The Roosters* and *The Stalin* among others - as part of the cast, as well as 1970s folk singer/songwriter Shigeru Izumiya. Interestingly, Izumiya was also credited as a Planner and the film's Art Director, suggesting that he had a strong involvement in shaping *Burst City*'s influential aesthetic. This serves as a vital link as Izumiya would go on to write and direct his own film; a film that would go on to crystallise many of the conventions and ideas of Japanese cyberpunk that would later be explored by Tsukamoto and Fukui.

Shigeru Izumiya's *Death Powder* (1986) introduces the unorthodox visuals and abstract delivery that would prove instrumental in future Japanese cyberpunk execution. Like *Burst City*, sound also plays a vital part here; further laying the foundations for the sensory assault aspect of the movement that would later be championed and refined by Tsukamoto. Izumiya, like Ishii, is from a musical background; a popular folk singer/songwriter as well as a film composer - he wrote the music for Ishii's breakthrough feature *Crazy Thunder Road*.

Lost in public domain purgatory for decades, *Death Powder* barely exists, available on bootleg DVD and only recently as video segments on the internet [3]. Western understanding of the film has been largely incoherent and underwhelming due to bad and partial translation into English and as a result, *Death Powder* is frequently overlooked. However, its influence is unmistakably clear and it's arguably the first film of Japan's extreme cyberpunk movement, exemplifying the invasive, corporeal surrealism that would follow over the next ten years.

Set in present or near-future Tokyo, the film follows a group of researchers who have in their possession Guernica; a feminine, cybernetic android capable of spewing poisonous dust from its mouth. Karima (played by Izumiya) is left to guard the android but appears to lose his mind, attacking the other two - Noris and Kiyoshi - when they return. Kiyoshi inhales some of Guernica's powder and starts to mutate as a result. He also starts hallucinating as their subconscious starts to merge. One sequence entitled "Dr. Loo Made Me" - which suggests that the android is trying to communicate with Kiyoshi - sees the Guernica project in its early stages featuring the three researchers as well as the eccentric Dr. Loo, the guitar wielding head of the operation. The hallucinations provide Kiyoshi with further omniscience, detailing Karima's apparent love for Guernica as well as the research group's ongoing struggle with the 'scar people'; men disfigured as their flesh deteriorates uncontrollably.

The subject of flesh, the boundary between life and death and the notion of what it means to be human come into play regularly as the film drifts from one surrealist situation to another. *Death Powder* poses the question : if you cease to have flesh, do you cease to be human ? This is an idea that is routinely explored in cyberpunk but while western examples such as *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer* focus on larger-scale implications, *Death Powder* - and most of Japan's subsequent cyberpunk output for that matter - looks at the changes within the individual. With the former; invasive technologies are not only fully realised, but have been successfully integrated into society, thus becoming common practice. The technologies explored in the latter however, are still in their primordial stages; they are works in progress and extremely esoteric, and as a result, extremely volatile and unpredictable.

BURST CITY DEATH POWDER AKIRA

Death Powder also establishes Japanese cyberpunk's tendency to place imagery ahead of its narrative, a fundamental aspect of the no-holds barred sensory assault style that they exhibit. As a result, story and purpose are evinced from what is seen as opposed to what is told, allowing subsequent films a tonal and philosophical quality. Like many similar spirited films that would follow, *Death Powder* highlights the destructive and dehumanising nature of technology. A big clue comes in the form of the android Guernica sharing the same name as Pablo Picasso's famous 1937 painting that depicts the bombing of Guernica by Nazi warplanes (in support of Franco) during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso's mural shows an orgy of twisted bodies, animals and buildings, deformed by war, or more broadly, the deviant technologies that power it. The film's end sees the cast fused and writhing in an ocean of monstrous flesh; the human form consumed and destroyed at the hands of

intervening science.

Despite *Death Powder*'s aesthetic and thematic influence, it went by with little fanfare and was never seen outside of Japan until years later. The subsequent, similar minded *Android of Notre Dame* (Kuramoto; 1988) fared slightly better, partly due to the infamy that surrounded the film series it was part of, a seven-film collection known as the *Guinea Pig* series; short exploitation features that focused on torture, murder and other destructive processes, designed to appear realistic and snuff-like [4]. *Android of Notre Dame* failed to strike a chord with wider audiences and has since wallowed in cult obscurity along with its filmic brethren. However, this all changed as Japanese cyberpunk began to creep into the international spotlight with the anime feature film adaptation of Katsuhiro Otomo's popular manga series, *Akira* (1988).

Although this writing focuses mainly on live-action cyberpunk output, *Akira*'s arrival was so important and influential to the sub-genre that it needs to be acknowledged. *Akira* achieved two things : first; it opened up and, almost single-handedly, popularised anime and manga for global audiences (especially in the UK and US) and second; it perpetuated the cyberpunk ethos on perhaps the largest scale to date - combining the neon-lit, high-technology/low-living metropolis of *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer* with body horror overtones. The film condensed the vast narrative of Otomo's gargantuan, six-part magnum opus into a streamlined, two-hour feature directed by Otomo himself. It is a milestone within Japanese cyberpunk as it was the first of the sub-genre to not only have commercial success domestically, but also managed to find an audience overseas.

Set within the destitute overcrowding of futuristic Neo Tokyo, the story revolves around juvenile biker thugs and best friends Kaneda and Tetsuo. During a turf spat with a rival gang, Tetsuo crashes but is mysteriously taken away by military and scientific officials. They experiment on him with chemically altering drugs, turning Tetsuo into a psycho-kinetic demigod with uncontrollable power. He goes on a destructive rampage through the city to seek an audience with *Akira*, a highly powerful entity that destroyed the old Tokyo decades before.

Part of *Akira*'s success inevitably lies in its attention to detail and vaulting ambition. The budget was astronomical for an anime feature at the time - around ¥1,100,000,000 [5] - acquired through the partnership of several major Japanese media companies including Toho and Bandai. It avoided the corner cutting of anime projects in the past, producing hundreds of thousands of animation cells to create fluid motion - particularly in its many action set-pieces - and capture nuances that would've otherwise not existed. Otomo also went to the trouble of doing lip-synched sound recording; a first for anime, resulting in extremely high and rich production values. The film set box office records for an anime in Japan during its summer 1988 release, grossing over ¥6,300,000,000 [6]. Internationally, it got a limited theatrical run in America and the United Kingdom soon after - sowing the seeds for the immense western cult fanbase that it enjoys to this day - but failed to get home video distribution until the early nineties.

Themes of mutation, modernity and social unrest are rife. Kaneda and Tetsuo's biker gang are like a revved up version of the delinquents seen in Ishii's *Crazy Thunder Road* and *Burst City*, while Tetsuo's ESP and subsequent transformation sets the film firmly in Cronenberg's body horror territory. His eventual fusion with metal - resulting in a horrific man-machine hybrid that sees Tetsuo become the master of a newly formed universe - not only is evocative of the cyberpunk notion of technology corrupting the human form (in this case literally) but also serves as an important visual precursor to the movement's next breakthrough, live-action work.

Metal-morphosis : Tetsuo: The Iron Man and Tetsuo II: The Body Hammer

Often revered as the definitive example of extreme Japanese cyberpunk and a vital cornerstone in the rebuilding of contemporary Japanese cinema, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* was a baffling international success story, prompting

many a sceptic on Japan's future cinematic involvement to turn their attention eastward. Barely over an hour in length, *Tetsuo* was a breath of fresh air; a no-holds-barred sensory assault that gave Japanese cinema a major image renovation and launched the career of its director, Shinya Tsukamoto, who has gone on to become one of the country's most respected and treasured auteurs.

During its unprecedented and lengthy tour of international film festivals, *Tetsuo* not only pointed towards exciting new possibilities for contemporary Japanese cinema but was able to fit "snugly into a pantheon of genre works that included Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, James Cameron's *The Terminator*, David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and the work of David Cronenberg, Sam Raimi and Clive Barker" [7], which no doubt broadened its appeal. Its use of kinetic cinematography, rapid-fire editing and DIY, zero-budget special effects served as an invitation; a call to arms if you will, for independent filmmakers everywhere to produce unique and challenging cinema.

However, the majority of the film's innovative style is, for the most part, lifted from elsewhere, promoting the fusion of a variety of influences including the hyperactive camerawork of Ishii's *Burst City*; the body horror of Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) and *The Fly* (1986); the biomechanical perversions of artist H.R. Giger; the literature of J.G. Ballard - particularly *Crash* (1973) - and the stop-motion animation of Jan Svankmayer. There is also a sense of strange nostalgia for the old kaiju (monster) movies and television serials that Tsukamoto watched when growing up in a Tokyo experiencing post-war re-construction as well as major expansion and modernising in preparation for the Japan hosting of the 1964 Olympic Games.

Like Ishii, Tsukamoto's early development stemmed from making 8 mm films as a teenager during the 1970s, using his younger brother and friends as cast and crew members. As he reached adulthood, Tsukamoto abandoned filmmaking and turned his attention increasingly towards the stage, forming a theatre troupe with like minded university students and directing plays [8]. One of the plays that Tsukamoto wrote would subsequently be adapted into a film; *The Adventure of Denchu Kozo* (1987) with the assistance of his theatre cohorts - christened "Kaiju Theatre". It was this same group that also made *Tetsuo*, along with a revolving-door line-up of other helpers, most notably fellow filmmaker Shozin Fukui who would go to make his own cyberpunk features during the nineties.

Tetsuo's chief concern is the impact of technology on society and subsequently - and more specifically - the human form. Tsukamoto suggests that technology is a disease, bursting forth unannounced and unexplained as evidenced in the salaryman's transformation - simultaneously reminiscent of Cronenberg's *The Fly* and Otomo's *Akira* - where a shard of metal lodged in the protagonist's cheek is the starting point for further mutation. Like Seth Brundle of *The Fly*, the salaryman is both repulsed yet intrigued by what he is turning into and, coincidently, his evolution shares the namesake of the transforming character of *Akira* : Tetsuo; meaning "iron man" or "clear thinking/philosophical man". Tsukamoto embraces both interpretations of his film's title. On one hand is the literal transformation of flesh to iron and on the other, a philosophical enquiry on technology's consuming nature and the symbiosis between city and citizen.

However, closer inspection reveals further concerns, as evidenced by Steven T. Brown, author of *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*, in which he says : "...the mixing of flesh and metal in *Tetsuo* is not only intensely violent but also darkly erotomechanical and techno-fetishistic, evoking sadomasochistic sexual practices and pleasures, as well as fears of both male and female sexuality out of control" [9].

In this regard, Tsukamoto gives horror and eroticism equal attention : the salaryman has a nightmare involving his girlfriend (played by Kei Fujiwara) sodomising him with a mechanical, snakelike appendage strapped to her crotch. This gender-reversal is not only representative of one of David Cronenberg's favourite thematic stomping grounds, but also shares the Canadian director's Ballardian [10] allusions, hyper-masculinity and homoerotic undertones. When the film's antagonist, Yatsu (meaning 'Guy') - a metal fetishist (played by

Tsukamoto himself) suffering from the same man-machine affliction - arrives at the apartment, he turns up "presenting flowers to the salaryman in a parody of courtship" [11] that ends with physical assimilation.

TETSUO: THE IRON MAN TETSUO II: BODY HAMMER

This mechanical eros continues when, in an early stage of his transformation, the salaryman's penis turns into a rapidly oscillating drill which he then uses on his girlfriend with graphic results. By the film's end, he does battle and fuses together with the metal fetishist; the result is a large tank-like monstrosity with the suggested goal of world domination. His newfound unrepressed nature effectively destroys his heterosexual relationship, only to start a new one with someone - another male - experiencing similar changes to their body.

The film's metaphorical capacity is achieved primarily through its abstract and surrealist execution that bears similarities to Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) - as noted by Brown in *Tokyo Cyberpunk* (p.60-64) - and David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. The latter is a popular comparison, prompting many to refer to *Tetsuo* as a "Japanese Eraserhead". Whilst both films share an allegiance to post-humanism and industrialised iconography, *Eraserhead* takes a slower burning, atmospheric approach. *Tetsuo* on the other hand, takes a startlingly aggressive stance from the outset; combining hand-held camerawork, rapid fire editing and a pummelling, industrial music score by composer Chu Ishikawa - who would serve as composer for future Tsukamoto projects - to create a battering and invasive sensory assault. It was an ethos that would carry over into the next decade of underground filmmaking.

After completing his second feature, the manga adaptation *Hiruko the Goblin* (1990), Tsukamoto returned to the world of mutated scrap with a second *Tetsuo* film. *Tetsuo II: The Body Hammer* (1992) serves more as a companion piece than as a straightforward sequel or remake. It is a new interpretation of the same basic premise - man-machine transformation - but played out on a larger scale. Tomorowo Taguchi reprises his role as a (different) salaryman. This time, he lives in a sterile, high-rise apartment with his wife and young son. His metamorphosis is triggered when his son is kidnapped by an underground faction of skinheads who want to harness the salaryman's cyber-kinetic powers so that they can augment their bodies into organic weaponry in order to bring about mass destruction.

If the ethos of the first *Tetsuo* was related to *The Fly*, the second film perhaps bears more of a similarity to Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981) as the salaryman comes to blows against his mutated brother (played by Tsukamoto), the leader of the skinhead group. In doing so, *Body Hammer* moves away from the surreal macabre horror of its predecessor and more towards an action/science fiction movie template; although plenty of avant-garde trimmings still remain to bridge, connect and embellish ideas. As a result, Tsukamoto operates within a somewhat more conventional and ultimately, more accessible narrative structure, and the inclusion of a larger budget means that he is able to fully realise the end-of-the-world scenario suggested in the closing moments of the first film. As per Tsukamoto's wish, Tokyo is razed to the ground.

Like the first film, *Body Hammer* blurs the distinction between form and content. It also re-imagines concepts that were given little attention the first time around; the metal fetishist's obsession with physical perfection as suggested by the photos of successful athletes that adorn his shack like abode is "brought very much to the foreground in the shape of the skinhead cult, which consists of athletes, bodybuilders and boxers who push there training regimen to the extreme" [12] - a topic that would dominate Tsukamoto's subsequent film project. It's a possible indictment of the obsessive, body culture phenomenon that came about in the 1980s that saw more and

more people going to the gym and taking advantage of artificial enhancements such as plastic surgery; a time where there was a strong emphasis on physical perfection and beauty.

The film also hints at the direction Tsukamoto would start to take with future productions : the environmental focus has shifted ever so slightly from the decaying urban sprawl to the sterile functionality of the metropolis centre, and more of an emphasis has been placed on the relationship between the salaryman and his wife; a marriage torn apart by invasive elements. The catalyst for transformation this time is not from infection or a curse as suggested in the original, but from demonstrative rage. The prospect of the salaryman's son being killed by the skinheads provokes the first instance of transformation, which occurs again when his wife is kidnapped, causing multiple gun-barrels to erupt from his chest and limbs. Rage would go on to transform Tsukamoto's protagonists in future films *Tokyo Fist* (1995) and *Bullet Ballet* (1998), albeit figuratively instead of literally.

When mental anguish exceeds physical pain : Pinocchio v946 and Rubber's Lover

In the wake of *Tetsuo*'s startling domestic and international success, one would think that it would have acted as a catalyst to trigger a wave of similarly styled films. In retrospect, this wasn't the case as very few filmmakers decided to follow the path forged by Tsukamoto's breakthrough work. However, former colleague Shozin Fukui was one of the few to accept the challenge.

Like Tsukamoto and Izumiya before him, Fukui is a disciple of Sogo Ishii's breakthrough independent filmmaking during the late seventies as well as the music that inspired it. Born in 1961, and upon moving to Tokyo in the early eighties, Fukui quickly became infatuated with the burgeoning underground punk music scene and set about forming his own band with friends. These same friends would serve as Fukui's cast and crew on early forays into filmmaking such as *Metal Days* (1986) and the short films *Gerorisuto* (1986) and *Caterpillar* (1988) [13].

After serving as assistant director to both Tsukamoto and Ishii - on *Tetsuo* and the short film *The Master of Shiatsu* (*Shiatsu Oja*, 1989) respectively - Fukui started to write and direct his own feature films. His first was *Pinocchio v946* (1991), and while it did not share the same philosophical leanings that *Tetsuo* did two years before, it was an effective manifesto for Fukui's thematic preoccupations nonetheless; how technological augmentation impacts on the fragile and potentially volatile nature of the human mind. The story focuses on the titular protagonist, a brainwashed individual who has been scientifically modified to operate as a sex slave. Upon being thrown away by his sexually demanding female owners, Pinocchio wonders the streets of present-day Tokyo where he meets Himiko, a fellow destitute. She takes Pinocchio under her wing whereby he begins to fall in love with her, prompting the return of previously erased memories. When Pinocchio realises what has happened to him and knows who's responsible, he plans revenge. Meanwhile, the corporation in question organise a search party to reclaim their missing product.

Pinocchio v946 is frequently compared to *Tetsuo* by cyberpunk enthusiasts and academics alike. Both films represent the feature length debut of Fukui and Tsukamoto respectively and both films exhibit a similarly energetic and manic execution. It can be argued that Fukui's style is indebted to Tsukamoto due to his serving as assistant director for a period of *Tetsuo*'s filming. Fukui's previous short, *Caterpillar* - made at around the same time as *Tetsuo* - features similar techniques including hyperactive, hand-held camerawork and stop-motion animation as well as similar imagery : mounds of scrap, ubiquitous urban living and flesh merged with machinery.

However, there are some major differences. The most apparent is inherent in the film's mise en scene : *Pinocchio v946* is in colour (except for its opening sequence) whereas *Tetsuo* is black and white - though its

sequel was in colour. Thematically, unlike Tsukamoto's notion of technology as an organic, mutating disease, Fukui's film depicts the body transformed as the direct result of man-made augmentation similar to early Cronenberg - *Shivers* (1975) and *Rabid* (1977) for example - as well as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818). Like the monster in Shelly's seminal work, Pinocchio is at first oblivious to his condition, but time spent in the real world causes him to realise his artificial existence and he seeks revenge against his creator. However, unlike Frankenstein's monster, Pinocchio was not constructed from scratch; he is his namesake in reverse - a human turned product through neuro tampering and memory wiping. Fukui seems to suggest that modernity is programming the populous to concern themselves with nothing but sex; a sentiment that's readily apparent in the media and advertising industries.

It could be argued then, that *Pinocchio v946* is the more precise cyberpunk text, offering a speculative stance on potential future technologies i.e. altered living through cybernetic assistance. As suggested in *Tetsuo*, these technological changes have a perverse impact on sex; Pinocchio is compelled to suckle on Himiko's breasts in a brain-damaged, baby like stupor - not knowing any better - whereas the salaryman's girlfriend is enticed and drawn to ride her lover's newly developed drill-penis.

The conclusion of *Pinocchio v946* sees further transformation beyond the esoteric boundaries as previously established. Like the salaryman and metal fetishist, Pinocchio and Himiko - both of whom are victims of the corporation's scientific dalliances - merge together in a manner and style reminiscent of Peter Jackson's first lo-fi feature *Bad Taste* (1987), suggesting the start of a new, technologically altered meta-race in keeping with Cronenberg's corporeal philosophy of the "New Flesh" [14].

Due to *Tetsuo*'s worldwide success - along with other newly emerging work like Takashi Kitano's gritty police procedural *Violent Cop* (1989) - *Pinocchio v946* enjoyed a modicum of cult success as international demand for strange and ultra-violent Japanese cinema began to increase. Film companies such as Toho started to cater to this newfound interest by introducing direct-to-video distribution lines that specialised in outputting low-budget, sensationalist material. One such entry was Tomoo Haraguchi's specifically titled *Mikadroid: Robokill Beneath Disco Club Layla* (1991), a cyber/steampunk horror about a buried, technologically augmented, super-soldier - built by Japanese scientists during the second world war - being re-activated and going on a murderous rampage. Largely unheard of, the film is perhaps most notable for featuring an acting turn from a then little-known Kiyoshi Kurosawa, who would later go on to direct internationally renowned works such as *Cure* (1997), *Pulse* (2001) and *Tokyo Sonata* (2008).

Both *Pinocchio v946* and *Mikadroid* would be overshadowed by Tsukamoto's higher budget and higher profile *Tetsuo* sequel, which arrived the following year. In the meantime, Fukui was already planning the next project; one that would take almost five years to gestate and execute.

The result was *Rubber's Lover* (1996), Fukui's second and, at present, last feature; a subterranean post-industrial nightmare of human experimentation and bodily destruction. A clandestine group of scientists experiment on human guinea pigs pinched from the street to unlock psychic powers. This is achieved through a combination of computer interfaces, sensory depravation and regular injections of ether, usually resulting in the subject dying a gruesome and explosive death.

Often interpreted as a lose prequel to *Pinocchio v946*, *Rubber's Lover*, despite similarities to its predecessor also

represents a distinct contrast. The most readily apparent differences are the film's use of monochrome photography - a decision made by Fukui when he disliked the look of the S&M flavoured costumes when filmed in colour - and the film's comparatively subdued pace; favouring atmosphere over propulsion. However, his pre-established tropes still remain : invasive technologies; bizarre sexual practices as a by-product of such technologies; retrograde/outdated equipment; mutation; and a fetish for bodily fluids - pus, blood, vomit etc.

Like *Tetsuo*, *Rubber's Lover* depicts the establishment of a new world order through corporeal and technologically informed symbiosis : the biological co-existence between flesh and metal and the destruction of mental and physical barriers respectively. *Rubber's Lover* also takes great pleasure in distorting the boundaries and exploring the grey area between sex and violence; much more so than *Pinocchio v946*. One scene sees a frenzied character tearing the flesh off another, mid-coitus on a hospital bed whilst a corporate scumbag laughs in the corner of the room. The researcher's successful test subject, Motomiya - a former member of the team who has since become addicted to ether - is made to wear a strange, rubber S&M bodysuit, further augmented with makeshift technological add-ons of monitors, wires and outdated gizmos. Their nurse's rotating, ether injector is especially phallic and is used on their subjects rectally for "immediate effect", suggesting a notion of perversion that transcends sex and violence and into the realms of science and technology.

Rubber's Lover's perverted view on science not only echoes some of the imagery and themes from Izumiya's *Death Powder* (and to a lesser extent, Haraguchi's *Mikadroid*) but the real-life, deranged human experiments carried out by the Japanese military's infamous Unit 731 on Chinese prisoners of war during the 1930s and forties [15]; depicting a doomsday scenario that sees the human race tear itself apart in the pursuit of scientific understanding and technological superiority. Motomiya's ether addiction is caused by one of his research colleagues. The same colleague later kidnaps and rapes a representative of the project's benefactor sent in to oversee its shutdown. She is also subjugated to D.D.D (Direct Digital Drive), the apparatus used in the project's testing.

Fukui's fascination over the frailty and destructibility of the human mind comes to fruition as Motomiya quickly turns mad; burdened with newly unlocked psychic powers that he can't control. Like *Pinocchio v946*, *Rubber's Lover* examines the mental transformation that invasive technologies incur on the human condition. This is in stark contrast to Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* films that focus primarily on the physical transformation caused by the same factors, which perhaps serves as the key difference between their otherwise similar films within the sub-genre.

Ishii's second revolution : Electric Dragon 80,000V

By the mid-to-late 1990s, Japanese cyberpunk cinema was starting to wane; having been overtaken by the blood-stained yakuza films of Kitano and Miike in terms of international prominence, who would in turn be overshadowed by the new wave of supernatural, "J-Horror" films that emerged at the turn of the century including Hideo Nakata's *The Ring* (1998) and *Ring 2* (1999).

Fukui's *Rubber's Lover* was the last underground cyberpunk film of the nineties and arguably the last ever. Upon its completion and after getting a limited video release, Fukui put filmmaking on hold to join a video production company; he worked there for the best part of ten years. Tsukamoto had moved on also, continuing his exploration of the symbiosis between city and citizen with a matured pallet. His films *Tokyo Fist* (1995) and *Bullet Ballet* (1998) eschew virtually all of the science fiction and horror imagery that had characterised his work previously.

Cyberpunk was kept alive within Japan's anime and manga industries but it wasn't until the turn of the

millennium when it returned to cinema. The year 2001 saw the release of two films that would give the genre a new lease of life. Mamoru Oshii made *Avalon*, a live-action Japanese/Polish co-production about an addictive virtual simulation game. It was Oshii's first film since his internationally successful anime feature film adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) - he would go on to direct the sequel; *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004).

Shot in Poland with Polish actors and a Japanese crew, *Avalon*'s themes of virtual reality places it in the same territory as a lot of American produced cyberpunk that surfaced during the nineties : *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Strange Days* (1995), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999) and Cronenberg's similarly concerned *eXistenZ* (1999) for example. It was also redolent of many similarly themed anime releases - both theatrical and televised - that emerged during the same decade as the real-life phenomenon of the internet started to make the world seem even smaller; Oshii's own adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell* and Ryutaro Nakamura's *Serial Experiments: Lain* (1998) series were particularly indicative of these technological and cultural changes. Another notable example and precursor to much of the VR-centric work that would appear in the 1990s is the four-part anime series *Megazone 23* (1985-1989), which explores the idea of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo existing as a futuristic virtual simulation.

The second film from 2001 was Sogo Ishii's *Electric Dragon 80,000V*, which not only served as Ishii's return to punk cinema after a decade of more meditative output but, like *Burst City*, spearheaded a new generation of like minded filmmaking that has evolved Japanese cyberpunk into a new and strange beast. As with the sensory assault cinema favoured by Tsukamoto and Fukui, *Electric Dragon* is a film that is experienced rather than watched, stimulating the most primitive parts of the brain in a tsunami of sound and image.

The premise is simple enough; a young boy contracts the ability to channel and wield electricity after receiving multiple jolts of electro-shock therapy for violent behaviour. Now an adult with megawatts of power coursing through him, Dragon Eye Morrison is a professional reptile investigator, searching alleyways for lost lizards. Equilibrium is disturbed by the arrival of Thunderbolt Buddha, a TV repair man turned vigilante who has the same electro-conductive talents, acquired from a childhood accident whilst climbing some power lines. The two meet and battle for supremacy on Tokyo's rooftops.

As was the case with *Burst City*, *Electric Dragon* leans less towards the cyber and more towards the punk aspect of the sub-genre, with Ishii following the train of thought he employed with his music videos and concert films during the eighties. The film's title also makes reference to the old days, partly derived from "Live Spot 20,000V", the concert venue that plays a pivotal role in *Burst City* and one of Ishii's early shorts, *The Solitude of One Divided by 880,000* (1978). *Electric Dragon* is less about the nightmare and more about anarchic expression at odds with the post-modern universe.

However, some cyber signifiers do remain; the oppressive Tokyo setting realised in stark monochrome; the fetishist attitude towards power lines, aerials, ventilation ducts and other ubiquitous technological appliances; the hyperactive and frequently expressionist delivery; its low-budget, guerrilla-like execution and, like *Tetsuo*, the concept of two characters augmented through technology, giving them powers that they can't fully control, coming to blows. Dragon Eye Morrison has to clamp himself to a metal bed frame at night whilst Thunderbolt Buddha's penchants for electronic devices to assist in his nocturnal excursions sometimes get the better of him

as he fights for control of his own body.

The psycho-sexual themes that dominated past Japanese cyberpunk have been replaced with an equally primal notion of animal magnetism. Morrison's electric power is derived from the "Dragon" that's embedded in all living things. His rage unlocks the strength of the dragon, meaning that he can harness more energy by sucking it out of household appliances or by creating a non-melodic racket on his electric guitar; a high-voltage cacophony of noise and expression announcing that Ishii's punk spirit is still alive and well. Indeed, lead actor Tadanobu Asano occasionally guests in Ishii's industrial noise-punk ensemble *Mach 1.67*, which provided the film's propulsive soundtrack. The film would later be used to accompany the group's live shows, a strategy Ishii pioneered back in 1983 when he made the short film *Asia Strikes Back* - a little-known cyberpunk piece that provided the template for Shozin Fukui's preferred set-up of underground experiments gone haywire - to back up the album and tour of the short-lived punk supergroup *The Bacillus Army*.

Similar to Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo*, dialogue in *Electric Dragon 80,000V* is minimal thus the narrative is powered mainly by image and follows a similar template; the protagonist is seen acquiring his power; the antagonist then challenges the protagonist to combat and the final act sees them clash. All of this is wrapped up in a high energy, fatless sixty-minute package. Ishii's film is not only is a throwback to the eighties cyberpunk manifesto but reminds us that rather than being characterised by heavy, science fiction concepts, as was the case in the West, it was defined by its independence, attitude and the will to create something out of nothing.

The rise of "splatter-punk"

In the years following *Electric Dragon 80,000V*, a new wave of low-budget horror/science fiction began to surface largely thanks to increased DVD distribution channels, cheaper production techniques and the ever increasing reach of the internet. Films like *Hellevator: The Bottled Fools* (Hiroki Yamaguchi, 2004), *Meatball Machine* (Yudai Yamaguchi & Junichi Yamamoto, 2005), *The Machine Girl* (Noboru Iguchi, 2008) and *Tokyo Gore Police* (Yoshihiro Nishimura, 2008) have ushered in a new era of cyberpunk informed, gore-centric movies that have since been termed "splatter-punk".

These splatter-punk movies share the same independent spirit of their precursors, substituting 8 mm and 16 mm film methods for cheap DV technology, retaining as much budget as possible for make-up, costume and practical effects. Many of the effects in these films depict mutation and body alteration; splatter re-imaginings of the flesh-metal fusions of *Tetsuo*, and the perverse, organic weaponry of *Tetsuo II*. Similar to the "splatstick" horror of early Sam Raimi and Peter Jackson, the effects and transformations lean towards the ridiculous for comedic effect. One mutated character in *Tokyo Gore Police* wields an oversized cannon made of contorted flesh, protruding from his crotch much like an erect penis, suggesting - in a very tongue-in-cheek manner - the blur between sex and violence that was posited by Tsukamoto and Fukui. Yamaguchi and Yamamoto's *Meatball Machine* is perhaps the closest to the Japanese cyberpunk of old; parasitic aliens infect unsuspecting people, which promptly turns them into macabre man-machine teratoids that fight it out.

In many ways, this "splatter-punk" phase is also reminiscent of the special-effects race that occurred with American horror movies during the 1980s; Cronenberg included. As practical effects became more advanced, a seemingly never-ending slew of films were produced, trying to out-shock one another with advancing exercises in gore. The same can be said here; the ante seems to be continually raised as each new release contorts and morphs the body in increasingly elaborate and grotesque ways.

MEATBALL MACHINE MACHINE GIRL TOKYO GORE POLICE

A reason for this is that many of these film's directors initially came from special effects backgrounds : *Tokyo Gore Police* director Yoshihiro Nishimura for instance, has supervised the special effects for many modern gore productions including Noboru Iguchi's *The Machine Girl* and *Robo-Geisha* (2009). In fact, many of these films are made through Fundoshi Corps, a production company founded by Nishimura, Iguchi and film producer Yukihiko Yamaguchi, that specialise in cheaply produced, over-the-top movies of this ilk. It has proven to be a successful business model as their output is continually building a strong international fanbase, looking for perverse and outlandish content.

The recurring touchstones of combining eroticism and perversion are also present. However, they for the most part forego subverted techno-fetishism in favour of contemporary V-Cinema and Pink Film preoccupations. *The Machine Girl* for instance, uses typical imagery such as the Japanese schoolgirl - a popular conceit in a lot of the nation's anime, manga and pornography industries - and takes it to new abject levels, connecting bullet spewing hardware to her severed limbs and even granting her the ability to grow weaponry from out of the small of her spine; skirt raised of course.

Unfortunately, it would appear that live-action Japanese cyberpunk cinema has moved on from the daring, experimental underground from whence it came. The remnants of its ideas are now utilised in violent gore shockers that are bereft of the immediacy and philosophical potential of their progenitors. The movement, once an expression of attitude, concerns and frustration with the world, the way it's structured and the technology used - not just an exploration of the grey area between science fiction and horror - seems to have disappeared.

However in 2009, Shinya Tsukamoto announced his return to the world of cyberpunk with a third Tetsuo project. *Tetsuo: The Bullet Man* is not only a return, but a new beginning for Tsukamoto as it is his first English language film; an attempt to expose the demented world of *Tetsuo* to a wider audience. It premiered at the 2009 Venice Film Festival to mixed fanfare, prompting Tsukamoto to continue working on it. Subsequent showings - the 2010 Tribeca Festival for instance - have found greater critical favour, but a vital caveat still remains...

Like the punk scene that it emulated, Japanese cyberpunk was pertinent and inextricably linked to a specific time and place. More than a sub-genre, it tackled the anxieties of the period in ways that conventional expression would fall short. But now that we're in the technologically dependent twenty-first century - the post-human nightmare now a grim reality - can it still be relevant ?

References & endnotes

1. Sogo Ishii's biographical details were adapted from an interview with the director.

2. 1982/1983 would prove to be a crucial time in the international development of cyberpunk. This period saw the release of four highly influential texts : Sogo Ishii's *Burst City* (1982), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), the initial publishing of Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* manga series (1982-1990) and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983).

3. *Death Powder* can be viewed in sections on Youtube.

4. The *Guinea Pig* film series gained its notoriety when the fourth film of the series *Mermaid in a Manhole* (1988) was found in the house of Japanese serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki in the late 1980s. The series garnered further infamy in 1991 when American actor Charlie Sheen mistakenly reported the series' second entry *Flower of Flesh and Blood* (1985) as a genuine snuff film.

5. *Akira* webpage on IMDb.

6. Ibid.

7. Mes, Tom - *Iron Man: The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto*, FAB Press, 2005 (p.59)

8. Shinya Tsukamoto's biographical details were adapted from sections of : Mes; 2005 (p.15-37)

9. Brown, Stephen T. - *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 (p.68-69)

10. Derived from the author J.G Ballard, the term "Ballardian" is defined by Collins English Dictionary as : "resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels & stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak man- made landscapes & the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments". This definition can be found at www.ballardian.com, a website dedicated to the discussion of Ballard's writing.

11. Brown; 2010 (p.107).

12. Mes; 2005 (p.93).

13. Shozin Fukui's biographical details were adapted from an interview with the director.

14. The tern "New Flesh" was first coined by characters in Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) and has since been used by academics and scholars to characterise the recurring themes and philisophical preoccupations apparent in the director's early body-horror works. In this regard, the New Flesh usually refers to societal and/or sexual revolution manifested through technologically informed body modification, as evidenced in the films *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* and *The Fly* (1986).

15. Unit 731 was a secret military department established to research biological and chemical warfare solutions against China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The unit carried out a variety of lethal human experiments on prisoners of war which included studying the effects of weapons, explosives and germ warfare. Invasive surgery would be performed on the surviving test subjects - removing limbs, organs etc - to analyse the results.