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# Pinky Violence: Shock, awe and the exploitation of sexual liberation

## ABSTRACT

*This article examines Pinky Violence films, exploitation movies from 1960s and 1970s Japan, focusing specifically on radical portrayals of gender and sex. Utilizing the subversive space of exploitation cinema, Pinky Violence films provide alternative constructions of gender and female sexuality through the character of the sukeban: the girl gang boss. An evaluation of both the cultural and the historical factors that led to the development of Pinky Violence films demonstrates how the changing post-war society indelibly influenced new iterations of gender for Japanese women. An assessment of the tropes of the films and an analysis of the ideology behind them pinpoints Pinky Violence as an unvalued, and hence understudied, area in transgressive Japanese cinema. By doing so, the article ultimately attempts to position Pinky Violence films as a valuable source of untapped material that can offer a unique insight into constructions of gender in Japanese cinema.*

## KEYWORDS

Pinky Violence  
sukeban  
exploitation film  
sexuality  
gender in Japanese  
film  
female transgression

Japanese cinema in the 1970s saw an explosion of Pinky Violence films: exploitation films built around soft-core pornography and sadomasochistic themes. A potent combination of exploitation film aesthetics and transgressive images, Pinky Violence are female-driven narratives focused around teenage girl gangs, soft-core pornography, social commentary and radical

1. The term 'Pinky Violence' is a retrospective one as Toei did not have a truly uniform contemporaneous label for the genre. The closest thing one could consider to a branding term for the films when they were released would be *sukeban*, as a number of the films contained this term in the title and used the idea of the *sukeban* as a model for a majority of the female leads. But solely referring to them as *sukeban* films leaves out the films that were definitely part of the same tradition, but that located themselves inside a *ronin* tradition rather than in urban Japan. The term 'Pinky Violence' came to popular use in the 1990s after the title of a book called *Pinky Violence: Toei's Bad Girl Films* by J-Taro Sugisaku and Takeshi Uechi (1999), which was a retrospective homage to the films, and included interviews with directors, actresses, etc. The term has since been picked up within exploitation film circles (by fans, writers, historians and critics). The versions of these films available in the United States are released under the Pinky Violence label as well. These films differ from the traditional pink films based mainly on the fact that sex is secondary to violence in the films, although Pinky Violence films owe a significant debt to *pinku-eiga*. My use of the term is really twofold: to emphasize the place of the films in the recuperative discussions around exploitation film and to simultaneously identify the films as both distinct from but indebted to the pink tradition.
2. This is not to neglect the trend towards feminist liberation in Japan before the

conceptualizations of female sexuality. By elevating the character of the female gambler through noble criminality and social conscience, Pinky Violence created a series of films that celebrated the power and sexuality of young Japanese women. Constructed around the character of the *sukeban* (translated as girl boss or bad girl boss) and girl gangs in urban Japan, Pinky Violence is primarily concerned with women as independent outlaws operating in a world bound by criminality and patriarchy. The films follow their exploits as they struggle to maintain their independence in the face of threats from the male-dominated political system and the traditional criminal underworld.

Rather than fit comfortably in their exploitation label, Pinky Violence highlights various intersections of female power and sexuality, creating complex female characters whose actions openly question normative ideas of appropriate female action and gender stratification. These are films that allow Japanese cinema to showcase radical representations of female sexuality through the subversive cinematic space of exploitation film.

### LAYING THE CULTURAL GROUNDWORK

The 1960s Japan saw shrinking movie studio profits as television rose to prominence. To combat the loss of viewership studios turned to creating exploitation films that were cheap to make and popular at the box office. The early 1960s saw independent studios primarily producing low-budget exploitation and pornography films to great financial success. Larger studios took notice, and in the 1970s, began producing what was termed *roman-poruno*/romance pornography: soft-core pornography mixed with sadomasochistic interludes (Macias 2001: 187). Expanding on this formula, Toei Studios saw the value of creating a line of films focused on more than just sex: mixing tales of criminality, violence, class, race, vigilantism, torture, sex and girls gone bad. Pinky Violence films were born.<sup>1</sup>

These films were made in a changing social climate that bore the heavy influence of World War II and the post-war Allied Occupation. The cultural and psychological changes brought about by the war strained the conventions of hierarchy and behaviour in Japanese society, and traditional gender expectations were abruptly confronted with the reality of life in wartime, propelling the education and work experience of Japanese women around the war effort (Havens 1975: 914). Additionally, the Occupation forces believed that 'Japanese women were destined to play a key role in "democratization," that is, the democratic reorganization of political institutions, practices, and governing philosophy ...' (Garner 2004: 208). As such, they encouraged partnerships with western feminist-led organizations to promote the participation of Japanese women in policy-making and government.

One such organization, the World YWCA, led a series of efforts in Japan in the late 1940s in order to help Japanese women liberate (read: westernize) themselves by working to overcome what they considered to be the culturally bred tendencies that disabled them from fully participating in society and government (Garner 2004: 216). An allegiance formed between western feminists, the occupying Allied forces and politically astute Japanese feminists to advocate for the political and civil rights of Japanese women (Garner 2004: 215). As a result of these and other efforts, Japanese women were given the right to vote in 1947, and a new Constitution developed by the occupying Allied authorities included an equal rights clause and a revised Civil Code, allowing women new spousal, property, education and equal-pay rights.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, by the late 1960s, when Pinky Violence films would make their first appearance, Japanese women were ostensibly living in a more equitable society, affording them more social and legal freedom than ever before.

Cinematically, New Wave Japanese film-makers like Hani, Imamura and Ōshima were transforming Japanese cinema by incorporating revolutionary ideas into their work: social outcasts as protagonists, critiques of social structures, uninhibited sexuality and the changing roles of women (Mellen 1976: 419–26). Combined with the new role of film as an exploration of the post-war Japanese identity, a new type of Japanese cinematic realism emerged. The low-budget, non-studio films of the New Wave, and the growing role of exploitation film, provided fertile ground for new female characterizations in Japanese film, from more prominent roles in traditional yakuza films to the female gambler movies like the *Hibotan bakuto/Red Peony Gambler* series (1968–1972). These social, stylistic and aesthetic changes converged in the character of the *sukeban*.

### A NEW KIND OF JAPANESE OUTLAW

Pinky Violence films are deeply indebted to an outlaw and anti-authoritarian ideology. The philosophy presented in these films reflects an overall dissatisfaction with normative social patterns, including the idea of a gendered and hierarchical society, a deep distrust of government and its representatives and heterosexual family expectations. Pinky films demonstrate a pathological need to expose social, governmental and legal hypocrisy. One of the most devastating condemnations of government authority can be found in *Kyōfu joshikōkō: bōkō rinchi kyōshitsu/Terrifying Girls High School: Lynch Law Classroom* (Suzuki, 1973). In a government-run reform school delinquent girls are given one last chance to remake their lives in accordance with normal social expectations, primarily through a scholarship programme sponsored by a local politician. The only student in the school intent on changing her life is dedicated to performing well in this programme. Her reward for her performance is to be raped by the politician the programme is both named for and sponsored by.

Pinky Violence films are standard in structure: a gang of female teenage outlaws exploit normative Japanese society to survive, in the process exposing hypocrisy and validating their outlaw status.<sup>3</sup> The gangs are led by their *sukeban*, both boss and mother to the orphaned brood. The most famous *sukeban* actresses were Ike Reiko and Sugimoto Miki. [Figure 1] Working for Toei Studios and their Pinky Violence auteur Suzuki Norifumi, Ike and Sugimoto would become the face of the new Japanese female outlaw.<sup>4</sup> Their cinematic partnership, like the films themselves, was based on formula: starting out as rivals, they are determined to overthrow one another. Engaging in a physical altercation proves that they are matched as equals, and from this equality emerges a grudging respect. Soon they are full-fledged comrades, uniting against a common enemy.

The *sukeban* character and her gang share a number of similar characteristics that help to construct their outlaw status and also provide context to their pathological distrust of traditional Japanese society and authority. Character tropes for *sukeban* include living an orphaned childhood on city streets; accumulating multiple arrests resulting either in extended stints in abusive jails, reform schools or both; exhibiting a strong sense of sexual ownership and power; cultivating a reputation based around physical ability and fighting

Occupation. Pre-war Japanese feminists had mounted a successful force, but their cause was severely repressed by the government and was ultimately decimated by the war.

3. There are also several Pinky Violence films that reconceptualize the character of the *sukeban* through the filter of the *ronin*, constructing her as a woman bred for violent revenge. See, for instance, films like *Furyo anego den: Inoshika Ocho/Sex and Fury* (Suzuki, 1973) and *Shurayukihime/Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973).
4. Suzuki was the closest thing Pinky films had to an auteur. He made Pinky films, shocksploitation, nunsplotation and all manner of exploitation fare for Toei Studios for over twenty years.



Figure 1: Poster for Girl Boss Guerilla/Sukeban Guerrilla starring the iconic duo of Ike Reiko and Sugimoto Miki.

proWess; serving as knowledge-seekers, plugging themselves into the underground criminal network in order to exploit their cultivated knowledge to accomplish their goals; expressing an unyielding devotion to exposing authority figures for their corrupt and hypocritical ways; and exhibiting unwavering loyalty to their fellow gang sisters.

The subculture of the gangs is bounded by highly structured rituals and a strict honour code, both of which function to create each woman as part of the larger whole, with a loose leadership role ascribed to the *sukeban*. What is conspicuously missing from their group structure is a rigid power dynamic,

instead replaced with a type of communal feminism fostered by equal participation in all activities, democratic decision-making and a protective nature. This communal power structure is a result of the women's threefold minority status, triggered through their gender, economic and legal status. This marginalization engenders a common bond for their community. Because of their marginal status, these women practice the honour system they espouse. For example, in the film *Girl Boss Revenge: Sukeban/Sukeban* (Suzuki, 1973), a yakuza soldier asks a *sukeban* why she would risk her life to save her rival, an act of loyalty he cannot comprehend. She answers: 'We don't talk about honor like you and your crime syndicates. Our honor is so much different than yours'. By implementing, rather than simply espousing, their honour system regardless of internal subgroup politics, the women are validating their communal subgroup structure, while simultaneously reinforcing their desire to exist outside of the rigid power dynamics that define Japanese society.

### PINKY VIOLENCE AS OPPOSITIONAL FILM-MAKING

Textual analysis of these films and their impact occurs within the recuperative tradition of reading exploitation films as a type of oppositional film-making. This recuperative process rests on the theory that poor acting, and fractured and often incomprehensible narratives are more than indicators of a film's legitimacy. Rather, they are markers that serve to subvert the construction of the classical Hollywood narrative, which in turn exposes the overtly patriarchal system that underlies traditional filmic narratives. Reshaping this idea in a more active way, Pinky Violence films consciously destabilize the idea of the classical narrative by positioning audience identification with the female characters, constructing both their outlaw status and sexual agency as heroic characteristics. To reinforce this unexpected primary identification, Pinky Violence films take the traditional space of viewer identification, the male characters, and render them ineffectual and inadequate.

This process leaves no room for the audience to identify with male characters, essentially forcing the audience into the female point of view. This identification positioning is similar to Clover's theory of the final girl in slasher films, films in which the audience is also forced to identify the hero as feminine as male characters are weak and marginal (1992). Men in *sukeban* films are almost universally corrupt, degenerate and destructive in their criminality, whether they are yakuza, teachers, policemen or government officials. Male characters are feeble as men and as authority figures, and are ruled by their sexual desires, a trait that provides the *sukeban* with powerful leverage. In the plot to overthrow their evil school, the girls of *Lynch Law Classroom* exploit the school administrator's total inability to rebuke the sexual advances of a student. The encounter is taped and used as blackmail to oust the corrupt bureaucrat. This type of sexual leverage is a standard trope in Pinky films, utilized as a type of social purging. Consequently, the male voyeurism and assumed sexual dominance of traditional exploitation films becomes submerged under the weight of female sexual power and agency.

The role of the female body as home to sexual power, physical power and outlaw gender status is consistently on display in Pinky Violence films. [Figure 2] Sexual power is a weapon in the *sukeban's* arsenal against a male dictatorship and the society that dictatorship created: one that has no use for women who refuse to sublimate their sexuality or regard it as something dangerous. This type of unapologetic sexual ownership establishes the base



Figure 2: The female body on display is nevertheless a site of sexual and physical power, as well as signifying her outlaw gender status. Frame capture from *Girl Boss Guerilla*.

for female power in these films, and that base is further buttressed through the physical use of the female body as an expression of non-normative female actions. The women in these films are very physical: riding motorcycles, crashing cars, breaking out of jail, running, jumping out of cars and fighting. The combative and unapologetic physicality and sexuality that is on display in these films complicates these characters, allowing them to bypass the traditional role of women in exploitation films as scopophilic fetish objects and permitting them to serve as manifestations of socially transgressive female power.

The re-formation of these characters from object to subject is additionally reinforced through the multiple iterations of violence in the films. Violence is primarily performed in one of two categories: male-on-female violence or female-on-female violence. Female-on-female violence is ritualistic and is used to maintain the group's structure. It can be used to transition leadership, unite disparate groups or to punish an offense. In all instances nudity accompanies the violence. The viewer relates to the violence as female physical power, responds to the sexual thrill of nudity constructed outside of the traditional male-female power dynamic and reacts to the excitement of participating in the break of that standard sexual binary.

Male-on-female violence is also accompanied by partial nudity. At first glance this violence can be seen as highly eroticized under a traditional sexual dynamic, and often displays the fairly rote construction of cinematic sadomasochism in exploitation films. However, the presentation of the violence makes the nudity problematic as a source of audience titillation. In order to find this nudity sexually exciting, the viewer would be forced to implicate themselves as the torturers and rapists of the characters they have come to identify as their heroes, severing their primary character identification. Based on the films' refusal to create other characters that could engender identification, desuturing the viewer from the female hero would leave the audience in an unmoored viewing position. As such, transferring identification to allow for sexual titillation is unlikely. Therefore, male-on-female violence further solidifies the audience's connection with the female characters through sympathy.

This indictment of the male character's abnormal violence and the female's practice of acceptable violence transfers traditional male authority onto the women. The authority, and the power it confers, is wielded through proactive and radical sexuality in order to equalize social power dynamics and to protect and maintain their independent outlaw subculture. In *Zenka onna: koroshi-bushi/Criminal Woman: Killing Medley* (Mihori, 1973), the women finance their operation to take down the local yakuza by sexually grifting American GIs; the heroine of *Furyô anego den: Inoshika Ochô/Sex and Fury* has sex with the man who murdered her friend, but not before she covers her body in a poisonous liquid to ensure his death and the *sukeban* of *Seijû gakuen/School of the Holy Beast* (Suzuki, 1974) gets revenge for her mother's death by manipulating the sexual hypocrisies of a convent of nuns. It is this radical sexual agency that inverts the traditional sexual hierarchy, constructing these women as manifestations of subversive gender power and rendering male control impossible.

In addition to placing a primacy on subversive and revolutionary portrayals of female sexuality, Pinky Violence films also tackle other social issues, such as concerns with race and racial impurity stemming from the Allied Occupation. Although the forces in the Allied Occupation were made up of troops from different nations, it was widely regarded as an 'American show', with General Douglas MacArthur serving as the Supreme Commander of the forces (Passin 1990: 108). It is therefore no surprise that in these films, the anger and resentment resulting from the Occupation is placed on the American doorstep. The rape and sexual assault of Japanese women by American GIs, and the residual trauma, becomes a focal point in a number of Pinky Violence films. As with Pinky's representation of the changing social status of Japanese women, these issues are born, at least in part, of historical basis. Historian John Dower notes that many Japanese feared the threat of rape by Allied troops (1999: 124–30). This does not take into account the experiential trauma of 'comfort women', Japanese women who were installed in brothels to serve the Allied Occupation troops, many of whom were forcibly recruited.

Pinky Violence utilizes this reality in their treatment of filmic 'half-breeds': characters of mixed Japanese and American parentage born after the Occupation. These bi-racial characters are tainted by their American parentage, and as such serve as signifiers for fears around racial legitimacy. This is most notably on display in the film series *Konketsuji Rika/Half-Breed Rica* (1972–1974). Rica was born after her mother was raped by American GIs. Single and with a child to support, Rica's mother turns to prostitution, and as a result Rica herself is raped at an early age by one of her mother's customers. As an adult Rica is bent on revenge against her rapist and any man she deems offensive. Rica's bi-racial status becomes both a motivator for her revenge and a liability for her safety as she is confronted by individuals who believe her to be tainted by her American blood, a stigma punishable with extreme violence. Another example, the *Nora-neko rokku/Stray Cat Rock* series, also deals with the treatment of bi-racial Japanese teenagers, especially in the film *Nora-neko rokku: Sekkusu hanta/Stray Cat Rock: Sex Hunter* (Hasebe, 1970). The plot of the film revolves around a yakuza's relentless mission to kill all the bi-racial teenagers in town because his sister was raped by an American GI.

By incorporating contemporary racial issues with revolutionary portrayals of gender hierarchies, female sexuality, overt anti-authority ideology and a celebration of outlaw status, Pinky Violence films were responding to a changing society. Utilizing the non-traditional cinematic space of exploitation film, Pinky Violence was able to conceptualize a new iteration of Japanese

woman, one whose transgressive sexuality and female agency has played a critical role in shaping alternative constructions of gendered power in the context of Japanese cinema. Of course, these cursory observations, and the Pinky Violence films themselves, warrant a deeper and more comprehensive evaluation. The goal of this introduction to the *sukeban* character and Pinky Violence films is both to create a starting point for deeper analysis and to emphasize these semi-obscure films as a rich vein of material: material that highlights spaces of social and sexual transgression, material that allows for subversive cinematic expressions of Japanese gender and material that challenges ideas about the role of women in Japanese film.

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