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The Voice of Meiko Kaji in 1970s Japanese Exploitation Cinema

by Ash Johann Curry-Machado

Meiko Kaji was a singer and actress in the Japanese exploitation cinema of the 1970s, a feminine cinematic icon of vengeance who used her voice in interesting juxtaposition to violence. Her filmography exemplified the inherent beauty and dangers of Japanese grindhouse through performances that embodied the anarchic spirit of the time. Pairing her cinematic appearances with songs that vocalise themes of vengeance, they intertwine with her central feminine struggles through lyrics that paint the films' violence.

Kaji was particularly prolific between 1970 and 1974. This was a period where Japanese cinema struggled to retain audiences that were becoming increasingly captivated by television, resulting in “the sluggish film industry” needing help in revitalising.[1] This “required films that would stand out”, resulting in “the coming 70’s heralding a newer, edgier take”,[2] successfully ushering in “the era when turnover was at its highest”. [3] During the 1950s, women were little better than “window dressing” for the “macho world” of samurai action films and yakuza crime dramas, as “aggressive physical behaviour by a woman was not tolerated in mainstream entertainment.”[4] Conversely, Yuko Mihara Weisser argues that the 1970s provided “the most nurturing climate for the concept of action divas to grow,” guiding an aesthetic of grace amidst the brutality.[5] Weisser highlights how far Japanese female characters had progressed in representation, “undeniably influenced by America’s feminist movement” with “a bolder, naughtier approach to entertainment”. [6] To Laura Treglia, exploitation cinema in the 1970s prided itself on featuring “powerful visions of women’s rebellion and retributive fury”. [7]

Kaji was one of many female performers raised by studios to exploit their bodies in cheaply produced films that could be delivered to youthful Japanese audiences as quickly as possible (in 1970 alone, Kaji performed in twelve films). Rikke Schubart described her as “a hauntingly beautiful, enigmatic, and seductive actress”, whose characters possess “a lonely existence immersed in darkness”. [8] Playing fashionably dressed gang leaders, convicts, outlaws and assassins, Kaji all but replaced the male-dominated samurais that came before. She found immense popularity due to her combination of striking performance with beautiful singing in ‘enka’ style, which combines traditional Japanese musical techniques with electric

instrumentation, sentimental lyrics and evocative vocals (the songs mostly being those she composed herself). This allowed for her “memorable outlaws bent on revenge” to stand out from the many other women acting in very similar films at this time, as the songs are what made her films unique.[9] She was one of the first Japanese women on screen to embrace violence and be widely loved for it, joining contemporaries who, as Alicia Kozma writes, performed “complex female characters whose actions openly question normative ideas of appropriate female action and gender stratification”, with her “radical representations of female sexuality” creating an interesting microcosm of the changing times.[10] To this end, “the star persona of Meiko Kaji is located between the extraordinary powers of a castrating gaze and the existential malaise of a female killer,” a persona she embraced yet which ultimately stifled her growth.[11]



FIGURE 1 — Meiko Kaji, “hauntingly beautiful, enigmatic and seductive”, in *Grudge Song* (1973), © TOEI COMPANY

Beginning with an exploration of Kaji’s deadly silence and the singing that stems from patriarchal oppression in *Joshū Sasori / Female Prisoner Scorpion* (Shunya Ito, 1972-1973), I go on to explore the love songs of vengeance characterised by *Shurayuki-hime / Lady Snowblood* (Toshiya Fujita, 1973-74) and *Gincho Wataridori / Wandering Ginza Butterfly* (Kazuhiko Yamaguchi, 1972), followed by an analysis of the anarchistic singing that arises in *Nora neko rokku / Stray Cat Rock* (Yasuharu Hasebe & Toshiya Fujita, 1970-1971). I conclude by arguing that both her first lead performance in *Kaidan nobori ryū / Blind Woman’s Curse*

(Teruo Ishii, 1970) and her most recent appearance in *Subarashiki Sekai / Under the Open Sky* (Miwa Nishikawa, 2020) suggest a narrative that disowns the violence her career is characterised by, rejecting her popular image to arrive at a peaceful resolution.

Silent but Deadly Scorpion

What is most striking about Kaji is that the characters she plays hardly ever speak. Many have written about the ferocity expressed simply through her eyes - a dangerous, “iconic stare”, [12] which Tom Mes describes as “able to impale whoever was unlucky enough to tread into their field of vision.” [13] Tony Williams notes how Japanese cinema strived to accentuate the femininity of its action heroines, resulting in Kaji having “greater depth” as it afforded her “a quieter, more brooding style of intensity”. [14] Jay Beck suggests that silence “serve[s] to engender fear in... the audience”, so whenever a film focuses on Kaji’s complete absence of sound, the audience is unnerved, unsure of when she will strike. [15] Lisa Coulthard emphasises this point, suggesting that “silence can make us aware of complicity”, which in turn impacts our bodies more vociferously when violence breaks out. [16] Weisser expresses “this unusual paradox” as creating “an amazing chemistry with her audience”, because despite her quietness, she “never shirked a demonstrative fighting display”, conveying hatred, sadness and fear entirely through “her reticent attitude and cold demeanour”. [17] Schubart compares Kaji to Clint Eastwood’s character in the *Dollars Trilogy* (Sergio Leone, 1964-1966), with both “creating a mythical hero” by convincing their directors to cut most of their lines, leaving them as mysterious, silent figures. [18]



FIGURE 2 — Meiko Kaji’s “dangerous, iconic stare”, in *Female Prisoner Scorpion* (1972) (above) and *Jailhouse 41* (1972) (below), © TOEI COMPANY

In her silence, Kaji’s voice is instead felt through song. Fundamental to Kaji’s popularity was her singing a new theme song for each film,[19] “emoting the lyrics... as she would with dialogue from a film, playing the character behind the words.”[20] As Michel Chion writes, “the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception.”[21] The voco-centricity of Kaji’s singing leads her voice to take precedence over all other sounds. When she sings, the audience immediately becomes transfixed, her voice dominating all other sonic elements. As Kaji reveals, “it was common back then... for performers to sing the theme songs for the films they were in.”[22] However, not all actresses during this time could handle the singing aspects of their roles.[23] What made Kaji so remarkable was that she possessed attractiveness in both her appearance and voice, thus not only surviving in the tough environment, but flourishing in it. Kaji can be compared to Michael Bronski’s assessment of Judy Garland, for “when she sang she was vulnerable. There was a hurt in her voice that most other singers don’t have”. [24] It is the vulnerability in her singing that allows her to explore the

plight of violated women returning for revenge, maintaining a delicate air around her as she articulates themes of vengeance through theme songs laced with poetic lyricism.

This is conveyed most strongly in the *Joshū Sasori / Female Prisoner Scorpion* films (Shunya Ito, 1972-1973) and their theme song ‘Urami Bushi / My Grudge Blues’. Opening with a shot of the Japanese flag standing proudly above a prison complex, the sense of Japan’s unwavering male authority is thrown into turmoil as the sirens announce Kaji’s prison escape. Upon her recapture, but not before valiantly fending off the guards, she menacingly stares into the camera while in voice over begins to sing. ‘Urami Bushi’, composed by Kaji herself, details how a man might flatter a woman with words such as “beautiful flower”, but will toss her away “once you’re in full bloom”. The woman here, having been fooled, is repeatedly lambasted by Kaji as “foolish”, with this being the “foolish woman’s song... her song of vengeance.” This adjective is replaced with each repetition of the chorus, becoming “lamenting”, “burning” and other despairing words. At the opening of *Dai 41 Zakkuyōbō / Jailhouse 41* (Shunya Ito, 1972), Kaji is shown unremittingly sharpening a spoon with her mouth against the floor of a dank dungeon while her legs and arms are tied up, the lyrics now starting to talk about how even “shedding blood once a month” can’t make her forget about her unfulfilled dreams; although left to rot in a dingy prison cell, her singing the theme song assures the audience that she will eventually free herself and continue the rampage. And in *Kemono Beya / Beast Stable* (Shunya Ito, 1973), while running through busy Tokyo streets with the severed hand of the detective pursuing her attached by handcuffs to her arm, she refers to herself as “a bright red rose”, not wanting to pierce the men with her thorns but asking “how else will I get free?”; at the end of the film, she chants “I cannot die before I fulfil my fate; so I live on, driven only by my hate”, creating anticipation for more vengeance to follow despite the otherwise conclusive tone. Each time the song plays, a new stanza is lifted from the original, so that the song itself tells its own story across these films: from the plight of a woman being beaten and discarded by men, who cannot show her tears because then she will be hurt again, to finally liberating herself the only way she knows how – through vengeance.



FIGURE 3 — Meiko Kaji tied up on prison floor in *Jailhouse 41* (1972) (above), and running away with severed arm in *Beast Stable* (1973) (below), © TOEI COMPANY

Through the use of song, Kaji's plight becomes intimately felt by the spectator, as an entity driven by a singular purpose, prevented from ever achieving happiness. Similar to Bjork's singing in *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000) whenever reality becomes too painful to bear, so does Kaji sing to escape the brutal prison. Throughout these films, important moments - of escape, of violence, of reflection - are accompanied by the same song, lifting the themes outside of painful reality into a fantastical musical world that allows the message to be heard clearly by the spectator. As Steven Feld argues, knowledge is only gained "through an ongoing cumulative and interactive process of participation and reflection", so the repetitiveness of the theme song heightens the audience's grasp on the meaning behind the

singing.[25] It liberates her from the gritty realism of an abusive, patriarchal world, each repeated use of the theme song heightening the juxtaposition between fantasy and reality. This was integral to Kaji's performances, becoming the exemplary image of an elegant spirit of feminist vengeance, grappling with a fundamental identity of subjugation followed by violent liberation, as she overthrew authority and murdered the men that oppressed her, all while singing beautifully.

As shown by the lyrics, Kaji's character is governed by forces beyond her control. Her voice, likewise, is shown as an entity that cannot freely express itself, which Liz Greene suggests is due to "a sound bias that restricts the female voice in cinema".[26] To Kozma, these films are about women struggling "to maintain their independence in the face of threats from the male-dominated political system." [27] It is "a brutal, darkly comic but ultimately feminist masterpiece", [28] with lyrics that, as Treglia writes, "concern the burning everlasting resentment of women who have been deceived by men." [29] She draws links between the frequent rape sequences that occur in these films to the brutal actions of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War, a taboo topic within Japan and thus only capable of being explored through such exploitation films, with "the use of identical music [alerting] the viewer to another breakdown of order". [30] Singing becomes the only means of escape, Kaji reinforcing Schubart's identification of how all female heroes during this period of cinema "were presented as Amazons who love to fight and kill, hate men, burn with sexual desire and delight in violence and destruction", the vengeful lyrics becoming a weapon far deadlier than any knife. [31] Ito states that Kaji "removed her sexuality and stood up against authority" through her silence, a defence mechanism for surviving the harsh prison life, before violently lashing out against her brutal prison guards by expressing herself through song, which guides her body like a spectre. [32] When she sings about a woman's "song for vengeance" at the end of the first film, she does so in tandem with going on a killing spree against the men who violated her, the fulfilment of her vengeance winning the audience's favour having had to suffer through the silence with her. Kaji singing 'Urami Bushi' therefore gives her escape from prison a cathartic quality, as she is taking back control of her voice as a representative of all women violated by men.

Love Songs of Vengeance

Shurayuki-hime / Lady Snowblood and the sequel subtitled *Urami renka / Love Song of Vengeance* (Toshiya Fujita, 1973-1974) crystallised Kaji's image as an elegant yet bloodthirsty

spirit unrepentant about bringing vengeance for all violated women. Her character has been fashioned into a ruthless killer against her will, literally “born for vengeance” as stated by her dying mother soon after giving birth to her, her purpose in life now one of retributive fury for innocent women. At the beginning of the film, she confronts a gang who attempt to kill her, assuming she has come to assassinate their leader. Calmly standing in white kimono against falling snow, with an umbrella masking her face, she mercilessly hacks them down, the pure white scenery becoming spoiled by gushing blood. When the leader asks her “who are you?” before dying, she states that she is “revenge”; when he asks her whose revenge, she replies “those helpless people that have suffered thanks to you”. Her iconic deathly stare and the start of her theme song ‘Shura no Hana / Flower of Carnage’ then becomes the only answer she requires, the camera tracking her from overhead as she walks through the snow under her umbrella, the music overlaying their dead bodies with a lingering sense of romantic fury.[33] As she articulates by singing “I’ve immersed my body in the river of vengeance, and thrown away my womanhood many moons ago”, she is no longer a human living for her own means, but rather the living embodiment of this ethereal concept that is vengeance.



FIGURE 4 — Meiko Kaji with umbrella and dagger in snow, in *Lady Snowblood* (1973), © TOHO CO. LTD.

As the song continues, she moves from snow to forest and sea, practising her sword fighting while chanting about how the “begrieving snow falls” and that “an umbrella that holds

onto the darkness is all there is". Even as she sings from above the film's diegesis, the sounds of her sword clashing against wood or whistling through the air, as well as the crashing waves and howling wind, remain audible, such that the singing becomes influenced by her environment and actions, the lyrics expressing her emotions with each swing of her sword. The 'sonic space' of the films thus becomes voco-centrally structured around her, so that every violent sound effect is musically dominated by the vengeful lyrics. Such a "musical dominant", Coulthard suggests, "creates uncanny effects by dislodging the violence from realism and placing it in a musical realm that highlights its stylization and artifice". This runs the risk of entirely eradicating diegetic sound and thus lessening the shocking effects of the violence for the audience.[34] This can be seen in *Bara no Sōretsu / Funeral Parade of Roses* (Toshio Matsumoto, 1969) - part of the contemporary Japanese New Wave movement – where such musical stylization directs "audience enjoyment in a manner akin to a laugh track", with comedic music playing over the fights.[35] Nevertheless, it is in the climax where the music ceases to make the violence ironic, with a harrowing scene as the protagonist gouges her eyes out as part of an oedipal twist of fate, the carnivalesque music now horrifying rather than funny, while stumbling onto the street with frightening realism. Scenes of violence in *Lady Snowblood*, for all their musical stylisation, likewise never lose the sense of diegesis necessary to make the violence impactful: the slicing of her sword, splatter of blood against snow and grunts of men dying are fully audible and uninterrupted, so that there is no danger of the violence being dislodged from its place in reality. Kaji sings when she is the last one standing surrounded by complete silence, compounding the harrowing effects of the violence on the audience, to leave them with remorse for the devastating cruelty while priming them for further carnage.

The 'Flower of Carnage' theme song additionally signals the film's end as Kaji dies with her vengeance fulfilled. Lying in the snow, her disembodied voice continues singing above the world while gazing upon the violence below - physically removed from Kaji and thus representing a transcendent view of vengeance. It runs counter to what is expected from a real person, who is restricted to speaking diegetically, ceasing to exist upon death as their voice is materially stuck to their body. Yet to Chion, "the richest of voice-image relations... [is] the situation in which we don't see the person we hear." [36] Her voice singing from outside the image causes all other sounds to disappear, conveying her plight more powerfully than diegetic singing allows, amplifying the vengeance themes of her films by extrapolating them to a holistic encapsulation of feminine struggle. The female voice has a sense of embodying the space internal to the listener rather than external, as Greene argues that the female voice is

recorded “without a sense of the reverberant space in which it is situated”, providing “a very close aural perspective that invites intimacy with the audience”.^[37] This gives Kaji’s voice a profoundly more resonant tone, impacting the audience and making them feel as though her call for feminine vengeance exists within them. Her singing the theme as voiceover represents the fantastical vengeance that frees her voice of bodily constraints, allowing her to live on after death and achieve a transcendent perspective on her world. The compulsion for vengeance that Kaji embodies thus transcends the text to live on sonically far beyond its time.

Kaji’s ‘love song of vengeance’ in these films aptly encapsulates her combination of violence and sentimentality. *Gincho Wataridori / Wandering Ginza Butterfly* (Kazuhiko Yamaguchi, 1972) finds itself situated in this thematic juxtaposition, with love becoming the very source and result of violence. Dressed in a kimono like her *Lady Snowblood* character, yet recently released from prison as though she were a reformed *Female Prisoner Scorpion*, the titular theme song accompanies her train journey back towards civilization in search of a future. The first words she sings are how “for a man I love, I’d give up my life.” No love interest has been established yet, but considering the complete rejection of men in *Female Prisoner Scorpion*, it instantly sets up Kaji as a romantic who by the end will either kill or die for whoever she gives her heart to. Indeed, the song returns to accompany her melancholic walk through the rain after the man she loved is shot and killed, the lyrics pattering down onto the blue and gold neon infused wet ground while Kaji tearfully walks under an umbrella, almost identical to the opening theme song sequence in *Lady Snowblood*; the stark similarities between both shots points to Kaji’s persona prevailing across films, a unified image shaped by studios rather than an actress playing different characters. The combination of romantic singing, dramatic cinematography and silent performance all serve to compel the audience towards anticipating a return to violence, which Kaji’s character sought to free herself from.



FIGURE 5 — Meiko Kaji walking under umbrella in rain/snow, in *Wandering Ginza Butterfly* (1971) (above) © TOEI, and *Lady Snowblood* (1973) (below) © TOHO

Rather than simply bookending the film like in *Lady Snowblood*, the songs in *Wandering Ginza Butterfly* are interlaced throughout the film more akin to *Female Prisoner Scorpion*, to signal the fundamental changes in the central character. Phillip O'Connor compares Kaji's two roles: in *Female Prisoner Scorpion* she "is an instrument of mindless violence that has a purpose to destroy those who imprisoned her", while in *Wandering Ginza Butterfly* she "is an instrument of destruction that is awoken again with terrible purpose because her friends and loved ones are threatened", displaying violence as an expression of love.[38] Ultimately, she massacres the entire gang in a fit of revenge, the song concluding the film as she is arrested by police. O'Connor highlights a "wariness of more bloodshed and violence", with these love songs having consequences beyond her control.[39] Upon ruminating about what tomorrow will bring, she sings how "I've lost everything, I've lost the last hope", so that

despite the triumph of the villains being killed, her voice puts into action the deep moral conundrums that audiences rooting for such violence may try to evade.

Singing as Anarchy

Such violence goes beyond mere individual feuds, with the yakuza-infested urbanity of *Wandering Ginza Butterfly* being built on the back of the Japanese imperialism that pervades the two *Lady Snowblood* films. Kaji's assassination quest to avenge her raped mother happens as a consequence of the radical revolutions that occurred in nineteenth-century Japan as the country propelled itself into the modern world through the Meiji restoration, which as the film itself states, resulted in peasants revolting against the government's attempts to develop their "military power similar to that of foreign superpowers"[40] - ultimately leading to their subjugation after the Second World War. As expressed by the full version of 'Flower of Carnage', "the loyal, invincible and brave" soldiers are sent out to war and "solemnly resolved not to return alive, without victory" - for all the violence implicit in Kaji's revenge-fuelled journey, it pales in comparison to the very real atrocities committed by the government acting in the shadows of the films.

This comes to the forefront in *Lady Snowblood* as a conflict of identity with America. Kaji infiltrates a masquerade ball in pursuit of her final target, where the uncharacteristically gentle Western ballads of high society can be heard playing alongside both a Japanese and American flag hanging on the banister. When Kaji kills the main villain, he tears down the Japanese flag as he falls off the balcony, painting a clear message of Japan's integrity and morality crumbling. The music highlights how this is a Japan obsessed with their place in the world, their rapid importation of "Western technology, industrial practices and military strategy" signifying their increasing betrayal of the country's old way of life as the societal elites sell the people out for the chance to stand next to the Americans.[41] As this is on the eve of the first Sino-Japanese War, Kaji's voice in contrast to the diegetic music implies an anarchic spirit that rejects Japan's ramping imperialism.

There is a politicisation seeping throughout *Lady Snowblood*, with the sinister presence of the Meiji secret police accentuating the anarchist sentiments at the centre of the plot. With *Love Song of Vengeance*, as Kaji's single-minded quest for revenge has been fulfilled, she becomes more aware of the world around her. As said directly in the film, the politics are made more overt, with Kaji becoming swept up into a shadowy war between the secret police and

anarchists, no longer “choosing to ignore the nation’s predicament solely to continue her journey along the road of carnage.” Yet as a result, there is a distinct lack of singing here, Kaji becoming like the ordinary people who are “as voiceless as ever” and fuming in silence, the government seeking “to eliminate insurgents who rebel against the almighty, divine nation that is Japan” proving the complete annihilation of her singing voice. Vengeance comes not in one individual’s hatred of other individuals as a lofty desire to avenge all women, but as a far more profound movement to attain justice against this corrupt and tyrannical authority that is now stripping Kaji herself of her iconic song. She finds herself entering into the company of lowlives that “lived with tenacity and spirit” in a “lawless district”, attempting to inspire an uprising that “will become so uncontrollable that the government will inevitably be crushed.” Anarchy thus defines the very fabric of this film, no longer hidden in visual symbolism or lyrical metaphors, but entirely in the blunt speech of its characters fighting against Japanese imperialism.

Crime festers in the shadow of this imperialism, informing the anarchic spirit and animosity towards authority that pervades the exploitation cinema of the 70s, including *Nora neko rokku / Stray Cat Rock* (Yasuharu Hasebe & Toshiya Fujita, 1970-1971). This series (*Onna banchō / Delinquent Girl Boss*, *Wairudo janbo / Wild Jumbo*, *Sekkusu hantaa / Sex Hunter*, *Mashin animaru / Machine Animal*, *Bôsô shûdan '71 / Beat 71*) portrays modern Japanese society as full of feminine violence and unbridled liberty, with a general malaise enveloping all the characters. Tatsuya Fuji (Kaji’s co-star) asserts that contemporary viewers “can feel the strange power and passion which these films emit”,^[42] with Fuji describing how “most of the time we didn’t have filming permission”, so all the street-level chaos came from a genuinely “feverish” attitude.^[43] These films present a microcosm of their time, featuring “infectiously catchy songs of the 70s” so as to build a sonic space appealing to contemporary audiences, conveying scenes of underground bars imbued with anarchy as distinctly Japanese rock bands play psychedelic and distressing music diegetically to pull the audience further into Japan’s underworld of listless young women stuck in a criminal world.^[44] Within it, Kaji stands as the boss of all women in Tokyo’s nightlife, with Fuji describing her primarily as “fashionable”, typical of a Tokyo city girl with “a very modern sense of beauty and charm.”^[45] Jeff Goodhartz writes about how the director “decked her and the co-stars out in the absolute coolest clothing imaginable”.^[46] It is an image that harkens back to the flapper girls of the 1920s in the West, who likewise found their new urban lifestyles to become the object of interest in the popular cinema of the time.^[47]



FIGURE 6 — Meiko Kaji displaying her “very modern sense of beauty and charm”, in *Stray Cat Rock* (1970), © NIKKATSU

Dominating the music scene portrayed in the *Stray Cat Rock* films is a sense of antagonism towards America. Fuji sheds insight into the social context behind these films, saying that “it was influenced by the conflict over the US/Japan Security Treaty in the 70s”,^[48] which allowed “the United States to maintain military bases on Japanese soil” and led to widespread protests against American presence in Japan.^[49] These protests began in the 1960s, inspiring the chaotic ambience that Yasuharu Hasebe and Toshiya Fujita would imbue into the social climate of these five films, themselves releasing to a resurgence of such sentiments. Such a political rift was exacerbated by the failed coup attempt on 25th November 1970 by Yukio Mishima, a famous writer in Japan who became angered by America’s control of his country. He attempted to lead a right-wing militia to restore the “political power to the emperor and to the Japanese military”,^[49] a political undercurrent that ravaged Japan at the time, as seen in the harrowing lynchings of ‘mixed-race’ Japanese in *Sex Hunter*. On the one hand, *Wild Jumbo* sees Americans as easy pickings: Kaji and Fuji help American tourists take a photo, before Kaji steals an extortionate tip - the tourist’s disbelief is comedically subdued by Fuji’s “no... yes”, emulating Jean-Paul Belmondo’s “oh yeah” in *Pierrot Le Fou* (Jean-luc Godard 1965). On the other hand, *Sex Hunter* shows America as violating Japan’s sovereignty, with the gang

emerging from a bar whose sign states “Welcome Americans... Japanese people welcome too”, displaying them as inferior in their own country. Later on, wealthy Americans attempt to force themselves onto the all-female Japanese gang after they’ve been sold out by the male rival gang, but are stopped by Kaji breaking in just in time with an arsenal of Coca Cola bottles fashioned into Molotov cocktails, burning the party to the ground with this epitome of American consumerism. *Stray Cat Rock* is thus concerned “with the strength and rebellion of youngsters against that background”, disenfranchised by the post-war attitudes of a Japan suffocating under America's influence and the ensuing chaos of reactionaries vying for their former glory.[50]



FIGURE 7 — Meiko Kaji walking out of “Welcome Americans” bar (above) and burning Coca Cola bottles (below), in *Sex Hunter* (1970), © NIKKATSU

Despite being set a century later, *Stray Cat Rock* echoes the similar sentiments found in *Lady Snowblood*, marking Kaji’s career in gang warfare and feminine vengeance as fundamentally rooted in the narratives of political injustice that have defined Japan’s identity

in the twentieth-century. This becomes amplified when Rikiya Yasuoka sings as he enters *Sex Hunter*. Kaji had just had to fend off the male gang, but the male lead simply sings a love song, titled 'Kinji rareta ichiya / Forbidden Night'. The politics keeping the characters constantly on edge is undercut by this romanticism, becoming a song they sing together at the end on the eve of their shootout with the gang. "We both devoured the short time we had" brings an emotiveness to their tragedy, retroactively turning the entire narrative - otherwise concerned with the racial tensions they have had to suffer - into a romance between these two characters fated to die. As the song he sang when they first met, the lyrics suddenly become pertinent to their current predicament, as "our night together will soon be over" - as the sun comes out, so do the bullets start firing. Although not concerned with vengeance, it shows how Kaji's love songs are steeped in an anarchic rejection of the politics dominating the film - be it secret police and imperialism, or gangs and racism - with these beautiful moments of song putting an end to the violence.

A Voice for Peace

Song as the antidote to violence can be seen through a comparison between Kaji and Pam Grier. Also a female icon of vengeance in 1970s exploitation cinema, Grier was the "Queen of Blaxploitation".[51] Brian Greene writes about Kaji as "Japan's answer to Pam Grier",[52] with Schubart calling them both "queen[s] of cult cinema and erotic bloodshed".[53] Singing plays a strong role in Grier's films, having sung 'Long Time Woman' for *The Big Doll House* (Jack Hill, 1971), reprised in *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997).[54] However, 'Coffy Baby', the theme song to *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973), is not sung by Grier (that honour goes to Denise Bridgewater), and so does not feel like it emanates from the character, focusing on her appearance rather than building up her need for vengeance as with Kaji: "sweet as a chocolate bar" and "rare black pearl" do little to express Grier's feelings as she prepares her gun by sticking it into a stuffed animal. Despite exploring similar themes inside a similar type of cinema, their characterisation is quite different, because while Kaji is iconic for her silence, Grier speaks a lot, callous and cruel with plenty of mean one-liners.[55] For example, Grier's first kill in *Coffy* has her bluntly state "this is the end of your rotten life, you motherfuckin' dope pusher" right before pulling the trigger and blowing his head off - the kind of unnuanced line that Kaji worked hard to entirely eliminate from her own scripts, as it gives unnecessary aggression to a scene when the shotgun was all that was needed. Due to Grier's performance not achieving Kaji's level of tonal juxtaposition, the anger is communicated bluntly through

the voice, which leaves the music feeling superfluous, as everything is understood plainly. This contrasts with Kaji, who leaves the rage to be felt by her piercing eyes, making her singing uniquely effective as the tension is released ethereally rather than tangibly, transcending the brutal violence towards a more spiritual consolidation of vengeance. Thus, although Kaji fills a similar role as Grier, her voice exhibits a distinctly different quality that gives increased nuance to the violence she sings of, highlighting a paradox between the immorality of violence and the desire to empower women.



FIGURE 8 — Pam Grier with shotgun in *Coffy* (1973) (above) © AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURES, and Meiko Kaji with dagger in *Lady Snowblood* (1973) (below) © TOHO

Kaidan nobori ryū / Blind Woman's Curse (Teruo Ishii, 1970) exemplifies this ethical struggle. It is the first time Kaji was in the lead role, and as O'Connor writes, "[she] bolts you to the ground with a completely toned, even, passionate and electric performance."^[56] As a leader of a clan with dragon tattoos, when she accidentally blinds another woman with her sword, it leaves Kaji traumatised - and when a cat licks at the blood, she becomes literally

cursed. Already, *Blind Woman's Curse* seems to be arguing against the use of violence, with the villain being the one seeking vengeance rather than the hero, entirely flipping the genre conventions on its head. In the final battle, Kaji is sliced across the back, which cuts out the eyes of her dragon tattoo; symbolically removing reliance on sight and inviting the audience to understand the story through hearing. After making amends with the woman who had placed a curse upon her, they end the fight with mutual respect, whereupon Kaji sings 'Jingi Komori Uta / Lullaby of Honour' (her very first musical release) as the final words of the film, making for a powerful ending as she chants "the dragon launches itself to fight for justice.". It leaves the film with a lingering desire for violence, as neither the protagonist nor antagonist met their demise, so the audience has been deprived of such catharsis. It is this musical element that gives the film the emotional weight required to fully punch the message into the audience, who otherwise would have just been left desiring more bloodshed. Through the song and the recurring dragon motif, a new resolution is crafted, disowning the use of violence to resolve matters of justice.



FIGURE 9 — Meiko Kaji regretting her violent actions (above), and with dragon eyes slashed out (below), in *Blind Woman's Curse* (1970), © NIKKATSU

This suggests a problem in the method of production in the Japanese film industry of the 1970s, considering their simultaneous profiting from and disownment of violence. While the American 1960s counterculture paved the way for the dismantling of the Hollywood studio system for the new era of independent productions that Grier found herself in,[57] studios became more powerful in Japan as they co-opted the sentiments of the time, engineering a stronger cinematic culture to stand against their American contemporaries.[58] These were not independent filmmakers tapping into the taboo tastes of an underground audience; they were

studio-mandated products being churned out for a profit. The studios gravitated towards ‘pinkie violence’ to “survive the financial crisis that swept the industry”[59] - an extreme form of grindhouse cinema with explicit sexual violence, creating a toxic environment for Kaji, whose body and voice were exploited.[60] Kaji’s vocal and visual image became the property of the male-dominated studios she worked under, moulded by their idea of what would make her popular.[61] As she states, “it was a company policy to make an actress into her own image, to aim in the direction each actress seemed to naturally be heading.”[62] Although Kaji’s ability to combine vengeful violence and singing forged her career, her singing of vengeance was restricted in an environment “corrupted by studio politics”, for “once they get a certain image of you, they don’t want anything different”.[63]

In an interview with Chris Desjardins, Kaji expressed gratitude for being “well received as an ‘outlaw’ character”, but resented that it caused her to be “pigeon-holed into a certain type of role”, ultimately pleased that she was in the last generation of actors who had to suffer such a fate.[64] It was a fate shared by Grier, the source of their success pushing them both towards obscurity. After reaching her peak in 1974, Kaji decided to transition to smaller acting roles, with a focus on television. Still content with ‘samurai’ period pieces, she took further her experience acting alongside Toshiro Mifune in *Kōya no surōnin / Ronin of the Wilderness* (Eiichi Kudo, Tokuzō Tanaka, Kazuo Ikehiro, 1972-1974) by spending the rest of the century mostly in shows like *Onihei Hankachō / Onihei Crime Book* (Masahiro Takase, Yoshiki Onoda, 1989-2001). Winning awards for her performance in *Sonezaki Shinjū / Double Suicide of Sonezaki* (Yasuzo Masumura, 1978)[65] - where the only violence she inflicts is on herself - she found this more rewarding than her “tailor-made star vehicles”.[66] Additionally, when not acting, she focused on her singing career, unbinding her voice from the violent films she sought to escape from by creating love songs that could exist independently.

Now an old woman, *Subarashiki Sekai / Under the Open Sky* (Miwa Nishikawa, 2020) represents her full transformation, rejecting violence in its entirety as her singing has nothing to do with vengeance. Here, she is playing a minor role as a kind, elderly lady trying to help an ex-yakuza member (played by Koji Yakuzo) who has just been released from prison, “a pariah whose soul is crushed by systemic discrimination and a world of hypocritical conformity.”[67] Celebrating his full integration back into peaceful society, towards the end of the film she sings with no calls for violence; it is to congratulate him getting his first proper job, singing about the stars wishing him happiness. She is fully outside her popular image now, disowning her

previous anarchist spirit as she fully embraces a conventional life inside society: like the ex-yakuza desperately trying to leave his old ways behind him, so does she seem to be trying to escape her image as an icon of feminine vengeance towards her more authentic, loving self. Although in the film there is a glimpse at the glamour of the yakuza life when the protagonist is temporarily tempted to return, upon further inspection that entire world is crumbling in the face of Japan's new order.[68] Kaji's voice dies down as applause erupts, the first time the diegesis has given a proper reaction to her singing, as though the film characters themselves are applauding the actress for the completion of her redemption and the release of her need for vengeance.



FIGURE 10 — Meiko Kaji singing, in *Under the Open Sky* (2020), © WARNER BROS. JAPAN LLC

Conclusion

The Japanese exploitation cinema Kaji made her name in is now largely relegated to the past, a movement that began and ended in that very specific, localised moment of history. Yasuharu Hasebe, who directed Kaji in *Female Prisoner Scorpion*, believed “that films belong to their own eras”, which is why he thought that what he made could never last beyond a week.[69] But through Kaji they have, her songs keeping this period of Japanese exploitation cinema alive. For instance, Quentin Tarantino grew up on international exploitation films and was eager to pay homage within his own filmmaking.[70] Kaji's singing influenced the aesthetic of *Kill Bill* (2003-2004), as Lucy Liu's character is directly modelled on *Lady Snowblood*, with ‘Flower

of *Carnage*’ and *My Grudge Blues*’ playing in both films.[71] Kaji’s spirit of feminine vengeance manifests itself within the film to bring further eloquence to the already poignant drama and action, simply through use of her songs. As Martijn Huisman elaborates, it led “to an international revival of interest in the career and work of Meiko Kaji”, as by hearing her ghost in the lyrics, listeners were compelled to discover their origin.[72] Therefore, there is a timeless factor to her songs, the themes of feminine vengeance remaining ever pertinent for its listeners and connecting all her roles together.

Music is an effective gateway into understanding certain cinematic movements, with Meiko Kaji’s singing bringing to life the beauty and dangers of Japanese exploitation cinema in the 1970s. Her performances embodied the anarchic spirit of the time, her sense of urban femininity combining with theme songs to amplify the societal conflicts she herself experienced, fighting for women’s liberation in an environment dominated by patriarchal studios. By singing about feminine vengeance so profoundly, she gave a voice to silenced characters, highlighting the violence against women plaguing society and thus touching audiences across time and cultures. But Kaji’s singing of vengeance itself reveals the systematised problem of her work environment and her rejection of the image associated with her. Thus, singing becomes the means by which she can escape this fate of endless, exploitative violence, creating a female hero who goes beyond mere vengeance.

[1] Weisser (2001), 'Japanese Fighting Divas 101', p.45-46

[2] Ibid. p.52

[3] Treglia (2022), 'Figuring Female Resentment in Japanese 1970s Grindhouse Cinema', p.51

[4] Weisser (2001), p.49

[5] Huisman (2017), *Flower of Carnage: The Revenge Films of Meiko Kaji*, p.3

[6] Kozma (2011), 'Pinky Violence', p.38

[7] Schubart (2014), *The Female Hero in Popular Cinema*, pp.107-108

[8] O'Connor (2014), 'Blind Woman's Curse'

[9] Weisser (2001), p.50

[10] Fuji (2006), interview

[11] Schubart (2014), p.119

[12] Evans (2015), interview

[13] Mes (2017), *Unchained Melody*, video

[14] Williams (2000), 'Addendum', p.60

[15] Beck (2008), 'The Sounds of Silence', p.81

[16] Coulthard (2016), 'Acoustic Disgust', p.185

[17] Weisser (2001), p.52

[18] Schubart (2014), p.108

[19] Huisman (2017), p.11

[20] Mes (2017)

[21] Chion (1999), 'Raising the Voice', p.5

[22] Desjardins (2005), *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film*, p.65

[23] Weisser (2001), p.50

[24] Bronski (1978), 'Judy Garland and Others', p.202

[25] Feld (2015), 'Acoustemology', p.13-14

[26] Greene (2009), 'Speaking, Singing, Screaming', p.63

[27] Kozma (2011), p.38

[28] Galbraith & Duncan (2009), *Japanese Cinema*, p.114

[29] Treglia (2022), p.51

[30] Ibid. pp.63-64

[31] Schubert (2014), p.44

[32] Ito (2006), interview

[33] Hampton (2016), 'The Complete Lady Snowblood'

[34] Coulthard (2016), p.184

[35] Ibid., p.185

[36] Chion (1999), p.9

[37] Green (2009), p.64

[38] O'Connor (2015), 'Wandering Ginza Butterfly',

[39] Ibid.

[40] *Lady Snowblood, Extras: History*

[41] Ibid.

[42] Fuji (2006)

- [43] Ibid.
- [44] Dang (2020), 'Stray Cat Rock: A Groovy Retrospective'
- [45] Fuji (2006)
- [46] Goodhart (2000), 'Asia's Greatest Action Divas', p.62
- [47] Mulvey (2023), 'Flappers on film'
- [48] Fuji (2006)
- [49] Kapur (2018), *Japan at the Crossroads*, p.1
- [50] Cather (2021), 'Japan's most famous writer committed suicide after a failed coup attempt'
- [51] Fuji (2006)
- [52] Schubart (2014), p.41
- [53] Greene (2016), 'Meiko Kaji'
- [54] Schubart (2014), p.107
- [55] Ibid. p.43
- [56] Ibid. p.42
- [57] O'Connor (2014)
- [58] Cook (1998), 'Auteur Cinema and the film generation in 70s Hollywood', pp.1-4
- [59] Criterion, 'Eclipse Series 17: Nikkatsu Noir'
- [60] Treglia (2022), p.52
- [61] Fischer (2012), *The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan*, p.123
- [62] Desjardins (2005), p.62,68
- [63] Ibid. p.72

[64] Ibid. p.66

[65] Huisman (2017), p.21,24

[66] Mes (2017)

[67] Lee (2020), 'Under the Open Sky'

[68] Kao (2021), 'Under the Open Sky'

[69] Hasebe (2006), interview

[70] Steve Rose (2004), 'Where Tarantino gets his ideas'

[71] Huisman (2017), p.22

[72] Ibid., p.11

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