

A RARE ORIGINAL AMIDST A SEA OF ADAPTATION AND IMITATION. SONO SION HAS CARVED A STRANGELY IMAGINATIVE CINEMATIC PATH

By Maggie Lee

Though his name is not unheard of in film circles, and most of his works have been quietly showcased at festivals, Sono Sion has somehow never made an impact like his contemporary Kore-eda Hirokazu, or the younger Yamashita Nobuhiro, in spite of a distinctive vision and prolific output.

Born in Aichi in 1961, Sono was a published poet at 17, but got his film break through the PIA film festival. Shorts *Ore wa Sono Sion da!* (1985) and *Otoko no hanamichi* (1987), both in competition, led to a Grand Prize, then a PIA fellowship, with which he made debut feature *Bicycle Sighs* (1990). A masterpiece of visual composition and existential *l'ennui*, his next film, *The Room* (1992) traveled to almost 50 festivals.

Sono radically changed course in his career from experimental films to mainstream fare like *Jisatsu saakuru (Suicide Club)* (2002) or *Hazard* (2003), *Kikyuu kurabu, sonogo* (2006), but his thematic diversity and idiosyncrasy, and tendency to go off on tangents make him both refreshing and frustratingly hard to pin down. In an industry where Japanese directors habitually opt for the safe bet of manga and bestseller adaptations, Sono is one of the very few who always writes his own screenplays, and sometimes even the music and lyrics.

David Lynch, whom Sono admires, is perhaps a good Western equivalent to characterise his plumbing of the troubled psyche and the dark underbelly of Japan's squeaky-clean social surfaces. He has a nihilistic vision, and recurring fascination with death. As with Lynch, there are overlapping narratives, and parallel or converging worlds, between reality and fiction. *Utsushimi* (2000) is an intriguing hybrid of fiction and documentary about two different stages and two merging artistic visions – *butoh* and the catwalk. *Bicycle Sighs* conjoins the attempt of an amateur filmmaker and his often mysteriously absent friend, with the SFX fantasy film-within-a-film world of a transparent superhero. *Into a Dream* (2005) juggles three imaginary worlds – all featuring the same characters in different roles and backgrounds, but acting out the same personalities and mannerisms, and sharing a common anxiety about sexually transmitted diseases. The question is, who is in whose dream? Which world is illusion, which one is real?

In *Strange Circus* (2005), actress Masumi Miyazaki makes a comeback playing four roles – all possibly figments of each other's febrile imaginations. A stylized blend of Electra-complex erotica and Victorian Gothic horror, it won accolades at Montreal Fantastic Film Festival.

Sono has a spot-on understanding of teenage mentality. His exploration of their alienation, spiritual void and pent-up anger is always sympathetic, distinct from the patronising or prurient perspectives of so many Japanese 'Youth' films. *Suicide Club* (2002), despite its morbid and sensational subject of 54 schoolgirls jumping off the rail track in unison, is a pertinent comment on teenage peer-pressure and on Japan's consumerist culture, which eroticizes children and infantilizes adults.



Made four years ago but theatrically released in November 2006, *Hazard* again exposes the mental sluggishness of Japan's youth, through the rite de passage of a timid and square college student (Joe Odagiri) who goes to New York in search of adventure.

Noriko's Dining Table (2005), billed as a sequel to *Suicide Club*, has an equally tabloid (real life inspired) subject– the rental family. Eschewing most of the gore of *Suicide Club*, it is no less violent, or powerful, in the merciless way family and social relations are exposed as a façade and self-comforting lie. That Noriko becomes carried away posing as a strangers' daughter accentuates, by contrast, how she can only communicate with her real father as a client, and throws into relief the artificial nature of the family construct and her father's grating exhortations for her to "be happy". While *Suicide Club* represented a social phenomenon, the 'sequel' actually delves into the background and motives that led to such nihilism.

Kikyuu kurabu, sonogo (2006), his latest film again centres on youth, but possibly marks a new direction and outlook. The protagonists are ex-members of a balloon club, reuniting for a night of reckoning. The balloon used for filming belongs to Sono. "It's a been tied to my roof for years, and I never got round to riding in it. It's a symbol of my youth, and unfulfilled aspirations." Nevertheless, he wants to make a film that commemorates this period.

His next project returns to his familiar turf of the macabre and mysterious. *EXTE*, a horror film about hair extensions that carry a curse from the original owner. Hopefully, it will turn the genre conventions of the dark, but now stagnant waters of J-Horror on its head.

As well as being a filmmaker, Sono is still active as a poet and performer. With his group TokyoGAGAGA he is known for organising guerrilla street performances/political protest actions, for more details on this and his films see www.sonosion.com. *Suicide Club* with English subtitles is available as a Region 1 DVD from the usual online retailers.

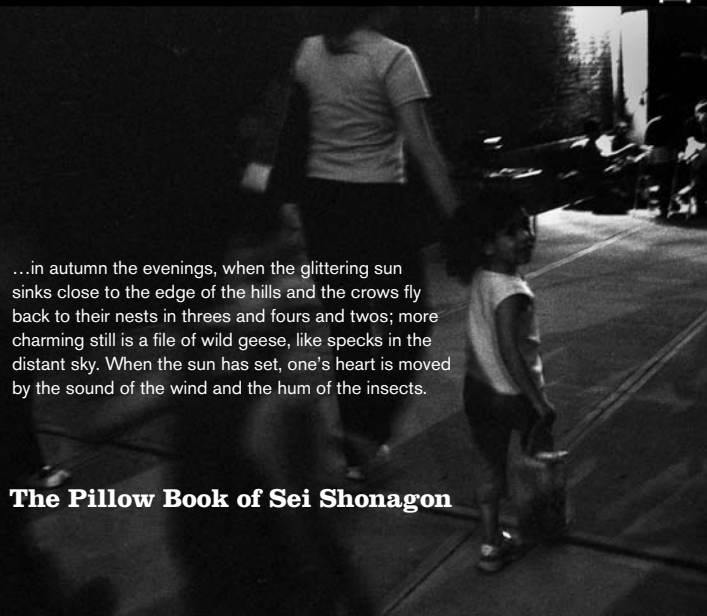
1. Sono Sion
2, 3. *Into a Dream*, 2005
4. *Noriko's Dining Table*, 2005

THE DARK POET

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE AMATEUR AND THE PROFESSIONAL [IN FILMMAKING] IS LIKE THAT BETWEEN LOVE AND PROSTITUTION... I WANT TO KEEP BOTH THE PASSION AND THE PROFESSIONALISM IN EQUILIBRIUM.
SONO SHION, *ORE TO EIGA (ME AND FILM)*



FROM THE FLOATING WORLD 四



...in autumn the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wild geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the sun has set, one's heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon