

TOKYO PORN WARNING

Shu Lea Cheang Feature

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In *Blade Runner*, The Tyrell Corporation bio-engineered a strain of cyborg slaves called replicants that were declared illegal on Earth and marked for death by special police squads. This was not called execution, you may recall. It was called retirement. In *IKU*, a freaky Japanese digital cyberporn which will make its debut UK debut at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in December, a shadowy enterprise called the Genom Corporation bioengineers a strain of replicants who collect orgasm data by fucking as many people as possible so that the information can be sold as microchips in vending machines on the street. This is not called love, goes *IKU's* portentous slogan. This is called sex.

The brainchild of Japanese indie film producer Asai Takashi (whose Uplink production house co-financed four Derek Jarman films) and Taiwanese-born visual artist and digital drifter Shu Lea Cheang, *IKU* was shot for the renegade price of half a million US dollars on Canon SL digital equipment and edited on a desktop computer using a software program called Premiere. Forget the cheesy Seventies hardcore like *Deep Throat* and *Debbie Does Dallas*, now being repackaged and reappraised in the light of Britain's liberalized pornography laws. Forget gonzo porn by the likes of (ahem) Seymour Butts, or the arty French hardcore of a *Romance*. *IKU* (the term 'iku,' often uttered at the moment of orgasm, is Japanese for 'I'm coming!') comes from the twin traditions of Japanese trash culture and New York underground art, delving into each for a unique and deeply alien vision of futuristic sex.

It also bears the noble distinction of being the first pornographic film to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, where its midnight screening in January sent festival-goers fleeing in droves from the Egyptian Theater in Park City, Utah. In the years since the early Eighties, when VCR fundamentally changed the porn film market, no one has debuted an 'adult' movie on the big screen, much less in America's most morally rigid state. The film also courted controversy at festivals in New York, Berlin and Copenhagen, while it made headlines in China after Cheang presented it at a bookstore in Taipei. So what's all the fuss about?

With its cartoonish sex scenes, ridiculous outfits, discombobulated plot, low-budget special effects and cheesy pop score, some critics have dismissed *IKU* as Pizzicato porn — either that or the second coming of the 1982 cult sci-fi curiosity *Liquid Sky* (once described as 'Close Encounters for acid casualties'). It's hard not to laugh out loud when a female-to-male transsexual character in *IKU* develops a virtual penis on the end of her hand and proceeds to vaginally fist her partner as the production morphs into a virtually composed 'cunt-cam' sequence depicting penetration as viewed from the inside out.

Virtual reality-driven porn acrobatics and a slew of rather flaccid erections aside, it's this intersection between sex and technology that lends *IKU* its groundbreaking pedigree — and not just as pornography. *IKU* is one long, lavish visual metaphor for the sexual freedoms afforded

by the Internet; fantasies you can indulge with others regardless of gender, social constraints or even physical possibility. People with hyperlink attention spans won't be able to take their eyes off Cheang's artfully composed couplings and triplings of gay, straight and transsexual performers who interface in *IKU*'s low-budget, neon-lit nightworld in every conceivable sexual permutation. Two guys go at it in the front seat of a car; an orgy erupts in a Tokyo strip club; two women frolic amid a sea of inflatable sex dolls; data hunter protagonist Reiko (played by Japanese erotic film star Tokito Ayumu) gets fingered in an elevator by a female-to-male transsexual played by Zachary Nataf, the Amsterdam transplant responsible for London's Transgender Film Festival; a rope artist ties up our randy heroine before she gets fucked.

In Japan, sex roles are so rigidly defined that you'd never see gay and straight scenes in the same adult movie, never mind that censorship requires penetration, genitals and even pubic hair, to be blocked by a digitally inserted mosaic effect. "Unfortunately, Japanese audiences never get to see pussy and penis on the screen," explains Takashi, who plans to release a censored version of the film in Japan early next year. "In Japan, we've learned to get off on the mosaic image itself." The message in *IKU* is that sexuality has no boundaries in the cyber realm. Ladies and gentlemen, we are fucking in space.

Takashi commissioned web-based artist Cheang to write and direct *IKU* after viewing her 1994 cult obscurity *Fresh Kill* (partly funded by Channel Four), a film about a lesbian couple who thwart a contaminated sushi conspiracy unleashed on New York City by a corrupt multinational corporation. Already a noted figure on the international art scene, Cheang garnered acclaim for her 1999 Guggenheim Museum Web installation entitled *Brandon*, which New York paper *The Village Voice* called "the inaugural piece in the canon of online art." A full year before the film *Boys Don't Cry*, it explored the story of Brandon Teena, the cross-dressing young Nebraskan lesbian who was brutally raped and killed at the hands of her lover's redneck relatives. Anticipating *IKU*, *Brandon* celebrates the web as the ultimate safe place, where gender can be explored and recreated without fear of persecution or violence. Visitors to the Guggenheim site can peer at images of tattooed bodies, pierced nipples and dissected penises, discovering along the way what it means to construct alternative identities or digi-genders.

Cheang's most recent installation, at a gallery in Harlem called *The Project*, was a series of Duchamp-inspired urinals attached to Sony CPJ-200 projectors that pumped in footage of puckering assholes onto the toilet drains. Her modus operandi seems to be locating the middle ground between technology and pornography, virtual and actual. She claims to physically live on the net, fiber-optically dodging in and out of virtual communities as she surfs from project to project. Right now, a Hotmail account is her only fixed address.

Asai Takashi, for his part, envisioned a project that would help demystify overseas perceptions of Japanese popular culture. "I wanted to produce a hip, cool film for an international audience that didn't rely on mainstream images of Japan, including Sony, Honda or Geisha girls," Takashi explains from his Tokyo production office. "What's popular about Japan around the world is its subcultures: animé, manga, video games, techno music ... I wanted to mix all of those up in a futuristic sex movie that reflected the true image of Japan — not unlike the version that Ridley Scott showed in the downtown sequences of *Blade Runner*."

“Takashi gave me the idea to use *Blade Runner* as a launch pad for my ideas,” explains Cheang, on the phone from Sicily, where she will design a guest room in a themed hotel after she finishes directing another sci-fi porn — this time in the more sexually tolerant climes of Denmark. “I realized there was this unfulfilled tension between the Rachael and Deckard characters and I thought it would be interesting to continue with the elevator scene that closes *Blade Runner*. I copied a line of dialogue — ‘Do you love me? I love you. Do you trust me? I trust you.’” The pair then rapidly get down to business. “I was also interested in *Blade Runner*’s examination of corporations and replicants ... how we live within or learn to get around that sort of system or structure. I have this whole theory that a replicant’s body is a hard drive ... and the pussy is the matrix.”

You most definitely have to be in the right mood for the result: like most porn films, there isn’t a lot of plot. But whether you believe *IKU* to be the ultimate cross-gender future fuck or a boring, badly acted load of old cobblers, it undoubtedly represents another type of matrix, a place where art and kitsch, live action and animé, even Eastern and Western cultural traditions are all grist to the mill of a common, uniting interest: sex. Where mainstream culture borrows prodigiously from porn (advertising, fashion, men’s magazines), *IKU* steals it back, unapologetic about its pilfering or its status as pornography. And while the porn biz has long aped mainstream motion pictures — *Face Jam*, *The Sperminator*, *IR4: Inrearendence Day* and so on — *IKU*’s technical and conceptual virtuosity lifts it far beyond sci-fi parody.

Cheang is already at work on her next film, a digital hardcore techno-porn film produced under a division of Lars Von Trier’s Zentropa empire called Pussy Power. Entitled *Fluid*, it continues to explore the possibility of public sex and the exchange of bodily fluids within a cyberporn construct, serving up another outrageous plot involving an AIDS virus mutation that yields a strain of psychoactive semen — that’s right, sperm that gets you high. “One thing I never managed to pull off in the last movie was the money shot,” Cheang sighs. “I got away with a really simple cum-shot in *IKU*, but I want an explosion the next time around. I want it to shoot all over the place.”