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## END OF A CENTURY: AN INTRODUCTION TO *LOVE & POP* ALEXANDER FEE

*"Fingers like that deserve a topaz."*

—Ryu Murakami, *Topaz*

Capturing a teenager's inner vulnerability through its mile-a-minute traversal of Shibuya-ku and continuous transference of perspective—inventively mixing CRT screens, the convex of a fish-eye lens and POV shots—*Love & Pop* can be seen chiefly as a young girl's fantasy, fixated on the allure of an imperial topaz ring. Adapted from a novel by Ryu Murakami, an *enfant terrible* of transgressive literature and author of *Audition*, *Coin Locker Babies* and *In the Miso Soup*, *Love & Pop* is in fact, a sequel of sorts—its source material designated by an accompanying subtitle: *Love & Pop: Topaz 2* (1996). The book's predecessor, a short story entitled *Topaz* (1988), concerns a S&M prostitute and her schoolgirl crush on a famous musician—a "real artist" she insists—as she fantasizes about being his mistress, going so far as to purchase a topaz ring that he, in her imagined fantasy, "recommended." Misplacing the ring after a degrading session with a client, the fleeting comfort of her fantasy collapses into loneliness. Murakami adapted his story (with some changes) in 1992 as his dark, murky feature *Tokyo Decadence*. The thematic throughlines of *Topaz* and *Love & Pop* are the dreams of its young women, reflected within the rosy depths of a gemstone. What is the promise of an imperial topaz?

By the mid-nineties, well into the economic atrophy of the bubble burst, *enjo kosai* or compensated dating had incited moral panic; the activities of young girls during work hours, often dressed in *ko gyaru* fashion—loose, ankle-high socks, short skirts and school uniforms—had become a signifier of society's decline. Yet while

*enjo kosai* has now become synonymous with prostitution, it started, according to the founder of *egg* magazine—a revolutionary '90s *gyaru* publication—as “playing with and lowkey controlling men.” *Gyaru* itself was a reaction to expectations on how Japanese women should look and act, a rebellion against suffocating social pressures. The sensationalization of *enjo kosai* sparked pearl-clutching and outcry for the future of these young girls, and media outlets exaggerated stories of prostitution, furthering *gyaru*'s association with sex work and corrupted youth.

Originally planned for a late-night slot on TV until he grasped the extent of production costs needed to realize his vision, Anno's live-action debut employs the use of consumer-grade cameras during most of its runtime (the exception being a final sequence shot on 35mm), facilitating its constant invention of unique compositions and shots, oftentimes having actors record their “real” actions. Through its use of inner monologues and existential meditations, *Love & Pop* lends itself to comparison with Anno's *Evangelion*, applying themes he explored in the series—self-worth, isolation, loneliness, ennui—into contemporary Tokyo. Anno, however, would take exception, stating, “This is not *Evangelion Part II*,” and going so far as to remove the opening line of *Love & Pop*'s shooting script, “How disgusting,” a callback to the final line spoken in *The End of Evangelion* (1997). Perhaps no more than a playful reference, the events of *Love & Pop* were also set on July 19, 1997—the day *End of Evangelion* was released in theaters.

*Love & Pop* opens with Hiromi (Asumi Miwa) examining her outstretched, bare fingers. Adopting the turn of the century's materialism as they tour Shibuya's casual hangouts, idolizing brand names and flip phones, Hiromi and her friends earn quick cash by engaging in *enjo kosai*, often for their own amusement. The dream of the imperial topaz motivates a darker confrontation with the practice of *enjo kosai*, one which brings into question their casual ethos in entertaining the perversions of older men. Anno characterized it as older men seeking the “energy”—now extinguished within them—in young girls, remarking, “There's no energy left in Japan.” As Hiromi wears the topaz,

she poeticizes the experience, comparing it to the intimacy of a first kiss or one's first time. The film's interspersed quiet moments of introspection and lyricism reveal the profound complexities of girlhood, immersing viewers fully into the psychology of a young teen girl. And it calls into question the cost of these experiences as Hiromi descends down this more disturbing backroad, engaging in the fantasies of others while in pursuit of her own.











## IN *LOVE & POP*, HIDEAKI ANNO'S STYLE COMES OF AGE KAMBOLE CAMPBELL



For those only familiar with Hideaki Anno through his famous animation work like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Love & Pop* is like a skeleton key to his work as a live-action filmmaker. The 1998 experiment with digital handheld was his live-action debut, becoming part of a lineage that now includes acclaimed *tokusatsu* films like *Shin Godzilla*.

To rewind a little bit: Hideaki Anno is a co-founder of the studio Gainax, which was established after his famous work on Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, alongside friends and creative collaborators such as Shinji Higuchi, who also worked on *Love & Pop* and would later be his co-director on *Shin Godzilla* (and after that, directed the Anno-penned *Shin Ultraman*). After working as animation director on *Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honnemaïse*, Anno directed a number of projects including *Gunbuster* and then the *Evangelion* series and its feature film finale, *The End of Evangelion*. In 2006, Anno left to found the studio khara, which produced the *Rebuild of Evangelion* film series. So up to the point when *Love & Pop* was released, Anno's work had primarily been in animation, though he had flirted with live-action filmmaking through short films made as a student. Filmed in the summer of 1997, following the release of *The End of Evangelion* that same year, *Love & Pop* is shot with a wild creative verve. Through this film, Anno synthesises the visual language he developed as a director of animation into a bold and idiosyncratic style, one which would inform all of his work following, in both mediums.

The film mainly follows the teenager Hiromi (Asumi Miwa) as she saves up for a ring to buy before the store closes, tongue-in-cheek intertitles track her monetary progress as she races to accumulate the required amount. The fastest route she sees



available to her is through *enjo kosai*, or compensated dating, something her friends Nao, Chieko and Chisa are also doing to make some quick cash. The term *enjo kosai* is broad but often connotes a younger woman—as young as high school age, as depicted in the film—and an older man. The services paid for can be something as simple as going to karaoke with a customer or talking to them on the phone. But, as depicted in the film, there are often more perverse requests involved, many of which overlap with sex work as it's more commonly understood. Such moments come as a shock to the teenage heroines as well as the audience, the exploitative nature of these transactions made plain to see. The film's most unsettling moments occur when this line is crossed, usually unwillingly, such as in the aforementioned karaoke session turning into a request for Hiromi and her friends to chew some grapes and give them back, so the man can sell them on.

Despite the film's narrative being technically much smaller scale than his animated work—following the misadventures of four high school girls over a single day in July 1997—Anno makes it feel expansive by examining it from every visual angle possible. From inside a microwave, from a first-person perspective, from the perspective of a sweater being pulled over the wearer's head—the film's high ambitions for the digital camcorder are made perfectly,



immediately clear amidst this disorientation. The format of digital video feels chosen for its sense of spontaneity, that we're being dropped directly into a real life and being carried along. This unconventional style was also chosen for a natural feeling but also expressive viewpoint on delicate subject matter, the desaturated imagery situates the film in the real world, while embodying how Hiromi and her friends see it.

This wild approach to cinematography is anchored by a number of Anno's familiar stylistic tics. Classical piano pieces play over narration, title cards act as part of the visual language and represent dialogue. The film's opening shot from below the water recalls similar shots in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (both Shinji and Rei are frequently shown in a similar state), the main character dreaming of herself in suspension below the surface.

With its contemporary setting in 1997 Japan, in the midst of its "Lost Decade", Anno's live action debut is colored with the fatalism and cynicism of a generation growing up in a time where the economic bubble of the 80s has burst. In *Evangelion*, this is embodied by the younger members of its cast of characters being surrounded by the literal apocalypse, living in a hollowed-out shell of Tokyo. In *Love & Pop* this doomed feeling is more ambient as its characters roam the commercial hub of Shibuya. They still

feel like they have no future, they're constantly aware of and disgusted by the male gaze on them—so they figure why not use it for their own gain? Hiromi's narration betrays a fatalistic perspective of the world, cynical and wary of its repetitions and patterns, feeling that things are designed to be ephemeral (which is why she takes so many film photos, a sense of permanent record amidst all of these things fading). The roaming camerawork highlights vulnerability, while the narrative resists talking down to or scolding its own characters. They're not unaware of this exploitation, but their surroundings offer few better alternatives to enjoy the luxuries they've been conditioned to want.

A two-part "making of" documentary about *Love & Pop*, included with the Japanese release of the film, affirms this connection between *Love & Pop* and Anno's animation—how could they not be connected, given that *Love & Pop* began filming just a few months after *Evangelion's* theatrical release. The documentaries themselves are incredibly tongue-in-cheek (one crew member says "we were left confused by Anno's thought process" over footage of him bungee jumping), with a vaguely fictitious spin on the production: the first part is told from the perspective of a camera assistant who stole the film reel containing the film's original ending, set on an island. But there's some kernels of truth that appear amidst the short doc's meta-jokes, about the film's rather spontaneous creative process as well as its roots.

Higuchi speaks candidly about the origins of the film's use of handheld cameras. In short, it's because Anno wanted the project to resemble a documentary, and the rawness of the film's camcorder imagery is done so to try and reflect reality, resisting building any kind of allure around compensated dating. Higuchi says that Anno originally bought the VX digital camera used for *Love & Pop* to film a "making of" documentary for *The End of Evangelion*, "during production he kept running around and filming everything", and his interest in digital cameras grew. The influence of Anno's animated work wasn't a one-way street: watching his 1998 anime adaptation of *Kare Kano (His & Her Circumstances)*, you can see a direct line between the shots used in *Love & Pop* (which released in January the same year) and those of *Kare Kano's* end credits sequences, which featured live action footage roaming different locations.





Though it may match some of the editing and framing style, *Love & Pop* is far from the romantic tone of *Kare Kano*. Cinematographer Takahide Shibunushi's imagery adopts a gritty texture, using naturalistic lighting in concert with unconventional angles and movements of the camerawork. The glare that comes from changes in position reveals the blemishes and dirt on the lens. That's a strong indication of its attitude towards compensated dating, refusing to glamorize these transactions.

A harrowing example is the use of split screen as a man named Uehara examines Hiromi. It feels claustrophobic, the extreme close-up and wide-angle lens embodying her silent discomfort. *Love & Pop*'s scariest and probably most uncomfortable sequence also uses first person to this effect - with Captain EO (Tadanobu Asano, who recently played Yabushige in FX's *Shogun*) cornering Hiromi. At one point, Hiromi goes into an almost dissociative state, represented by rapid fire aspect ratio changes, superimposition and split screen as she repeats "what should I do". It's a terrifying and incredibly potent use of not just the camera's subjective potential, but the manipulation of the screen image itself. *Evangelion* did this with a contrast of animation and other mixed media, as it followed the tale of a boy becoming resentful of both himself and the world around him; *Love & Pop* has similar interests while further examining the harm which adults have inflicted on this generation of children.

That so many of these elements are embodied through stylistic approach alone, before getting to these considered moments of narration, is what makes *Love & Pop* a crucial part of Anno's filmography as well as an exciting one, despite its austere subject matter. Just as the style that he honed with *Evangelion* informed his first live-action film, the experimental form of *Love & Pop* can still be felt in all of Anno's work going forward. When I saw a shot in *Ritual* or another in *Shin Godzilla*, the camera placed on a chair before moving towards a completely different angle, I thought of *Love & Pop*. It's the moment where he became just as exciting as a live-action filmmaker as he is with a pen and paper.











