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## Moving from Japanese Film Distribution to Production: An Interview with Third Window Films' Adam Torel

*Jonathan Wroot* May 18, 2018

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Adam Torel. © Third Window Films

What Third Window's practices and Adam Torel's insights provide is a view of the

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industry that contrasts significantly from current Japanese film research, especially in light of other exhibitors and distributors financing feature productions, such as Amazon and Netflix. Third Window is going against the dominant corporate and commercially focused aims of studios, but also operates separately from established online streaming platforms.


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East Asian cinema continues to have an audience in the UK, but finding this audience is a significant challenge. Following Tartan's short-lived but influential Asia Extreme sub-label (which lasted from 2000 to 2008), other distributors have used a range of techniques and strategies to encourage audiences to attend screenings of Asian films, as well as to purchase DVDs or digital alternatives. DVDs, and to some extent Blu-rays, have continued to be the most popular formats for Asian film releases in the UK, despite the availability of streaming and downloading alternatives. Third Window Films is one label that particularly illustrates these trends. However, in this challenging market, managing director Adam Torel has now moved into producing films in order to acquire new titles and continue to promote them around the world. Distribution is often seen as an invisible process within the film industry, despite being central to exhibition and consumption. Third Window's latest efforts show

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how the label's experiences within distribution have successfully led to film production, often through crowdfunding and social media promotions. They do not necessarily have to rely on corporate or studio support, nor the latest digital alternatives, in order to get their films seen within existing global infrastructures of exhibition and consumption. This is particularly illustrated through Third Window's first independently produced feature, *Lowlife Love* (dir. Eiji Uchida, 2015). I interviewed Torel at the end of 2016, shortly after the UK DVD and Blu-ray release of *Lowlife Love*. His experiences of this change in role will be documented later in this article. First, it is necessary to chart Third Window's history before *Lowlife Love* to demonstrate how this was an important turning point for the company and to show practices of independent filmmaking and distribution.

Insights into Third Window's activities provide in-depth perspectives of the contemporary Japanese film industry. In one of our email exchanges, Torel stated one of several reasons for going into film production: "I think Japanese cinema over the past few years is really at a low, and I can't see it getting much better for a while..."

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As of January 2018, Third Window is still acquiring and releasing Japanese film titles, such as *Love and Other Cults* (dir. Eiji Uchida, 2017), another independent production completed by the company. What Third Window's practices and Torel's insights provide is a view of the industry that contrasts significantly with current Japanese film research, especially in light of other exhibitors and distributors financing feature productions, such as Amazon and Netflix. Third Window is going against the dominant corporate and commercially focused aims of studios, but also operates separately from established online streaming platforms.

However, this independent strategy has recently been thrown into question by the restructuring of Curzon Artificial Eye. The company used to offer sales and distribution services through Fusion Media, relied upon by many independent UK labels (including Third Window). In January 2018, Curzon announced

they would only provide these services for their own titles (Wiseman). Shortly after, in March 2018, a new sales company was founded, through Arrow Films joining up with both Third Window and Terracotta Distribution (another independent Asian film distributor). Arrow, which also funds productions and distribution deals, has perhaps noticed Torel's success as an independent film distributor and producer. Or such strategies and partnerships are perhaps a sign of the times, and may be the only way of keeping these independent practices alive, and keeping in circulation a wide variety of films. In either case, this article aims to document the work that is required to cater to UK audiences for East Asian cinema.

*Third Window's Place within the Japanese Film Industry*

## third window films

The potential jeopardy of independent labels like Third Window does not bode well for global cinephiles, especially when Japanese filmmaking continues to fascinate audiences around the world. However, most other published research within this area focuses on the films' content and their interpretation. The critical acclaim met by *Rashomon* (dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1951) at the Venice Film Festival is often cited as bringing Japanese cinema to the attention of audiences outside of Asia. In addition, the work of film directors

from before and after this date has been the focus of several text-based studies. This includes the work of Donald Richie – from *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (1982) to *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (2005) – to later edited collections, such as *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts* (Phillips and Stringer [eds.], 2007). In short, though the work of Richie and other scholars situates critical analysis within historical context, factors concerning film production and other industrial perspectives have often been overlooked.

Research within one very recent collection, *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (Miyao [ed.], 2014), has addressed some of these gaps in film studies research, within the chapters by Hiroshi Kitamura, Sangjoon Lee, Abe Mark Nornes, and Ichiro Yamamoto. Respectively, these chapters cover: the operations of Paramount Studios in Japan throughout the 1950s and '60s; the history of the now defunct Asian Film Festival; the impact of the Yamagata Film Festival and its inspiration on filmmakers from other, neighbouring countries; and Yamamoto then charts his experiences as a producer of films such as *The Twilight Samurai* (dir. Yoji Yamada, 2002) and *Love and Honour* (dir. Yoji Yamada, 2006). However, the majority of the chapters in the *Handbook* still focus on the content of film texts.

Rayna Denison has particularly explored the production contexts and promotional practices in terms

of the *seisaku iinkai* (production committee) system. Here, the production costs of a Japanese blockbuster feature (or *daihitto*) are shared amongst various multimedia organisations, so that they can obtain their share of the profits from subsequent media platforms and spin-offs (Denison, 67-88). This includes cinema releases, home media releases, TV broadcasts, and merchandise such as soundtracks, *manga* (comics), and other memorabilia. As each company is keen to guarantee their profits, these productions tend to be “second-generation (or later) texts ... often adaptations, remakes, and serialized film releases associated with already-profitable textual networks” (68). Such practices enable Japanese films to become commercial successes in local markets in Asia, not just in Japan, though their appeal outside of Asia is limited due to their intertextual links and second-generation status.

Third Window operates on the opposite end of this scale, focusing on low-budget but critically acclaimed productions. Yet they also manage to make use of social media and online communication in order to widely promote their releases. This can be seen in the case of *Lowlife Love*, as the promotion of the film ran parallel to its shooting schedule, through successful crowdfunding that raised money for post-production. Exploring these processes in further depth, in conjunction with insights from Adam Torel, illustrates the impact a

distributor can have when taking up additional roles, such as film producer – especially in contrast to corporate strategies and practices, which are common within the Japanese *inkai* system.



Producer Adam Torel, lead actor for *Lowlife Love*, Kiyohiko Shibukawa, and director Eiji Uchida, at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan. © Third Window Films.

The actions of Adam Torel, as the managing director of Third Window, could be deemed unique – in terms of his decision to shift to film producer from distributor. However, as other corporations – such as Netflix and Amazon – are financing production as well as distribution, what becomes clear is the influence that such practices can have, especially within the contemporary context. The lines are further blurred between institutions and artists (or authors, money, and apparatus), as distributors become more involved with the film production process. Torel's insight into film distribution and production, within the UK and Japan, reveals how these broader contexts have affected his own practices. Third Window's actions show what alternative strategies are available in contrast to Japan's *inkai* systems, and other multinational



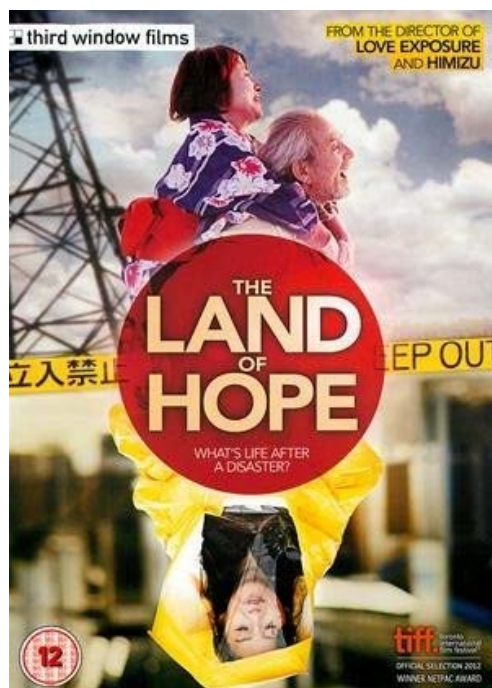
conglomerates, as well as how successful they can be.

At the beginning of our interview, Torel stated his label's intentions:

Third Window Films was initially set up as a distribution company with the aims of expanding the reach of lesser-known Asian cinema in the West. Since its first release in 2007, Third Window Films has released more than 80 Asian films (from Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea) in the UK. In 2011, Third Window Films expanded to also work in production and soon after started international sales of Japanese films.

Third Window's constant goal has been to challenge the prolonged stereotype of Asia Extreme – meaning films filled with violent and/or surreal imagery – popularised by past distributors such as Tartan Video (Dew; Martin; Shin). This is despite the knowledge that, in contrast to the demise of Tartan, such titles are often an easy means of generating revenue. Torel has admitted to the continuing existence of this market, as demonstrated through his release of *Teenage Hooker Became a Killing Machine* (dir. Nam Ki-woong, 2000), where the title alone helped to boost sales (Hurtado). The odd “extreme” film notwithstanding, Third Window has made a success of its diverse remit. For example, in 2017 the company celebrated the ten-year anniversary of its first DVD release through a photography competition on its Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Quality, for Third Window, has therefore meant going against the Asia Extreme stereotype. Despite such successes, Torel has been vocal about struggles he has faced with his company – from the loss of stock during the 2011 London riots, to the challenging demands of the UK market, as DVD and Blu-ray sales have fallen year-on-year since 2015 (“Market Insight,” BASE figures). Third Window’s focus on physical releases contrasts with this trend, though this also highlights rights issues with online platforms, and the minimal profile that exists for Asian titles through streaming services such as iTunes and Netflix (Parmer).



*The Land of Hope* (dir. Sion Sono, 2012). ©  
Third Window Films

Torel’s most recent strategy for combatting these challenges has involved moving into film production. *Lowlife Love* was the first independently financed production from the company, but Torel had actually moved in this

direction several years before. *The Land of Hope* (dir. Sion Sono, 2012) and *Fuku-chan of Fuku-Fuku Flats* (dir. Yosuke Fujita, 2014) were co-productions with larger companies and conglomerates. Torel decided to become a part of these projects on the basis of the cast and crew involved, as he had found success distributing DVDs of the directors' earlier works (e.g. Sono's *Love Exposure* [2008] and Fujita's *Fine Totally Fine* [2008]). However, this was a learning curve for Torel, mainly because these productions involved working within Japan's *iinkai* committee system.



*Fuku-chan of Fuku-Fuku Flats* (dir. Yosuke Fujita, 2014). © Third Window Films

As explained earlier, the committee system represents either a temporary or long-term collaboration between companies, in order to share the burden of film financing, as well as being mutually beneficial in terms of profits. Through this committee system,

certain decisions can be made at an early stage, such as which companies and representatives are going to be responsible for marketing and promotion, distribution, exhibition, and later processes such as rights for home media releases and TV broadcasts. Though there are obvious advantages to this system, the dominance of it has led to accusations that the Japanese film industry is stifling creativity, especially when remakes of older titles and adaptations of other media texts are frequently financed. Adam Torel has made such statements several times (Bull; Schilling). It is this perception of the contemporary Japanese film industry, and Torel's striving for diverse and quality Asian cinema, that has now led him to pursue film production. However, this was not an easy road to set out on. Though venturing into film production has broadened Third Window's opportunities, in terms of the range of titles it can distribute and on what platforms, Torel's negative view of the *iinkai* system arose from his first-hand experience.

In addition to distributing some of the directors' earlier works, Third Window's involvement with Sono's *The Land of Hope* and Fujita's *Fukuchan of Fuku-Fuku Flats* initially looked promising. Sono's production is a sombre drama about the impact of a nuclear power station failure on a fictional family. This deliberately draws parallels with the 2011 Fukushima disaster – an event that not only has a continuing impact within Japan, but was also given

considerable coverage through news media around the world. *Fuku-chan of Fuku-Fuku Flats* is a comedy-drama concerning the solitary life of a labourer and what happens when he re-connects with a former crush from his school days. However, the twist with this film is that the lead, Fuku-chan, is played by a female, Miyuki Oshima. Both films therefore had unique selling points that are likely to attract distribution deals.

Torel hoped to be able to shape their release strategy by being involved as a co-producer. In practice, these hopes were never fulfilled, as Torel explains within the interview:

For *Land of Hope* I was just one of many producers involved, as I was with *Fukuchan*. Though I had a lot more involvement with *Fukuchan* than with *Land of Hope*. For *Fukuchan*, I brought in many other investors, created the first international co-production of its kind with a Japanese indie comedy, and brought the film to many festivals and handled international sales on it as well. Though even with both being “independent” films and both from non-mainstream directors, they were both “film committee” films and therefore a complete mess when it came to what happened to the films after production. It is very hard for creative people to work in the film committee system, which is why most producers in Japan are not creative at all. Both films failed miserably at the box office.

Though these systems ultimately provided funding so these projects could be completed, the restrictions involved in this arrangement are clearly illustrated. Torel's intentions were for a broader international audience, and his experiences suggest that such systems are not appropriate for films to generate revenue within international markets.

Third Window's success with their first independently funded feature, *Lowlife Love*, suggests that films made outside of the *iinkai* system are more likely to find global success. Torel went on to explain that:

Contrary to the other "film committee" titles, *Lowlife Love* was a huge success in Japan and overseas. In Japan, its first 3 weeks in a Tokyo cinema were sold out many, many times (the last of these weeks had every screening sold out), and it played all across Japan, then around 20 big international film festivals (including such established ones as Tokyo Film Festival, Rotterdam, Edinburgh, Taipei, Fantasia, Gent, and more). Plus it sold for distribution in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Germany, and to a VOD company in the States. To a small extent, international festivals helped its word of mouth in Japan, but weren't a major factor. Its marketing strategy, the cinema it started playing in Tokyo (Theatre Shinjuku), and main actor were the major points.

Later in the interview, Torel explained that the production budget for *Lowlife Love* was approximately \$60,000, with \$20,000 being sourced through crowdfunding. To date, the film has grossed \$100,000 worldwide, though it is still being made available through VOD platforms in various countries. Similar instances of UK low-budget and independent releases finding success through alternative strategies have been documented (Smits), making *Lowlife Love* a comparable low-budget production. Furthermore, Torel has detailed what the work relating to production and distribution actually involves, in terms of his role as the central producer of *Lowlife Love*.



Members of the cast and crew for *Lowlife Love* at the Udine Far East Film Festival. Torel and Uchida are on the left. © Third Window Films

### *The Roles of a British Producer within Japanese Filmmaking*

Though this article details the influence of the producer within low-budget Japanese filmmaking – namely through Torel’s experiences – the director is still a key figure in terms of how Third Window came to be involved in film production:

JW: How did the opportunity to produce *Lowlife Love* come about?

AT: I had released a film in 2014 called *Greatful Dead* (dir. Eiji Uchida, 2013), and after I acquired the title I became close to the director in preparing for the UK release. During that time, he approached me and asked me if I wanted to help him make a film in America, which I turned down as I'm more interested in working on very "domestic" films. So instead he said that he had another idea about a film, a very domestic and very small film about indie filmmaking in Tokyo. The idea seemed interesting, so we decided to work on that project instead.

Uchida's insight into Japanese filmmaking turned out to be crucial for the film. *Lowlife Love* concerns the trials and tribulations of a low-budget film director, Tetuso (Kiyohiko Shibukawa). He struggles to complete feature film projects, and only regularly succeeds at making short pornographic videos, which are quickly sold on for a small profit to a local gang of hoodlums. His creative spark is ignited by a naïve young actress with raw talent (Minami, played by Maya Okano), who is quickly noticed by a more successful director, known for sexually exploiting young actresses. Tetsuo at first is despondent at losing out on the chance to work with Minami, but later uses his feelings to fuel his passion for filmmaking and finance his latest project.





From left to right: Kiyohiko Shibukawa as Tetsuo; Shugo Oshinari as Ken, Tetsuo's latest scriptwriting colleague; and Denden as Kida, their shady source of finances. © Third Window Films

Uchida's experience is vital in constructing the film's story. Uchida had grown up outside of Japan in Brazil. A few years after returning to Japan, he found a job working in TV as an assistant director, for several of Takeshi Kitano's entertainment shows, and then on the drama serial *Joshi ana icchokusen!* (2007-), before venturing into low-budget filmmaking. Eventually, he made the horror-comedy *Greatful Dead*, which was noticed by Torel. In addition to developing his filmmaking career, Uchida witnessed many incidents similar to those depicted in *Lowlife Love*, and explained this context in several promotional interviews for the film. Though this may have parallels with more recent stories about Harvey Weinstein and allegations against other Hollywood filmmakers, a more conservative attitude to the publicity of such allegations is believed to exist within several Asian film industries (Chow). Uchida also confirms such views, and he noticed them as an "outsider," having not grown up in Japan:

Take the misogyny in *Lowlife Love*, and the position of women in daily life. Most people who are born and raised in Japan wouldn't notice it as anything out of the ordinary. They'd see this film and consider it to be almost normal. But someone viewing this from outside that culture will most likely offer a much stronger opinion. (Vijn)

No directors see the actresses as prey, but I think there is a lack of the equality in the industry. Many of the scenes from the film I took from seeing some awful things in my time in the film and TV industry (of course I won't name names!), so there are a lot of bad things out there, though the majority come from producers I have come across or hearing stories of bad producers in the industry. (Kotzathanasis)

However, Uchida's experiences and insights into Japan's film and TV industries would not help the film get made, beyond his concepts and work on the script. Torel instead became an essential figure in making sure the production was funded, completed, and then distributed – as detailed in the following interview extracts:

JW: Was this a natural, or intended, progression from co-producing *The Land of Hope* and *Fuku-chan of FukuFuku Flats*?

AT: Yes, as it was a natural progression from working as a distributor to a producer.

Though both of those films were set up within the Japanese film committee system, and so had many companies and producers involved, which I didn't like. So I moved on to independent productions with *Lowlife Love*.

JW: Was the Kickstarter project an essential aspect of it?

AT: As there were no other companies or producers involved in *Lowlife Love*, it was essential to raise money and awareness. Crowdfunding is not just about raising money, but also great publicity on a project. I actually ran crowdfunding in both the West with Kickstarter and locally in Japan too with a system there called Campfire.

JW: What exactly was your role as a producer?

AT: There are many "producers" in many films, from "associate" producers, "executive" producers, "line" producers, and so on. Even the role of a "producer" can be very different within different projects in Japan. In the Japanese film committee system for a mid- to large-level film (even sometimes small films), most producers are just salary-men (company men) and basically just work on bringing together the different parts of the film committee, which is not terribly hard work and not creative in the least. For my role on *Lowlife Love*, I handled every single aspect for 2 years – from working with the director on the script; raising all the

money; casting; rehearsals; locations; being on set every day (I even shot the making of); editing the film; setting looks; then after we had finished the film I set up all the cast and crew screenings; made the website and handled all social networks; ran the distribution side of things; created and printed all posters and marketing materials; made the trailer; booked the cinemas and was at every single screening, both meeting every audience member and organising talk events; made the DVDs including editing the extras; putting the film in festivals and bringing the cast to these screenings; handling international sales and preparing materials for their releases, etc. In fact, I even got new songs made for the film. I went into a studio with the band, and we made a 7-inch record for the release which became the start of Third Window Records.

In contrast to the *iinkai* (committee) system, Torel details how he himself took on a similar role – as an independent financier, rather than through a corporate partnership. Rather than outsourcing these jobs to other companies, Torel used his previous experience with Third Window to complete these tasks himself, in contrast to agreeing to separate rights to promotion, merchandising, and distribution (as is standard within the *iinkai* system). Here is further evidence of Torel’s perspective – in that the *iinkai*

system stifles not only creativity, but also proactive engagement with filmmaking practices and professionals, in order to complete work to a high standard.



*Lowlife Love* – available on DVD, Blu-ray and vinyl. © Third Window Films

Uchida also expresses appreciation for Torel's role, especially in terms of innovation and originality in finding sources of funding:

The Kickstarter campaign went so well that I ended up really liking it. It wasn't my idea, I thought it was a bit weird and I wasn't expecting much of it, to be honest. In Japan, crowdfunding is mostly an unexplored area. But we had a great experience with it. And not just because we got money, but also because we got it from fans of the project, who were happy with all the information we gave them, and helped spread it, creating publicity. Yes, we were really pleased with the crowdfunding. (Vijn)

Here, crowdfunding is confirmed as an unexplored and potentially lucrative venture in the Japanese film industry, especially for low-budget productions. Few other film productions have been documented that utilise this practice, though

there are an increasing number of Japanese animated projects that are using Kickstarter in Japan (Clements). Torel, though, has experience with these initiatives. While Third Window has not used it in film production before, the distributor has used Kickstarter to help fund Blu-ray and DVD releases from debut filmmakers (Wroot). In addition to helping with the script, Torel has therefore turned his creative thinking to logistical issues that affect film production. As a result, Uchida had more creative freedom in making *Lowlife Love*, compared to other projects – which he explains in relation to the film's ending:

What happened with that final scene was, we weren't entirely happy with some of these characters just walking away, we wanted something with a bit more impact. So on the fly we rented a car and some people, bought some balaclavas and baseball bats, and we shot the current ending.... Making a change like this would have been impossible on a regular Japanese production, one for the bigger studios. In the past, when I worked on big commercial projects, I already got into big trouble when I changed a single word in the script. The assistant producer went like ... [acts out dumbstruck shock].

He reprimanded me and told me to remember that such changes need to be approved by all the scriptwriters. In Japan, you always need to

address the scriptwriter as “Sensei,” the honorific for teacher, master. And that was for ONE WORD! You can imagine what changing the ending would have been like. (Vijn)

So is this the way forward for all distributors, to move into independent production? Torel is proud of what he has achieved, but is also cautious and realistic of the work involved in distribution:

JW: Were there major contrasts, from your work as a distributor, to that of a film producer?

AT: A distributor works with a final project and cannot change what they have, just help sell it.

JW: Is your focus shifting from distribution to production?

AT: I’d say that I don’t enjoy distribution in the UK as much as before as it’s too hard with VOD and the fact that people don’t seem to want to pay for anything anymore.

JW: Is this a trend you are noticing more in the industry – in Japan, and in other countries? The increasing influence, or involvement, of the distributor in film production?

AT: Japan’s film committee system means there are always distribution companies involved in film production, but it’s a different process than what I do.

JW: Is this part of a large-scale shift in the industry or a short-term phase?

AT: As a distributor, you only have a certain length of rights when distributing and are very tied down with what you can do. Like with the current trend with Netflix, it can be easier and more rewarding creating your own content and having a lifetime to earn from it. Though most producers do not own the rights to what they've made, working as a producer on independent films allows me to take copyright on the titles and maintain full control of them forever. Though over the years, many other distributors over the world have started to get involved with production too, and with the old fashioned "distributor" going out of fashion due to VOD not needing distributors, we can see many distributors going into production. Unfortunately, it's also been the end of many distributors such as Tartan Films who lost a lot attempting to go too much into production.

Earlier in the interview, Torel explained that he worked at Tartan before establishing his own label. Though Tartan went bankrupt in 2008, it was pivotal in establishing certain stereotypes about Asian cinema, such as the Asia Extreme category, which Torel wanted to challenge with Third Window. However, though Tartan got into financial troubles from its ventures into production, other companies have been utilising similar strategies



in recent years. For example, Netflix is mentioned by Torel – at first a rental platform for discs, then a digital distributor and exhibitor, and now an original content producer. It is spending billions of dollars on original content production, leading to speculation on how successful this practice is, and for how long it will last (Dawson; Jarvey).

As for Torel's future ventures, in 2016 he built on the success of *Lowlife Love*:

JW: Is this the start of more similar projects for Third Window?

AT: I already made another film since *Lowlife Love*. I'm actually in Los Angeles right now working on its colour grading.

JW: Is there anything you can tell me about this film project?

AT: It's called *Love and Other Cults* and is a black comedy love story about gangs and cult religions in Japan's countryside.

Despite keeping to a similar tack in terms of working with Uchida, Torel has also revealed how draining this process is, on a personal level. Shortly after the screenings of *Love and Other Cults* at London's 2017 Raindance Festival, and then at Camera Japan 2017 in Amsterdam, a video interview with Torel and Uchida was uploaded to YouTube by the online film rental service FilmDoo. Here, Uchida states he has future filmmaking plans, but Torel expresses exhaustion at the production process. Specifically, he

looks forward to getting back to distributing new and older Asian titles, and introducing them to new audiences in the UK and around the world. Therefore, Torel's strategies are potentially lucrative in contrast to established practices, but are taxing in terms of labour.

Nonetheless, his insights help to illustrate how such ventures are challenging established practices, processes, and perceptions of authorship and film production.



© Third Window Films

Torel is also not the only filmmaker from outside of Japan that is currently based there and is trying to shake up the status quo. In 2017, he was interviewed alongside producer Jason Gray, actor and producer Bryerly Long, and director John Williams, who are trying hard to create unique titles despite bureaucratic hurdles (Hadfield). Though recent changes in UK film sales and distribution, as highlighted by Curzon, temporarily put the future of Third Window into doubt, Torel has overcome similar difficulties before. Here's hoping that he continues to demonstrate what can be achieved by operating outside of a film industry infrastructure as corporate as Japan's, as he now

works in partnership with both Terracotta and Arrow.

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