Crazy Love
(Kurejii rabu)

Staff
Producer  Okabe Michio
Director  Okabe Michio
Screenplay  Okabe Michio
Photography  Kawa Toshiaki, Kamata Katsuhiko, Kitagawa Hideo, Watanabe Hitomi, Hakushika Masaru, Okabe Michio
Editing  Okabe Michio
Art direction  Saitô Shirô

Cast
Aoyama Mami, Suenaga Tamio, Miyai Rikurô, Gulliver, Tone Yasunao, Kanesaka Kenji, Satô Shigeomi, Ishii Mitsutaka, Koyama Tetsuo, Maro Akaji, Okabe Michio, Koyama Tetsuo

Release date: September 22, 1968
93 min.; B&W/Color; 1:1.33; 16mm

Upon its first public screening in 1968, Okabe Michio’s Crazy Love became a long-running hit at the Sasori-za, the venue for experimental film and art events named by Mishima Yukio. Located underneath ATG’s flagship Shinjuku Bunka theatre, the Sasori-za was one of the epicenters of the forming underground – or angura – culture that itself was heavily centered on the Shinjuku area of Tôkyô.

It is not difficult to see why Crazy Love was popular. Then as now, the film seems like a vibrant psycho-geography of the late 1960s Shinjuku scene set to an exuberant soundtrack, an infectious effort in affective urban planning. The delirious bundle of Soul, French chansons, and Japanese enka and “Group Sounds” pop is ironically and exuberantly fused to a never-ending fountain of images and never too serious performance art antics. And then as now, Crazy Love’s value was probably perceived as both didactic and experiential. Crazy Love showed anyone who wanted to participate, what Shinjuku was all about in a way so attractively stylized and abstract it was impossible to misunderstand. With a surprising lightness in tone often enough absent from the self-understood avant-garde, it mapped out the intricate connections between a specific urban space and the drive for new practices in (combining) art and life. Key angura figures such as artist Suenaga Tamio, film curator Kanesaka Kenji, critic Satô Shigeomi, Butô dancers Ishii Mitsutaka and Maro Akaji and the musician and Fluxus member Tone Yasunao appear in various roles, as does the influential performance art group zero jigen (“zero dimension”). Okabe not only maps the formal, emotional and intellectual dynamics of the Shinjuku underground, he in a sense uses angura itself as a stage for expanding on it’s ideas.

Although lacking any kind of classically coherent narrative, Crazy Love is carefully and very rhythmically structured. The first image tellingly positions the camera inside a theater, with the silhouettes of the audience rushing back and forth among their seats. What follows is a burst into song and 90 minutes of almost manic wandering through the liminal space of Shinjuku. The camera assumes the role of a constantly distracted turbo-flaneur, never resting, always moving from one detail to the next sensation. Along the way, boundary dissolution becomes the obvious theme for this high-tension endeavor. Moving images meld into flashes of still images and superimpositions and then naturally slip back into the streets and parks of Shinjuku; the space of
experience melds with that of fiction as well as that of documentation. The performances and happenings deliberately set in the public space supply an ample contrast between the attitudinal community of the Shinjuku angura and the “normal” citizens going about their presumed business. Yet the film never overplays this contrast, as Okabe is finally more interested in the melding of these spheres than in their separation. Gender is another obvious target for the blurring of boundaries, and Okabe revels in scenes that carnivalescically call it into question. However, despite all the tugging at the borderlines of gender and sexuality, Crazy Love never hides – or even touches upon – the fact that this is primarily a man’s world and it remains his privilege to play with the gender toy. Nonetheless, the ambivalent but exhilarating interlocking of performance and the everyday make the film effective on several levels, and it is fascinating simply to catch glimpses of Tokyo in 1968 (with several unexpected sights; watch for the right-wing demonstration taking place in front of Shinjuku station at the periphery of the frame, when suddenly a Nazi swastika – not a Buddhist one – slips into frame along with the Japanese flag).

The recurring protagonists of this journey are a group of fûten, a term that loosely translates as “bum” or “vagabond”, but that in the late 1960s began to conjure up images of glue-sniffing youths that hang around train stations with no inclination for school or work. One of the “actors”, Gulliver (Garibâ), was actually a famous Shinjuku fûten. In Okabe’s hands, the fûten become pure artifice. He designs them as stylish and transgressive urban parasites, as counter-drafts to the idealistic and nature-loving hippies. However for Okabe they are also playful and free-floating, a collection of down-and-out polymorph perverse dandies without ideological chains. As Okabe himself puts it, “fûten are camp”.

Camp is a central term for Okabe’s strategy for Crazy Love, and it points to several of his influences. He initially began his artistic career in the fine arts, participating in the Neo-Dada movement of Akasegawa Genpei – several of whose pictures feature in Crazy Love – from around 1965. This was also the time of the first Japanese screenings of American experimental films at the Sôgetsu Hall (owned by the family of Teshigahara Hiroshi, director of Woman in the Dunes), and Okabe quickly gravitated towards the medium of film. He won a prize at the first experimental film festival held at Sôgetsu Hall in 1967 for his film Tenchi sôzô setsu (Creation Tale), and proceeded to shoot Crazy Love as his next project. The many-layered and eclectic use of an astonishing assembly of popular music is an obvious nod to the films of Kenneth Anger; Okabe himself professes to have been deeply impressed by Scorpio Rising, and Andy Warhol’s and even Sergio Leone’s filmic work always lingers in the background. However, Okabe does not simply reproduce an imported notion or technique of camp. His drive towards artifice deftly localizes a development taking place in the entire late-industrial world. Through Crazy Love he grafts it to an ephemeral and somehow global Shinjuku spatiality, short-circuiting fragments from film history with staccato montages of professional wrestling, the Beatles, and street demonstrations in Paris. After Crazy Love, Okabe went on to shoot Saijiki (Haiku Glossary, 1973), Shônen shikô (A Taste for Boys, 1975) and Kaisô-roku (Reminiscences, 1977), which were shown widely at international film festivals. He then focused on literature and radio as his media of choice and faded out of an alternative film scene that had completely switched its focus from discourses of the public to an exploration of interiority.

Alex Zahlten