

EVENT SUMMARY:

Film Screening & Discussion - Predator: The Secret Scandal of J-Pop

Q&A session with Mobeen Azhar and Megumi Inman chaired by Jason James.

Wednesday 10 May 2023

Mobeen Azhar: This film was made as a very collaborative effort with Megumi, who is a brilliant producer and director. I think some people will feel uncomfortable while watching this film - the point of the film isn't to make people uncomfortable, and it certainly isn't a film that is meant to be in any way voyeuristic. Having said that, as someone who's visited Japan previously and loves Japanese culture, I was extremely surprised at many of the attitudes and many of the themes that we captured, and you will see that in this film. I also want to say that this event is around six weeks after the original film actually aired, and in my career as a journalist, I think I've always really aspired to make content - be it films, podcasts or written articles - that will fuel the discussion, so that it won't end when a piece of work is going out to the world, and this is one of those projects. Since this film aired in the UK, and it went out in Japan, and in other various territories, I think it has fueled a discussion. Rarely a day will go by when I don't get a notification on my Twitter, or an email in regards to this story, and I think that's a very healthy thing. This kind of journalism is all about the hope of societal change, and that can only happen as a joint effort over a period of time. I hope today, this webinar is part of that.

Megumi Inman: As Mobeen said, it's great that almost two months after this film first went out with the BBC, it is still in conversation - in Japan too, it has been taken on by journalists. It's what we wished for and hoped for, so we're really happy that it's gone in this direction. I don't usually talk about my background but I think it's relevant for this film so if you'll allow me: I'm mixed Japanese and English, and I grew up in both countries and spent my childhood there, so I speak Japanese fluently and I consider both countries my home. Johnny's boy bands were a big part of my childhood, so this film was quite personal to me too, and I say this because I think having that experience and perspective was important and helpful in making this film - combined with all of Mobeen and the rest of the team's experience, we were able to make this powerful documentary.

Discussion and Q&A:

Jason James: You mentioned the age of consent was 13. Is it clear to you that a crime actually took place?

Mobeen Azhar: I think it is clear ultimately that a crime took place, and I think there are various reasons for that: Primarily, it comes down to the brilliant work that the journalists at Bunshun did, back in the late 1990s. A lot of their work ended up being the subject of a libel case brought on by Johnny & Associates, and when that went to court, the vast majority of what had been written in a series of articles was actually upheld. There was one allegation that wasn't upheld, and that

was that Johnny Kitagawa was supplying very young men with cigarettes, but all the other allegations, including that he was having sex with these boys and coercing them, were all upheld as part of this libel case. That suggests to me that there is clear evidence that a crime was committed back then. What we also know is that over a period of decades of Johnny Kitagawa's career, he had access to and control over young men and boys who were going through this whole system. This is where we get into muddier territory because it's not helpful to make assumptions but what we do know is that there has been this drip-drip of people coming forward over many years, including the four people who very bravely spoke in this film, as well as the multiple people that spoke to Bunshun, and actually, multiple people have come forward more recently after this documentary got aired; they all have very similar stories, very similar allegations, so in my mind it is very clear that a crime has been committed historically.

Jason James: So the crime in question would be sexual assault, of people who are not consenting?

Mobeen Azhar: Absolutely, I think you referenced the age of consent there, It pains me to say this but there will be a kind of technical way of looking at this - if the age of consent was 13 at the time, and you had a 14-year-old who was consenting, then in a technical sense, surely that can't be sexual assault. I understand that, but I also think these stories all have a lot in common in terms of coercion, so when you talk about a consenting sexual relationship, in my mind, that doesn't involve a power dynamic, where someone is saying to you "you need to go along with this, or it's going to have consequences for you" or "you're not gonna make your debut", that very clearly is coercion, and there's this element of grooming there. I think all that adds up to a very clear indication that crimes were committed.

Guest (name redacted): I am a male survivor of sexual abuse. I was sexually abused in London when I was a student at a drama school in 2001 when I was 29 years old. In Japan, people really don't know how to treat male survivors of sexual abuse. They are not supported or treated properly by the government, local authorities and even experts like critical psychiatrists. For example, there's no support guideline for male survivors of sexual abuse by the government. In places like New Zealand, the Ministry of Social Development has a very clear service guideline for these male survivors as well as in the UK where a similar guideline exists. People in Japan don't recognise how poor their society is in regards to treating male victims of sexual abuse. In my opinion, Japanese people aren't interested in unearthing the sexual victimisation by Johnny Kitagawa; that is what I believe.

Guest (Nakajima-san): Thank you so much for making that really powerful film. I applaud you for putting it on air. I'm surprised that I hadn't been aware of the existence of that until now. One of the comments that struck me from the men you interviewed - the one who had the host club in Osaka - he said "Offer up your arse to this man if you want to progress your career" and that I think you said came from his mother? This was one of the most shocking comments I heard in this whole film. If that is true, the family of this man or people around him, or if you take a wider interpretation, society, have been acting as an enabler for Johnny Kitagawa to commit these acts. Is that how you saw it? This is a societal issue, rather than an individual matter, and I think

he was able to perpetrate these acts because he was allowed to do so, and continues to be protected because society lets it be protected. I want to hear your views on that.

Megumi Inman: We were also very surprised to hear this comment, but as you say, I think that's the problem we had with this: society knew that this was happening, but it just wasn't seen as a crime. That links to what the previous guest spoke about, regarding how male survivors aren't recognised as victims in Japan and this mainly stems from Japan being a homophobic society. Also, the amount of fame, power, glitz and glamour that Johnny & Associates had, especially during the 90s, when it was sort of reaching its heyday, made it seem like to us that they almost gave you the 'golden ticket' to success. It was almost like if you want something that badly, just put up with it, close your eyes and put up with it. It's only a few seconds and you get what you want. That's the kind of comments we received - it was almost seen as transactional if you know what I mean. I think that also perpetuated this problem. I also believe that because of the homophobic nature of Japan, this was never seen as a crime, only as a scandal. But this wasn't an affair between two consenting adults, this was a man abusing, manipulating and coercing children and I think it's taken a while for Japan to really get to grips with that, and that's what we tried to pinpoint in this documentary.

Mobeen Azhar: I would also say we were very shocked by the transactional nature and the way in which survivors would reference what had happened to them. As you saw, if there are four people who are brave enough to speak out in the film, I think it's fair to characterise three of those survivors as not seeing themselves as survivors of abuse, and not acknowledging what happened to them as abuse. They are not even at the point where they believe that what happened to them was morally questionable; they don't believe they have survived anything. Knowing what I know, I would absolutely characterise them as survivors of abuse and I think that the point is that how they view what happened to them is purely transactional. I think the point that Megumi makes about casual homophobia, it does really play into this because it's important to say that there's a world of difference between same-sex consensual sexual relationships and the exploitation of an individual when there's a huge gap in age and power, and a child effectively isn't offering consent. However, in sections of Japanese culture, there's a conflation and these things are seen as one and the same. That's why some of the contributors, like Jun'ya, talked about this idea of 'boys will be boys', and that "this is just something that boys do", and I think it's unfounded and unjust - we've got to be really careful and precise that what these young people experienced was abuse, it was wrong, and it was criminal.

Guest (Ms Kentridge): I currently work in the Japanese translation unit for BBC World News, so I was part of the team that was organising the provision of Japanese subtitles for this documentary when it was showing in Japan, which was a really interesting job because I think it was super important that we made sure it was translated accurately so that Japanese people can experience this documentary as it's supposed to be. I was just curious about what sort of backlash you've had, or what the reception was like in Japan, particularly among the female fans of Johnny's bands. I had a look at Twitter just to see the response to the tweet about the documentary, and the responses were generally positive saying 'It's great', 'It's a really important documentary', 'They should show it on NHK' etc. But of course, Johnny's is huge, and

there's this huge fandom, and actually within fandoms like that, quite often there's almost a fetishisation of man-on-man relationships, so I just wondered what sort of feedback you heard from within Japan?

Mobeen Azhar: I have to say, overwhelmingly, the feedback has been really positive. There were lots of people in the online space who were taking on the subject matter, who were really pushing for a more mainstream discussion inside Japan and pushing for broadcasters inside Japan to take this on. Many people in the social media space have also taken on this issue, including a famous YouTuber inside Japan, who made a video about this particular subject after the documentary came out. However, I'm sure there's been a whole section of society, including Johnny's fans, who have just hit the mute button and are not involved in that conversation whatsoever. I think that reflects what we've seen in recent decades. There are lots of people who are fans of the bands that are produced by Johnny & Associates who just want to look the other way and not get involved.

Megumi Inman: I think it's a difficult topic for fans because I think a lot of fans knew that this was going on, but they tried to just ignore it - it was an inconvenient truth for them. They separated the boy bands and the boys that they were supporting and this issue of Johnny Kitagawa's sexual abuse. They've got quite a mixed understanding of it: by bringing it up they think they might be harming the bands by ruining their careers, but actually not talking about it is also acknowledging the crimes that have happened. I think the fans are in a difficult position, but ignoring it certainly isn't going to make the issue go away. It'll be interesting to see how the fans continue to grow - a lot of the fans feel like they've grown up with the talent so I wonder what journey they're going to go on.

Guest (Ms Latouche-Charles): If you were to go back to it, would you maybe look into the more psychological aspects of the victims' mindsets? For example, some of the victims were like "I'm really grateful to Johnny" or "I really love Johnny". Even though I can't speak for them because I don't know their personal feelings or emotions, I could kind of relate because I've been through tough times with a person and it's hard to separate what they've done to hurt you from what they've done to help you, and piecing all that together. As a piece of feedback, I was wondering if would you look more into the mindset of victims and why it's such a struggle for them.

Mobeen Azhar: I think the mechanism of meeting someone and capturing a reaction straight away, the whole point of that is to allow an audience to settle with the thought and process it so I actually wouldn't change those responses because I think what's really important in those moments is to highlight and make a distinction about how grooming works and what grooming is. So in one sense you can look at those interactions, and you can look at someone like Ren for example, who was in the host club, who makes it very clear that it was a transaction - if it was offered to me I would've gone there and done that. I do find it difficult to wrap my head around that because it's a kind of crystallised, concentrated version in my view of the culture of the casting couch, which we've seen in multiple geographical locations, in multiple industries, over a very long time. I think if we get into this idea that maybe he was helping them and maybe

therefore they forgive him or they see him as a good person - I understand that, but ultimately what is that? I would say it's grooming. It's grooming and that's something that isn't discussed within Japanese society - actually, Nobuki, who's the therapist we speak to at the end, offered this kind of analysis in terms of how our minds work as human beings and how men with immense power, whether it's R. Kelly, Michael Jackson, or in our case, Johnny Kitagawa, are master manipulators and are brilliant at manipulating young people, and instilling this idea of a relationship being special and the idea of 'you're doing this for me so I'm going to do this for you'. That is how grooming works. I think it's really important in a documentary like this to have clarity of thought and not compromise.

Guest (Ms Muranaka): After your film came out, on the BBC and also in Japan, I've spoken to many journalists for TV or newspapers, and asked "What can you do about this?", but all the journalists told me that none of the victims are actually suing Johnny & Associates. No media has directly picked this issue up and actually made an effort. Ultimately, only Kauan Okamoto spoke out as a victim and even then only some media started to report about it - no Japanese media really pursued this issue. What do you think is the responsibility of the media, and what can we do?

Megumi Inman: Many people have asked me questions like "The perpetrator at hand is dead so what can you do?" or "What's the point in bringing it up now?". The silence that surrounded this for fifty, or sixty years is the problem, and it's a complicit silence. The media and the news media are meant to hold powerful people/institutions/companies to account, and so that's what the media needs to do. Johnny & Associates can also come out and publicly acknowledge what has happened and give the survivors the acknowledgement for what they went through. Right now, the entertainment industry and the news industry are very intertwined, and politics to an extent too, and unfortunately it's not that simple and straightforward in Japan, but we need to continue to highlight and fight for change.

Jason James: What difference do you think it would have made if the victims had been girls rather than boys? Do you think that would have made any significant difference in a Japanese context?

Megumi Inman: Sadly I do think that it would have made a difference because I think there is a casual homophobic nature in Japan, and so this understanding of relationships between males isn't really fully understood. Also, because of that, even though this is a crime, I think it is fetishised or understood as something else and it's much easier to take the traditional route of understanding a woman being abused by a man. I think sadly it might have made a difference.

Guest (Ms Kuroki): Do you think this can be stopped, and how would you go about this? It's difficult to stop this because many young men want to debut.

Mobeen Azhar: I think this is always about critical mass, and what I mean by that is, you will have in any popular movement or cultural shift in society, you'll have the fringes of society that start talking about something and will often be ostracised or shut down. We know this

conversation has been going on since the 1990s and it was shut down. Then you'll have people in influence or people in power who will join that conversation, and then there will be a critical mass of people who will say 'This is unacceptable' and I think what is required here is critical mass. We need more people, more newspapers, more journalists, more bloggers, and more people of influence to continue this conversation. I think it's a separate question of whether I have faith that that will actually happen and the short answer to that is I simply don't know. But I am really pleased that Bunshun continued to report this, NHK did report very briefly on this story last month, so I hope that conversation will continue to build up and gain traction, and whether it takes six months or years, ultimately when there's critical mass there will be a culture shift, and there will be a reckoning.

Transcribed by Mia Aikman