

Reappropriating Effacing: An Investigation into the History of Marketable Effacement in  
Hollywood and Hong Kong

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Before starting the main bulk of research for this project, I was admittedly drawn to intellectual properties I was more familiar with. It felt safer and more comfortable to deal with subject material I had more experience with than to learn a new language of reading films I had no prior experience with. When this class met to look through what the archives had to offer, I was drawn straight to the cover page of *Gremlins*. Unknowingly, I had opened the George R. Simkowski Papers, a Wisconsin graduate who had worked as a script supervisor, especially suited to look for product placement and marketing opportunities in film. The collection mainly consisted of materials he accumulated from his time at Amblin Entertainment. From the *Goonies* to other 80's cult classics, everything felt as familiar as Sunday cereal, but the reason for these to be on the table felt missing. I wondered why these scripts, production reports, and call sheets were here, and what did this have to do with Asian American representation and history in film? But then the first words of the script leapt off the page. I quickly began to scour the pages.

Simkowski's circling not only made the reality of the artifact all too clear, but it also demonstrated the scripts intent far better than the words alone could do. The lumping of consumer goods, like electronics, food, and hardware with the setting of an "Oriental city"<sup>1</sup> was

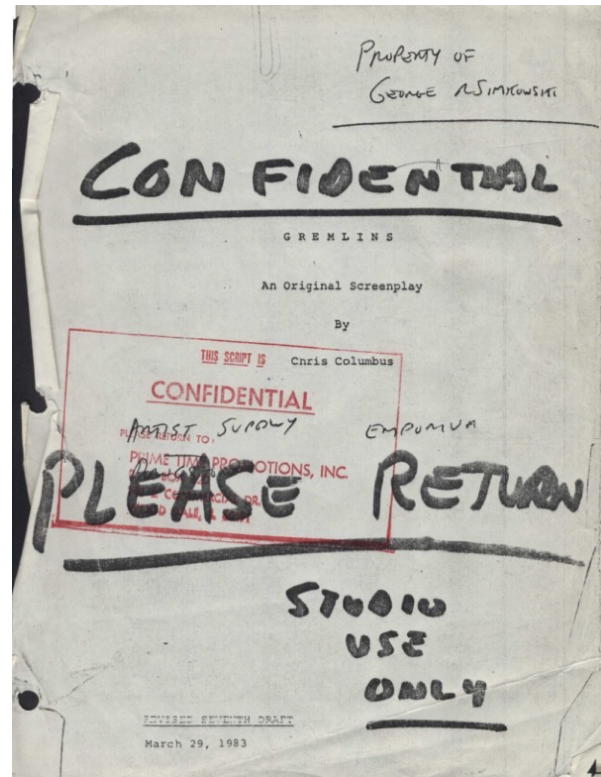


Figure 1, *Gremlins* Cover Page

<sup>1</sup> See Figure 2.

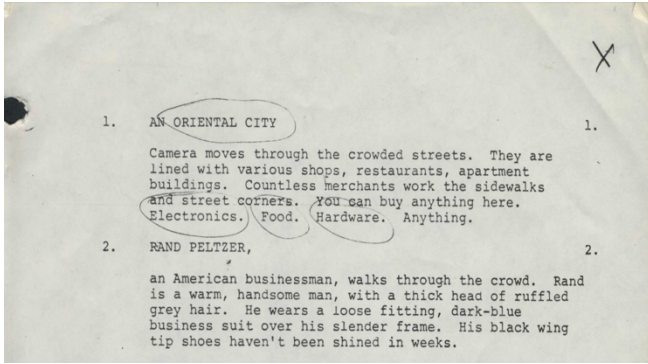


Figure 2, Gremlins Script page 1

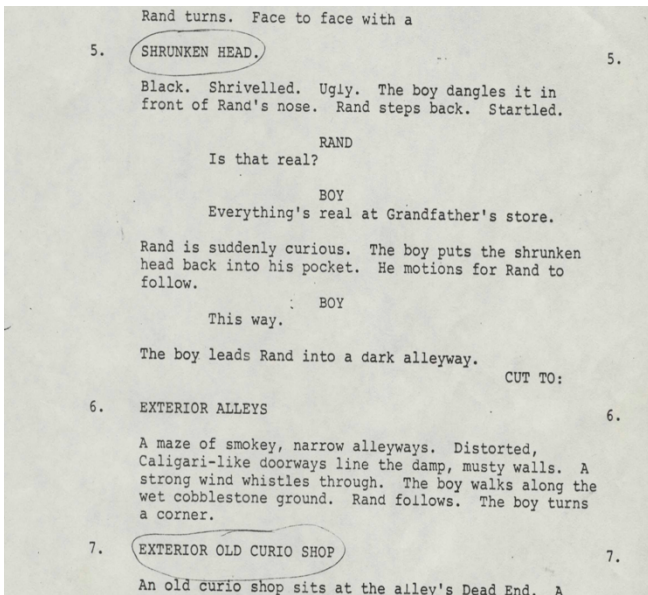


Figure 3, Gremlins Script page 2

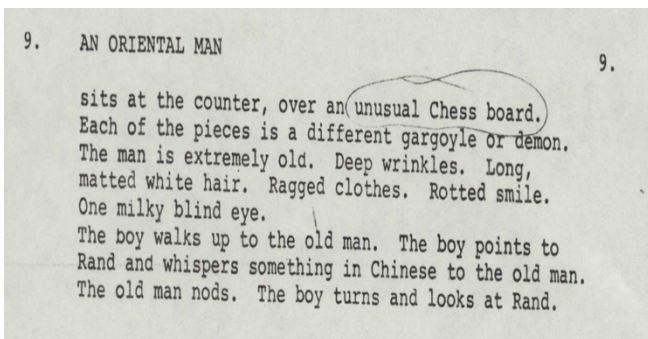


Figure 4, Gremlins Script page 3

a clear and direct attempt to highlight the opportunity to market, exoticize and commercialize this detail. The next page continues this specific attention to conveying both the act of slumming and the exotic, foreign, and seedy nature of the setting. Simkowski has deliberately circled both a “shrunken head”<sup>2</sup> and the concept of a “curio shop”<sup>3</sup> as a clear continuation of being able to market this Chinatown as an adventurous and untamed place. As I kept turning the pages, I came upon the descriptions and stage directions that is normally reserved for the production side of the film. These small details hidden in the margins of scripts to cue everyone from the higher ups of productions to the character actors themselves, became a newfound gold mine of information about how the script felt it should portray the people in this shop of curiosities. The screenwriter Chris Columbus notes that the shop owner be unnaturally old, with “deep wrinkles,” “long matted white hair,” “milky blind eye, and a “rotten smile”<sup>4</sup> for good measure. On the same page, Columbus crafts a

<sup>2</sup> See Figure 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Figure 4.

short image of catfish juice running down the old man's chin, a detail, like many of these that is missing from the final version of the film. The only detail, in this description to make it into the film is that "milky blind eye"<sup>5</sup> the owner glares with. The deliberate effacement, exoticizing, and commercializing found in a scene where I didn't remember or expect it led me to conclusion that the long history of this practice should be investigated



*Figure 5, Shop owner from Gremlins.*

further, and into a genre of films I had little to no prior experience with. It was this path that would lead me into investigating Kung Fu Grindhouse films of the late 1970's. The reason I chose this line of inquiry for the simple fact of the complex situation these films inhabit within the history of film. As I soon learned, the pieces of Kung Fu grindhouse were heavily laced with stereotypes, tropes, and conventions born from longstanding traditions in Hollywood. Yet, these films come from a completely different tradition of cinema that was not familiar or prone to these predispositions and predilections of American media censors and mogul sensibilities. The question of why these films choose to make the conscious decisions became the crux of my search.

Grindhouse films were a broad, widespread, and hard to track phenomena, one that would require a significant narrowing of focus if I was to study them properly. To first get a

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<sup>5</sup> See Figure 5.



Figure 6, Photo taken Sept. 30, 1985 (c) Brian Camp

background on what these films were, I turned to images of the notorious Deuce on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Manhattan. It shocked me how many of these images of the theater were all caked with either Kung-Fu and martial arts nomenclature or general evocations of a vaguely Asian sentiment that almost seemed like a highly coordinated affair. The marques and poster all contributing to the same

onslaught of what looked like a feverish obsession. In the blogpost that contained these images, a quote from Bill Landis really captures the feeling of the era:

At the genre's peak in the mid-to-late 1970s, hundreds of kung fu movies were hitting the Deuce each year, and each grindhouse worked them into their fare. The whole kung fu look became a fashion statement, with karate robes, "Ninja" T-shirts, and China-bowl hats becoming frequent sights around the Deuce. But this proliferation of martial arts cinema was more than a fad or passing trend, these films can't simple be isolated and plucked from the continuity they exist in; they pulled from a long history of American films before them and would later influence decades of actions films to come. To demonstrate this reality of continuity I decided to investigate the production of these films further. With the thousands of B-movies, schlocky, campy, and exploitative cuts I could sift through, I further narrowed my search to the filmography of the Goldig Film Company. On their official site, they claim to have been founded in Hong Kong by Gouw Hiap Kian (Alex Gouw) in the late 1960's. The company initially worked only in distribution of international movies but in the 1970's found in niche in cheap productions their existing chain of distribution could support. This vertical integration in the B-movie industry allowed them to become a major exporter of film to not only the rest of Asia but to the West as well. But this online deep dive



could only tell me so much. I knew I had to see one of these for myself I was to understand how and why they targeted American audiences so aggressively with deliberately manufactured foreignness and orientalisms.

For my trip to the archives, I requested a viewing of *Duel of the Seven Tigers*. When the film reels started, I quickly noticed that the freeze frame title cards were missing from this print.<sup>6</sup> In

the introduction to the cast of martial artists, the awkwardness and cheapness of the posed freeze frames was not only emphasized by the error within this print, but also how poorly timed these snapshots were, feeling almost random, never quite catching the pose while it was either held still or in focus. As the film proper began, the film's use of sound editing became one of the most important takeaways from my experience. Firstly, there is a complete barrage of non-diegetic sounds added in post-production. An entire stock sound library full of sound effects like punches, claps, thuds,

clangs, whooshes, and slices punctuated almost any movement during a choreographed fight scene. This can be seen in an extreme example where a man flexing his muscles makes the same sound as him cracking his knuckles—which has been interestingly cut from most versions of the film I could find online. The next piece of sound is the complete ADR (Automated or Additional Dialogue Replacement) track layered on top of the film. From the grunts to more clearly articulated monologue, every actor has been



Figure 7, reel #1 from *Duel of the Seven Tigers*, and brief cameo from the writer.



Figure 8, Online version of *Duel of the Seven Tigers*.

<sup>6</sup> See figure 7 & 8, *Duel of the Seven Tigers*, (timestamp: 1:42) 1979.

dubbed over by English speakers, but it has been done in a noticeably inconsistent way. Many of the characters on screen have an affected accent to sound more foreign while the main characters do not.<sup>7</sup> Of the characters effected by this type of auditory yellow facing, most of them sound like cheap imitations of a Charlie Chan or Mr. Yunioshi, but for clarity's sake, any important piece of dialogue is meant to be understood by an American, English-speaking audience. One last piece of the audio I found interesting is less concrete than the prior two examples. Based on some of the lines in the dubbing, contextually not always making sense within the story of the film, I am led to believe that whoever was working on the English dub of the film did not have full access or understanding of the script. One of the most common ways this becomes apparent is whenever character's laughs are completely inappropriate, don't make sense, and/or totally out of place within the context of the film.<sup>8</sup> To this point, some of the errors can be written off to the cheapness and rushed level of production, but some like the yellow facing in the audio and the stereotypical exoticizing found in the film cannot be so easily explained. For that, I would need to dig deeper into the film's history of production. But despite my best efforts, I ran into a dead-end. No matter where I searched, I could not seem to find any materials left over from the productions of these films online, nor could I locate any living participants in the time of this investigation. In order to better understand how these decisions were made, I needed to look into another film's production history and attempt to analyze the probable causes behind their choices.

The producers at Goldig were pulling inspirations from Hollywood depictions of APIDA identities, especially from the Last Wave of these films. And I could think of no better film to research than *Sayonara* (1957). Within the archives, I came upon the Paul Osborn collection

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<sup>7</sup> *Duel of the Seven Tigers*, (timestamp: 14:51) 1979.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, (timestamp: 21:30).



Figure 9, *Sayonara* Promotional Photo #1, shot by Floyd McCarty

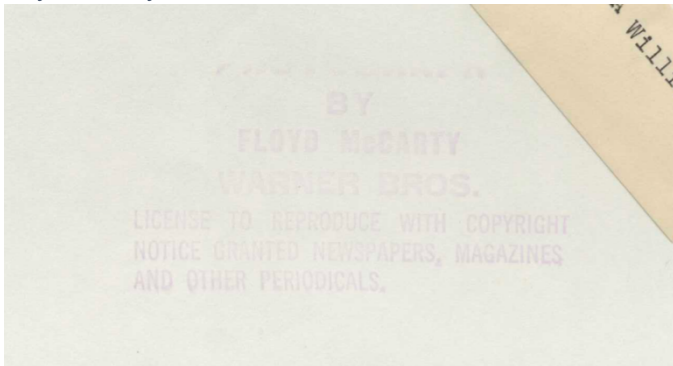


Figure 10, back of Photo #1, zoomed in on stamp



Figure 11, *Sayonara* Promotional Photo #2, shot by Bert Six

photographers hire for these candid shots. Only one of the photos left is attributed to a Floyd McCarthy<sup>9</sup>, while the rest are stamped with the name Bert Six<sup>10</sup>. What solidifies this fact as taking place at different times is the difference

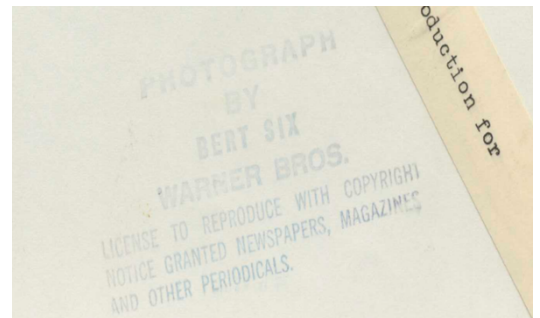


Figure 12, back of Photo #2, zoomed in on stamp

which contained a wealth of files from the storied screenwriter. Osborn is most commonly known for his screenplays for *South Pacific* (1958), and *East of Eden* (1955), but from what I could find in his personal files, it seemed that the uncommon scenario of a screenwriter having an active role in not only pre-production, but also production and post-production as well. The best evidence I found for this fact the bulk of post-production materials Osborn kept in his files aside from his previous script drafts and notes. But before I dove into the nitty gritty of those script drafts and personal discourses, I was immediately

drawn to those post-production artifacts, amounting to collections of used and unused promotional photos.

After a few minutes of sifting through the files, I quickly noticed that there was ample evidence of multiple photoshoots taking place. The most obvious indication of this fact was that there were different

<sup>9</sup> See Figure 10.

<sup>10</sup> See Figure 12.



in numbering conventions between the two different photographers' photos<sup>11</sup>. Another indication of this fact is the clear disparities in the tones of the pictures themselves. Between McCarthy and Six's attention to the capturing of the two leads, there is an obvious intent in creating varying degrees of explicit sexuality and sexual tension. In McCarthy's only remaining photo, it is the only one where Marlon Brando and Miiko Taka just about kiss, their lips practically



Figure 13, *Sayonara* Promotional Photo #3, shot by Bert Six



Figure 14, *Sayonara* Promotional Photo #4, shot by Bert Six

salivating as

they hover just over each other.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, Six's photoshoot has an increasing level of sexual tension, from none at all to slightly simmer, but never as explicit or overtly sexual as the first photoshoot.<sup>13</sup> Despite these clear differences, there is striking consistency that cannot be overlooked, how these photos are tagged. The exact same tag is attached to the back of each photo, in the exact same place<sup>14</sup>; this doesn't only imply that the same person labeled the back of each photo, but they were

<sup>11</sup> See Figure 9, numbers in bottom right corner.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Figures 11, 13, and 14.

<sup>14</sup> See Figures 15 and 16.

likely reviewed at the same time, likely by the same board of invested interests, and likely including Paul Osborn in some capacity. And the most self-evident proof of this fact is found on back of the fourth photo where a clear stamp of approval by the advertising code has chosen which one of these promotional photos gets to see not

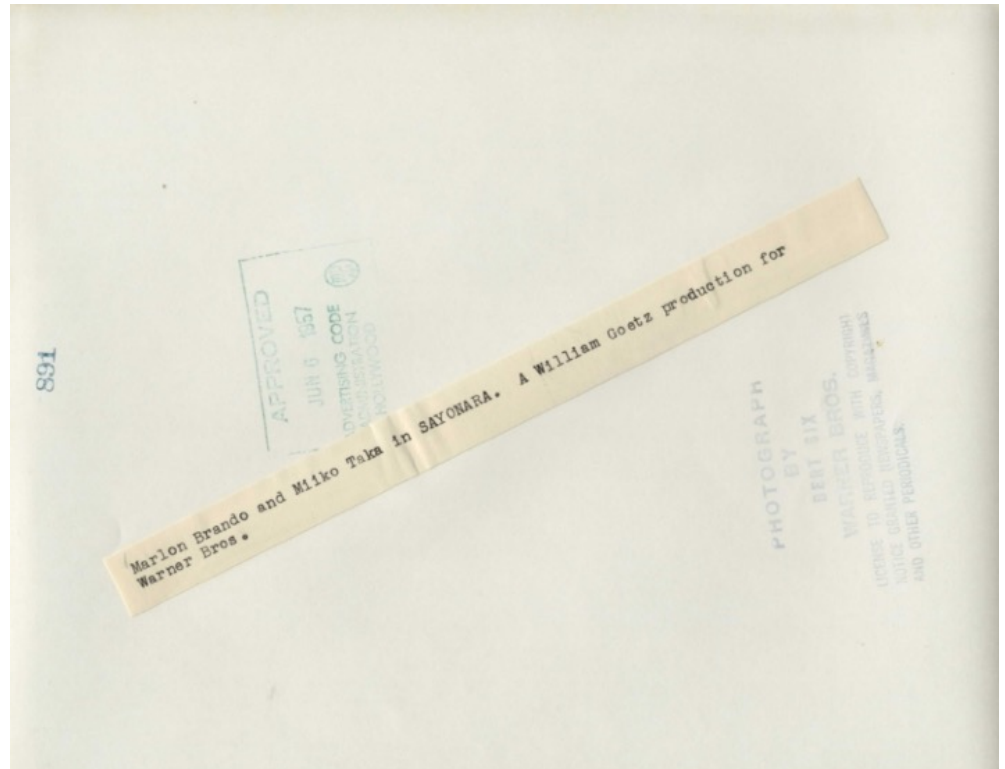


Figure 15, back of Photo #4

only the light of day, but the masses of the press as well.<sup>15</sup> But this choice has more to it than merely just being the most photogenic, it is the last in the series of Six's photos, it is the most sexually overt of his photoshoot. While it never gets as steamy or raunchy as McCarthy's hovering aftermath or anticipation of a kiss, it is a far cry from the Christmas

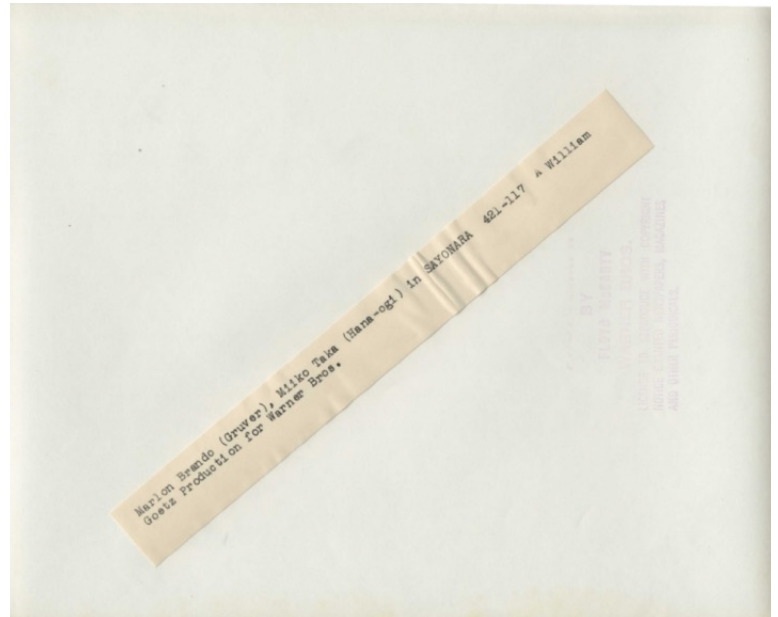


Figure 16, back of Photo #1, zoomed out

Card headshots found in the second photo. This pushing of the envelope as far as they could

<sup>15</sup> See Figure 15.

within the advertising code is an excellent example of the type of portrayal they wanted to capture in their film. They clearly wanted both leads to look good, sexy, and vulnerable but didn't want Brando to be lusting over her. In the same frame of mind, whoever was making decision what to send to the advertisers not clearly anticipate what they could and could not get away with, changes needing to be made in hiring a second photographer being more than evident in order to correct their over-sexualization of the leads.

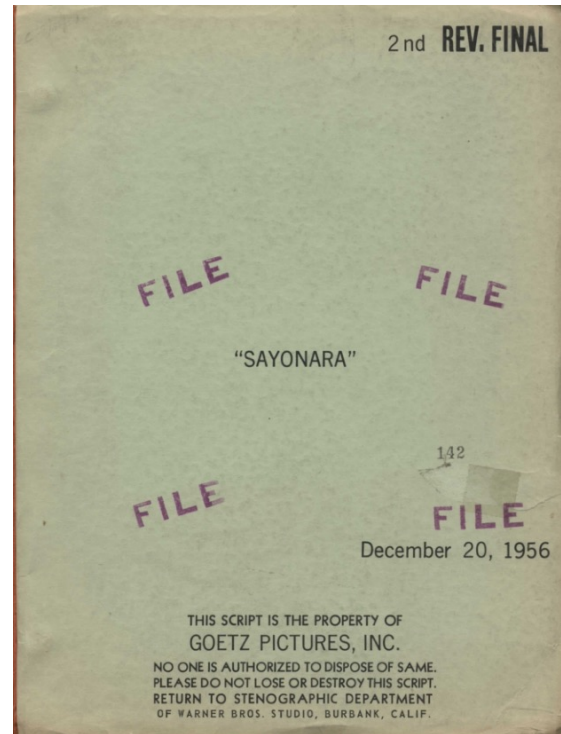


Figure 17, cover of *Sayonara* script final revision

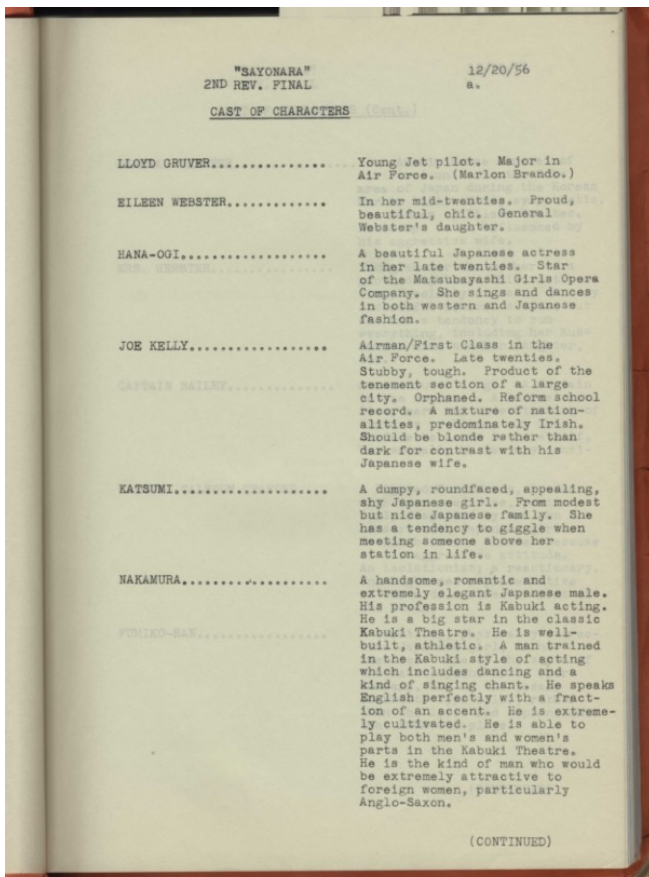


Figure 18, Cast of Characters page, final revision

But despite the clarity of the changes made in the photoshoot, the script offered fewer clear answers. As I began to dig into the pile of scripts, I soon realized I had to dig deeper due to the multiple versions and discrepancies between the scripts. But what I soon realized was that it was these discrepancies, these changes, that could ultimately lead me towards my objective of understanding the logic and probable intent behind their decisions. The first difference between the editions was the inclusion of a “cast of characters” page only found in the final revision. As the characters between editions have complete



overhauls as Osborn retooled and reworked his script, it makes sense that he waited to send out a detailed list of what each character needed until he was very set on the story's path. It is in these short character descriptions that much of his private intent to the producers, studios, and actors comes through. For example, the only character he goes into extensive background and requirements is Nakamura, interestingly a character that initially was under-utilized and often not referred to by name in earlier drafts as Osborn was still reworking this role. The long descriptions notes that this well-trained Kabuki actor should speak English perfectly, but with the caveat of "a fraction of an accent"<sup>16</sup> to make sure the audience knows that despite his looks, charm, and English, he's still a foreigner. The

heavy winded account also ends with the detail that the actor they should find for this role should be someone who'd be attractive to foreign women, "particularly Anglo-Saxon"<sup>17</sup> as if the

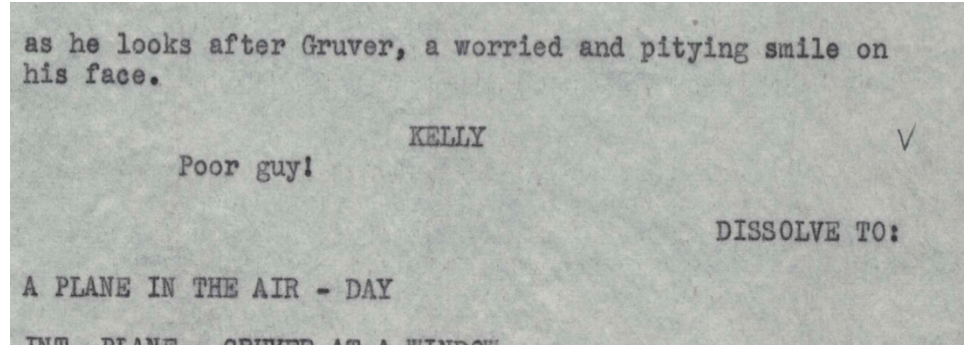


Figure 19, *Sayonara* draft, page 11.

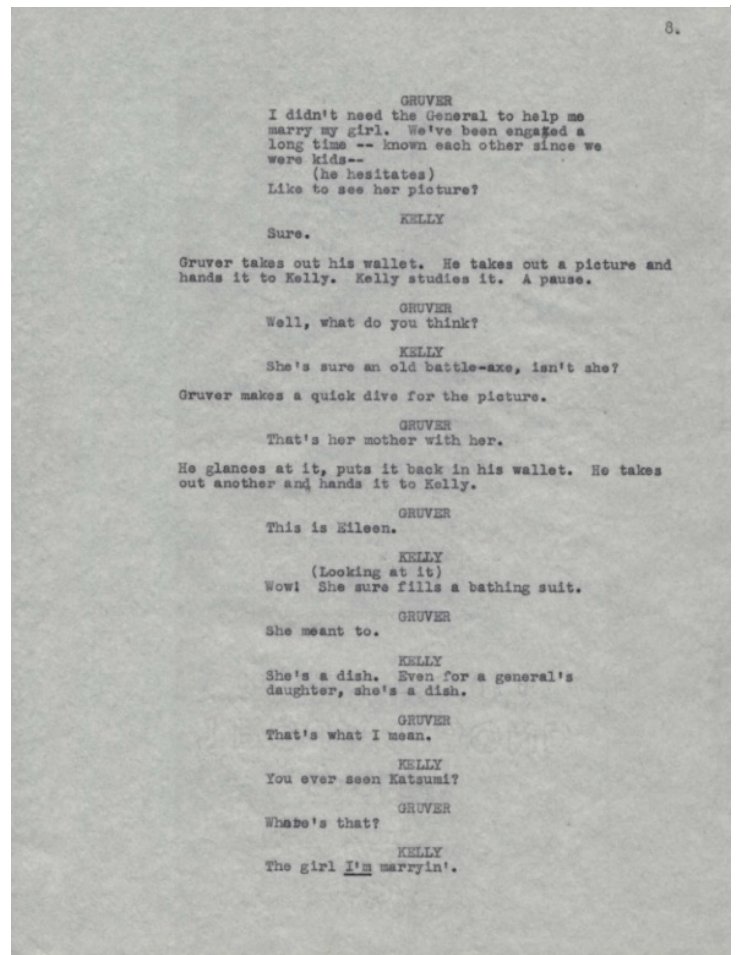


Figure 20, draft page 8.

<sup>16</sup> See Figure 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

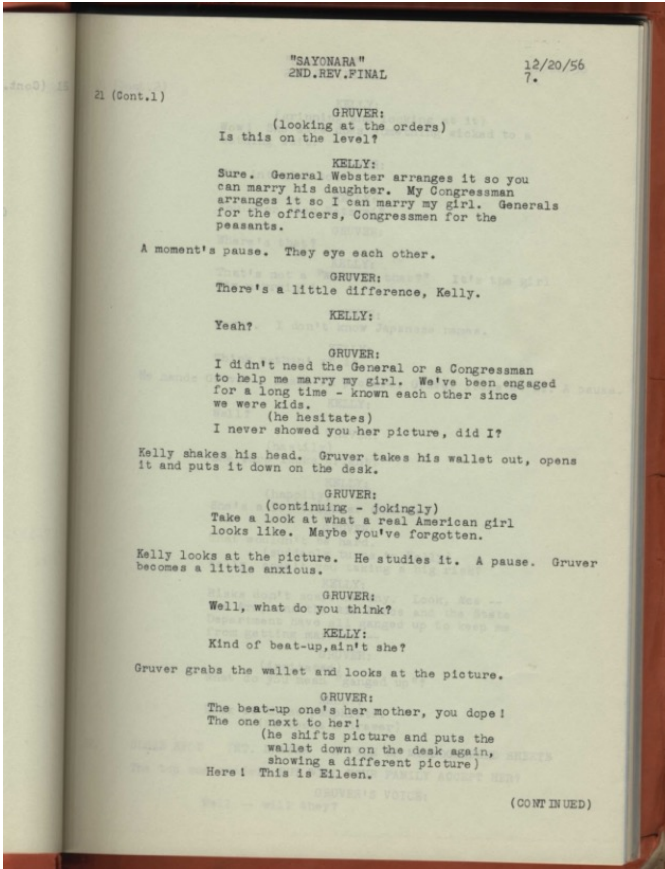


Figure 21, final revision page 7.

foreignness wasn't clear enough to the recipient of this script. But the exclusion of this casting page is comparatively easy to spot when considering all of the minute changes littered between these editions.

But to analyze these properly, I first had to discern

Osborn's style of editing and revision, I

needed clues to understand

where the changes were

and how he

made them if I was to attempt to know why he made them.

By scouring the pages of an early draft, I noticed Osborn had a habit of writing in X's and checks with his pen to highlight moments. I initially thought the X's meant he

wanted to remove something, and check meant that something was working well. I soon realized my hunch was incorrect when I compared it to the final revision. The real consistency between these two notations was the these were moments he wanted to check back on, both needing some reworking, in the final version. An example of this can be found on page 11 of draft where

Osborn left a check on a moment, he liked but ended up deleting the line from the revision.<sup>18</sup>

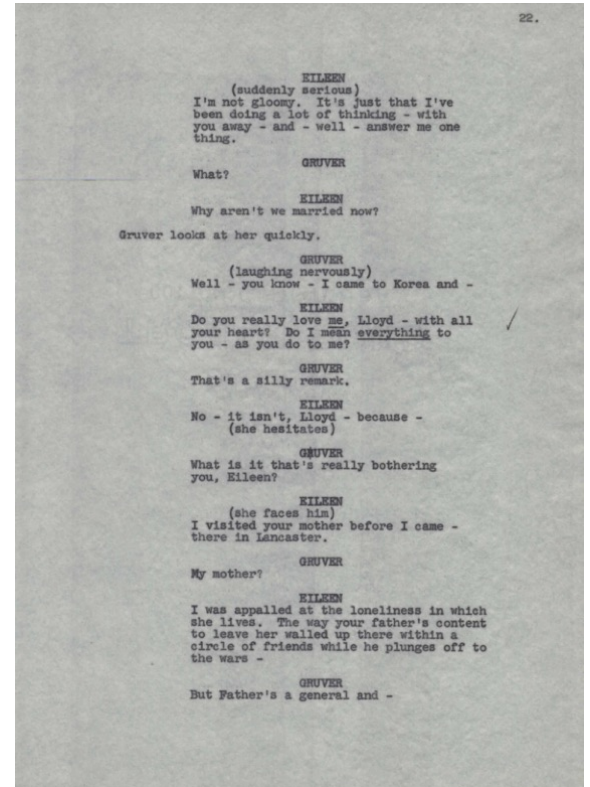


Figure 22, draft page 22.

<sup>18</sup> See Figure 19.



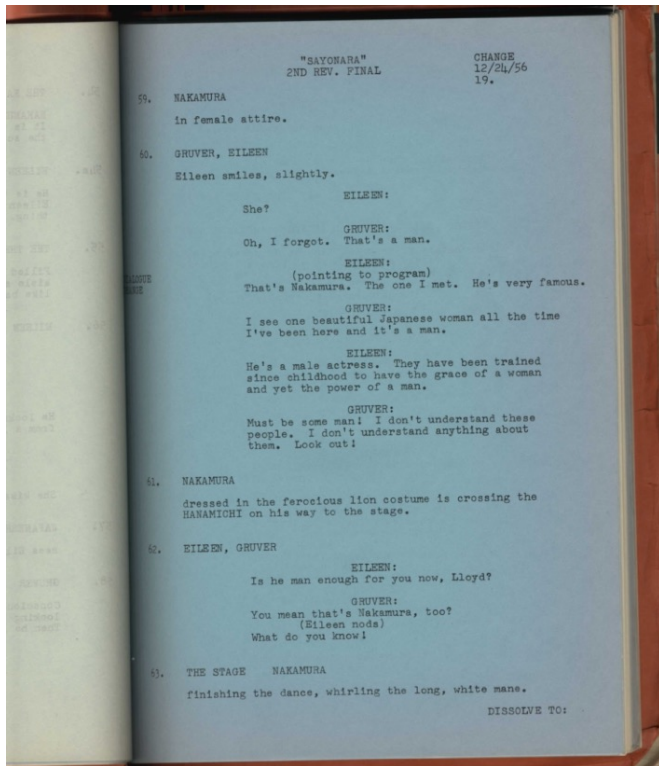


Figure 23, final revision page 19.

Brando shares a very by the numbers small talk with Kelly about his fiancée.<sup>19</sup> In the final revision, Osborn inserts the more pointed line for Brando: “Take a look at what a real American girl looks like. Maybe you’ve forgotten.”<sup>20</sup> This more direct and overt statement of the themes of the film through Brando can be seen as an overall change throughout the final revision. Another example of this change is in the flushing out of Nakamura’s character. In the

early draft, Gruver and Eileen overtly discuss the troubles of their relationship at the Kabuki

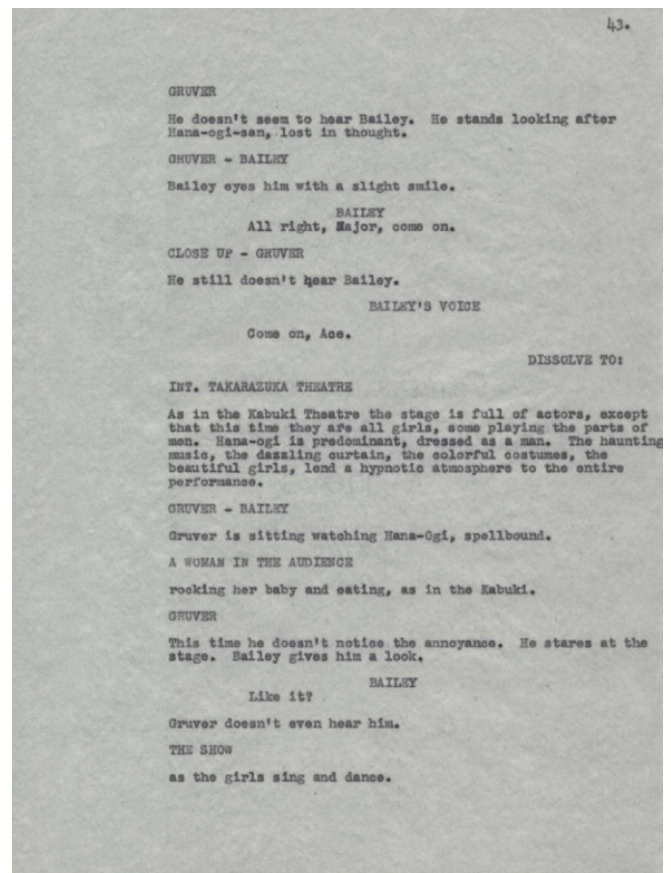


Figure 24, draft page 44.

Knowing this, I tried to double back and check and scene that had this, even if the line that was noted was changed itself as Osborn would not limit himself to changing just what he noted. An early moment where this unmarked change occurs in an early scene between Gruver and Kelly. In the original version of this scene,

<sup>19</sup> See Figure 20.

<sup>20</sup> See Figure 21.

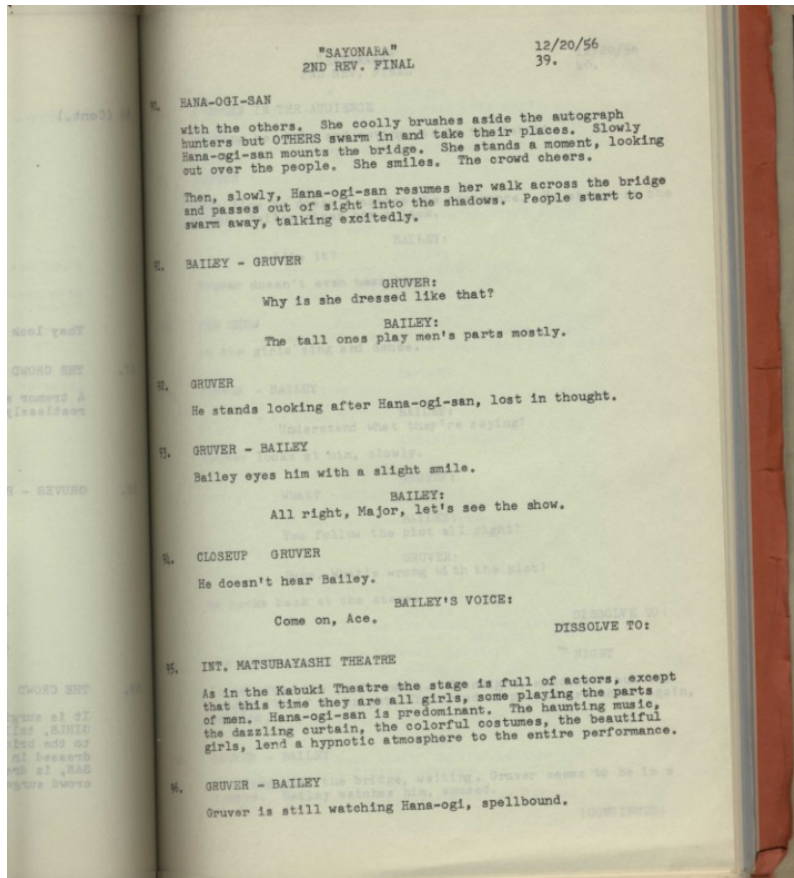


Figure 25, final revision 39.

theater.<sup>21</sup> Most of the exoticism of the setting falls away and the rift forming between them is the emphasis of the scene. By the time of the final draft, the emphasis has completely shifted to not only capturing the setting, but the character of Nakamura. The draft contains a check mark on the line “do you really love me,”<sup>22</sup> which has been moved to a different point in the film. The final draft was completely

reworked and frames this scene all around the performance, with Gruver’s enamoring with the production being the new paramount objective of the scene. With new lines like “is he man enough for you”<sup>23</sup> being one of the few consistencies left behind. But the intent of the reorientation of this scene as not as clear cut as the next scene I happened upon. The draft and final version treatment the introduction of Hana-Ogi have the clearest change in intent over the course of the film’s preproduction phase. In the draft, Brando is directed to show little interest, investment or understanding in the performance.<sup>24</sup> It is meant to seem foreign and strange to his character. But the final revision completely changes the moment to one of an unbreakable,

<sup>21</sup> See Figure 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See Figure 23.

<sup>24</sup> See Figure 24.

seductive trancelike state. Osborn notes that Brando should be “lost in thought”<sup>25</sup> and more importantly “spellbound.”<sup>26</sup> It is this seduction that is the most telling change I found between the scripts; it definitively shows a conscious effort not only by Osborn but by all the invested interests in the project to actively work on crafting a seductive portrayal of its Japanese characters.

It was these insights I gained from the Osborn papers that started make the oddities of the grindhouse self-effacing make more sense. The changes made in pre- and post-production in both films was in service of carefully tailoring a presentation of Asian-ness to American audience. Both films attempted to capitalize on and commercialize a hyperbolic, exaggerated, and often seductive allure of the far east for western audiences. But the main difference between the two films distanced by so many degrees of separation in time, space, genre, audience and endless other categories, is in the fact of who was supervising these works. Just as both Simkowski and Osborn both guided a long-standing tradition of yellow-effacing and Orientalism in their representations, the work behind Goldig’s production aimed to reappropriate this reality to sell it back to America. With all of the over-the-top sequences, non-sequiturs, red herrings, and nonsensical conventions of the Kung Fu grindhouse experience, there is an inescapable reality that these films aimed deliberately recreate the yellow-facing, erasing and effacement found in classical Hollywood. This recreation in an “authentic” setting created these power trip and adventure fantasies whereby the insanity of it all, the leaning into stereotypes becomes a tongue in cheek, winking, cash grab that built an underground empire of schlock. And it is the legacy of this leaning into stereotype that has paved the way for a reappropriation of these campy tropes established by grindhouse into a means of empowerment for APIDA creators today.

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<sup>25</sup> See Figure 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

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