

STAGE AND SCREAM: THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL JAPANESE THEATER,  
CULTURE, AND AESTHETICS ON JAPAN'S CINEMA OF THE FANTASTIC

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Although widely viewed in the West, Japanese films are often misunderstood, as they are built on cultural, theatrical, and aesthetic traditions entirely foreign to Western audiences. Particularly in regards to Japan's "fantastic" cinema – including giant monster pictures, ghost stories, and "J-Horror" films – what is often perceived as "cheap" or "cheesy" is merely an expression of these unique cultural roots. By observing and exploring such cultural artifacts as *kabuki*, *noh*, and *bunraku* – the traditional theatrical forms of Japan – long-standing literary traditions, deeply embedded philosophical beliefs, and even more recent developments such as the controversial dance form *butoh*, these films, including *Gojira* (1954), *Daimajin* (1966), *Kwaidan* (1964), *Onibaba* (1964), *Testuo the Iron Man* (1989), and *Ju-On* (2002), can be placed in their proper perspective, leading to a reevaluation of their worth not merely as commercial products, but as uniquely Japanese expressions of that society's unique place in world culture.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

To someone raised on the prevalent aesthetics and cultural background of the West, Eastern art – be it the beautiful and minimalist rendering of a Chinese brush painting, the microtonal structure of an Indian *raga*, or the starkly realized look of the Japanese art of *ukiyo-e*, or woodblock print – is often perceived as entirely alien. As much as we can appreciate the beauty and the craftsmanship of such works, we are largely kept at a distance from them due to a lack of understanding of the cultural precepts that underlie their origins. Worse yet, in an effort to embrace them, we tend to equate them to familiar, Western forms of art, which diminishes their unique outlook and artistry.

Indeed, cinema, like any other art form, is deeply entrenched in the larger cultural, political, and historical context in which it is made, and this context informs both the way in which a particular film is produced as well as the way in which its intended audience negotiates with and decodes it. Although meaning is ultimately subject to decoding and interpretation – a highly subjective act – it is important to examine, or at least understand, to the extent possible, the cultural and aesthetic coding, both conscious and unconscious, that underlies the text and its production. By examining the ideologies and assumptions upon which a particular film is based, that text can reveal new and hitherto unrealized meanings, leading not only to a better understanding of the work in question, but also to a better understanding of the culture or society that produced it. This approach is increasingly important in an ever-expanding international society, in which the unique nature of individual cultures can easily be overlooked in favor of a more global interpretation of culture in which physical accessibility equals cultural accessibility. In other words, many assume that because they can physically possess a DVD of a subtitled



Japanese film, the film in question is instantly accessible to them, without requiring a prior knowledge of Japanese culture, customs, beliefs, etc., leading to the belief that “film is film,” no matter its point of origin. Simply because the technological requirements of film in America and film in Japan are similar does not mean that the films made with the same equipment are similar in content, meaning, style, or presentation. In erasing the boundaries of accessibility, we also risk erasing the unique voice with which each culture speaks.

In the same way, we would never assume that the works of William Shakespeare are easily conflatable with those of Stephen King, even though both are producers of works in English, and sometimes treat similar subject matter (both deal with ghosts, supernatural creatures, etc.), as they are products of two very different times and cultures, and each reflect the society in which they live and work. We can appreciate both Shakespeare and King, but to fully do so requires an understanding of the context in which their works were born. Similarly, we must then approach Japanese films with an understanding for, and an appreciation of, such underlying values as Buddhist and Shinto beliefs and practices, Japanese history and culture, and even Eastern aesthetics, in order to gain a greater understanding of their cinematic texts.

It should be noted that, although the term “Eastern aesthetics” is used in a general sense to differentiate it from the aesthetic system that dominates Western culture, the aesthetic traditions of, say, China, Japan, and India – all broadly lumped under the term “Eastern” – are markedly different. This project focuses on the traditional aesthetics found in Japan, and therefore the term “Eastern aesthetics” refers to that culture, unless otherwise noted.

And so, when approaching these Eastern art forms, one is perhaps best served by approaching them on their own terms, considering and regarding those elements unique to their culture of origin, in order to fully appreciate the final product. A painting, for example, is not a

mere picture, but a work of art imbued with the cultural values of the artist who created it. There are profound differences between, say, Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, widely considered to be one of the greatest works of Western art ever created, and Katsushika Hokusai's *36 Views of Mount Fuji: Back of a Wave on the Open Sea off Kanagawa*, an iconic image from the Japanese *ukiyo-e* tradition.



**Figure 1: L – *Mona Lisa* [c. 1503-1506] by Leonardo DaVinci (collegeart.org); R – *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* [c. 1830-1833] by Katsushika Hokusai (flickr.com).**

Both works embody the aesthetic values of their respective cultures, and resist direct comparison. While those raised in a Western tradition might find Hokusai's work overly simplistic and lacking in realistic detail, Eastern eyes might look at DaVinci's masterpiece and see an overly photographic work, lacking any semblance of poetry. Of course, taking works of art like these at face value misses some of the more interesting aspects or discourses that abound in a study of the culture that produced them.

Film, as one of the most modern art forms, must be approached in the same way. Unfortunately, the process of appreciation is often complicated by the necessity of translation and, often, adaptation. Unlike a painting or a print that is made up entirely of images and

therefore needs no translation (as opposed to interpretation), films made during the sound era require either subtitling or dubbing to be made comprehensible to a foreign audience. As seen in the releases of early Godzilla films, producers additionally felt that it was necessary to edit and change the actual work in order to make it palatable to American viewers. By doing this, they not only changed the basic structure of the film, but also, perhaps inadvertently, caused a clash of aesthetic styles that was difficult to reconcile. When watching *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956), for example – the American version of Ishiro Honda’s film, recut and edited by Terry Morse, the director of the segments featuring Raymond Burr – one is buffeted between Honda’s scenes, filmed from an Eastern perspective, and Morse’s, filmed by someone schooled and raised in the West. The result is, at best, disjointed and confusing to both sides.

The larger problem, however, is that, by “adapting” works from one culture to another, the impression is created that “film is film,” and that all film, no matter its culture of origin, is, at its core, the same. As noted earlier, this fails to consider the cultural referents that underlie the film, and the traditions, philosophies, and values that a particular creator brings to his or her work. In order to fully understand a film, or any piece of art, for that matter, one must consider its place of origin and all that that implies: the religious, political, and cultural influences that existed at the time of the work, as well as the conditions under which the film was made.

Before diving into the heart of this project – the way in which traditional Japanese theater, culture, and aesthetics has influenced that country’s cinema of the fantastic – it’s essential to provide some background on a number of topics, including the history of Japanese cinema, Eastern vs. Western aesthetics and the specific qualities that make Japanese art unique. The basics of Buddhism and Shinto – the philosophical systems that form the foundation of Japanese thought and culture – and the nature of Japan’s traditional theatrical forms, specifically

the way in which those forms differ from their Western counterparts, are all thoroughly considered. In short, it is necessary to enter into a Japanese frame of mind in order to fully appreciate the Japanese films that are discussed. By providing this background, the correlations seen in following chapters is made much clearer.

Surprisingly, little, if anything, has been written on the way in which traditional Japanese theater, aesthetics, literature, and culture have influenced the Japanese cinema of the fantastic, requiring research into a number of different areas in order to bring together the various branches of this thesis. The process has been very much like the way in which one goes about assembling a jigsaw puzzle: piece by piece until the overall picture begins to finally emerge and take shape.

As a glance at the bibliography shows, research spanned a vast number of books and articles on a variety of topics, making it impossible to discuss all of them here. A few outstanding examples must suffice. Perhaps the book closest in spirit to this thesis is Keiko I. McDonald's *Japanese Classical Theater in Films*, an examination into the way in which such classic Japanese movies as *Yokinojo henge (An Actor's Revenge, 1963)*, *Kanawa (The Iron Crown, 1972)*, based on the *noh* play *Kanawa* by Zeami), and *Yoru no tsuzumi (Night Drum, 1958)*, based on the *bunraku* play *Horikawa nami no tsuzumi* by Chikamatsu) reflect the influence of *kabuki*, *noh*, and *bunraku* respectively. McDonald's understanding of these theatrical forms is deep and broad, and she provides valuable insights into the way stage and screen intersect and overlap. As she says in her introduction:

...I would like to break new ground by charting the influence of Japanese classical theater on its national cinema and assess the consequences for filmic art. I do hope that one of the pleasures this book has to offer is a heightened awareness in the West of the contributions made by Japanese classical theater to a cinematic tradition already known worldwide for its outstanding achievements and unique character. (McDonald, 9)

I could not have stated the overall goal of this current project any more succinctly or eloquently.

The history and customs of Japan's classical stage is well documented, with Faubion Bowers' *Japanese Theater*, Earle Ernst's *The Kabuki Theater*, and Donald Keene's *No [sic] and Bunraku* being perhaps the most helpful in developing an understanding of these ancient and time-honored forms. Bowers' background is particularly interesting, as he served as Censor of the Theater during the American Occupation of Japan from 1947-48, giving him first-hand and intimate knowledge of Japan's dramatic traditions; therefore, his text is particularly insightful and informative. In *Japanese Theater*, he provides a detailed history of *kabuki*, *bunraku*, and *noh*, complete with comprehensive discussions of the aesthetics of the forms and insights regarding the ways in which these forms have interacted and grown together over the centuries.

Japanese cinema is another area that does not lack for documentation. The key work in this area is, unquestionably, Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie's *The Japanese Film: Art & Industry*, a magnificent history of cinema in Japan from its very earliest days. Unfortunately, as the book was written in 1959, its coverage of films after that point is sparse, even in the expanded edition. Nevertheless, Anderson and Richie succeed in painting a compelling portrait of a cinematic tradition that evolved in a very different way from its Western counterpart. Their coverage of Japanese cinema's silent era, particularly the phenomenon of the *benshi*, is, in particular, quite exacting, allowing for a deep understanding of this often overlooked corner of film history. Although frustratingly small – at a mere 102 pages – Donald Richie's *Japanese Cinema: An Introduction* handily fills in the gaps left by his earlier publication with Anderson. A more complete picture of Japanese cinema to the present day is provided by Noel Burch in *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, although Burch, taking a Marxist approach to his subject, argues that the aesthetic values that arose in Japan's cinema

stem from artistic traditions established in the ninth and twelfth centuries. He also asserts that the medium of film in that country remained “pure” – untouched by foreign influence – until after World War II, an assertion that has been challenged by many critics of his work as historically dubious. In discussing the earliest days of moving pictures, he does, however, identify an important difference between Western and Japanese films, when he talks about, “[the] fundamental incompatibility between the West's developing 'codes of illusionism' and Japanese indifference to 'illusionism' in the Western sense" (Burch, 66). Here he is referring to the way in which both cultures approach the representation of reality, and what value they place on such a representation. This is an important distinction, and I will discuss it shortly. Isolde Standish's *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*, is a solid cultural study of Japan's national cinema which considers the influence of both history and politics on the development of the film industry. Taking a thematic approach, Standish explores the relationship between cinema and such ideas as gender, modernity, transgression, and political ideology, pinpointing the ways in which prevailing culture helped to shape the new artistic medium of film.

As well-documented as Japanese cinema is on the whole, the cinema of the fantastic treated in the current document has received much less consideration. Anderson and Richie, for example, dispose of *Gojira* – and, indeed, the entire *dai kaiju*, or giant monster genre – in a single page; Richie's slim book mentions the King of the Monsters not at all, an omission echoed in both Burch and Standish. Stuart Kenneth Galbraith IV has written several volumes on this topic, the most interesting being his *Japanese Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films*, an extensive survey of movies in this genre that takes a more academic, critical tone, but sadly consists of little more than capsule discussions of a large number of films.

To be sure, books have been written about *Gojira* and the ensuing wave of *dai kaiju* films, but many of these tend to be written from a fan perspective, making them largely unsuitable for academic research. William Tsutsui's *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of the Monsters*, and his collection of academic articles, *In the Footsteps of Godzilla*, are far and away the best books on the subject for the purposes of this project, as the author, dean of the Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University, brings a degree of academic rigor to his work, even though the book is clearly written for the mass-market. He therefore manages the seemingly impossible task of presenting academically insightful material in a popular form. His chapter on "Understanding the Monster," for example, draws on a number of theoretical and critical writings about both *Gojira* specifically and *dai kaiju* in general in an attempt to get beyond the typical rhetoric of "Godzilla represents the atomic bomb" that is as far as most Godzilla fans go. Instead, Tsutsui explores themes of nationalism, militarism, Japan's post-War relationship with America, and even psychoanalysis and Marxism in order to reach an understanding of the appeal and meaning of this 50+- year-old media superstar. Throughout the book, it's clear that Tsutsui has seriously considered his subject, and his insights are a welcome addition to a field that has been largely ignored by the academic community.

In other areas, Nancy Hume's volume *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader* has proven invaluable in beginning a journey of understanding regarding a wholly foreign philosophy of art. Within that volume, Donald Keene's article on "Japanese Aesthetics," and J. Thomas Rimer's "Japanese Literature: Four Polarities," for example, provide an essentially elementary introduction to the basic principles of the aesthetic qualities that are at the base of virtually all Japanese art, from painting and poetry to literature and film. Most usefully, they point out the differences between Western and Japanese art and artforms, positioning Japanese

art as a unique cultural artifact instead of merely an “Eastern” version of something already established in the West. In other words, from their perspective, Japanese court poetry of the sixteenth century, although it may bear certain similarities to Western court poetry of the same era, is an entirely separate phenomenon, and deserves consideration as such, an important point that this current work hopes to reinforce. Additionally, Makoto Ueda’s “Zeami on the Art of the No [*sic*] Drama: Imitation, *Yugen*, and Sublimity” is a brilliant distilling of the treatises of Zeami – providing a primer that outlines the basic arguments of Zeami’s theories of drama – and is also an excellent introduction to the often murky subject of *yugen* (a concept discussed in greater detail later in this project). All were particularly useful introductory texts for a critical portion of this project, and offered much-needed jumping-off points for further study. As well, both Motohisa Yamakage’s *The Essence of Shinto: Japan’s Spiritual Heart*, and Sokyo Ono’s *Shinto: The Kami Way* provided an introduction to a faith that, while little-known here in the West, became an important lens of understanding for much of this project.

Mention should also be made of the writings of Lafcadio Hearn, a Westerner who lived in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and who set about passionately collecting Japanese folklore and documenting Japanese customs. As someone who lived and worked in the country during the Meiji period, Hearn provides a valuable key to unlocking the Japanese national psyche through its culture, its legends, and its folkloric beliefs. For us in the West, Hearn makes available a body of literature of which we would no doubt otherwise be wholly ignorant, and allows us to make connections across the centuries with literature and film that would otherwise doubtless remain obscure. As a bridge between the East and West, anyone interested in researching the culture and customs of traditional Japan owes Hearn a significant debt of gratitude.



## A Brief History of Japanese Cinema

To truly understand the unique nature of Japanese cinema, it is necessary to consider one of the most significant moments in Japan's long and storied history: the Meiji Restoration and the opening of Japan to the West.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), Japan had largely cut itself off from foreign trade and influence, almost entirely promoting a policy of isolationism that saw a ban on foreign literature and travel, and the suppression of Christianity, which had been introduced to the country in 1542 with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries. Although these restrictions would be moderated over the 250 years that the Tokugawa shogunate ruled the land, Japan remained a highly insular society at this time, developing its own arts and literature in a period marked by peace and prosperity, as well as the rise of the new middle class, now untroubled by the devastating period of civil war that had marked earlier days.

In time, however, foreign nations such as Russia and America pressured the Japanese government to open their ports, an idea that became popular with the Japanese people as they recognized the West's advances in science, technology, and military might. In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry, an officer in the U.S. Navy, landed near Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and demanded that the country be opened to the West. When the country's leaders refused, and asked him to sail to the port at Nagasaki, where very limited trade with the Netherlands was allowed, Perry refused, and threatened to level the town with his overwhelming firepower until his demands were met, and actually opened fire on several buildings. Knowing that they could not resist, the Japanese capitulated, and allowed Perry to land, at which point he presented to them a letter from President Millard Fillmore outlining his desire for a trade treaty between Japan and America. After sailing for China, Perry returned to Japan in 1854 – with twice the number of ships – and

signed the Convention of Kanagawa, ensuring trade relations between the two countries and effectively ending 200 years of Japan's self-imposed isolation. However, the resulting social upheaval – many believed that the treaties were unfavorable to Japan, and supported the overthrow of the shogun and the restoration of the Emperor as a result – quickly led to the dissolution of the shogunate and the end of the Tokugawa-dominated Edo period.

In 1868, the Meiji period dawned – typically referred to as the Meiji Restoration, as it saw the restoration of imperial power in the person of the Emperor Meiji, power that had been largely held by the shoguns for generations – a period marked by an increasing Western influence in Japan. It was during this time, as well, that Japonism – a fascination with all things Japanese or Oriental in art, literature, décor, etc. – took hold in the West, as Japanese trade goods began to reach European and American shores. Painters such as Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Claude Monet all drew inspiration from the art of the Japanese woodblock print, or *ukiyo-e*, adapting its illustrative, simply-rendered nature, as well as its subject matter, for their own use.

As much as the West was fascinated with the arts and culture of Japan, that interest was no less felt in the East. Japanese people quickly adopted Western clothing styles, and foreign words began to creep into the Japanese language for the first time. One of the most significant Western artifacts to make it to the Land of the Rising Sun, however, was the motion picture camera.

One of the earliest surviving examples of a “motion picture” is *Roundhay Garden Scene* (1888), approximately 24 frames of film showing a group of people walking around a garden. The Edison Studio released its first short film, *Monkeyshines No. 1*, in 1890, kicking off a long series of films that would, in many ways, drive the development of the industry.

It didn't take long for this exciting new technology to cross the Pacific. The first Kinetoscopes reached Japan in 1896, just two years after making their American debut. The following year saw the arrival of the Cinématographe Lumière and the Edison Vitascope, each accompanied by an assortment of films, including such popular Western productions as *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895) and *L'Arrivée d'un Train a La Ciotat* (1896). As fascinated as the Japanese people were by the phenomenon of moving pictures, they were equally entranced by the technology involved. Indeed, it was not unheard of for performances to be given in which the projector was situated at one end of the stage, with the screen at the other. Granted, this made it difficult for the audience to view the picture being shown, but gave them an excellent view of the operation of the projector, which required a small army to run<sup>1</sup>.

An important component of the early Japanese silent film industry was the *benshi*, a sort of narrator-explainer, whose job it was to provide interpretation of the action on the screen for the benefit of an audience largely unfamiliar with Western customs. The role of the *benshi* is not unlike that of the *yoruri* found in the *bunraku* theater, who serves as the storyteller, not only setting the scene but providing individual character voices, or the narrator that often accompanied magic lantern shows of nineteenth century America. The *benshi* quickly became the uncontested star of these early performances, his name frequently presented in bigger letters than even the name of the picture. Not surprisingly, the *benshi* became immensely powerful in the early days of the Japanese film industry, resisting any development – especially the coming of synchronized sound or even the introduction of interstitial title cards – that would threaten

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<sup>1</sup> According to Anderson and Richie, “There was a handle-turner to crank the film through the machine, a lens-focuser, a reel-rewinding man, a man to look at the screen and make sure everything was going well, a man to adjust the carbon arcs, a man to thread the machine between reels, a general supervisor, a boy to fan those working around the hot projector, and several others whose duties were not specified” (Anderson & Richie, 22).

their position, a situation that would have major ramifications for the development of cinema in Japan over the next several decades.

The first motion picture camera came to Japan in 1897, with the first native films released in the following year. Like their Western counterparts, the earliest efforts reproduced scenes of everyday life, but also included filmed versions of two popular *kabuki* dramas – *Maple Viewing* and *Two People at Dojo Temple* – both helmed by Tsunekichi Shibata. With the success of Shibata’s efforts, others quickly followed, and soon several film production companies were established. In the earliest days of Japan’s national cinema, the vast majority of pictures were filmed records of theatrical events, and served as little more than illustrations for the *benshi* to narrate. But Japanese films were quick to evolve, both by adopting the developing cinematic grammar of Western films as well as by the efforts of such innovative minds as Tanaka Eizo , one of the first Japanese directors to effectively use close-up shots; Kaeriyama Norimasu, who consciously brought a more “Western” style of filmmaking to his craft, including a variety of shot lengths, realistic acting styles, editing techniques inspired by the work of D.W. Griffith, and perhaps most importantly, the use of actual female actors<sup>2</sup> for female roles; and Osanai Kaoru, one of the founders of the Shingeki tradition of realistic drama and the director of *Rojo no reikon* (*Souls on the Road*, 1921), the film that many scholars acknowledge as the true starting point of Japanese cinema due to its seamless blending of both Eastern and Western cinematic techniques.

And then, on September 1, 1923, at 11:58 a.m., disaster struck in the form of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Registering a massive 7.9 on the Richter Scale, this devastating quake virtually obliterated Tokyo and Yokohama, and severely damaged a number of surrounding prefectures, causing as many as 150,000 casualties. For the film industry, centered in Tokyo as it

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<sup>2</sup> As opposed to *onnagata*, or male actors impersonating females, a holdover from the *kabuki* stage.

was, the result was significant. Not only were the vast majority of films made before that date lost for all time, but production of *jidaigeki* (historical or period films) moved to Kyoto, as the antique architecture provided ready-made “sets” for these films, while *gendaigeki*, or films of contemporary life, remained in Tokyo. As well, the aftermath of the quake saw an increased demand for films, as people flocked to the cinema in order to gain respite from the horrors of the devastation they saw all around them.

Cinema flourished in Japan in the 1920s, with native pictures playing side-by-side with European imports, a period that gave rise to perhaps Japan’s first great director, Kenji Mizoguchi, whose career behind the camera began with 1923’s *Ai ni yomigaeru hi*, a *shimpa*, or “new school” – meaning realistic rather than historical – melodrama. During this time, German Expressionism was a popular genre, particularly in the cosmopolitan city of Tokyo. But although Western productions continued to be shown in Japan, including such silent epics as D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), the Japanese film industry was slow to pick up the advances in film grammar such pictures demonstrated, long retaining the stage-bound quality that characterized the medium’s earliest days. Early experiments in both synchronized sound and the use of subtitles likewise failed, opposed as they were by the powerful *benshi*.

Progress refused to be denied, however, and by the mid-1930s, Japanese films had learned to speak, following in the footsteps of their Western counterparts. This period of growth was also seen in the new tendency of Japanese films to undertake messages of social criticism, as filmmakers examined the shortcomings of Japanese government and society, a direction spurred on by a crushing depression and the rising popularity of Marxism. Mizoguchi, for example, made two films in 1929 – *Tokyo koshinkyoko* (*Tokyo March*) and *Tokai kokyogaku* (*Metropolitan Symphony*) – which contrasted the lives of working class individuals with those of the wealthy;

in the following year, director Suzuki Shigeyoshi released *Naze kanao o so saseta ka* (*What Made Her Do It?*), a hard-edged film spotlighting a poor girl's cruel mistreatment at the hands of a cold and uncaring society. Much like Warner Brothers' "social problem" films of the 1930s, Japan's film industry cast a critical eye on its own society in these *keiko-eiga*, or "tendency films," and used what it saw as grist for the cinematic mill.

But unlike American cinema, this period of political outspokenness was to be all too short-lived. By 1937, the formerly authoritarian, now totalitarian, Japanese government exercised almost complete control over the film industry and banned the making of not only *keiko-eiga*, but all realistic, and hence critical, historical and period films as well. As was the case in Italy and Germany, the Japanese government during this time turned the film industry into a propaganda tool, and severely curtailed the importation of Western pictures (those that did make it through were savagely censored). This was the era of *senikyoyo-eiga*, or "national policy films," designed to promote Japan's militaristic policies. Beginning in 1939, the newly-passed Motion Picture Law required that all films produced in Japan be *senikyoyo-eiga*. Consequently, the number of native films produced dropped precipitously, from around five hundred features per year in the 1930s, to roughly half that in 1941, and bottoming out at a mere 26 in 1945.

This trend, of course, came to an end with the American Occupation of Japan following V-J Day on August 14, 1945, although some would argue that the new laws regarding film were just as restrictive as those put in place by the fascist government. The American government instituted severe content restrictions, forbidding films that included such subjects as "feudal loyalty," – the focus of the *senikyoyo-eiga* – criticism of the United States and her allies, and any mention of censorship. Ideological control was the order of the day, a concept delineated in this

phrase from the *Basic Directive for Post Surrender Military Government in Japan Proper*, written by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and dated November 3, 1945:

Freedom of thought will be fostered by the dissemination of democratic ideals and principles through all available media of public information.

That freedom of thought, however, extended only as far as the occupying force was comfortable in allowing. In other words, the Japanese were free to think whatever they wanted, and to express themselves as they chose, as long as their thoughts and expressions were in line with the democratic ideals of their conquerors. As a result, Japanese scriptwriters at this time were reluctant even to show two characters bowing to each other, as it was feared that would be read as “anti-democratic,” leading to criticism that Japanese films could no longer portray Japanese people as they really were. In retrospect, it seems that the era of the national policy film was far from over; rather, it was merely that the policy itself had changed.

The Occupation ended when the Treaty of San Francisco took effect on April 28, 1952, marking the establishment once again of Japan as an independent nation. As such, the restrictions on filmmaking instituted by the Americans were lifted, but over the next several years, little actually changed in terms of the films being produced, as they still largely engaged in the new democratic forms and structures. The reason for this reluctance to produce more challenging pieces lies in the fact that Japan was, at this time, seeking re-entry into the world community, and was anxious to be seen, not as an aggressor, but as a friend and ally, especially by her former enemies. Wisely, the Japanese government was cognizant of the power of film, and worked to ensure its cinematic product would not unduly antagonize the rest of the world by overtly criticizing the Allied nations, especially America. Consequently, few films were made at this

time that overtly dealt with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki<sup>3</sup>, or with the experience of being occupied by a conquering nation.

Japan's ambition was realized in 1956, when they gained admittance to the United Nations. During this time, the country was experiencing what would come to be known as "The Golden Age of Japanese Cinema," marked by such masterful achievements as Akira Kurosawa's *Rashômon* (1950), *Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1954) and *Shichinin no samurai* (*The Seven Samurai*, 1954), Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu monogatari* (*Tales of the Moon and Rain*, 1953) and *Sansho dayu* (*Sansho the Bailiff*, 1953); Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1954) and *Ukikusa* (*Floating Weeds*, 1958); and Ishiro Honda's *Gojira* (*Godzilla*, 1954). In parallel with developments in the West, this period also saw the birth of Japan's "New Wave" movement in 1956, a movement that lasted far longer – extending well into the 1970s – than its Western counterparts. It is interesting to note that, where the French *Nouvelle Vague*, for example, began with studio outsiders, like Francois Truffaut, Alan Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol, the Japanese *nubero bagu* – as their "New Wave" movement was called – began with the studios themselves. During this challenging time, desperate executives were actively seeking new voices in order to appeal to a new audience and stave off the collapse of cinema that seemed imminent at the time due to the increasing prevalence of television, and the corresponding decrease in movie theater ticket sales.

Through the 1960s, and into the 1970s, the history of cinema in Japan closely paralleled that in America, with declining ticket revenues leading not only to widespread theater closures, but to the development of such niche genres as *pinku eiga*, a sort of soft-core porn which reportedly represented more than 40 percent of studio production in 1965 (Standish, 268), and

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<sup>3</sup> *Gojira* (1954) is a clever metaphor for the bombing and destruction suffered by the Japanese people, brilliantly disguised as a simple giant monster film.



the rise of independent, non-studio productions. This period of decline was checked in the early 1980s, a period that is treated in more detail in Chapter Four.

As this brief history shows, Japan's cinema has developed along its own path, based on its unique history and culture, resulting in a filmic tradition as deep and rich as that of any other nation. The cultural, literary, and theatrical traditions that underlie that cinema, as well as their specific effects on several selected films, is the focus of the rest of this project.

#### Eastern vs. Western Aesthetics

The concept of aesthetics has been developed over thousands of years. According to George Lansing Raymond, "Aesthetics is the science of the beautiful as exemplified in art" (Raymond, iv). In other words, the study of aesthetics is the logical and theoretical study of what a particular culture or people perceive as beautiful and pleasing, and why. That the interpretation of aesthetics should vary from nation to nation and culture to culture should be apparent, leading to the divergence in the concepts of beauty to be found between, say, Europe and the Far East.

The concepts embodied in the Western tradition of aesthetics largely originated in the works of Plato and Aristotle in the third and fourth centuries BCE. For Plato, and to a lesser extent Aristotle, everything that exists in the physical world is based on an idealized version, called a Form. For example, there exists, according to Plato, an ideal form of a "couch." When a craftsman makes a couch in the physical world, he aspires to that ideal, but cannot achieve it, making his effort an imperfect copy of that ideal Form. A painting of that same couch, it follows, is an imperfect copy of that imperfect copy. This distinction, according to Plato, is fraught with danger, as it could lead to a potentially maddening delusional state, entirely devoid of truth because it is many steps away from the ideal of the original Form. At its very best, he concluded, art was nothing but entertainment as it merely imitated the Forms of everyday life,

and therefore was not worthy of serious study. Fortunately, later theorists were not quite so dismissive.

These other theorists, then, building on Plato's work – particularly during the Renaissance – interpreted his concepts differently. It is possible, they said, for an artist to create a rendering that was truer to the ideal Form than could be found in nature, especially if that artist was divinely inspired. Therefore, to these artists, the idealized rendering of nature – as accurately, and more than accurately, as possible – was the goal and the ultimate aesthetic. With this construct came the emphasis on such important visual elements as proportion and perspective, both cornerstones of Western aesthetic theory. These elements would influence art and artists for millennia to come, and indeed, have formed the basis for our Western ideal of beauty and art. As Richard L. Anderson states, “No matter what divergent courses Western art theorists have followed, Western artists themselves have continually attached great importance to art's capacity to imitate the world around them...” (Anderson, 203). In film, this desire for realism was perhaps best articulated by André Bazin who advocated an emphasis on “objective reality” in cinema (achieved, he believed, through the use of wide shots and deep focus, among other techniques). Cinema, even more than photography, Bazin said in his landmark essay, “The Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image,” was the ultimate expression of the human craving for realism in art, as only the moving picture was able to fully capture reality in a way that would survive the passing of the creator, conferring upon him a sort of immortality, which he compares to ancient civilization's urge to mummify their dead in an attempt to preserve them beyond their natural lifespan. He says, “Today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose. It is no longer a question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal

destiny” (Bazin, 6). He goes on to identify the photographic image as “the object itself” (ibid, 8), unmediated by the hand of the artist, as a painted image necessarily is, again prioritizing the “realistic” photographic image over the “nonrealistic” painted image.

This, then, is the cultural underpinning of Western aesthetics: a desire to achieve art that is as “realistic,” as close to nature, as possible. Even Modernists – those artists that eschew traditional values of proportion, perspective, realistic anatomy, etc – show their understanding of, and indoctrination in, Western aesthetics by their conscious distancing from those basic principles. In order to effectively work against a system, one must first have thoroughly absorbed and understood that system.

Filmmakers participate in this aesthetic, crafting films that, in Bazinian terms, present “objective reality” on the motion picture screen. The “180 degree rule,” for example, which states that two elements in the same shot should always maintain the same left/right relationship to one another, is an attempt to recreate reality for the viewer, as is the traditional focus on shot-to-shot continuity. Even when creating a film in the fantasy or science fiction genre, like *Star Wars* (1977) or *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), an effort is made to mimic reality as far as possible, even when adding in such unnatural and fantastic elements as dragons, hobbits, Wookies, and Ewoks. When this is achieved, when reality is imitated so faithfully that the audience “cannot see the wires,” as it were, then the film in question is judged to be “good,” as it meets or exceeds the aesthetic expectations of our Western minds.

Japanese aesthetic tradition, however, developed along entirely different lines, with the influence of such religious and philosophical traditions as Shinto and Buddhism. While much of Japanese art takes natural settings, places, and events as its starting point, the emphasis has never been on a slavish recreation of reality. Instead, Japanese artists value such qualities as

suggestion, perishability, irregularity, and simplicity (Anderson, 192; Keene in Hume, 29) in their approach, concepts that are inextricably tied to these diverse philosophical traditions. As Beong-Cheon Yu notes in his examination of the *kaidan* (supernatural) literature of Lafcadio Hearn and its grounding in Japanese aesthetics and philosophy, "...the secret of art is not to copy the object realistically but to capture its soul..." (Yu, 66)<sup>4</sup>.

### Japanese Philosophical Traditions

Shinto<sup>5</sup> is the native religion of Japan, its establishment in the country predating the development of Japan's written language. It is, "...an authentic, indigenous spiritual tradition of the Japanese people" (Yamakage, 15). An animistic faith, Shinto is unlike other religions in that it has no central leaders and no established book or text. Nevertheless, the precepts of Shinto have become deeply ingrained in the cultural consciousness of the Japanese people, establishing some of their most deeply held traditions and beliefs. As Sokyo Ono notes, "...[Shinto] is an amalgam of attitudes, ideas, and ways of doing things that through two millennia and more have become an integral part of the *way* of the Japanese people" (Ono, 3).

At its core, Shinto is a nature-based faith, a philosophical construct that sees humanity's place in the world inextricably tied to their natural surroundings. According to Shinto belief, mankind's goal is to live in harmony with nature, not to strive and struggle against it in an attempt to dominate it. Therefore, every natural occurrence – be it a beautiful sunrise, the blooming of the cherry blossoms, a violent rainstorm, an earthquake, or even death itself – is seen as part of the natural cycle, without the judgmental assignment of such abstract qualities as

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<sup>4</sup> Although a tie to Modernism, especially as it relates to art, might seem obvious here, it should be understood that Modernism is an entirely different phenomenon. Modernism is based on the rejection of traditional Western aesthetic values such as perspective and proportion, as opposed to the focus on an entirely different set of aesthetics as seen in Japanese art. Although the end products might seem similar, the paths from which they each derive are separate and distinct.

<sup>5</sup> The word "Shinto" derives from the Chinese: "shin," which refers to gods or *kami*, and "to" (related to *tao*), which indicates a philosophy or path of study. Taken together, then, "Shinto" means, "The Way of the Gods."

“good” and “evil,” or “ugly” and “beautiful,” values prevalent in the West. A typhoon that kills hundreds of people is not “bad” or “evil,” according to Shinto, it is simply a part of the natural order.

One of the central beliefs of Shinto is in the existence of *kami*, a concept that can be difficult for Western minds to grasp, but one that is central to an understanding of this important faith. In Japanese culture, *kami* are spirits, essences, or natural forces, often seen as being embodied in objects that cause awe or reverence – and so making them worthy of veneration – and therefore placing them as central objects of Shinto worship. In *Shōgun*, his bestselling novel of Japan, James Clavell explains the concept of *kami* in this way:

*Kami* is inexplicable, Anjin-san. It is like a spirit, but not, like a soul but not. Perhaps it is the insubstantial essence of a thing or person... you should know a human being becomes a *kami* after death but a tree or rock or plant or painting is equally a *kami*. *Kami* are venerated, never worshipped. They exist between heaven and earth and visit this Land of the Gods or leave it, all at the same time. (Clavell, 622-23)

Certainly supernatural beings can be regarded as *kami* – indeed, the word itself is sometimes translated as “god” or “deity,” although this can be misleading as *kami* do not possess the same qualities that Westerners associate with these words – but the word can also be applied to natural objects, such as stones or trees or mountains. Spirits of the deceased, be they spirits of gallant warriors, revered Emperors, or debased criminals, can be *kami*, as can such named deities as Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess, and Inari Okami, the god of foxes. In the canon of the Godzilla films, for example, King Seesar, who first appears in *Godzilla vs. MechaGodzilla* (1974), can be read as a particularly large and powerful *kami* who lives within a mountain and serves as guardian of the royal Azumi family. As well, the spirits of Yoda, Anakin Skywalker, and Obi-Wan Kenobi in the *Star Wars* films might be seen as expressions of *kami*, as they appear to, and aid, Luke Skywalker on his hero’s journey. Less spectacularly, a devotee of Shinto might

see *kami* in a particularly beautiful waterfall or a powerful earthquake or a delicate butterfly resting on a flower petal. Many Japanese consider Mt. Fuji to be *kami*, and refer to the mountain affectionately as “Fuji-san” – adding the honorific “san” usually reserved for people – reflecting this attitude of veneration. This recognition of the otherworldly *kami* in everyday objects – seeing the awe-inspiring even in the ordinary – allows the Japanese culture to live within both the objective world of physical reality and the subjective world of spiritual reality, a dual-mind approach that allows a decidedly non-Western perception of the films to be discussed in later chapters. As Motohisa Yamakage observes in his enlightening book, *The Essence of Shinto*, “Shinto comes into existence as soon as people are convinced of the existence of other worlds” (Yamakage, 22), hinting at the inherent acceptance of the supernatural that inhabits Japanese cultural thought, as opposed to the very concrete reality which largely forms the basis of Western culture.

It should be noted that *kami* are related to, but entirely separate from, the supernatural beings known as *yokai*, although both are important parts of Japan’s national culture. *Yokai* are supernatural entities, often mischievous, something like the Western concept of the poltergeist. The term has sometimes been translated as phantom, goblin, demon, or monster, although these Western terms carry unfortunate negative connotations that obscure a true understanding of the *yokai*’s complex nature. Quite often, *yokai* are visualized as common household objects: an umbrella for instance, transformed by a spirit into a bizarre being, as seen in the bizarre cult films *Yokai hayaku monogatari* (*100 Monsters*, 1968), *Yokai daisenso* (*Spook Warfare*, 1968), and *Tokaido obake dochu* (*Yokai Monsters: Along with Ghosts*, 1969), all featuring strange supernatural characters who visit justice upon evil and corrupt humans.



Figure 2: A pair of Japanese B2 posters for *Yokai hayaku monogatari* [1968], showing a number of the strange and bizarre title creatures (HA.com).

Michael Dylan Foster, in attempting to provide a distinction between *kami* and *yokai* suggests that while *kami* are worshipped, *yokai* are not (Foster, 15). As befits Shinto, with its reverence for the natural order, it should be noted that *yokai* are not inherently evil. A water spirit, for example, may be seen as benevolent to a family dependent upon water to irrigate their crops, while at another time malevolent to that same family who loses their fields to a flash flood. *Yokai* exist, as do all natural forces, beyond good and evil. This distinction becomes more important as such cinematic creatures as *Gojira* and *Daimaijin* are considered.

Shinto, then, provides a framework in which the supernatural exists at all times and in all places, and bizarre beings are all around us and can appear at any time. The frequent appearance of supernatural beings in *noh* and *kabuki* plays can be traced to this belief, as can the absolute acceptance with which the Japanese people in the giant monster films seem to acknowledge the existence of such bizarre beings as *Gojira*, *Gamera*, *Rodan*, and the like – all of whom “existed,” at least diegetically, before the events chronicled in their respective films – unlike American

giant monster movies, all of which must provide a “reason” for the creatures’ existence<sup>6</sup>. That the creatures in Japanese films must be dealt with (in the context of the film) is a function of plot and action; that they exist at all is taken for granted, similar to the existence of the *kami* and the *yokai* that are assumed to surround the Japanese people on a daily basis. Perhaps this particular cultural view can best be demonstrated by quoting the following lines of dialogue from *Gojira* (1954), spoken between two Odo Islanders:

Woman: Gojira? That’s just a legend.

Man: Perhaps, but it’s still true.

That dialogue perfectly encapsulates the Japanese attitude towards the nature of reality. There is not a clear divide between the realms of “fantasy” and “reality” as there is in the West. Shinto encourages a belief in unseen forces that act upon our very existence – for good or ill – unseen forces that are as much a natural part of life as the wind and rain and sun that we see every day. The degree of emphasis placed on symbolism and presentation in Japanese art, as opposed to concrete representations of reality, can be traced to this very belief system as illustrated in the quote above. As Antonia Levi notes in *Samurai from Outer Space*, “The Shinto ability to blend the fantastic with the everyday is basic to Japanese life...” (Levi, 35).

In many American giant monster movies, there is a sense of “this can’t be happening.” American monsters – be they creatures from beneath the sea, from the far reaches of outer space, or the hubristic creation of a misguided scientist – are monstrous because they exist so far outside of everyday reality as to be terrifying. Whether or not they destroy a single building or kill a single person, they are still classed as monsters. (For example, *The Man from Planet X*

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<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, the giant animals in such classic films as *Them!* (1954), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), and *Tarantula* (1955), all ordinary animals mutated, either by accident or design, by atomic radiation. The accident/experiment that creates them is an integral part of the plot of each film, grounding their existence in a “reality” that Western viewers can accept.



[UA, 1951], about a benevolent alien who lands on Earth and is persecuted as a “monster” based solely on his appearance and origin, is a prime example of this line of thought.) The giant monster films that come out of Japan, however, proceed from a standpoint of, “Of course this can happen.” Japanese monsters are monstrous solely because of what they do, not what they are. Giant monsters like Mothra, and even Godzilla in later films of the series, are hailed as heroes and protectors of the Earth, despite their monstrous size and appearance. There is an innate understanding in Japanese culture that such creatures, like *kami* and *yokai*, can be harmful or beneficent, regardless of their monstrous appearance. This, in part, explains why Americans largely tend to see giant monster movies as silly and unrealistic, while the Japanese see them as more complex and capable of conveying deeper meanings.

Indeed, a basic understanding of Shinto perception provides a lens through which to view the many differences between Eastern and Western aesthetics. In *Shinto: The Way Home*, Thomas P. Kasulis points out:

In ancient Greece some twenty-four centuries ago, Aristotle said that philosophy... begins in wonder and awe. Yet his reaction differed from Shinto's. Aristotle hoped to use reason to root out the ground of this wonder; for him philosophy's purpose was to lead us from awe into understanding. For Shinto, though, the point is to accept the awesome part of the world in which we live. (Kasulis, 11-12)

It is this view of the “awesome part of the world” that informs and gives shape to Japan's theater – and cinema – of the fantastic. There is scant diegetical reason given for the terrifying events of *Ju-On* (2002) or *Kairo* (2001), for example, as culturally, the Japanese audience already possesses a view of the universe that allows them to understand the sudden intrusion of the supernatural into everyday life. In the same way, we, as part of a Western Judeo-Christian culture, needed little explanation of the events chronicled in *The Exorcist* (1973). We understand, through years of cultural conditioning, whether or not we personally hold the belief systems

invoked, that Satan is ever at the ready to entrap innocent souls and spread evil, thus the possession of Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) requires little diegetic explanation. We accept it for what it is, as it reflects lessons that have been culturally implanted in us since birth.

As well, the Shinto roots of Japanese drama run deep. Far from existing as mere entertainment, Japanese dramatic presentations were originally created to both entertain the *kami* – this explains why injury and death are seldom seen in *noh* and *kabuki* plays, as those acts are considered unclean and thus displeasing to the spirits – and to pass along important traditions and legends to a largely illiterate public. Although these may not be the primary reasons for staging *kabuki* and *noh* dramas today, the influence of these early motivations is still felt in the very structure of the plays.

Without an inscribed doctrine, a central organizing figure, and an inherent dogma, Shinto is virtually unique among world faiths in its flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, when Buddhism came to Japan by way of China in the sixth century, it found itself not in conflict with Shinto, but actually partnering with it, as devotees of Shinto were well-equipped to accept Buddha as another *kami* (conversely, Buddhists saw the Shinto *kami* as manifestations of the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas with which they were familiar). The result was a unique philosophical system that infused Japanese culture, society, business, arts, theater, and more; in short, every aspect of Japanese life. Although both faiths maintained their separate and distinct identities, their effect on Japan was felt in tandem. Indeed, it's common today to find people who claim to follow both paths, relying on Shinto for temporal matters, and turning to Buddhism for more spiritual affairs. As Richard B. Pilgrim, in *Buddhism and the Arts of Japan*, notes:

Rarely in the Japanese context can one find Buddhism uninfluenced by Shinto or Shinto uninfluenced by Buddhism – or, for that matter, art uninfluenced by either! (Pilgrim, 1)

Buddhism brought with it an organization that Shinto largely lacked, particularly in the area of the priesthood. It helped codify the beliefs that had been current in Japan for hundreds of years, but had never been given concrete form, form that was expressed physically at first through a new tradition of unique architecture, and later through such arts as flower arranging, *haiku*, *noh*, *kabuki*, and more.

At the core of Buddhism is a striving to overcome human ignorance and attachment, in order to reach a state of enlightenment. To the Buddhist, things in the material world are transient and ever-changing, and it's our attachments to these material things that blocks us from achieving an enlightened state. Additionally, all things are interconnected, and anything that happens in one area has an effect on all others. This concept of interdependent causality explains why, in Buddhist philosophy, nothing is permanent, as everything is constantly changing in relation to everything else, an attitude that made possible Buddhism's transformation once it came to Japan.

Initially, perhaps, the message of suffering that Buddhism promotes, and the ongoing need to strive against the things of the world – particularly the material and transient things – could be seen as conflicting with the tree-bending-in-the-wind nature of Shinto, but at its core, Buddhism also reflects an inherent quality of optimism in its belief that goodness and enlightenment is, at some point, attainable. By acknowledging and embracing both the differences and the similarities of both faiths, Buddhism and Shinto were able to thrive side-by-side, providing the Japanese people with a unique worldview that informed their developing aesthetic.

### *Yugen, Wabi-Sabi, and Aware*

For the purposes of this study, perhaps the most important concept to arise from these

blended traditions is that of *yugen*, an ideal pursued in virtually all forms of Japanese art, including poetry, literature, painting, film, and theater. *Yugen* derives from the Shinto concept of universal harmony, wherein a thing's appearance, purpose, relation to people, and nature were all intimately related, and could only be understood on a subconscious level. A frustratingly difficult term to pin down – it has no direct analogue in Western thought – *yugen* refers to a fundamental quality of art that goes beyond the simple surface trappings of a thing, and enters a realm of subtlety and depth. It is the single quality that most separates Japanese from Western art.

Part of the reason *yugen* is so hard to define is that its meaning has evolved over the years. Indeed, Zeami Motokiyo, the legendary Japanese playwright and theorist whose writings on theater and performance are still read and studied today and who wrote extensively on *yugen* in his landmark treatises on the *noh*, revised his definition and conception of *yugen* over the course of his lifetime. Initially likening *yugen* to the beauty and grace exhibited by the refined habits of the nobility, a sort of dignified elegance, Zeami maintained that only the finest actors could capture and express *yugen* in their performances. As Zeami considered the concept over the years, however, he came to realize that *yugen* is more than simple grace and elegance; it is a beauty that goes beyond the traditional concepts of what might be considered beautiful, to an elusive inner beauty – Zeami termed it “spirit” – that is often disconnected from the outer trappings of a thing. Zeami asserted that great actors bring *yugen* to all the roles they portray; that is why they are great actors. For example, where a mediocre actor might portray the horrific and ugly characteristics of a demon based solely on surface qualities – and thus risk alienating his audience by simply terrifying them – a great actor would project the quality of *yugen* in his performance, therefore imbuing the demon with a dark, occult sense of beauty that transcends

horror. According to Zeami, this quality of finding beauty even in the midst of darkness was likened to “blossoms on a dead tree.”

And so we begin to see the true meaning of *yugen*: a dark, hidden, subtle beauty that is often present even in things we would not typically term beautiful. Consider the famous poem by Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241):

Gaze out far enough,/beyond all cherry blossoms/and scarlet maples,  
to those huts by the harbor/fading in the autumn dusk.

A poet less accomplished in the art of *yugen* might have focused on the traditional symbols of beauty: the cherry blossoms and scarlet maples. Indeed, countless poems have been written in Japan extolling the virtues of those beautiful objects. However, in just a few lines, Teika moves the mind’s eye past these typical representations of beauty until it arrives at the simple image of “huts by the harbor,” offered as more beautiful – because of its possession of *yugen* – than the cherry blossoms or the scarlet maples. The image of the huts has a melancholy aspect, made oddly beautiful by their relation to the cherry blossoms and scarlet maples. The phrase, “gaze out far enough...” implies a need to look closely and deeply at the thing in question, a need to see beyond the aspects that are readily apparent, and to actively work to perceive the things that are truly beautiful. The perception of *yugen*, then, is not something that comes simply or easily, but is something that requires effort to achieve. As Makoto Ueda puts it, “*Yugen*, then is the beauty not merely of appearance but of the spirit; it is inner beauty manifesting itself outwards” (Ueda in Hume, 182).

This melancholia plays an important part in the definition of *yugen*. According to Zeami, there is *yugen* in suffering, and in sadness. He cites as examples several noble characters from the Japanese epic, *The Tale of Genji*, including Lady Aoi, who finds herself haunted by the spirit of Lady Rokujo (a woman of high birth who suffers unintentional humiliation at the hands of

Genji, and thus becomes a spirit that torments the women in Genji's life); Lady Yugao, (a woman of common birth who finds favor with Genji and who subsequently becomes the target of Lady Rokujo's angry spirit); and Lady Murasaki (Genji's lover of mixed birth – her father was noble, her mother a commoner – who also suffers from spirit possession). None of these women are responsible for the predicaments in which they find themselves, which Zeami contends increases their beauty, as it shows that even the most fortunate and beautiful people cannot escape that suffering which all living beings share. It is in this sadness, caused simply by living life itself, that Zeami sees *yugen*.

One can also see the quality of *yugen* on display in Akira Kurosawa's masterful meditation on life and death, *Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1954), the story of lifelong civil servant Kanji Watanabe (Takashi Shimura), who discovers that he is dying from cancer. He sets out to complete one meaningful act – the construction of a much-needed children's park in a run-down neighborhood – before his passing. The scene in which Kurosawa documents the moments leading up to Watanabe's death, as he sits quietly on a swing in the park that his efforts created, with snow gently falling on him, and slowly sings a mournful song about the swiftness with which life passes, is equally tragic and beautiful. Kurosawa's simple framing of the scene emphasizes the sense of *yugen* created by Watanabe's suffering, juxtaposed against the simple and elegant beauty of a quiet winter's night (winter itself being a well-used metaphor for death). Like "blossoms on a dead tree," Kurosawa effectively reminds us that there is joy and beauty even in the midst of death, the very definition of *yugen*.



**Figure 3: Kenji Watanabe [Takashi Shimura] just prior to his death in Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* [*To Live*, 1954], demonstrating the director's mastery of the quality of *yugen*.**

To bring the discussion forward in time, one could see the beauty (*yugen*) in a mushroom cloud or in a typhoon. Certainly, neither of these things are desirable (at least from a human perspective), nor are they commonly referred to as “beautiful,” but they each partake in that dark, subtle beauty which Zeami prizes, regardless of their ultimate effect. Of course, the supernatural creatures discussed in later chapters - *onryo*, *yurei*, *kami*, and *yokai*, for example - are often seen as possessing a darkly terrible beauty, demonstrating *yugen* even in their ability to terrify.



**Figure 4: *Ukiyo-e* print showing a beautiful yet bizarre *yokai*-like snake-woman figure. Her beauty, tinged with the dark and unmistakable stamp of the otherworld, is a wonderful expression of *yugen* (author's collection).**

To return to the context of film, the scene of Gojira basking in the flames of a devastated Tokyo can be seen to possess *yugen*. The destruction on a massive scale would, in the hands of a lesser director, simply reflect the terror of the moment. But Ishiro Honda frames the scene in such a way as to emphasize its awe and dark beauty, as Gojira is silhouetted against the rising flames, basking in the cauldron of fiery destruction.



**Figure 5: Gojira devastates Tokyo [*Gojira*, 1954]. Notice the way the scene is framed to maximize the awe-inspiring sense of *yugen*.**

Rather than focusing on Gojira, Honda constructs the *mise-en-scene* to show a larger view of the city, with helpless observers in the foreground watching the giant beast as it towers over the tallest buildings, seemingly rejoicing in the flaming ruin. Like watching the explosion of an atomic bomb from just far enough away, and seeing the resulting mushroom cloud, there is a palpable sense of terror and regret in this scene, made even more manifest by the stark quality of the brilliant black-and-white photography. At the same time, however, thanks to Honda's inherent visual sense, the scene – especially when isolated as a single image – attracts the viewer by the dark beauty of *yugen* at the same time that the overall image frightens and terrifies. It is a powerful image, an image of an unstoppable force of nature, made more powerful by Honda's



awareness of *yugen* and his ability to paint this horrific scene in wonderfully poetic tones. A Japanese audience, inherently familiar with the quality of *yugen*, may appreciate the horror and beauty of this scene in a way that a Western audience may not, perhaps even feeling a certain sympathy for Gojira.

As well, consider the image of the “vengeful ghost,” Kayako, in *Ju-On*. The face of the woman who died and returned as a restless spirit is undeniably beautiful, though her beauty is tinged by utter madness. It is significant that, when creating this character, writer/director Takashi Shimizu chose not to portray her as ugly, horrific, or deformed (all choices a Western director might have made. See, for example, the Regan MacNeil make-up in *The Exorcist* [1973], or even the make-up for The Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz* [1939]). As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, the long, unkempt hair flowing over her face is a cultural symbol of madness, but there is nothing inherently horrific in the character. The horror in that film comes from what is suggested, not what is seen.



**Figure 6: This image, virtually in black and white, embodies the concept of *yugen*: a dark, mysterious, sometimes disturbing beauty [*Ju-On*, 2002].**

As important to Japanese aesthetics as the concept of *yugen* is that of *wabi-sabi*, a sense of beauty that is imperfect, impermanent, and transient. These qualities derive from the teachings

of Buddha, who preached that things have three characteristics, or marks, of existence: impermanence, as all things are constantly changing; dissatisfaction, as nothing in the material world can ever bring true satisfaction; and “non-self,” in that the “self,” as it is usually thought of, does not truly exist, as it is itself impermanent and inconstant<sup>7</sup>. Although the words themselves are difficult to translate, most agree that *wabi*, as it is currently used, relates to a sort of natural, unpretentious simplicity or understated elegance, and can be applicable to either people or objects. It can also refer to those unique hallmarks of things created by hand, which mark an object as utterly unique. A hand-thrown pot, for example, is unlike any other pot ever created, as it bears the unique marks of its maker’s hands, marks that cannot be exactly duplicated in any other pot. Those very things that some might see as imperfections are, in terms of Japanese aesthetics, counted as the highest virtues. Indeed, it would be a mistake to take the unpretentiousness of *wabi* beauty for artlessness, or to assume that something rich in *wabi* is simply coarse or unrefined, as to think in such a way is to miss the subtlety of *wabi*. “[Wabi] is a beauty of great depth which finds its expression in simple and unpretentious terms” (Koshiro in Hume, 247).

Coupled with this is the concept of *sabi*, a beauty that comes forth with time, as a result of age. A delicate patina on a bronze sculpture would be one example of *sabi*, as would the pleasing yet subtle flavors experienced in a well-aged wine that has reached the peak of its perfection. By its nature, *sabi* cannot be created, only achieved through time. In the Buddhist view, an appreciation of this simple yet important quality represents a departure from the material world and an acceptance of a simpler, more enlightened way of life through seeing the

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<sup>7</sup> This concept of “non-self” (or *anatta*) is in direct opposition to the Platonic concept of Forms, which stated that each thing has an unchanging, ideal essence that can be codified and defined. According to Buddhism, the insightful wisdom that comes with an understanding of the concept of *anatta* is essential to overcoming suffering, which is at the heart of the practice.

beauty in things as they are and appreciating the beauty that comes from their natural state.

Taoists speak of a similar concept when they talk about *P'u*, or the Uncarved Block, described by Benjamin Hoff as, “[the concept that] things in their original simplicity contain their own natural power, power that is easily lost when that simplicity is changed” (Hoff, 10).

The understanding of *wabi-sabi* helps to explain why so much of Japan’s theater of the fantastic has deep roots in past history. In diegetic terms, *Gojira*, for example, has been known to the Odo Islanders for centuries; *Daimajin* has been the protector of the Hanabasa clan since time immemorial; even the title of the film *Kwaidan* (1964) references ancient and archaic stories far removed from the present time. Tellingly, even as neo-*kaidan* – or J-Horror – gains popularity around the world, the basic plot elements of those films are largely rooted in past events.

As a further demonstration of this concept, it’s important to note that “origin stories” have little place in either Japanese film or literature. The extra-normal beings in these instances are presented as a *fait accompli*, unlike Western films which go to great pains to show the genesis of their monsters. Japanese monsters are ancient, while American monsters are shiny and new. Contrast, for example, the *dai kaiju* *Mothra*, who, we are told in the course of the film, has been the protector of the natives of Infant Island for centuries. In *Mosura* (*Mothra*, 1961), the modern world first becomes aware of this creature who has lived for untold centuries. *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1961), on the other hand, goes to great lengths to show the origins of its titular giant, from his accidental exposure to radiation at the site of a plutonium bomb blast, to the pseudo-scientific explanation given by the resident experts regarding his unexpected growth and beyond. *The Amazing Colossal Man* is a modern take on the ancient legend of giants, complete with a highly detailed origin story; *Mosura* is an ancient take on the modern phenomenon of *dai kaiju*, in which no origin story is necessary. The implication seems to be that

things gain power over time; that supernatural beings gain strength from their very age, and that that age provides them with both *yugen* and *wabi-sabi*. Conversely, America, a young country that values innovation and all things up-to-date and cutting edge, promotes the value of newly-created creatures – creatures born in a laboratory, or as the result of a nuclear accident, or hailing from a distant planet and newly arrived on Earth – over creatures rooted in the past. Even the hoary vampire, perhaps the best example of a long-lived monster with roots in the dim and distant days of bygone eras, has recently been recast and revitalized as a young, hip, new type of monster in such popular culture phenomenon as *Twilight* (2008) and *True Blood* (2008). Overly-emotive teen vampires – with perfect hair and fabulous physiques – have largely replaced the likes of Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, who represented vampires that had lived for centuries.

Aligned with the important concepts of *yugen* and *wabi-sabi* is that of *aware* (sometimes *mono no aware*), typically defined as a sense of melancholic sadness brought on by an acute sensitivity, usually invoked by suggesting natural objects that are, by their nature, finite and perishable. A tenet of Buddhist philosophy, *aware* was an integral part of the samurai code, as these dedicated warriors were required to be willing to lay down their lives at a moment's notice. Thus, sadness and melancholy derive from the ever-changing, impermanent nature of things, as taught by Buddha. *Aware* is not a depressing melancholy however, but a recognition of the beauty of a thing that is and will never be again, like a particularly beautiful sunset.

Perhaps the concept of *aware* can best be illustrated in the following poem by Saigyō Hoshi (1118-1190), who wrote:

The cry of the crickets,  
As the nights grow chill  
And autumn advances,  
Grows weak and more distant.

Here, Saigyō marks the passing of a season by the diminishment of the crickets chirping.

He mourns the passing of time and the change of season, at the same time knowing that such change is inevitable. The season, like the crickets, will soon pass, causing his melancholy musing. Of course, it's possible to see this poem as a metaphoric meditation on the passing of life itself, seen from the perspective of one's "autumn years," but infused with a sense of peace that comes from accepting the changes that life – and death – inevitably bring. Again, this very much reflects the acceptance of natural events and forces encouraged by Shinto, an acceptance that leads to peace, not sadness, at the passage of both time and life.

These three qualities, *yugen*, *wabi-sabi*, and *aware*, are critical components of Japanese aesthetics. Although they have been extensively discussed in terms of their relationship to Japanese poetry, their influence is deeply felt in all forms of Japanese art and expression, including Japan's traditional theatrical forms and their films, as will be further explored later in this project. All three derive from an appreciation of, and a sensitivity to, that which lies beneath a thing's outer appearance. This, then, is perhaps the most striking difference between Eastern and Western aesthetics: where Western artists take great pains to faithfully reproduce the outer form of a thing in an attempt to match it to the ultimate Ideal Form, Japanese artists look beyond the outer trappings to attempt to experience the thing's true nature<sup>8</sup>.

This explains the difference in approach to, say, landscape renderings as created by artists hailing from East and West. Consider, for example, this painting by Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), a central figure of the Hudson River School. Beautifully rendered, one can appreciate Church's attention to detail, as he endeavors to replicate the scene he experienced for the benefit of viewers of the painting.

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<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, a high-level discussion of aesthetics. It should be noted that Western art is not a monolithic form, but contains many tenets and fascinations, not all of which – even prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century – were intent on realism. The purpose here is to explore a philosophical distinction between the two systems, rather than to offer an exhaustive comparison.



Figure 7: Frederic Edwin Church. *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859 (artofmanliness.com)

The Hudson River School, which flourished in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America, focused on landscapes in order to capture the grandeur and magnificence of the natural world through a realistic approach to painting. Their use of light, color, perspective, and proportion mark them as solidly standing within the set of Western aesthetics first codified by Aristotle and Plato millennia earlier, as they set down images that can be praised as near-photographic realizations of natural scenes.

On the other hand, Japanese artists approached renderings of the natural world in a very different way, as demonstrated by this elegant brush painting by Tenshō Shūbun.



Figure 8: Tenshō Shūbun. *Reading in a Bamboo Grove*, 1446 (Wikipedia.org).

The differences between Church's and Shūbun's efforts to capture a natural scene are striking. Shūbun clearly eschews the realism that Western artists prize so highly in favor of an increased sense of suggestibility and impermanence. Notice, for example, the way in which Church and Shūbun render mountains in the backgrounds of their scenes. Church's mountain is solid and substantial, expertly delineated and realistically rendered. We see the mountain as if we are standing in the Andes alongside Church at the moment paint meets canvas. Indeed, the sense of reality is so strong that we would almost expect that mountain to exist, virtually unchanged, today, 150 years on.

Shūbun, on the other hand, merely suggests mountains, hidden in the background by the mist. His mountains are no less striking, but are suggested rather than explicitly stated. As viewers we know that they are mountains, but we are struck by their phantom quality rather than the majesty of their appearance. Consequently, we understand that Shūbun's mountains are transient things, things that will most likely fade – or at least change – with the passing of the mist. There are few hard lines in Shūbun's painting – most of the work is rendered in shades of grey.

Where we admire Church's work for its realism and its attention to detail, so do we admire Shūbun's work for its qualities of *yugen* (the stark scene, rendered in simple black and white, suggesting great depth), *wabi-sabi* (the imperfect nature of the rendering – note particularly the deformed and twisted trees – coupled with the sense of age it displays), and *aware* (the poignancy of the inherent perishability of the scene: the misty landscape Shūbun presents will never exist again in quite that same way. He has, therefore, presented us with a unique experience, once captured and cherished, but now gone).

It is with this mindset of Japanese aesthetics and philosophy that the rest of this project must be approached, as much of Japan's arts derive from this source.

#### Traditional Japanese Theater – *Noh*, *Kabuki*, and *Bunraku*

An argument can be advanced that the Japanese horror film draws on the storylines, structures, performance practices and iconography of traditional theatre as much on the traditions and mechanisms of western horror. (Richard J. Hand in McRoy, 22)

When moving pictures were first introduced to Japan in 1896, the people of that country embraced the new technology whole-heartedly. Crowds of people, from all social classes, flocked to see films by such cinematic luminaries as Thomas Edison and the Brothers Lumière, displaying as much interest in the projector and the new technology itself as in the short pictures being shown. In 1897, the first motion picture camera came to Japan, allowing Tsunekichi Shibata – head of the newly-minted photography department at the Mitsukoshi Department Store – to make the first native Japanese films. Quite naturally, Shibata turned to the *kabuki* theater for his subject matter, selecting segments of such well-known plays as *Maple Viewing* (a *kabuki* version of a *noh* drama), and *Two People at Dojo Temple*, a *kabuki* dance piece, as his first subjects. Thus, the link between traditional Japanese theater and the thoroughly modern technology of moving pictures was firmly established, a link that continues to be seen throughout the history of Japanese cinema. From its inception, therefore, theater and cinema in Japan were inextricably linked.

It would, of course, be naïve to suggest that theater is the only dramatic influence on these rich and often complex films; *Gojira* (1954), for example, clearly draws inspiration from American giant monster movies as well as such infamous real-life events as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (“Lucky Dragon Five”), in which a Japanese tuna boat was irradiated following the detonation of the first hydrogen bomb in the Bikini Atoll.



However, no matter how disparate the subject matter or tone of the films in question, the influence of traditional Japanese drama, culture, and aesthetics can often be seen in them, in one manner or another.

At its core, Japanese cinema – and Japanese dramatic presentations in general – is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart. If one grants that American theater, as epitomized by the Broadway production, is realistic – that is, the actors on stage typically behave as if the audience is not present in order to recreate reality as closely as possible – then Japanese theater, as seen in the traditional *noh* and *kabuki* plays, is fantastic, in that the actors acknowledge the audience and make no pretense of presenting “reality.” Indeed, as Earle Ernst states:

The actor Nakamura Kichiemon described the *kabuki* performance as *honto-rashii uso*, ‘a plausible lie’: the audience ... is not required to suspend its disbelief, willingly or unwillingly, for it accepts art on the premise of its being nonrealistic. (Ernst, 81)

Therefore, in watching these uniquely Japanese films, one must approach them with an Eastern “fantastic” mindset, in which reality is secondary to the ideas and concepts being presented, rather than a Western “realistic” mindset, in which the representation of reality is of the utmost importance. This difference between “realistic” and “fantastic” drama is key to the thoughts and ideas expressed in Japanese art in general, and Japanese film in particular.

#### Traditional Japanese Theatrical Forms

The *noh* play is widely considered to be the oldest and most refined theatrical form in Japanese history. Although clearly descended from earlier traditions, such as Shinto temple dances, the *noh* that we are familiar with today dates back to the mid-fourteenth century. Widely considered the “theater of the upper class,” *noh*, which has been described as, “...marked by restrained understatement and abstraction as compared to *kabuki*” (Balmain, 18), laid the

groundwork for other dramatic forms to come, including *kabuki* and *butoh*. Some of the traditional elements of *noh* include the *shite* (the principle actor), the *waki* (the character that opposes or supports the *shite*), and the *hayashi* (the musicians who provide the music on four traditional instruments: the *han*, a flute-like instrument; the *taiko*, a large drum played with two beaters; the *kotsuzumi*; a smaller shoulder drum; and the *otsuzumi*, a somewhat larger drum played at waist level), as well as the finely carved masks that represent everything from old men to young women to gods and monsters.

Additionally, there are five basic types of *noh* play: 1) *Kami mono*, in which the *shite* is human in the first act, and a deity in the second. This type of *noh* play typically tells the legendary story of a shrine, or offers praise to a particular spirit; 2) *Shura mono*, in which the *shite* appears as a ghost in the first act and a samurai in the second. This type of *noh* play is designed to allow the “ghost” to tell the story of his death; 3) *Katsura mono*, in which the *shite*, performing as a female, presents a series of elaborate songs and dances; 4) the so-called “miscellaneous” plays which do not fit into any other category. These can include *Kyoran mono* (madness plays), *onryo mono* (plays about vengeful spirits), or *genzai mono* (plays based in the present day); and 5) *Kiri no* (final plays) or *oni mono* (demon plays), in which the *shite* appears as a goblin, demon, or other monster. In a typical *noh* performance – which often lasts all day – all five types of these plays are performed, typically in the above given order.

In examining *noh*, it’s important to realize that the form has deep roots in the philosophies of Shinto and Buddhism. Rather than seeing man as separate and apart from, or having dominance over nature, as in Western culture, both Buddhism and Shinto regard man as an integral part of nature, no different than a flower, a mountain, or a tree, and subject to natural – and supernatural – forces. Indeed, the Lotus Sutra, an important Buddhist text, outlines ten

realms of consciousness, from the Buddhas at the top to the damned at the bottom (Stevenson, 166). Within that continuum exist heavenly beings, fighting demons, human beings, and hungry ghosts, all of which appear frequently in traditional *noh* plays.

*Kabuki* has its origins in the seventeenth century and has seen a rise, fall, and rise again during the last several centuries. Typically seen as the “theater of the people” – a “lower” form of theater compared to *noh* – *kabuki* encourages audience participation, unlike the more formal *noh* theater. Traditional elements of *kabuki* dramas include the use of color to denote special characteristics, the presentation of the traditional “*kabuki* horse” (in which a “horse” is shown with very human legs. There is no attempt to present the horse as “real,” as there would be in a Western production), and the vitally important *kurombo*, or “unseen” stagehand who, dressed entirely in black, moves around the stage assisting with costume changes, providing props, and more, all the while “invisible” due to a tacit agreement with the audience. There but not there, the *kurombo* is an integral part of the “fantastic” nature of the *kabuki* theater.



**Figure 9: The *kabuki* horse, from Yasujiro Ozu’s *Ukigusa monogatari* [*A Story of Floating Weeds*, 1934.]**

There are, too, several different types of *kabuki* plays, including: 1) *Jidaimono* – period plays in which historical events are used as metaphors for contemporary life; 2) *Sewamono* – domestic plays focusing on townspeople and peasants. Most plays of this type explore topics of societal pressure and limitation. Some of the most popular are of the “love suicide” sub-genre; and 3) *Shosagoto*, or dance plays.

Another important theatrical form is the traditional Japanese puppet theater called *bunraku*, a form virtually as old as *kabuki* itself. Unlike traditional Western puppet theater, *bunraku* puppets range in size from two and a half to four feet tall, or even taller, each requiring three puppeteers to operate. *Kabuki* and *bunraku* share many similar themes and stories, and often, plays written for one form will be adapted for the other (the aforementioned “love suicide” plays are particularly popular for both forms). As compared to *noh* plays, both *kabuki* and *bunraku* dramas tend to be more violent, more sensational, and more thrilling, as they were originally designed for the pleasures of the people, and not the pleasures of the spirits. Where *noh* plays rarely deal with issues of blood or violence, for instance, these are common aspects of both *kabuki* and *bunraku*.

Just as the theater of Japan has been influenced by everything from religious philosophy to folk tradition, Japanese theater has, in turn, influenced the relatively recent art of cinema, in the same way that the conventions of the American stage influenced and directed the earliest filmmakers in this country. That influence continues to be felt even as the language of film has evolved; the very shape of the modern movie screen, for example, recreates the rectangular image of the theater stage. As noted earlier, *kabuki* plays were some of the first subjects recorded by Japanese filmmakers, and the structure and underlying aesthetics of those ancient plays have found their way into the very fabric of Japanese cinema, making the films to come out of that

country unique products of a culture with a long history of artistic and philosophical achievement. In the following chapters, several genres of Japanese “fantastic” cinema will be examined, with the intention of positioning them as unique cultural achievements, separate and distinct from their Western counterparts. No value judgments are offered here; neither the Western nor the Eastern approach to aesthetics, theater, or film is held up as “better” or “worse” than the other. The intention here is merely to differentiate between stylistic and cultural approaches to each medium, not to place one above the other. In so doing, it is hoped that Japanese films can be approached and appreciated on the basis of their own merits, not merely as dubbed versions of their Western counterparts. These films are crafted from a unique and fascinating perspective, and an understanding of their underlying aesthetics and values enables the viewer to unlock new levels of meaning in these often-seen classics, opening up entire new areas of appreciation and insight.

In the following chapters, I examine three distinct types of Japanese film, and explore the relationship to, and development from, traditional Japanese culture, philosophy, aesthetics, and, most importantly, Japanese theatrical and performance forms. My goal is to set these films within a cultural framework that recognizes their specific origins, and positions them as unique objects designed to convey meanings that could be readily decoded by their intended audience, but that are often lost in their trans-cultural journeys. In short, my intention is to understand these films in the way that a native of Japan, raised with, and surrounded by the Japanese cultural milieu – a milieu that includes Shinto, Buddhism, *kabuki*, *noh*, *ukiyo-e*, traditional flower arranging, *haiku*, *bunraku*, and so much more – would understand them; to see these films through a new set of eyes, and thus gain a deeper understanding of both the films and of Japanese culture.

Chapter 2 focuses on giant monster, or *dai kaiju*, films, specifically *Gojira* (1954) and *Daimajin* (1966), both of which derive identifiable characteristics of form from the highly stylized *noh* theater tradition. Often dismissed as cheap “rubber suit” movies, a thorough analysis shows that these films are significantly different from their Western “giant monster” counterparts, in both structure and execution, a fact that often goes unnoticed by Western audiences, but which would be instantly understood by their original audiences. Tightly and traditionally constructed, they can be considered *noh* plays for the atomic age, dramas intended both to appease the spirits and instruct the audience.

Movies based on Japanese ghost stories are the focus of Chapter 3. For this section, *Kwaidan* (1964) and *Onibaba* (1964) are dissected, with special attention given not only to their links to traditional theater, but to Japanese folklore and the Japanese literary tradition of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, as well, positioning film as the latest iteration of the art of the Japanese ghost story. The ghost story has been a popular seed not only for the making of movies, but also for the construction of both *noh* and *kabuki* plays, and the analysis of these films serves to point up the difference in tone between *noh* and *kabuki* plays, as well as the uniquely Japanese connection to the world of the spirits.

In Chapter 4, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989) and *Ju-On* (2002) are considered, both as excellent examples of the current cinema phenomenon known as “J-Horror,” and as filmic descendants of the modern-era dance form known as *butoh*. Interestingly, these films break away from tradition in an effort to forge something entirely new and different, while at the same time foregrounding the Shinto and Buddhist philosophical teachings and beliefs that have undergirded virtually all of Japanese society for hundreds of years. At once modern and traditional, these films demonstrate the way in which Japan moves forward into the modern world while at the

same time embracing and retaining the traditions that have been at the heart of their culture since ancient times.

By looking at these films through a culturally-specific lens, and removing the prejudices and preconceptions that come with thinking of them as mere “Japanese versions” of our familiar American genres, they take on fascinating new dimensions, opening up like a cherry blossom to reveal new wonders within, and encouraging a reevaluation of their worth not only as films, but as cultural artifacts that can provide a window into the mind and soul of the Japanese people.

## CHAPTER 2

### *GOJIRA*(1954) AND *DAIMAJIN*(1966): *DAI KAIJU EIGA* AND

#### THE INFLUENCE OF *NOH*, *KABUKI*, AND *BUNRAKU*

For many years, the general public – at least in the West – has overwhelmingly regarded Japanese giant monster movies (*dai kaiju eiga*) as silly, childish, and “cheesy.” They often cite the unrealistic special effects and outlandish stories as proof of their assertions, with film scholars and historians proving particularly dismissive of this genre. While Japanese ghost movies such as *Kwaidan* and *Onibaba* are largely regarded as art films and praised for their atmosphere, mood, and cinematography – consider, for example, *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther’s effusive praise for *Kwaidan*, which he called, “...a horror picture with an extraordinarily delicate and sensuous quality... a symphony of color and sound that is truly past compare... a film that commends itself mainly to those viewers who can appreciate rare subtlety and grace... [director Masaki Kobayashi]... merits excited acclaim for his distinctly oriental cinematic artistry” (Crowther, 1965)<sup>9</sup> – films like *Gojira* and *Radon* (and especially their American versions, *Godzilla*, *King of the Monsters* and *Rodan*) are too often summarily dismissed as kiddie fare, suitable only for afternoon matinees, if that.

In their country of origin, however, these films are just as often seen as national treasures, revered and embraced by the populace for whom they were originally made (a bronze statue honoring *Gojira* proudly stands in the Ginza district of Tokyo, honoring one of the nation’s favorite sons and attesting to the importance of *Gojira*’s place in Japan’s cultural life).

According to Steve Ryfle, “In 1984, the prestigious film journal *Kinema Junpo* rated [*Gojira*] among the top 20 Japanese films of all time. In 1989, a published survey of 370 Japanese movie

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Crowther’s review was so positive that Continental, the American distributor of the film, used pull quotes from it on the poster campaign for *Kwaidan*.



critics, *Nihon Eiga Besuto 150 (The Best 150 Japanese Films)*, ranked [*Gojira*] the 27<sup>th</sup>-greatest Japanese feature ever made” (Ryfle, 38).



**Figure 10: This bronze Gojira statue proudly stands in the heart of Japan’s Ginza district.  
Photo ©2007 John E. Petty**

Does this mean that the Japanese people are simpler, less discerning, or more easily fooled than “sophisticated” film viewers in the West? Hardly. A more likely explanation would be that the Japanese people intuitively understand the cultural referents behind these films, and understand the foundations upon which they are built. Western audiences, lacking this frame of reference, see only a stunt actor in a rubber suit, and fail to see the deeper meaning that is apparent to Japanese audiences.

To be sure, Western audiences have not always been so dismissive regarding giant monster movies. When *The Lost World*, based on the novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was released in 1925 – complete with stop motion dinosaurs courtesy of special effects genius Willis O’Brien – the film was roundly hailed by both critics and audiences worldwide. *King Kong* (1933), considered by many to be *the* quintessential giant monster film, caused a sensation when it premiered on March 2, 1933, simultaneously playing at both the Roxy Theater and Radio City

Music Hall, the first film ever accorded such an honor. That it played to Standing Room Only crowds of more than 10,000 per show (the combined seating of both theaters) – single-handedly saving RKO Studios from imminent bankruptcy – attests to its popularity at the time; in 1958, WWOR-TV in New York showed the film twice a day for a solid week in its prestigious *Million Dollar Movie* slot. In 1953, *Variety* praised *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, the American giant monster film that set the standard for many that followed, saying, “...the sight of it [the rhedosaurus] stalking the canyons of New York is awesome.” Clearly, even by as late as 1953, the beginning of the giant monster boom in Hollywood, the genre was being taken seriously by both critics and the movie-going populace at large.

Why, then, was *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956), the Americanized version of Toho Studio’s *Gojira* (1954), excoriated by Crowther, who wrote: “*Godzilla*, produced in a Japanese studio, is an incredibly awful film... The whole thing is in the category of cheap cinematic horror-stuff, and it is too bad that a respectable theatre has to lure children and gullible grown-ups with such fare” (Crowther, 1956)?

Unfortunately, this has been the opinion of too many Western viewers. Even Donald Richie, widely recognized as one of the foremost Western authorities on Japanese cinema, largely turns a blind eye to the giant monster movies that came out of the post-war era. Certainly, Richie and other Japanese film scholars recognize the importance of such supernatural-themed films as Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) and Kaneto Shindo’s *Onibaba* (1964), both of which tell stories involving ghosts and demons, but *Gojira* (1954), *Gamera* (1965), and other films in the *dai kaiju eiga* genre are, for the most part, either quickly dismissed or entirely ignored.

Even the genre’s most ardent admirers often ignore aesthetics in favor of production

history, film trivia, or textual analysis (Gojira the character as a metaphor for the atomic bomb, etc.) when discussing *dai kaiju eiga*. David Kalat, in the introduction to his otherwise excellent book, states:

For many, the name Godzilla conjures up images of bad dubbing and the laughable sight of a man in a rubber monster suit stomping on a toy city. But those of us who consider ourselves connoisseurs of the Big G know there is much more to appreciate in Godzilla's twenty-three starring roles than most movie critics have recognized. Some of this appeal is nostalgic; the TV generation grew up watching the endless cycle of giant monsters trashing Japan. Beyond that surface appeal, though, lies a complex and sophisticated character that has dramatized serious, if not always subtle, political messages. (Kalat, 1)

While Kalat acknowledges that Gojira – both the movie and the character – is more than just “bad dubbing” and a “laughable ... man in a rubber monster suit,” he fails to explore exactly what that means, content to merely concede the monster's obvious socio-political message.

There is no attempt to investigate the mystery of why a film that was revered in Japan was derided in the West. Surely, the success of the first film, and of the *dai kaiju* genre as a whole, must be credited to something more than a rather pessimistic message of nuclear caution. J. D. Lees, one of Godzilla-fandom's leading citizens, writes, “What he may have lacked in technical perfection, Godzilla more than made up for in personality and charm,” (Lees, 7) as if the technical aspect of these films required an apology. Indeed, even future genre filmmaker Joe Dante – who would go on to helm such classics as *Pirhana* (1978), *The Howling* (1981), and *Gremlins* (1984) – included both *Gigantis, the Fire Monster*<sup>10</sup> (1959) and *Rodan* (1957) on his list of *50 Worst Horror Films Ever Made*, as published in the 1966 Yearbook edition of the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, calling the former, “...just another juvenile monster epic,” and the latter, “...another routine (Japanese) prehistoric-monster-on-the-loose melodrama, inferior to many U.S. productions.”

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<sup>10</sup> This was the title under which the second Gojira movie, *Gojira no gyakushu* (1955) was released in America. It was later retitled *Godzilla Raids Again* for subsequent releases.

Part of the problem may be that these films do not easily fit into a convenient Western genre. Is *Gojira* a horror movie about a monster destroying a city, or is it a science fiction film about a monster created by atomic radiation? (Apparently, even Warner Brothers couldn't decide. In the pressbook released in support of *Gigantis, the Fire Monster* [1959], the Americanized version of *Gojira no gyakushu* [1955], the second film in the franchise, they tie the film to science fiction, saying, "Science fiction fans represent your greatest ready market." However, in a 3-column ad mat promoting the double bill of *Gigantis* and *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1959), they use the headline, "Year's Super-Terror Show!"). Is *Daimajin* (1966) – the story of a giant stone statue that comes to life to avenge the wrongs done to a noble family – a period samurai drama, a supernatural tale, or something else entirely?

This confusion about how to classify these films speaks to a root problem: these are distinctly Japanese films that must be studied and understood, not through a Western lens, but as native art, examined with regard to its own cultural origins and history. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto notes in *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, Western/Eurocentric studies of Japanese cinema have typically suffered from two fatal flaws: they have either attempted to explore themes that are universal to both cinemas, thus ignoring the cultural specifics that are innate to the work, or they have concentrated on citing the differences between Japanese and Western cinema, thereby reducing Japanese film to a cultural "other," whose worth is measured only in its relation to cinema from the West (2005, 2). Neither approach is likely to result in an accurate picture of Japanese film.

But if we discard the labels "science fiction" and "horror" in regards to *Gojira*, what's left? Japan recognizes a genre that is unique to its own cinema: the *dai kaiju eiga* genre, a clear and distinct category of its own, with its own meanings and conventions. In short, *dai kaiju eiga*

(literally, “giant monster film”) is that category of motion picture that deals with giant monsters such as Gojira, King Gidorah, Gamera, Mothra, Daimajin, Ultraman, and other oversized creatures. Unlike cinema in the West, *dai kaiju eiga* is considered its own genre in Japan – indeed, it is often credited with being the salvation of the Japanese film industry in the 1960s, a time of great decline in theater attendance – and not simply a subset of the science fiction or horror film. Certainly, as in Western cinema, this genre does borrow and adapt tropes from other genres (the romantic relationship subplot, the espionage subplot, etc.), but it is recognized in Japan as a separate and distinct film form, one that, if the Japanese did not entirely invent, they have certainly perfected.

It is within this cultural context that these films must be considered, examining the ways, both overt and subtle, in which they have been influenced by traditional Japanese drama. The conventions of *noh* and *kabuki*, briefly discussed earlier, are cultural memes with which directors such as Ishiro Honda and Eiji Tsubaraya – both significant figures in the birth and development of the *dai kaiju eiga* – would certainly have been intimately familiar, just as we in America are fluent in the language of the Western. It’s easy to see how this aesthetic, pervasive in the lives of these Japanese filmmakers, would have influenced their work. To bring an examination of *dai kaiju eiga* into clearer focus, the rest of this chapter will look at two films representative of the genre: *Gojira* (1954), the first giant monster film made in Japan, and *Daimajin* (1966), a unique giant monster film set during Japan’s feudal period.

This examination begins with the American Occupation of Japan immediately following World War II. During this time, Hollywood films were imported to Japan, with two of the most popular being *King Kong* (1933) and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953). *Gojira* producer Tomoyuki Tanaka was certainly aware of, and partially influenced by, these classics, but the

genre soon took on a life and style of its own, as creators – especially director Ishiro Honda and special effects genius (and later director) Eiji Tsubaraya – adapted the giant monster tropes they saw in the popular American films in their own way and for their own people. Instead of adhering to the Western concept of giant monsters – which were typically either giant versions of common creatures (such as ants, lizards, spiders, etc.), giant humans, or some form of dinosaur – the Japanese creators drew on their rich folklore and mythology, which had already proved a potent inspiration for *kabuki* and, particularly, *noh* dramas. Consequently, these landmark films were extremely popular with Japanese audiences, quickly proliferating to include not just a wide range of movies, but a range of popular television shows, *anime* (Japanese cartoons), *manga* (Japanese comic books), and more. Tellingly, when the initial films in the *dai kaiju* genre – such as *Gojira* (1954), *Gojira no gyakushu* (1955), and even *Kingu Kongu tai Gojira* (1962) – were released to Western audiences, they were substantially edited and altered to make them palatable to an audience entirely unfamiliar with Japanese culture and tradition<sup>11</sup>.

#### Ishiro Honda's *Gojira* (1954)

Any examination of *dai kaiju eiga* must, by necessity, begin with *Gojira* (1954), the film that inaugurated the genre. Originally conceived by producer Tomoyuki Tanaka during a flight back to Japan from an abortive movie project in Indonesia, the film that would be *Gojira* drew inspiration from several sources, not the least of which were the recent releases in Japan of the American films *King Kong* (1933), and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), both of which had proven to be major box office hits.

Tanaka also considered recent real-world events, including the August 6, 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the subsequent bombing of Nagasaki on August 9. Although eight

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, after *Gojira* (1954) was re-packaged and re-edited for an American audience as *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956), that Western version was exported back to the East and released to Japanese audiences, with Raymond Burr's newly-added scenes subtitled. The film was a surprise hit, even with all the alterations.

years in the past, the wound was still fresh in the Japanese psyche, perhaps made more intense by the Japanese media's inability to confront these issues head-on, thanks to subject matter bans instituted by the post-war Occupation Forces. In part, these bans included, "anything infused with militarism, revenge, nationalism, or anti-foreignism; distortion of history... anti-democratic opinion... and opposition to the Potsdam Declaration [the document that outlined the terms of Japan's surrender from World War II]" (Anderson and Richie, 160). Specifically, this meant that films exploring the bombings and their aftermath were strictly forbidden. Even after the Occupation ended in 1952, Japan, eager to secure a new place among the nations of the world – by attempting to join the newly-formed United Nations, for example – was conscious of the effect their motion pictures could have on their international image, an image they were desperate to rehabilitate in the face of a changing world. For that reason, they were careful to avoid films and film subjects that could be considered provocative or insulting to their former enemies, in effect extending the censorship ban instituted by the Allies in the immediate post-War period.

Another real-life event that was much on Tanaka's mind was the more recent Castle Bravo Hydrogen Bomb test in the Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954. Controversial even at the time, the test was considered a success until it became known that a Japanese fishing boat, the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru*, had been swept by radioactive fallout, even though it was well outside of the "danger zone" as established by American officials. The boat, its crew, and its tuna catch were all irradiated, as were a number of additional boats, all also outside the predicted danger zone. The first crewman to die – ship's radioman Kuboyama Aikichi – passed away from radiation poisoning seven months after the blast; a number of his crewmates followed in subsequent years, all dying of radiation-induced illnesses. While the Americans blamed the tragedy on a stronger

than anticipated blast and unpredictable weather patterns, the incident sparked a deep resentment in the Japanese people, who termed it, “the second atomic bombing of Japan.”

Gathering all of these threads of inspiration together, Tanaka was able to weave them into a film that had a strong anti-nuclear sentiment, but also managed to avoid censorship. The result is a powerful film that resonates to this day with multiple levels of meaning.

Although this was the first movie filmed in Japan to feature a giant monster, the concept was far from unknown. One need look no farther than the *noh*, and later *kabuki*, play *Tsuchi-Gumo* (*The Monstrous Spider*) – one of the most popular plays in both the *noh* and *kabuki* repertoires – about a gigantic spider that attempts to kill the virtuous Lord Minimoto no Yorimitsu. Interestingly, when questioned about the reason for his attack on Lord Yorimitsu, the spider replies, “I intended to turn the country/Into an infernal region reigned by me” (Bowers, 244). If Gojira could speak, perhaps he would have said much the same thing, seeing as how he set Tokyo ablaze with his atomic fire breath.



Figure 11: Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861), Minimoto no Yorimitsu battles Tsuchi-Gumo (Wikipedia.org).



More importantly, *Gojira* set the tone for virtually every *dai kaiju eiga* to follow, particularly in the way in which the monster was “brought to life.” Initially, Tanaka had envisioned his creature animated in much the same way that Willis O’Brien gave life to King Kong: through the magic of stop-motion animation. He discussed his vision with Tsuburaya, who informed him that, since no one in Japan had ever done anything like what he was requesting, requiring Tsuburaya to teach himself the techniques from scratch, Tanaka’s movie would take more than seven years to complete. Tsuburaya came up with an alternative: a stuntman in a latex and foam-rubber suit filmed amidst a miniature set. For an audience raised on conventions like the *kabuki* horse, not to mention the tradition of *onnagata*, in which male actors play the part of female characters – part of the “symbolic” aspect of both *noh* and *kabuki* – this would have seemed like a perfectly reasonable solution. However, its inherent “unreality” has become a source of intense criticism in the West.

If we remove *Gojira* from the category of “giant monster movie” and examine it as a modern *noh* play, then the “unreality” is no longer a problem, but an integral part of its structure. It is this that sets it apart from Western films in the genre, and an understanding of this essential foundation allows for an analysis focused through a different, more culturally-specific lens.

The first step in this examination is to explore the place that a giant monster like *Gojira* inhabits in the Japanese mind and culture. As noted earlier, *Gojira* is very much an expression of both the Shinto concept of *kami*, those awe-inspiring spirits that are part and parcel of Japanese culture, and the more mischievous/malevolent folkloric *yokai*, a conception entirely lacking in American giant monster movies. This connection between Japanese giant monsters and *kami*, implied in the films since the very beginning, was made explicit in *Gojira*, *Mosura*, *Kingu* *Gidora: Daikaijū sōkōgeki* (*Godzilla, Mothra, King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All Out Attack*)

[2001], in which such monsters as Baragon, Mothra, and King Ghidorah are revealed to be “Guardian Monsters,” dedicated to the protection of Japan against such threats as Gojira, a concept familiar to Japanese people raised with the idea of the existence of “guardian *kami*” who oversee or protect some specific aspect of life, such as the distribution of water, or the process of healing. Although he is set in opposition to the guardian *kami*, Gojira’s connection to this fundamental object of belief is unquestionable. Gojira’s connection to the more monstrous – and often more harmful – *yokai* should be self-evident.

Gojira’s status as *kami* is diegetically supported by the worship and reverence shown him by the Odo Islanders, who had been accustomed to propitiating the creature with sacrifices and performing specific rituals designed to appease him. In line with their assumed Buddhist/Shinto faith, the Odo Islanders demonstrate their belief in living with the things of nature, rather than attempting to dominate them. Just as they would not pointlessly fight against an earthquake, or rage impotently in the face of a hurricane – as a typical Western film hero might do – the Odo Islanders have developed systems that allow them to live in harmony with Gojira, a harmony that is only disturbed by the intercession of the decidedly unnatural hydrogen bomb explosion. This belief, in living in harmony with nature, is a fundamental principle of Shinto, and the very definition of man’s relationship with the ever-present *kami*.

At the same time that Gojira is *kami*, he can also be seen as *yokai*, in that, unlike the more benign *kami*, he causes death and destruction by his very presence. Like many *yokai*, Gojira can be read as a human-animal hybrid. Consider, in this regard, his human-like posture and gait, a function of his suitmation construction, crossed with his origin as some species of lizard, dinosaur, or perhaps some presently unidentified animal. Indeed, the Heisei Era *Gojira tai King*

*Gidora*<sup>12</sup> [*Godzilla vs. King Gidorah*, 1991] portrayed the current Gojira as an atomically-mutated “Godzillasaurus”<sup>13</sup>) that possesses a supernatural weapon (his atomic firebreath) which he uses to bring destruction and misery to human beings. Like *yokai*, Gojira’s very existence is largely unexplainable, casting him as a fantastic and mysterious creature well outside the realm of ordinary comprehension.<sup>14</sup>

Having squarely placed Gojira himself within the Japanese cultural sphere of Shinto by his relation to *kami* and *yokai*, it is now necessary to determine to what category of *noh* play *Gojira* the film might belong. Since the Fifth Group deals with supernatural beings, demons, and devils, this would seem to be the most appropriate category in which to place the story of a giant monster. The diegetic narrative makes it clear that Gojira has been known and feared for quite some time; the Odo Islanders know who and what Gojira is, and in fact, by tradition, have been offering a young woman on a raft to the horrible sea beast for generations. This is in keeping with the demons and monsters that appear in *noh* plays, virtually all of which are known to the other characters, and a direct contrast to Western giant monster movies, in which the creatures are typically creations of science run amok, hail from another planet, or in some other way represent something totally new and unknown. Additionally, the offering of sacrifices to Gojira

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<sup>12</sup> Gojira enthusiasts have divided the canonic G-films – the Toho features, beginning with *Gojira* (1954) and ending with *Gojira: Fainaru uozo* [*Godzilla: Final Wars*] (2004) – into “eras” (the names of the first two are based on the names of the Emperors who ruled at the time the films were made) based on filmic styles. The Showa era begins with the first film, *Gojira* (1954) and continues through 1975’s *Mekagojira no gyakushu* (*Terror of Mechagodzilla*). The Heisei era starts up with the franchise’s reboot, *Gojira* [*The Return of Godzilla*; *Godzilla 1985*] in 1984, and runs through *Gojira tai Desutoroia* [*Godzilla vs. Destroyah*] (1995), intended to be the final movie in the series. That film’s popularity, however, led to the Millennium series – sometimes called the Shinsei series – which extends from *Gojira nisen: Mireniamu* [*Godzilla 2000: Millenium*] (1999) through *Gojira: fainaru uozo* [*Godzilla: Final Wars*] (2004). The American remake, *Godzilla* (1998), released by Tri-Star, is not included in any of these series or eras, and exists outside the canon of Gojira films..

<sup>13</sup> An addition to Gojira’s personal history that has since been largely ignored.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the execrable Tri-Star Pictures remake, *Godzilla* (1998) obliterates this unique feature of Gojira’s character, by explaining its monster as a marine iguana mutated by atomic testing. In this way, Tri-Star deftly removed virtually everything that made the original creation culturally unique.

positions him as a deific spirit, worthy and deserving of awe and reverence, and also links him to the American King Kong, to whom the Skull Islanders habitually offered sacrifices in the eponymously-titled 1933 film. Although sacrificing to the *kami* is not a part of traditional Shinto practice, it is common for devotees to leave offerings of fruit, salt, rice, rice paste (*mochi*), rice wine (*sake*), and other food items at a shrine, in order to propitiate the spirits. Seen through this lens, the offering of a young maiden to Gojira seems entirely appropriate.

As is common in Fifth Group *noh* plays, the monster/demon serves as the *shite* (doer), the character around whom the play revolves. This is the character that instigates action, the one who holds the most important role in the drama. Without the *shite*, the story would have no reason to exist. In many instances, the *shite* is a masked character, just as Haruo Nakajima – the main stuntman within the Gojira suit – wore a concealing mask and costume. In *Tsuchi-Gumo*, the *noh* play referenced earlier as having perhaps the most direct correlation to *Gojira*, the priest who becomes the giant spider takes the role of *shite*.

Opposite the *shite* is the *waki*, a character that can either aid or oppose the *shite*. In *Tsuchi-Gumo*, the *waki* role is taken by the brave warrior Hitori-musha, who defends his ailing master by battling and overcoming the giant spider. In the same way, Professor Serizawa (Akihiko Hirata), the inventor of the Oxygen Destroyer, directly battles Gojira in order to save the city of Tokyo, thereby becoming the *waki* of the film. In *noh*, the *shite* and *waki* are crucial roles, without which the play cannot exist. So too, in terms of the narrative of the film *Gojira*, the monster and Serizawa are the only truly indispensable roles, as the life or death of Tokyo and its millions of inhabitants rests solely with them.

As vital as the *shite* and the *waki* are to the performance, they are far from the only roles in the drama. In *Gojira*, Ogata (Akira Takarada), Emiko (Momoko Kochi), and Professor

Yamane (Takashi Shimura) each take the part of *tsure* (follower). The *tsure* are typically characters of lesser importance, who serve various dramatic functions to propel the story. Minamoto no Yorimitsu, the ailing lord in *Tsuchi-Gumo* who is the object of the giant spider's attack, as well as the handmaiden who brings him medicine at the beginning of the play, are both considered *tsure*.

Another class of character within the *noh* play is known as the *kyogen*. These are typically rustic or lower class characters, whose function is to reveal, usually in colloquial language, "...to the *waki* the history of some remarkable occurrence" (Keene, 21). Looking at *Gojira*, it is hardly a stretch to see the Odo Islanders, portrayed as simple, native people who are brought to Tokyo to testify to the devastation caused by one of Gojira's early attacks, as fulfilling the traditional *noh* role of *kyogen*. The outspoken woman who upbraids the Japanese parliament can also be placed in this class, as will be discussed momentarily.

Mention should also be made of the final character class, the *ko-kata*, or child actors. In *noh*, these roles are specifically written for children who, in some cases, actually play an adult<sup>15</sup>. In *Gojira*, the *ko-kata* assumes a brief, but vital position. The role is filled by the chorus of schoolgirls who sing the heartfelt Hymn of Peace after Gojira's destructive rampage through Tokyo. Hearing the hymn, Serizawa decides to use the Oxygen Destroyer against Gojira, thus setting into motion the climax of the film.

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<sup>15</sup> An example can be found in the play *Funa-Benkei*, in which the *ko-kata* takes the part of the Emperor Minamoto no Yoshitsune.

So, to summarize, the roles in *Gojira* and *Tsuchi-Gumo* break down as follows:

<b>ROLE</b>	<b>GOJIRA</b>	<b>TSUCHIGUMO</b>
<i>Shite</i>	Gojira	A priest, later a giant spider
<i>Waki</i>	Professor Serizawa	The warrior Hitori-musha
<i>Tsure</i>	Ogata	Minamoto no Yorimitsu, a.k.a. Raiko
	Emiko	Yorimitsu's swordbearer
	Professor Yamane	Kocho, a serving woman
<i>Kyogen</i>	Odo Islanders	A messenger
	Outspoken Woman	
<i>Ko-Kata</i>	Children's chorus	(Not applicable)

It can, of course, be argued that these character-types exist in all dramas, both Eastern and Western, and thus do little to distinguish *Gojira* as an example of an updated *noh* play. Consider, however, the structure of the film as it relates to the basic outline of the *noh* drama. In his landmark book, *Japanese Theater*, Faubion Bowers delineates the typical skeleton of the *noh* play by breaking it into three distinct parts:

- 1) *Jo* – The opening section, in which the *waki* – or sometimes the *tsure* – enters, introduces himself, and sets the stage for the drama to come. He will frequently encounter the *shite*, who is typically disguised in some way. Virtually all plot points are revealed in this section, giving the audience a good idea of what is to come.
- 2) *Ha* – This section typically contains a dance (called the *kuse*), performed by the *shite*, that recreates an event from the past. It is often followed by a humorous section performed in simpler language by the *kyogen*.

3) *Kyu* – This is the high point of the production, in which the *shite* appears in his true form. A spectacular dance ensues, in which the plot is resolved; the play ends with the performers leaving the stage in silence.

Looking at *Gojira*, we can see how director Ishiro Honda, consciously or not, based his film on this fundamental structure. Although *Gojira* is by no means a conventional *noh* drama – it is a different medium, after all, and was made subject to the realities of making a commercial film with a massive budget for a major studio – the similarities show the influence of the older form on Honda’s thinking.

The *Jo* section begins with the opening credits. The first sound heard is the deep bass drum – reminiscent of the traditional Japanese *taiko* – that diegetically represents *Gojira*’s ponderous footsteps. The *taiko* is an important part of the traditional *noh* presentation, and that this is the opening sound immediately links the movie that is about to play with the older style of drama. Hearing the *taiko* at the beginning of *Gojira* for a Japanese audience would be like an American audience hearing jingle bells at the beginning of a movie, instantly conjuring images of wintertime and Christmas. The *taiko* is an ancient instrument that is a deeply rooted part of Japan’s cultural heritage. In feudal Japan, it was used during warfare to motivate troops, to set the marching pace, and even to send messages over great distances. It is one of the standard instruments used in Japanese theater, and it is used extensively in both *noh* and *kabuki* performances. The opening notes of the *taiko* that first draw the audience into *Gojira* instantly link it to this older performance style.

The movie begins on a fishing boat at sea, setting up an important theme that will run throughout the movie. Water is an extremely important element in Shinto, used extensively in purification rituals as simple as hand or mouth washing, or as complete as standing under a

waterfall. Adherents to Shinto typically purify themselves with water – a ritual known as *misogi harai* – on a daily basis, as the idea of purity and cleanliness, both spiritual and physical, is central to their faith. Most Shinto shrines have pools of water before them that visitors may use for ritual cleansing. The ritual – first wash the left hand, then the right, then the mouth – is proscribed and important. Therefore, by beginning the film on a calm sea, Honda likens this brief, pre-Gojira period to purity and cleanliness. Throughout the film, water plays an important role, as it is the place that Gojira comes from and returns to, and it is the site of his first attacks on humanity.

In the best tradition of *noh*, the *shite* – Gojira – now appears “in disguise,” as a glow in the water. Indeed, it will be some time before Gojira fully reveals himself. Destroying the boat, Gojira renders the waters “impure,” a desecration that will require ritual purification by film’s end.

Ogata, the *tsure*, is introduced, not only by name but by rank and profession as well, as would be the case in a *noh* play. Appropriately, he has the first spoken lines, fulfilling the requirement of, in this case, the *tsure* to introduce the action. It is also in this section that the majority of the story is laid out, by the revelation of the legends of the Odo Islanders, who, apparently, have known of Gojira’s existence for generations. In times past, they blamed him for periods when the fish catches were low, and sent a maiden out on a raft to appease him. Although in recent times he has drifted into the mists of legend, that he has now returned seems to surprise them not at all.

Interestingly, Gojira is presented not as a mere monster, but as a force of nature, a categorization that sets him apart from most of his Western counterparts. The Rhedosaurus in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), for example, was presented as a simple giant monster, as



was *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), *Tarantula* (1955), and even *King Kong* (1933). These were creatures that could be fought and killed with conventional weapons. They were earthly beasts, albeit gigantic ones.

Gojira, on the other hand, is never presented as a simple “monster.” He is a force to be reckoned with, one upon which simple human weapons have absolutely no effect. Just as one cannot shoot a hurricane, stab an earthquake, or beat a volcano into submission, so too are human measures useless against Gojira. Like a hurricane, an earthquake, or a volcano, the best the population of Tokyo can do is wait until he leaves and do their best to survive. This presentation demonstrates the Shinto philosophy regarding the futility of striving against nature and trying to dominate it, as efforts in that regard are doomed to failure.

As if to make the link with *noh* theater even more explicit, Honda includes a ritual dance in this section, diegetically explained as the Odo Islander’s attempts at pacifying Gojira. All the traditional elements are present, including the artfully carved wooden masks worn by the performers. Of course, in strict *noh* format this dance would appear in the next section, but its presence in the film is too prominent an inclusion to ignore, as it appears to be Honda’s “tip of the hat” to the earlier tradition from which he has drawn inspiration and structure.

In the final part of the *Jo* section, Professor Serizawa is introduced. In the best tradition of *waki*, Serizawa is a warrior (we’re told he lost an eye as a result of an injury during the war), and it is he who will do final battle with Gojira. With the end of this section, all the necessary elements are in place for the narrative to move forward.

The *Ha* section is relatively short, as is typical in *noh*. It begins with the expedition to Odo Island, which effectively brings in the *kyogen*, or “rustic” characters, that typically populate this section. After Gojira appears – again, only a partial appearance, so still “in disguise” –

Professor Yamane (Takashi Shimura) relates the probable history of Gojira, from his prehistoric past to his recent mutation via the hydrogen bomb. In doing so, Yamane fulfills one of the requirements of the *Ha* section: the re-creation of an event set in the past in order to provide background to the present story. Set in this place in the film, this particular recitation provides an additional link to traditional *noh* theater.

Yamane's testimony also highlights an important philosophical element of the film: that of being out of step with the natural order. As Yamane explains, Gojira was affected by radiation (a man-made event), fundamentally changing his essential nature. In short, his *wabi*, his unique state of being, has been disturbed, leading to tragic results. To the Shintoist or Buddhist, this change would go a long way towards explaining the events of the film, in that prior to the bomb, Gojira and Japan were able to co-exist in virtual peace, with the giant beast content to stay within his underwater realm. After the explosion of the bomb, however, and the release of deadly radiation, the natural balance was upset and Gojira was placed in conflict with mankind. Had the bomb not been tested, the film implies, Gojira would have remained an unseen, and largely unthreatening, legend. Yamane recognizes this, and consequently wishes to study Gojira rather than destroy him, in an attempt to restore Gojira to the natural order rather than remove him from it. In the end, of course, he is unsuccessful in this attempt, but he functions as the voice of Shinto/Buddhist rationalism throughout the movie.

After Yamane's explanation is offered to the assembled National Diet of Japan (that country's supreme legislative body, akin to the American House and Senate or the British Parliament), the question of what to do with the information regarding Gojira's existence is debated. On one hand, the politicians present want to keep the event quiet, in order to maintain control for as long as possible. Another highly vocal faction, led by an exceptionally outspoken

woman, favors releasing all available information to the public immediately, in order that they might take steps to safeguard life and property as soon as possible. The debate quickly degrades into a rather humorous shouting match, with the woman telling the politician to “pipe down,” and calling him a “crackpot.” His response is a disdainful, and thoroughly unprofessional, “shut up.”

This brief scene is reminiscent of the *noh* tradition of *ai-kyogen* during the *Ha* section, in which minor characters, typically speaking in informal, colloquial language, provide a humorous interlude in the proceedings. There’s no doubt that the outspoken woman is intended as a colloquial character, one who succeeds in bringing the proud and haughty politician down to her level through plain and forceful speaking. Although the subject matter – whether or not to reveal the fact of Gojira’s existence to the Japanese public – is of the greatest seriousness, the tone is lightened considerably by the woman’s insults and jibes. It is, indeed, one of the only light-hearted moments in a markedly dark film. Certainly, the narrative would proceed effectively without it, leading one to conclude that Honda had a specific reason for including this seemingly out-of-place scene in his film. One possible conclusion is that he did so in order to maintain the *noh* structure that runs like an undercurrent throughout *Gojira*.

Before the *Ha* section ends, Honda inserts one additional brief moment that has some resonance. After the news of Gojira’s existence is released, there is a shot of several unnamed people on a train, presumably traveling to work. Talking about the news, they liken Gojira’s arrival not only to the atomic bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (“Evacuate Tokyo? Not again!”) but to the more recent hydrogen bomb explosion (the talk of “radioactive fish and rain” is a direct reference to the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* incident mentioned above). Not only does this solidly place the film in a distinct period of world history, but it also hearkens back to the

tradition in the *Ha* section of relating past events in order to enhance the present story. If there was any doubt as to Honda's intentions in linking this film to the traditional *noh* structure, this scene erases them handily.

With that, the film arrives at the *Kyu*, or final, section. As Bowers explains, this is,

... the final and most dramatic section... when the protagonist appears: this time in his true colors; often as a ghost or demon. He dances a climactic dance, resolving the plot, and the play ends. Performers, chorus, and musicians silently leave the stage. (Bowers, 18)

A more fitting description of the final part of *Gojira* is hard to imagine. In this section, Akira Ifukube's memorable score comes into its own. Unheard since the opening credits, music now plays an important part in the production, setting the mood for the action onscreen.

Although the score is composed in a Western orchestral fashion, it works to underscore the very Japanese themes which Honda expresses in the film. Just as it would be inconceivable to present a *noh* play without the requisite musicians, so too is it impossible to imagine *Gojira* without Ifukube's moving score.

It is in this section as well that Gojira makes his first full appearance, his first appearance in his "true form," as it were. Previously, he has only been suggested or partially seen, but now he appears fully revealed. In the traditional *noh* drama, the *Kyu* section is where the ghost or demon, having appeared in disguise in the *Jo* section, finally fully reveals himself.

As well, this is the section in which Gojira, as *shite*, performs his climactic "dance," when he ravages Tokyo. In keeping with Shinto philosophy, however, little actual violence is shown during the rampage, the inevitable deaths being more suggested than shown, as in the touching scene of a mother huddling in the shadow of a burning building with her two small children, telling them, "We'll be joining your father in just a moment." The implication, of course, is that their father either died during the war or in the bombing of either Hiroshima or

Nagasaki. This scene further links the film to those tragedies, but in a subtle, rather than overt, way<sup>16</sup>.

Indeed, this idea of muted violence is a unique characteristic of *Gojira*, in which even a fight between Ogata and Serizawa, when the two men struggle over the Oxygen Destroyer, takes place off-screen, suggested by sound effects of a struggle and a trickle of blood running down Ogata's temple following the "altercation." This is in direct opposition to such Western giant monster films as *King Kong* (1933) which, in the original cut, showed natives locked within Kong's mighty jaws and crushed under his massive feet, as well as an innocent woman plucked from a hotel room and thrown to her death by the great ape. Honda, however, cleaves to the *noh* ideal that such depictions would be offensive to the *kami*, and thus avoids direct representations of violence. Certainly, there are several scenes of the Japanese army firing everything from bullets to mortar shells to rockets at Gojira, but as they have no effect on him, there is no true violence to be seen.

All of which brings us to the beautiful, almost elegiac ending of *Gojira*, in which Serizawa, concerned that his Oxygen Destroyer, once revealed, will be weaponized and used as a greater instrument of destruction than any bomb ever exploded, sacrifices himself to destroy Gojira, his invention, and the knowledge needed to create it again. Locating Gojira underwater, Ogata and Serizawa dive to the sea floor where they find the monster sleeping. Sending Ogata to safety, Serizawa activates the device, which reduces both him and Gojira literally to nothingness, freeing Japan – and the world – from the threat of this nuclear monster.

While on the surface this might appear to be a simple science fiction ending – super-scientist defeats giant menace with technologically questionable super-weapon – it is far more

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, this scene, which would have had particular resonance in a post-war environment, is entirely absent from the American version, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956), starring Raymond Burr.

than that. Most Western giant monster movies end in violence – the Ymir in *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957) is blasted with guns, bazookas, and tank shells until he plummets from the top of Rome’s Colosseum to his death; the giant arachnid in *Tarantula* (1955) is engulfed in napalm dropped from fighter jets; the Rhedosaurus in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) is shot with a radioactive isotope grenade and then burned to death; and in *The Valley of Gwangi* (1969), the titular Tyrannosaur is trapped inside a burning church and immolated. In perhaps the most famous giant monster death of all, *King Kong* (1933), the Eighth Wonder of the World, is shot down by a squadron of bi-planes and falls from the very top of the Empire State Building to the pavement far below.

Gojira meets a very different fate, however. As Ifukube’s somber and heart-rending score plays in the background – its melancholy refrain increasing the sense of *yugen* dramatically – the two divers are seen underwater, gracefully moving as if performing a ballet or a traditional *noh* dance. There is a sense of sadness about the scene, rather than triumph as is the case in the Western films cited above. During this scene, as Gojira walks along the sea floor, his footsteps make no sound, his *taiko* is silent, as if his battle is finished and the drama is over. Even when the Oxygen Destroyer is activated, and Gojira is fully engulfed by its power, the only sound is Ifukube’s mournful requiem. Finally, we see the end result as Gojira transforms from flesh to skeleton to nothing at all. As befits the end of a traditional *noh* play, the characters exit in relative silence.

This transformation to nothingness echoes the Zen Buddhist belief in *mu*, a state of nothingness from which all come, and to which all return. Upon entering a Zen monastery, a novice must give up everything – clothes, possessions, familial relations, even one’s name – as an acknowledgement that the ultimate context of existence is nothingness. It is the first step in

the novitiate's journey to enlightenment. By returning Gojira to this state of *mu* – as opposed to simply killing him – Serizawa restores the natural order that was disturbed when Gojira was mutated by atomic radiation. He also symbolically purifies the water by cleansing it of all negative influences, an important consideration to believers in Shinto. That Serizawa sacrifices himself in the process – giving his life for the greater good of his country both now and in the future – is indicative of the Japanese state of mind which typically values the group over the individual, another strong difference between Western and Eastern thought. Serizawa is a latter-day kamikaze, acting for the good of all humanity by sacrificing his life to both defeat Gojira and to safeguard the world from the potential ravages of the Oxygen Destroyer.

In summarizing the structure of the *noh* play, Bowers says:

The primary point to be remembered in the analysis of a *noh* play is that action is generally recollected and that the plot hinges on an event that has already taken place in the past. This means that the dramatic situation is not necessarily acted realistically before one's eyes. Rather it is poetically recalled and discussed by the characters and chorus, and their movements become dreamlike glosses to the idea carried by the words. (Bowers, 17)

In *Tsuchi-Gumo*, the past event is the mysterious malady from which Lord Minimoto no Yorimitsu suffers. In *Gojira*, it is the unshown hydrogen bomb explosion that mutates the titular monster. Indeed, both *Tsuchi-Gumo* and *Gojira* tread the fine line between reality and fantasy in order to present their stories, a line that allows a simple priest to be, in reality, a giant spider, and a man in a latex suit to be a fearsome, city-destroying monster. This essential balance between reality and unreality is a cornerstone of Japanese aesthetics, one that is not shared by the West. It underlies much of their art, literature, and poetry, and is one of the characteristics that sets *Gojira* apart from virtually all other giant monster movies.

In a brilliant essay, J. Thomas Rimer identifies four essential polarities of Japanese literature, polarities that “together provide Japanese literature with its unique qualities” (Rimer in

Hume, 3). These four polarities are Internal Feeling vs. Exterior Action, Poetry vs. Prose, Aristocratic vs. Popular, and, perhaps most importantly for this discussion, Fiction vs. Fact.

As Rimer notes, fact and fiction are invariably intertwined in Japanese literature. The playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653 - 1725), widely regarded as Japan's foremost dramatist, often began his plays by investigating an actual incident – a particularly juicy scandal, for instance – and using the actual facts as a jumping off point upon which to create his narrative. His plays were not, however, “based on a true story,” as we might understand such works today, but entirely works of fiction built upon a kernel of truth. As Rimer says, “Chikamatsu’s question to himself is not *what* happened – that was a given – but *how* and *why* it happened” (Rimer in Hume, 17). Indeed, it is common to see historical figures appear in both *noh* and *kabuki* plays, often in wholly fictional situations. Lord Minomoto no Yorimitsu, for example, is a historical figure who lived from 944 to 1021; “*tsuchi-gumo*” is the name given to a tribe of indigenous Japanese who, in ancient times, were supposed to have lived in caves in the region now known as the Japanese Alps. The word “*tsuchi-gumo*” literally means “ground spider,” and is thought to have originated as a derisive term for cave-dwelling bandits and thieves. From these shreds of historical fact, the tale of *Tsuchi-Gumo* was brilliantly woven.

This, then, is the fundamental quality that separates *Gojira* from, say, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *20 Million Miles to Earth* or *King Kong*. Two cities in Japan really were destroyed by an unimaginable, monstrous force. The people of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki really were forced to confront the horror of nuclear devastation. Unlike other giant monster movies, there is a kernel of truth at the core of *Gojira* that gives it a resonance that continues to be felt. In terms of Chikamatsu’s question, the issue is not so much *what* happened: the destruction of a major Japanese city and the consequent loss of life, whether by a thermonuclear



device or by a giant monster, but *how* and *why* it happened: by man's prideful release of forces he did not fully understand and that were clearly beyond his control. While other giant monster movies use radiation as the source of their conflict, only *Gojira* manages to straddle that thin line between reality and fantasy in personalizing and characterizing this deadly force. In this sense, *Gojira* himself is far more than a mere nuclear metaphor, he is the modern successor to such fantastic creations as the giant spider of *Tsuchi-Gumo*.

Kimiyoshi Yasuda's *Daimajin* (1966)

*Daimajin* (1966) wears its theatrical origins on its proverbial sleeve. The story – which concerns a treacherous servant who kills his master and takes over his domain, and the vengeance that is wreaked upon him by the village's protector-god, a giant stone statue of a samurai warrior – incorporates elements from several sources, including the *kabuki* play *Chushingura* (*The Loyal 47 Ronin*), one of the most well-known and popular plays in the *kabuki* literature<sup>17</sup>. One look at the character *Daimajin* (whose name means “giant spirit”) reveals his origins, as his “true face” is a clear representation of a *noh* mask. Set during Japan's feudal period, this movie is closely linked to the popular subset of *noh* and *kabuki* plays known as *jidaimono* (historical plays).

The underlying structure of *Daimajin*<sup>18</sup> is worth considering, as it closely echoes a traditional *noh* play. The film begins with the murder of Lord Hanabasa by his treacherous chamberlain, Samanosuke (Ryutaro Gomi). Rescued from certain death by the loyal Kogenta (Jun Fujimaki), Lord Hanabasa's children are taken to hide on *Majin*'s mountain, literally an otherworldly place. This basic plot resembles that of the *kabuki* play *Gempei nunobiki no taki*, in

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<sup>17</sup> In *Chushingura*, a group of 47 samurai avenge their lord, who was murdered by a rival. In *Daimajin*, a brother and sister, with the help of a great stone god, avenge their father, who was also murdered by a rival.

<sup>18</sup> From this point forward, *Daimajin* will refer to the movie, while *Majin* will refer to the character of the giant stone statue.

which Yoshikata, a prominent member of the Genji clan is murdered by his nephew, causing his son, Yoshinaka, to flee to the safety of a mountain cave, where he was raised and cared for by faithful family retainers.

At this point, the scene shifts to ten years later, effectively creating an Act II, as is often the case in *noh* plays. Typically, the first half of the production will set out the foundation of the story, while the second half presents the resolution, frequently with the help of a god. For example, in the *noh* play *Dairokuten*, the first act begins with a meeting between the priest Geatsu Shonin and a village woman – actually a god in disguise – in which the woman warns the priest about an evil force that lurks nearby. In the second part, the devil-king Dairokuten appears, but is soon subdued by the god Susano-o. In the same way, *Daimajin* begins with the murder of Lord Hanabasa and the rescue of his children. In the second half, Samanosuke is shown to be a vicious ruler who has no regard for the people he governs, and no fear of the gods. For his arrogance and cruelty, Majin destroys him. The structure is simple, but effective. As well, it's important to note that each “act” begins with the singing of a traditional Japanese song – first heard off camera – just as a *noh* play is initiated by the playing of the Japanese flute from offstage.

In terms of character relations, Samanosuke, the murderous chamberlain, takes the role of the *shite*, as without his initial actions, the story would not take place. By his treacherous nature, one could read Samanosuke as “masked,” initially wearing the disguise of the loyal retainer, but discarding that mask when he murders his Lord, a distinction that further identifies him with the role of *shite*. Kogenta, the old woman who hides Lord Hanabasa's children, opposes Samanosuke as the *waki* in “Act I,” a role that is actively taken over by the grown Prince Tadafumi and Princess Kozasa – as children in “Act I,” they fulfill the *ko-kata* role – who seek

revenge for their father's murder, with Kogenta adopting the *kyogen*, or rustic, role. Tellingly, she is also the source of much exposition and information, revealing to her young charges – and the audience – all about the legend of Majin, for example. This role, of providing much needed information to the *waki*, traditionally falls to the *kyogen*. Finally, although his presence is strongly felt throughout the film, Majin doesn't actually take any action until the very end, casting him as an extremely important *tsure* in a sort of *deus-ex-machina* way. In this way, *Daimajin* sets itself apart from such *dai kaiju eiga* as *Gojira*, in that the main character, the character around whom the film is based, takes on a relatively minor role in terms of the action performed.

Music is an integral part of the *noh* play, and this aspect is not ignored in *Daimajin*. Renowned composer Akira Ifukube – composer of the soundtrack for many of the *Gojira* movies, including the first, as mentioned earlier – provides a haunting composition for the film, setting the scene from the very beginning with a dark and ominous tone, as if to presage the death and destruction to come.

Donald Keene says, “*noh* begins with a mask, and within the mask the presence of a god” (Keene, 1990:13). This fundamental concept sets *noh* apart from all other types of Japanese theater, and is of particular importance when considering *Daimajin*. The roots of *noh* are in the ages-old philosophies of Buddhism and, more importantly, Shinto, with its strong belief in *kami*, the gods and spirits that populate every corner of the Japanese world. Indeed, unlike *kabuki* and *bunraku*, *noh* is performed with a sense of stately reverence, as its purpose is to honor and appease the gods.

Of course, as noted earlier, the physical appearance of the giant stone statue is the most obvious link to his traditional theatrical roots. Interestingly, that appearance changes during the

course of the film. When Majin is first shown, he is a simple, if massive, stone statue carved into the side of a mountain, with rudimentary features. This is the god's mundane face, the one he wears when "asleep," in the same way that *noh* actors often think about the god descending into them as they don a particular mask.



**Figure 12: The "disguised face" of Majin.**

However, when Majin "wakes," he passes his hand before his face, and an amazing transformation takes place. His expressionless stone face becomes the face of a god, taking on the aspect of a finely carved *noh* mask.



**Figure 13: The "true face" of Majin.**

The face he takes on bears a striking resemblance to the *noh Kuro-beshimi* mask that is sometimes used in special productions. Like other masks in the *beshimi* (literally, “to close the lips firmly”) family – including the *O-beshimi* and the *Ko-beshimi* – the mouth is tightly closed, unlike most *noh* masks. The inference is that the god – or demon – is gathering and concentrating its power. Typically painted in dark colors to emphasize the god’s fierce nature, the *beshimi* family of masks are based on the appearance of the deities who are often found guarding the gates of Buddhist temples. Legend has it that these were originally mighty local gods who converted to Buddhism and now use their strength and power to protect the temples of that faith.



**Figure 14: A *Kuro-beshimi* mask (the-noh.com)**

In the same way, Majin is very much a guardian spirit, set to watch over the Hanabasa clan. It is, therefore, no mere coincidence that the *kuro-beshimi* was chosen as the basis for Majin’s appearance. Additionally, in his transformed state, Majin’s “skin” is colored green, the traditional kabuki color used to denote the supernatural.

The theme of transformation – as when Majin transforms from his mundane stone self to his godlike avenging form – is a common one in the literature of *noh*. In the *noh* play *Gendayu*,

an old man and old woman transform into the gods Ashinazuchi and Tenazuchi; in *Tsuchi-Gumo*, as noted earlier, a priest becomes a giant spider monster; in *Kanawa*, a wife changes herself into a devil by means of a magical iron crown in order to take revenge on a husband who abandoned her for another woman. This concept of transformation is at the heart of Buddhism. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to effect transformation on a human level, to change attitudes, beliefs, relations, and desires in order to effectuate enlightenment. Some Buddhists refer to this process as *bodhi*, or awakening, while the Mahayana Buddhists speak of the “transformation of consciousness” that comes with the awareness of truth. As Buddhism is highly concerned with enlightenment, and since enlightenment is seen as a form of transformation, it’s no wonder that this important concept would find its way into a spiritually-based art form like *noh*, and further, into film.

Like *Daimajin*, *noh* plays are typically set in the past, peopled with a variety of characters, some historical, some drawn from Japanese mythology, and still others wholly invented for the purposes of the drama. These characters are, typically, not as fully developed as characters in a Western drama. For example, Hamlet is a rich and complex character whose innermost thoughts and motivations are an integral part of Shakespeare’s immortal play. The characters that populate the literature of *noh*, however, are far less detailed, and possess far fewer individual traits. A specific *shite*, for instance, might portray a remorseful ghost recounting the incident of his death, a demon in the guise of a traveling priest, a man who hopes to win the love of a young woman, or any number of things. Often, these characters lack even names, being referred to simply as “a priest,” “an old man,” or “a fisher-girl.” In *Daimajin*, set in eighteenth century Japan, the characters are equally one-dimensional, representing such iconic characteristics as loyalty, betrayal, revenge, and reverence; they have less relevance to the story

as characters than they do as character types. It's not necessary to the story in *Daimajin* that we know the innermost thoughts and feelings of Prince Tadafumi (Yoshihiko Aoyama), for example; it's enough that we know he seeks revenge for the death of his father, Lord Hanabasa.

As a story of revenge, *Daimajin* draws as much or more from *kabuki* as from *noh* tradition. *noh* plays rarely display real conflict, as they tend to focus on one character only, the *shite*, relegating all other characters to secondary, more observational roles. An example can be found in the play *Ashi-Kari* ("The Rushcutter") – written by Zeami, one of the originators of the *noh* form – about a man named Saemon (the *shite*), who falls on hard times and leaves his wife in order to make a meager living as a rushcutter. His wife, however, finds success and prosperity and sets off in search of her husband, longing to reunite with him. When the two come together, their troubles solved, they dance and return home. In this example, only Saemon is named, and it is his story that is told. There is no "conflict," as one would expect to find in a Western drama, merely the telling of a story about an honest, hard-working man who suffered through hard times and was rewarded for his humble efforts.

Tales of vengeance and retribution run throughout the *kabuki* literature. Consider *Katakiuchi Tengajayamura* ("The Revenge at Tengajaya"), a popular play written in the late eighteenth century by Nagawa Kamesuke, that spawned several competing plays on the same historical topic. In *Tengajaya*, Toma Saburoemon murders the father of the Hayase brothers, Iori and Genjiro, who, quite naturally, seek revenge. Of course, their path is not so simple, and there are trials that they must go through in order to come face-to-face with Toma, including the betrayal of a formerly loyal vassal and the death of a beloved servant. In the same way, *Daimajin*'s Prince Tadafumi and Princess Kozasa (Miwa Takada), the children of Lord Hanabasa, seek revenge for their father's wrongful death at the hands of his trusted, but

treacherous, chamberlain, the evil Samanosuke. They, too, must struggle and overcome obstacles, including the death of the woman who raised them after the murder of their father. In this way, the basic structure of *Daimajin*, with its themes of betrayal, murder, and revenge, parallels that of the older, well-known *kabuki* play.

Of course, as a *dai kaiju* film, *Daimajin* adheres to the conventions of that genre as well. Like the best giant monsters, Majin is impervious to harm by mortal weapons, impassively withstanding the barrage of boulders, spears, arrows, and more thrown at him by the soldiers defending Samanosuke's castle. Taking a cue from the early *Gojira* movies, Majin is not a creature motivated by recognizable human emotions, but is, like his saurian counterpart, an implacable force of nature, whose destructive powers are visited on whoever happens to get in his way. He can only be stopped by the sacrifice of one who is pure at heart, in this case the Princess Kozasa, who offers her life in order to halt the giant statue's destructive rampage<sup>19</sup>.

Beyond the observable surface characteristics of *Daimajin*, however, lies a more philosophical foundation that connects it strongly to the *noh* tradition, the quality of *yugen*. This concept, as discussed earlier, can mean a dark or obscure type of beauty. To bring the concept of *yugen* into focus regarding *Daimajin*, consider the following poem:

Evening has come;/ The autumn winds from the fields/ Cuts into the flesh/ and the quails are calling now/ in Fukasuka village. (Keene, 1990:22)

As Keene notes, this is not a traditionally "beautiful" poem, invoking scenes of a peaceful, pastoral nature, but it is evocative nonetheless, its beauty coming from its stark and striking imagery. In discussing this hard-to-define quality, he explains the poem quoted above

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<sup>19</sup> In *Gojira* (1954), that sacrifice is made by Dr. Serizawa, who obliterates the monster with his Oxygen Destroyer, killing himself in the process so that the secret of his terrible weapon will never fall into the wrong hands. In *Gojira no gyakushu* (1955), heroic pilot Kobayashi buries *Gojira* beneath tons of ice by flying his plane into a mountainside and triggering an avalanche. All in all, Princess Kozasa, whose life is spared by the giant statue, gets off pretty easily.



by saying, “The atmosphere evoked in this poem is lonely rather than inviting, monochromatic rather than colorful, but beneath the externals one may glimpse a deeply-felt beauty” (Keene, 1990:22). His choice of the word “monochromatic” is particularly pertinent to the study of *Daimajin*, as the color palette utilized throughout the film is one of muted tones, with shades of brown and grey predominating. Bright colors are rarely seen, giving the *mise-en-scene* a decidedly monochromatic look. This subdued color scheme helps ground the early part of the film, increasing the feeling of unease when the sense of reality that has been so carefully created is shattered with the awakening of the giant stone statue Majin. Until the scene in which the statue wakes, one could see this story strictly as *jidaimono*, a period samurai drama. Bright colors, while perhaps more palatable to Western eyes, would have damaged the subtle beauty (*yugen*) of the world that director Kimiyoshi Yasuda has created. By contrast, consider *Kingu Kongu tai Gojira* (*King Kong vs. Godzilla*, 1962), in which bright primary colors abound, from shockingly red berries the size of tennis balls to glaring Hawaiian-style shirts to the bright yellow explosive packs on the raft that tows Kong to Japan. The effect is more cartoonish and less subtle than *Daimajin*, therefore the quality of *yugen* is almost entirely absent from this classic film<sup>20</sup>. It should be noted, however, that this subtle color scheme is directly opposed to the conventions of both *noh* and *kabuki*, which delight in bright colors and ornate costumes. In defying this tradition, the film can be seen as transcending its roots to become an artistic expression all its own.

It is this very quality that sets *Daimajin* apart from so many of its *dai kaiju* brethren. Indeed, *Daimajin*'s slow pace, and the appearance of the titular monster in only the final reel of the film, has drawn a certain amount of criticism. Stuart Galbraith IV notes, “... Majin does little

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<sup>20</sup> This should not be read as a criticism of *Kingu Kongu tai Gojira*, merely as a comparative analysis. *KK tai G* is, on one important level, a comment on the increasing Westernization of Japan in the wake of the American occupation, and thus the bright, hyper-Technicolor shades are appropriate.

more than wake up near the end... smashes a few buildings and squishes the bad guys before returning to his stone state” (Galbraith, 1994:130). What Galbraith misses, however, is that this structure, with the transformation in the “second act,” follows precisely the structure of a *noh* play, and increases the sense of *yugen*. Had the creature appeared earlier in the film, that sense of obscurity and mystery would have been terribly undercut. By making Majin a passive presence for so much of the film, director Yasuda builds a sense of mystery and anticipation which echoes the admonitions regarding these qualities first set forth by Zeami in his discussions on *noh*.

Perhaps because of its deep roots in traditional Japanese theater and thought, entirely foreign conventions largely unknown to Western audiences, *Daimajin* received a very limited release in the United States in 1968, relegated primarily to art house theaters. Writing in *The New York Times*, Howard Thompson dismissed it as,

...typical of a kind of Asian movie fare that apparently packs 'em in back home. It thumps forward like an old-fashioned Western, keyed by ominous music and fetching color. As usual, the English subtitles are adequate, no more. Mercifully and untypically, the picture only runs for 86 minutes. (Thompson, 1968)

Thompson’s thoughts are, unfortunately, typical of even die-hard *dai kaiju* enthusiasts, who apparently expect more rampaging and property damage in their giant monster films. For those raised on the exceptional work of Ray Harryhausen, for example, whose stop-motion creations ravaged the Western world, who can blame them? As discussed earlier, however, that isn’t the type of movie that Yasuda set out to make.

Finally, one must consider the seemingly out-of-place violence prevalent at the end of the film: Majin crushes a soldier underfoot, and impales Samanosuke to a wall with the very stake his soldiers used to try to destroy the giant statue. As neither *noh* nor *kabuki* typically portray these kinds of vicious acts, to find their root we must look to the Japanese puppet theater, *bunraku*.

The art of puppet performances in Japan dates back over a thousand years, but the term by which we know the art today, *bunraku*<sup>21</sup>, is of much more recent origin, and recalls a particularly gifted practitioner of that art named Bunrakuen, who established his own theater in the late nineteenth century. Although competing theaters came and went, Bunrakuen's was the only one that survived, and hence gave its name to the performance form. The details of *bunraku* performance are discussed more fully in Chapter Two, but suffice it to say that, as *bunraku* developed solely as an entertainment form – and not a vehicle to entertain the *kami* or instruct the populace, as *noh* did – a much higher degree of latitude was allowed in terms of dramatic material that could be covered in the puppet plays.

Early in the development of *bunraku*, some playwrights and puppeteers, particularly those of the Tokyo-based *aragoto* (“rough business”) school, realized that their puppets could do things that human actors could not, leading them to create stories of a bizarre, fantastic, or overly violent nature. This led to puppet plays such as *Amida no munewari* (“*The Chest-Splitting of Amida*”), a drama – rarely performed in modern times – in six acts, in which molten iron is poured down the throats of a couple who have offended the gods, and a young girl's chest is split open and her liver removed. This sense of spectacle was as eagerly received by contemporary Japanese audiences as today's movie-going audiences flock to see the latest slasher film, complete with 3-D special effects. This was something different, something that the Japanese people had never seen before, and they responded enthusiastically. Entrenched in a period of relative peace after the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate in the early seventeenth

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<sup>21</sup> Technically, this term is incorrect. To be scrupulously accurate, one would refer to Japanese puppet performances as *ningyo shibai* (doll theater) or *ayatsuri shibai* (manipulation theater). However, *bunraku* is an acceptable term in modern parlance. The common name, *bunraku*, comes from a popular theater, the Bunrakuza established in Osaka in 1872, which featured the work of Uemura Bunrakuken, for whom the theater was named. Bunrakuken was so identified with the practice of puppet theater that the form gradually became generically identified with his name in the mind of the general public. That idea continues to this day, as alternate terms have been almost totally discarded in favor of *bunraku* (Bowers, 31-32).

century, and with the specter of civil war now well behind them, audiences could enjoy the gruesome and bizarre plot elements of *bunraku*, content in the relative security of their lives. Seen in this context, the violence that marks the end of *Daimajin* does not seem so out of place, as it merely borrows elements from another form of traditional Japanese theater.

Every culture has its own particular outlook that informs everything that culture produces, including its art, literature, music, and, of course, film. Just as one must consider the ancient Japanese art of *ukiyo-e* – the beautiful woodblock prints that have offered a window into the Japanese aesthetic soul since the early seventeenth century – in the context of the culture that created it, so too must the unique Japanese genre of *dai kaiju eiga* be approached, not as a bastard form of American science fiction movies, but as its own unique and compelling art form. Only when this approach is taken can these films truly speak with their own unique cultural voice.

## CHAPTER 3

### *KWAIDAN*(1964) AND *ONIBABA*(1964): *ONRYO*“AVENGING SPIRIT” FILMS AND THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL JAPANESE LITERATURE AND THEATER

Ghosts, demons, and other strange creatures have been a part of the Japanese folkloric tradition for centuries. Predating any of the dramatic forms in Japanese history is the concept of *yokai*: a collection of bizarre, supernatural creatures that are deeply ingrained in Japanese culture. These creatures – some helpful, some harmful – come in an intriguing variety of shapes and sizes, with varying abilities, and often masquerade as human beings in order to deceive the unwary. As noted earlier, *yokai* are related to, but distinct from, *kami*, spirits of the Shinto faith that range from powerful gods (such as Amaterasu, the most revered of all Shinto deities) to ancestral spirits worshipped within a particular home, to natural objects like mountains or trees.

Clearly, supernatural creatures are a living part of Japanese culture. It's therefore not surprising that they should find their way into popular entertainment. Indeed, the literature of *noh* – steeped as it is in Buddhist and Shinto tradition and philosophy – and *kabuki*, as well as *bunraku*, are full of gods, demons, goblins, shape-changers, and all manner of bizarre and fascinating creatures. How they reached the stage – and eventually the screen – is a fascinating story. By looking back several hundred years, to the beginning of traditional Japanese theater, through the development of a rich tradition of ghost (*kaidan*) stories as popular entertainment, and the birth of cinema in Japan, it is possible to illustrate the way in which the Japanese ghost movie brought together both ancient traditions and modern technology, and developed in a very different and culturally unique way from ghost movies in Western nations.

#### The Birth of Traditional Japanese Theater

The Edo period of Japan's history (1603-1868) was largely a time of peace and

prosperity. Political power was, for the first time in Japan's long history, consolidated under the Tokugawa shogunate, and the newly-formed "middle class" – largely made up of peace-time samurai, artisans, and the rising merchant class – began to grow, leading to an increase in urbanization. For perhaps the first time, the Japanese people had the ability and the resources to pursue leisure activities, untroubled as they were by civil war or other martial distractions. Having disposable income, a new phenomenon for those in this newly-formed middle class, plastic arts, such as the beautiful *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, began to flourish as these new consumers sought tangible goods to mark their new status.

It was at precisely this time – the dawn of the Edo period – that *kabuki* came into existence, although in a very different form than it would eventually take. Its origins can be traced to the dry riverbeds of Kyoto, where, at the dawn of the seventeenth century, a *miko*<sup>22</sup> named Izumi no Okuni performed a new style of acting, singing, and dancing, leading an all-female troupe of performers who not only catered to their audiences aesthetic and spiritual needs, but also to their baser passions as well (Bowers, 37). Although Okuni became quite popular (she was even invited to appear before the Imperial Court) (Bowers, 42), because of the strong link between this new form of performance and prostitution, a link exploited not only by Okuni's troupe but also by the inevitable legion of imitators, women's *kabuki*, called *onna-kabuki*, was entirely banned by the Japanese government in 1629 (Bowers, 44). Not surprisingly, this led to the rapid development of *wakashu-kabuki*, or young boy's *kabuki*, another theatrical form intimately linked with prostitution, also quickly quashed (Bowers, 49). By the mid-1600s, the form had settled on *yaro-kabuki*, or men's *kabuki* (Bowers, 49), which gave rise to the popular

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<sup>22</sup> During the Edo period, a *miko* was a woman who acted as a spirit medium, receiving and conveying messages from *kami*, often in a trance-like state, comparable to the sibyl in ancient Greece. Today, however, the term has come to mean a female assistant at a Shinto shrine whose duties include everything from performing ceremonial dances to selling souvenirs.

*onnagata* acting style, in which accomplished male actors took on female roles. It is this style of exclusively male theater that exists to this day.

Soon after the establishment of *kabuki* came *bunraku*, Japan's traditional puppet theater. *Bunraku* and *kabuki* are closely tied together, with many texts serving both types of performance, most commonly the love-suicide dramas that are mainstays of both. The famous Japanese playwright Chikamatsu wrote for both forms, and his works continue to be cornerstone pieces of literature in both traditions. One main difference between the two theatrical forms, however, is in the emphasis of *kabuki* as opposed to that of *bunraku*. Where *kabuki* is decidedly a performer's theater – with the emphasis almost entirely placed upon the individual actors – *bunraku* is an author's theater. This is emphasized when, at the beginning of the performance, the *tayu* (or chanter), who will actually tell the story, takes the stage prior to the start of the performance and bows before the text to be given. The *tayu* tells the story, providing not only narration – complete with accompanying facial expression – but the voice of each character, accompanied by the *shamisen*<sup>23</sup> player, while the puppets perform the action.



**Figure 15: A tayu brings the story to life in a traditional *bunraku* performance (jappone.com)**

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<sup>23</sup> A traditional three-stringed instrument played with a plectrum, or *bachi*.

It is this very interaction that sets *bunraku* apart from other types of traditional Japanese theater. Because the *tayū*, the *shamisen* player, and the puppeteers must work together seamlessly, improvisation is impossible; to insert an extra line of dialogue, or even to elongate a particular syllable, without sufficient preparation could prove disastrous. Conversely, *kabuki* performances thrive on improvisation, with actors given free rein to change dialogue, movement, or blocking as they will, as *kabuki* is a theater entirely about performance. In fact, it was this very aspect of *kabuki* that caused Chikamatsu to move away from it and towards *bunraku*, as he became frustrated with the actor's apparent disrespect for his text. Indeed, he would sometimes fail to write the climactic scenes of his plays, providing only a skeletal outline, as he knew the actors would prefer to improvise their dialogue and movements anyway.

The elaborately constructed *bunraku* puppets – which are typically two to three feet tall – require three black-clad<sup>24</sup> puppeteers to operate them. The *omozukai* – or lead puppeteer – controls the doll's head and facial movements with his left hand, while operating the puppet's right hand with his right. The *hidarizukai* (sometimes known as the *sashizukai*) controls the left hand of the puppet with his right hand, and the *ashizukai* operates the puppet's feet and legs. Like the *kabuki* theater's *kurumbo*, discussed earlier, these three puppeteers are dressed entirely in black and thus “invisible” to the audience.

As mentioned earlier, because of the nature of puppetry, *bunraku* was able to present stories and events that would have been virtually impossible for living, breathing actors to accomplish. This led to gorier and more violent storylines that were eagerly accepted by a public hungry for spectacle and excitement. Scenes of murder, suicide, decapitation, disembowelment and more all became increasingly common in the *bunraku* repertoire, setting it even further apart

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<sup>24</sup> The color black represents “nothingness”; in terms of the physical operators, there is “nothing” there to see, making them invisible in the eyes of the audience.



from the traditional *noh* theater that avoided all such unpleasantness. This willingness to explore the dark side of drama made *bunraku* a perfect vehicle for plays and stories dealing with ghosts, demons, and all kinds of supernatural creatures.



**Figure 16: Puppeteers, dressed entirely in black, manipulate puppets in a bunraku performance (wikispaces.com)**

This, then, demonstrates the major difference between *noh*, the highly rarified theater of the aristocracy, and *bunraku*, the more earthy theater of the common man. Where *noh* intended to instruct, *bunraku* was content with merely entertaining. Where *noh* was austere and subtle, *bunraku* was showy and overt. Where *noh* avoided violent conflict and bloodshed, *bunraku* embraced both. In short, where *noh* was decidedly high-brow and meditative, fully accessible only to those who had studied and absorbed its conventions and philosophies, *bunraku* was clearly low-brow and loud, appealing to the cruder sensibilities of the working class. This in no way, however, should be read to imply that the aristocracy, the very audience for whom *noh* was created, did not also enjoy *bunraku*, as the novelty of the form, unburdened by the weight of didacticism, appealed across all social and economic lines.

## The Rise of *Kaidan* Storytelling

During this period, Japan saw an increasing interest in storytelling, as traveling performers, merchants, and itinerant priests roamed the land, spreading news and tales of people and events – some real, some fantastical – from far, far away. Subject matter was wide and varied, from court gossip to tales of events in foreign lands, from comic tales to stories of fearsome monsters and wondrous beasts, and more; soon this fascination with stories began to integrate with popular and social events. For example, during the Edo Period, it was common for people to observe the ritual known as *koshinmachi*<sup>25</sup>, which occurred approximately once every 60 days. The *koshinmachi* observant would attempt to stay awake throughout an entire night, as it was believed that three beings, or *sanshi*, lived within the human body. Once every 60 days they would leave their host and travel to the realm of Ten-Tei, a great god, to report their host's good and bad deeds. Worshippers believed that those with a large record of bad deeds would be punished, so they attempted to stay awake in order to try to prevent the *sanshi*'s flight. Not surprisingly, these worshippers found that telling scary stories during *koshinmachi* helped them stay awake until morning.

Perhaps as an extension of the increasingly popular *koshinmachi* storytelling tradition, a popular parlor game came into being called *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* (“A Gathering of 100 Supernatural Tales”). The game was played by lighting 100 candles in an otherwise dark room. Each participant would then take a turn telling a ghost story (*kaidan*), after which a candle was extinguished, with the room naturally growing darker and darker as the game progressed. It was believed that the last candle extinguished in this fashion would call forth a supernatural being. Originating among the samurai class, who saw it as a test of their bravery, the game soon spread

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<sup>25</sup> The term “*Koshin*” likely refers to an early form of Shinto, termed Koshinto, and *machi* means “waiting.” *Koshinmachi*, then, means the practice of waiting for the spirits.

to the civilian population, who quickly became enamored of the *kaidan* genre. Combined with the printing technology that had recently come to Japan, this resulted in a flood of *kaidan*-themed books, eagerly devoured by a ghost-happy public. Not surprisingly, the genre has remained popular throughout the intervening years.

Three literary works stand out as important to the development of the *kaidan* form in Japan during the Edo period, each of which represents a distinct style of ghostly tale (Reider: 2001, 88). *Otogi boko* (*Hand Puppets*) written by Asai Ryoji in 1666 is perhaps the most significant, and is frequently cited as the genesis point for later literary works of *kaidan* fiction. Building on the popularity of tales imported from China, Ryoji adapts sixty-eight macabre tales from Chinese literature, changing the settings to Japanese locations in order to better appeal to his readers. Although the book's stated intent is to encourage correct modes of behavior in "women and children," it succeeds more as a thriller than as a didactic text. Exceptionally popular at the time of its release, *Otogi boko* spawned a vast legion of imitators.

The second work to consider is Suzuki Shozo's *Inga monogatari* (*Tales of Cause and Effect*) written in about 1640. Shozo served as *hatamoto*<sup>26</sup> during the early years of the Tokugawa shogunate. After laying down his arms in 1620, he became a Zen Buddhist monk, and dedicated the rest of his life to study and teaching. His books include two moral works and one anti-Christian tract, as well as *Inga monogatari*, a collection of stories in the *kaidan* tradition. The tales in *Inga monogatari* serve to promote Buddhist messages and beliefs, including stories about men who are transformed into animals as a consequence of some base action. However, as the "message" is often subtly presented, it was entirely possible to enjoy the bizarre tales without being overwhelmed by the inherent Buddhist lessons. It is thought that Shozo and his disciples

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<sup>26</sup> The *hatamoto*, or high-level vassals, were the premiere level of samurai serving directly under the shogun – or supreme military leader – during the Tokugawa era. Unlike the *gokenin*, or lower-level vassals, who were also highly-regarded samurai, the *hatamoto* had the right of audience with the shogun himself.

would take the opportunity to add strong Buddhist elements when they told the stories to a live audience, but purged those elements from the print version, perhaps in an effort to make the anthology more commercially viable.

The last work of note is *Tonoigusa*, also known as *Otogi monogatari* (*Nursery Tales*), written by Ogita Ansei, a noted *haiku* poet, in 1660. This important collection of ghost stories, containing strong elements of Japanese folklore, has a connection to *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*. In fact, a story regarding this popular practice is included in this collection, alongside such popular supernatural subjects as foxes, spiders, snakes, and *oni*<sup>27</sup>, all of which made for thrilling reading.

Over the next century or so, the *kaidan* genre continued to develop, culminating in the publication of two landmark works. *Hanabusa zoshi* (*Tales of a Garland*), a work of great polish and sophistication written by the noted intellectual Tsuga Teisho in 1749, raised *kaidan* to a new level. If the preceding works had been the equivalent of the Western pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, *Hanabusa zoshi* introduced the concept of the professionally produced literary magazine. As well, *Ugetsu monogatari* (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*) – which was famously brought to the screen by director Kenji Mizoguchi in 1953 – published in 1776 and written by Takebe Ayatari, tied the *kaidan* genre more closely to the repertoire of the *noh*, as Ayatari specifically structured the nine stories in his collection on the traditional sequence of a single day's *noh* performance, "...plays of gods, warriors, women, mad persons (or miscellaneous present plays), and demons" (Reider: 2001, 93). In this way, the disparate disciplines of *kaidan* literature and traditional theater began to come together.

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<sup>27</sup> *Oni* are demons or evil beings, the souls of bad people who, after death, have nowhere to go and are worshipped by no one (in this way, they are the polar opposite of *kami*, who, after death, are worshipped and revered). Due to their debased condition, *oni* linger around the earthly realms causing trouble for humans. *Kami* are considered *yang*, while *oni* are considered *yin*, and it is to *yin* that all bad and evil attributes accrue.

A well-known and well-liked *kaidan* of this era was a story titled *Botan doro* (“Tales of the Peony Lantern”), a seventeenth century Chinese tale imported to Japan and destined to become one of the most popular ghost stories of that culture. The story of a young student who falls in love with a beautiful woman, and whose later apparent indifference causes her to pine and die – as well as the subsequent “reunion” of the two lovers when her ghost returns to him – quickly made its way to the *kabuki* stage in 1892 as *Kaidan botan doro*. *Botan doro*, then, is the original link between the written *kaidan* tradition and the *kabuki* theater, and became the first ghost story translated to the new medium of film in 1910. It remains a popular tale, with an updated version filmed as recently as 1996.

As well-known as *Botan doro* is the chilling tale *Yotsuya kaidan* (*Ghost Story of Yotsuya*). Originally written as a *kabuki* play in 1825 by Tsuruya Namboku IV (1755-1829) – one of the most significant playwrights of the late Edo period and fourth in the Namboku line of famous *kabuki* actors – *Yotsuya kaidan* tells the story of Iemon, a faithless – and penniless – samurai married to the beautiful Oiwa, who murders his father-in-law, and who, by his treacherous nature and his desire to marry a wealthy woman, causes his wife’s disfigurement and death as well. In true *onryo*, or “avenging ghost,” fashion, her spirit haunts Iemon and exacts revenge, driving the samurai first to madness and later to death. Arguably the most popular supernatural thriller in Japanese history, *Yotsuya kaidan* was first filmed in 1912, then brought before the cameras again in 1921, 1923, 1925, 1928, 1949, 1956, 1959, and 1965, a list that only includes filmings of the story under its original title. All in all, the story of Iemon and Oiwa has been translated to the screen more than 30 times, a testament to the popularity of this chilling legend.

The *kaidan* genre of Japan was brought to the attention of the West largely through the efforts of the Greek-Irish writer and journalist Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904)<sup>28</sup>. Raised in Ireland, Hearn lived briefly in the United States before traveling to Japan as a newspaper correspondent. Even after his journalistic commission ended, he stayed in Japan, where he married Koizumi Setso and held several teaching positions throughout the years. Hearn was so enamored of the Japanese culture that he became a naturalized citizen, taking the name Koizumi Yakumo.

Within his *kaidan*-related writings, Hearn sharply focuses on the idea of karma, in that the things that happen to his characters – for good or ill – happen to them as a result of their own actions. For example, in the story “A Promise Broken,” found in the posthumously-issued collection *A Japanese Miscellany*, a young samurai promises his dying wife that he will never remarry, and that he will honor her memory. After several years, however, he does remarry, and the ghost of his dead wife visits her former home, a terrifying event that ends with the new wife’s head being torn from her body<sup>29</sup>. This emphasis on karmic justice and retribution is seen time and again throughout Hearn’s oeuvre, and is foregrounded in the film *Kwaidan*. Contrast that emphasis with, say, H.P. Lovecraft, the renowned American weird fantasist who reached his creative peak several decades after Hearn’s death. Lovecraft’s richly imagined universe of extra-dimensional gods and monsters is far more capricious: innocent people may be sucked into a terrifying, insanity-inducing cosmic maelstrom for no other reason than that they unwittingly read the wrong book, stumbled across the wrong house, or had the misfortune to move in next to

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<sup>28</sup> Hearn’s heritage is important to note, as he brings together two cultures rich in traditions of mythology, folklore, and storytelling.

<sup>29</sup> There’s an interesting postscript to this text: “‘That is a wicked story,’ I said to the friend who had related it. ‘The vengeance of the dead— if taken at all—should have been taken upon the man.’ ‘Men think so,’ he made answer. ‘But that is not the way that a woman feels. . .’ He was right.” Perhaps this attitude explains the preponderance of female ghost figures in the literature of *kaidan*, as bringers of vengeance.

the wrong neighbor. Seen in this light, Hearn's tales are almost comforting, as his emphasis on karma presupposes a sense of "fairness" in the universe.

Hearn's legacy, however, is not the result of his philosophical insights, but rests entirely on his tireless collection and translation of Japanese folklore, specifically the weird *kaidan* tales that formed the basis of his five best-known books: *In Ghostly Japan* (1899), *Shadowings* (1900), *A Japanese Miscellany: Strange Stories, Folklore Gleanings, Studies Here & There* (1901), *Kotto: Being Japanese Curios, with Sundry Cobwebs* (1902), and *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1903). Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and the subsequent opening of Japan following centuries of self-enforced isolationism, Japonism became the latest craze to enflame the West, and Hearn's books were, for many in both Europe and America, the perfect introduction to the shadowy and bizarre side of a unique and highly artistic culture.

Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964)

Although, as noted earlier, tales of *kaidan* were part of the Japanese cinematic world since virtually the beginning of the medium, the trend in the earliest days of cinema was to simply film existing *kabuki* plays like *Botan doro* or *Yotsuya kaidan*, rather than create new works of ghostly fiction. This trend, which would be almost entirely overturned by the coming of neo-*kaidan* films (aka "J-Horror") in the 1990s, is on full display in director Masaki Kobayashi's award-winning, and critically acclaimed, film, released in the U.S. as *Kwaidan* (1964).

*Kaidan*<sup>30</sup> (the 1964 film's original Japanese release title; the title of Hearn's book, *Kwaidan*, was based on an earlier, archaic form of the same word, in keeping with the archaic nature of the tales told) is a "portmanteau" film, consisting of four separate stories, all involving ghosts or supernatural beings. Taken together, the four segments are reminiscent of the

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<sup>30</sup> For clarity's sake, from this point forward the film will be referred to by its American release title, *Kwaidan*, in order to avoid confusion with the folkloric tradition of *kaidan*.

experience of attending a *kabuki* performance, which typically presents a series of pieces in a variety of styles, rather than one specific storyline, as would be typical of a Broadway show. Perhaps even more tellingly, this portmanteau style of filmmaking harkens back to the antique tradition of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* in that it presents multiple ghost stories within a single framework in an attempt to raise the terror quotient with each successive vignette.

Unlike *Gojira* (1954), which is told strictly in the *noh* format as outlined in the previous chapter, *Kwaidan* borrows characteristics from all of Japan's theatrical traditions. From *noh*, it takes its overall tone, a subdued, almost meditative approach to the subject projected not only in the pacing of the picture, but in the muted color palette it presents. Also characteristic of *noh* is the minimalist musical score and the relatively sparse dialogue, as well as its emphasis on Buddhist themes like karma and the consequences of one's actions and choices. *Kabuki* lends to the film a more extravagant look than might be expected in *noh*, especially in the often-surrealistic set design, along with a greater emphasis on action and character. Finally, *bunraku* contributes the more horrific elements, and the scenes of violence that would have been unheard of in a *noh* play, and definitely frowned upon even in *kabuki*. What emerges, through the lens of Hearn's stories, is a unique production that, in many ways, epitomizes the Japanese approach to drama by blending three disparate traditions in a seamless, stylish whole.

There is almost no location shooting in *Kwaidan* – the film was nearly all shot in an airplane hanger – which subtly reinforces the artificiality of the production and hence its connection to the stage. Indeed, it is this very artificiality that imbues the film with a strong sense of *wabi-sabi*, as it presents a feeling of handcraftedness – the settings are created rather than simply captured – while at the same time having a sense of antiquity, a sense strengthened by setting the stories in the seventeenth century. In order to communicate this feeling of *wabi-sabi*



to his audience, Kobayashi uses color carefully, and in an almost painterly fashion: greys and browns predominate, a color scheme of earth tones, occasionally broken by a bright blue kimono or a brilliantly red coverlet atop a white sleeping mat (the combination of red and white, mirroring the colors of the Japanese flag, typically symbolize happy or auspicious occasions, such as weddings or, in this case, a husband returning home to the wife he abandoned years earlier). In fact, throughout the four segments, Kobayashi makes a point of including one startlingly red object in each narrative (in this case the coverlet), a red object that stands out due to its contrast with the drab background that surrounds it. Although defining the intent behind a single symbol like this is difficult, perhaps Kobayashi meant to imply that, even in the midst of sorrow and fear, there is always a kernel of hope and happiness; that even in the midst of the most drab and colorless landscape, there exists a single point of life and color. In this first segment, the red coverlet expresses the joy with which the wife welcomes her husband back home, and the passion displayed when she finds herself in his arms once again. That the red coverlet is only seen for a moment would seem to imply a comment on the transient nature of joy in the otherwise drab and dreary environment Kobayashi has constructed.

As in traditional Japanese theater, there is no real attempt to mimic reality here; rather, the intent seems to be to create a unique world in which these bizarre tales can play out, free from the restrictions of realism. As mentioned earlier, virtually every scene, save for a few cutaway and establishing shots, was filmed on an interior set, many against a painted, stylized backdrop. It is meant more to establish mood than mimic reality, much like the simple background of the *noh* play – a single pine tree painted on the back panel of the *noh* stage – or the stylized backgrounds and sets of a *kabuki* production. Dialogue is minimal, and many of the character movements are deliberate and ritualized. As well, stage composition is designed to give

a formal, theatrical appearance – particularly in the “Hoichi” segment which adapts parts of the *jidaimono kabuki* play *Yoshitsune*, recounting the legendary sea battle of Dan-no-ura between the Genji and Heike clans – and deep focus photography minimizes the effect of perspective, as in a traditional *ukiyo-e* print. Lighting is also extremely theatrical throughout, particularly when a single spot is used to highlight a specific character or object against an otherwise darkened set. All in all, the effect is often like watching a particularly well-staged and elaborate *kabuki* play.

Additionally, *Kwaidan* borrows from the *bunraku* tradition in that each segment is narrated by an off-screen voice, much like the *tayu*, or chanter, who recites all of the character’s lines and comments on the action, or the *benshi*, whose presence was so important to the development of early Japanese cinema. The effect is to heighten the sense of unreality and increase the feeling that a story is being told<sup>31</sup>, rather than simply acted out, as in a typical movie from the Occidental tradition, thus linking it strongly to the tradition of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* discussed earlier.

One of the main themes that runs throughout most of the film – specifically the first three segments – is that of oath-breaking and its consequences. In “The Black Hair,” the faithless samurai divorces his wife, breaking his marriage vows, with tragic consequences. Young Minokichi breaks his vow of silence regarding his experience in the hut in “The Snow Maiden,” and Hoichi breaks his vow, albeit unwillingly, to perform for the spirits of the dead in “Hoichi the Earless.” Moreso than in almost any other culture, the swearing of oaths represented (and, to a lesser degree, still represents) a sacred obligation to the Japanese, particularly to the samurai class, who valued honor above virtually everything else. Indeed, honor was central to the code of *bushido* (literally “the way of the warrior”), and breaking one’s oath was seen as a clear violation

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<sup>31</sup> In much the same way, the Western Gothic tradition, including such well-known works as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and many of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, often employ narrators to tell their tales, personalizing the narrative and heightening the innate sense of storytelling.

of one's honor (oath-breaking can also be seen as central to the conflict in *Daimajin* (1966), as it is Samanosuke's betrayal of his lord that initiates the action). Therefore, it's hardly surprising to see such blatant oath-breaking as is seen in *Kwaidan* resulting in serious consequences.

This theme has antecedents in both the literature of *noh* and *kabuki*. Consider, for example, the well-known *noh* play *Dojo-ji*, in which a priest tells a young girl that she will be his wife. Although he is joking, the young girl takes him seriously, and when it becomes apparent that he has no intention of honoring his promise, she transforms into a serpent and seeks his death, a plot that is eventually foiled by the actions of the priest's colleagues. Likewise, in *Kanawa*, a *noh* play by Zeami, a woman transforms herself into a devil in order to gain revenge upon her faithless husband, who cast her off in favor of a new wife. From the literature of *kabuki*, the play *Horikawa name no tsuzumi* tells the story of O Tane, a heartsick young woman whose husband is frequently away on business. Her grief, and her predilection for sake, cause her to have an adulterous affair with her son's teacher – thus breaking her marriage vow of fidelity – eventually leading to her shame and disgrace, and her ultimate death by *seppuku*. Considering the background in both Buddhism and Shinto shared by *noh* and *kabuki*, and the fact that many of these plays, at least on some level, were meant to be morally instructional, this emphasis on honor and the sanctity of oaths is entirely understandable.

The first segment of the film, "Black Hair," is about an ambitious samurai who leaves his loving wife for a chance to marry a wealthy woman and thus improve his position. Years later, disillusioned by the life he has chosen and realizing the treasure he has forsaken, he returns to find his first wife waiting for him, virtually unchanged. After a night of passionate love, he discovers that she died, pining for him, years earlier, and that he now holds a decaying skeleton in his arms. A hank of her luxurious black hair is all that remains of his former love.

Overall, this segment can be seen as a form of the *sewamono* tradition of the *kabuki* theater, which presented plays about the common people of the Edo period. Plays in this category eschew the legendary gods and heroes of other types of *kabuki*, preferring instead to focus on common, unknown individuals, such as the faithless – and unnamed – samurai and his devoted wife. Made popular by the legendary Chikamatsu, these plays told stories of everyday life, and were frequently based, at least in part, on actual events, turning the Japanese theater into, as Bowers puts it, “... [a] living newspaper at the service of the illiterate populace” (Bowers, 63). These tales often dealt with themes of thwarted love, many times including a resolution involving double suicide, and were largely banned in 1723, as they apparently inspired a rash of real-life double suicides.

In the tradition of oral storytelling, this segment proceeds from important point to important point, eschewing any intermittent connecting scenes that might slow down its pace. For example, when it becomes clear that the samurai is going to leave his second wife to return to his first home, the next scene shows him at the gateway to that house, without showing the samurai taking leave of his second wife and family, traveling on the road home, etc. In this way, the segment proceeds in an almost dreamlike fashion, smoothly transitioning from scene to scene in an almost stream-of-consciousness flow. The result is a story that presents itself more as a meditation than as a strict narrative, and one that succeeds in creating a strong atmosphere of *yugen*.

Indeed, much about this segment is unreal and bizarre, nicely setting the tone for the rest of the film. The samurai’s second wife, for example, seems to glide along the floor, disconnected from reality. She must be led around by attendants, and she typically bears an otherworldly appearance, as if she is both a part of, and separate from, the reality that the rest of us inhabit.

She seems to be modeled on the Japanese concept of the *yurei*, a specific kind of female ghost most often shown floating above the ground without feet, again contributing to the unreal sense that permeates the film.

As well, when the samurai returns home, he finds the house in which he used to live inexplicably changed (interestingly however, he never comments on this change, taking it in stride as one would within the context of a dream). The house is broken down and decayed, not only illustrating the passage of time – the dark side of *sabi* – but also mirroring his own spiritual breakdown. Entering the home, he passes through a series of unfamiliar “black rooms” – as noted earlier, black typically represents nothingness, symbolizing his journey through an otherworldly realm unrelated to his accustomed reality – until he finds his wife, still at her spinning wheel. To reach her, he must pass between two pillars in a carefully framed shot that reinforces the idea of entering the otherworld through gateways<sup>32</sup>.



**Figure 17: The samurai must pass through several gateways before reuniting with his wife.**

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<sup>32</sup> In Shinto belief, *torii*, or gates, are placed at the entrances to shrines marking the transition between sacred and secular space.

This concept of the otherworld is one frequently found in both *noh* and *kabuki*, and the frequent appearance of supernatural beings in each are a testament to the popularity of *kaidan*-related material. God plays, warrior-ghost plays, and demon plays represent three of the five divisions of *noh* dramas, and *kaidan*-themed *kabuki* plays, such as *Botan doro*, became more and more common as the Edo period progressed.

Mention should also be made of the importance and prominence of hair in this segment. Perhaps because Japanese hair is of a relatively uniform type and color, much has been made about the way in which it is worn and styled, distinctions that became more and more important during the years of relative peace that marked the Edo Period. As in many cultures, long, flowing hair was considered beautiful, and women, especially those of the upper classes, spent an inordinate amount of time growing and caring for their hair. During this time, Japanese women's hair was typically worn up, in a tightly styled form, held together with decorative pins or other ornaments (*kanzashi*), a style popularized by the *geisha* class and known as *shimada*. The appearance of one's hair took on a new significance, communicating marital status, age, social class, rank, mood, availability, and more. Indeed, one of the most feared *yokai* at this time was the dreaded *kamikiri*, or "hair-cutter," a creature visualized with scissor-like hands that he used to chop the hair of unsuspecting women, considered by many to be a fate worse than death. Wearing one's hair long and loose was extremely rare during the Edo and Meiji periods, although it had been the style of choice during the earlier Heian period (794-1185).

Men's hair styles, especially those of the samurai class, were just as strictly defined during this period. Just as the samurai was expected to be fastidious in other aspects of his life and appearance, so too was he expected to keep his hair neat and presentable. Most samurai wore their long hair in some sort of top-knot, and many shaved the front part of the scalp, ostensibly to

make the wearing of a helmet more practical and comfortable. In no event was the hair to be loose or unruly, as that would signify a level of personal dishevelment that would reflect badly both on the individual samurai and on his lord.

With that in mind, consider the way in which hair, particularly that of the samurai, gives insight into character in “Black Hair.” The samurai begins the segment with a neat, well-groomed appearance, his hair in a ponytail, as befits someone of his rank and status, an appearance he maintains until the introduction of supernatural elements into the tale. As the horror of the situation becomes apparent to him, when he realizes that his wife is, indeed, dead, and that the woman he made love to was an otherworldly creature, his hair not only turns white, but becomes disheveled and disarrayed and soon begins to fall out, providing a visual cue to the madness that quickly overtakes him. Just as the house fell into a state of decay and neglect, so too does the samurai suffer a similar physical disintegration. As will be seen more fully in Chapter 4, wild, disheveled hair is often a sign of madness in Japanese film, a visual trope that Kobayashi uses here to great effect. Of course, in terms of the wife, her hair is, in the end, all that is left of her, perhaps a subtle comment on the Edo period women whose entire lives, it seems, were given over to the care and tending of their glorious locks.



**Figure 18: The personal decay that the samurai experiences – from well-groomed young warrior on the left, to withered and dying old man on the right – mirrors the decay of the house in which he lived with his first wife, and her eventual death and decay as well. Note the stylistic progression of the hair as well, from black and tightly groomed, to loose and disheveled, to white.**

But it is not merely the supernatural elements that link the segment “Black Hair” to the Japanese theatrical tradition. The theme of substitution – in this case, the substitution of a dead body for a live one – especially substitution connected to sacrifice, is common in the literature of *bunraku*, appearing time and time again in various forms. For example, in Chikamatsu’s play *Shusse Kagekiyo* (*Kagekiyo Victorious*, 1685) – the playwright’s first major success – Kagekiyo is saved from execution when his beloved, Kannon, substitutes her head for his. By not insisting that her husband stay with her, by sacrificing her own happiness so that he could find his, the wife in “Black Hair” fulfills this role of sacrifice by substitution, accepting death so that he might enjoy life. It is entirely in line with the karmic teachings of Buddhism that he should learn the results of his selfishness, and reap the bitter rewards of his actions.

The next segment in the film, “Yuki-Onna” (“The Woman of the Snow”) – based on Hearn’s story “Yuki” as published in *Kwaidan* – was originally cut from the American print when it first premiered in 1965, presumably for length. It concerns a simple woodcutter, Minokichi (Tatsuya Nakadai) who witnesses Yuki-Onna (Keiko Kishi), a beautiful snow-spirit, devour the life-force from his friend Mosaku. Moved by his youth and beauty, the snow spirit spares the young woodcutter’s life, but only if he vows never to speak of the incident to anyone on pain of death. Years pass, and the woodcutter marries a beautiful woman who bears him several wonderful children. Finally, moved to remembrance of the night years earlier by the sight of a sudden snowstorm, he tells his wife the story of his encounter with the supernatural being. It is then that she reveals that she is, indeed, the snow spirit, and she spares his life only for the sake of their children. She then disappears into the snow.

Like *Yotsuya kaidan* discussed earlier, this segment of *Kwaidan* incorporates elements of two different *kabuki* traditions: *kaidanmono*, or “ghost plays,” and *kizewamono*, or “raw life



plays,” which focused on the lives of common people like thieves, prostitutes, and murderers – as well as supernatural themes – rather than the more rarified world of the aristocracy.

*Kizewamono* differs from *sewamono* – which also deals with the trials and tribulations of common people – in that *kizewamono* tends to look at the darker side of human existence rather than the simple struggles of merchants or laborers. *Kizewamono* gained popularity during the Edo period, at the same time that both *kaidanshu* – collections of ghost stories that were sweeping the nation – and *bunraku* – with its greater emphasis on violence and bloodshed – were developing, thus giving *kabuki* audiences stories with which they could more easily identify. Similarly, the current crop of neo-*kaidan* films that explore links between technology and the supernatural – films like *Kairo* (*Pulse*, 2001) and *Ringu* (*Ring*, 1998) – continue in this tradition of making established ghost stories relevant for a modern audience.

Yuki-Onna, perhaps related to the *kaze-no-kami* (“The kami of cold”) is a well-known character in Japanese folklore associated with snowy wastes and icy climes, and is distinctive due to her tall stature, her pale white skin, and her long, flowing black hair. She generally either draws the life out of her victims with her icy breath, or simply leads them into the wilderness to freeze to death. Not surprisingly, the figure of Yuki-Onna has made contemporary appearances in a variety of *anime*, *manga*, and even video games. She appears as the *shite* in the *noh* play *Yuki*, in which the supernatural character appears to a mortal man, and she is the subject of Tanaka Tokuzo’s 1968 film *Kaidan Yukijoro* (*Ghost Story of the Snow Witch*).

For this segment, Kobayashi creates one of his most surrealistic tableaux, with Dali-esque eyes floating in the sky and dead silences where one would normally expect sounds (as when a gust of wind slams open a door, presented silently).



**Figure 19: Director Masaki Kobayashi uses bizarre backgrounds to set the stage in the “Yuki-Onna” section of *Kwaidan*.**

The sense of *yugen* is strong here; the snow-covered winter landscape suggesting an appropriate sense of melancholy and approaching death against the beautiful and highly-stylized background. As in the previous segment, there is a very conscious sense of traveling through gateways, this time represented initially by the trees in the forest that are arranged in an unnaturally even formation, suggesting pillars (the very first shot of this segment frames a path through the forest in the same way that *torii* gates frame the entrance to a shrine).



**Figure 20: Trees line the forest path in “Yuki-Onna,” establishing a natural gateway into the “otherworld.”**

Later, Minokichi has a near-death experience, when Yuki-Onna kneels over him preparing to draw out his life as she did to Mosaku. Minokichi is reprieved at the last moment,

but this brush with death can also be seen as an entry point into the otherworld. The rest of his life, diegetically, can be seen as lived in this supernatural otherworld.

The color red plays an interesting part in this episode as well. It's important to note that there is no hint of red in the opening scenes set in the snowy forest. There are no red plants, and there is no red on the woodsmen's clothes. The only red on display in this vast, stark landscape is a red flag, which marks the location of a hut and an empty boatslip: the hut offers salvation from the cold, and the boatslip offers the possibility of escape. Both things represent life to the nearly-frozen woodcutters, who are clearly on the verge of death, lost in a blizzard. Entering the hut, then, is an act of life<sup>33</sup>. In this sense, red – the color of blood – is positioned as a metaphor for life in the midst of death, represented by the overwhelming presence of the whiteness of the winter landscape. In the next scene – the morning after the death of Mosaku – the sky is a blazing (and unnatural) red, reflecting Minokichi's life, and his triumph over death.



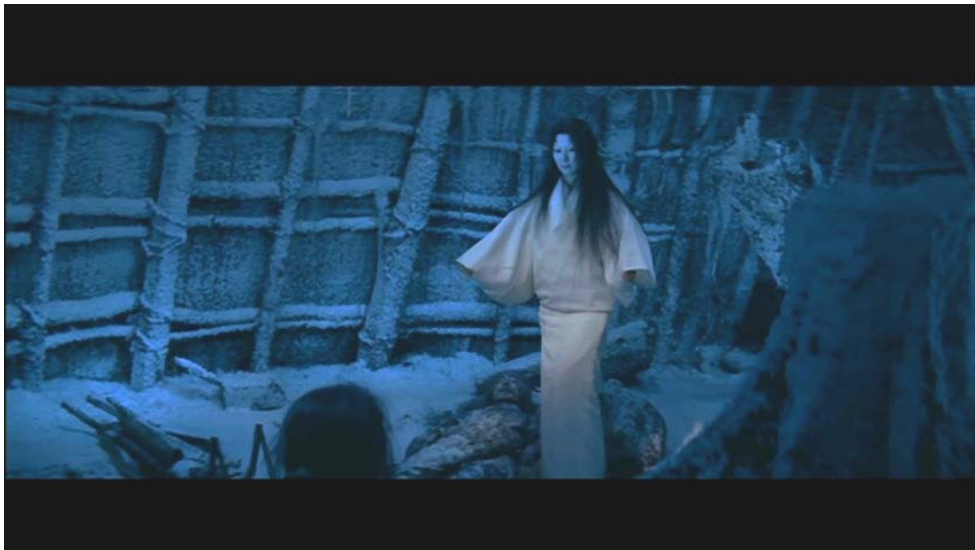
**Figure 21: The day after Minokichi's brush with death, the sky itself reflects the triumph of life.**

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<sup>33</sup> As well, entering the hut – moving from a place of danger (the snowstorm) to a place of safety (inside the hut) – can be seen as another passage through a gateway (the door), and entering a sacred (life-affirming) space from a secular (threat of death) space.

The unnatural quality of the scene reinforces the fact that Minokichi's life is no longer the same, that he now lives in a different world. Later in the film, after Minokichi has married the mysterious Yuki (the Woman of the Snow in human form), he makes her a pair of red sandals, saying, "Red is still your color," metaphorically affirming her status as a living human.

Yuki-Onna herself is a perfect representation of the classic *yurei* figure: tall, pale, dressed all in white with long flowing black hair, her hands and feet conspicuously absent (see Chapter 3, Fig. 41 for an illustration of the traditional Japanese *yurei*). As will be discussed more fully in the following chapter, this image of the *yurei* has found a new home in the current crop of neo-*kaidan* or "J-horror" films in such characters as *Kayako* in *Ju-On (The Grudge, 2001)* and *Sadako* in *Ringu (Ring, 1998)*.



**Figure 22: Yuki-Onna. Note the absence of hands, a typical characteristic of *yurei*.**

If "Yuki-Onna" blends *kaidanmono* with *kizewamono*, the next, and perhaps best known sequence, "Hoichi the Earless," deftly combines *kaidanmono* with *jidaimono*, or "historical/period plays." *Jidaimono* plays were some of the most popular of the *kabuki* repertoire, as they concerned famous warriors and samurai and the battles they fought. In certain ways, many of these plays can be seen as the Japanese version of the Occidental King Arthur

legends, in that they told romanticized stories of famous figures, set in a historical period, often containing more fiction than fact. Consider, for example, Takeda Izumo's play *Yoshitsune sembonzakura* (*The Thousand Cherry Trees*). Based on events deriving from the historical battle of Dan-no-Ura, the author takes several important liberties with actual history, including the survival of two main characters who were actually killed in the historical battle, and the introduction of a supernatural fox character. Nevertheless, *jidaimono* plays such as this were extremely popular with the Japanese public during the Edo period, just as the King Arthur legends have proven popular with Western audiences for centuries.

“Hoichi the Earless,” is the story of a blind *biwa*<sup>34</sup> player who is charged with performing the ballad of the battle of Dan-no-Ura, unaware that those who have commanded the performance are the ghosts of the warriors who died there. This legendary sea battle, which took place on April 25, 1185, is one of the most significant in Japanese history, equivalent to the Battle of Gettysburg – considered by many to be the turning point of the American Civil War – or the Battle of Hastings, which solidified Norman control of England. The Battle of Dan-no-Ura was fought between the Genji, or Minamoto, and Heike, or Taira, clans for control of Japan during the Genpei War. The Minamotos won the battle, with the result that Yoritomo Minamoto became the first Shogun, establishing the supremacy of the samurai class and marking the beginning of the feudal period in Japan, a period that would last well into the nineteenth century.

This battle, then, forms the backdrop for the tale of Hoichi, as he is summoned by the ghosts of the defeated Taira to perform for them. A highly-stylized *kabuki*-like version of the battle itself opens the sequence, complete with an extremely theatrical set design and the inclusion of *mie*, or specific poses struck and held by actors to emphasize important moments in

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<sup>34</sup> An ancient, four-stringed, lute-like instrument played with a wedge-shaped plectrum. It is similar to the *shamisen*, which is one of the traditional instruments of the *kabuki* theater.

the proceedings. Indeed, this segment is the most *kabuki*-like of the entire film, even including a comic interlude by a pair of *kyogen*, Yasaku and Matsuzo, who tease Hoichi about an imaginary “girlfriend.” Hoichi’s *biwa* playing also serves as the soundtrack, echoing the use of such an instrument in the *kabuki* theater.

The idea of a *biwa* player performing for ghosts is also seen in the popular *noh* drama *Genjo*, in which a young musician spends the night in the home of an old couple before sailing to China. As payment, he plays for them, and then discovers that they are actually the spirits of the Emperor Murakami and his consort, the Lady Nashitsubo, who gift him with a legendary instrument in payment for his outstanding artistry on the *biwa*.

Things don’t end quite so well for Hoichi, however. The Buddhist priest with whom Hoichi lives discovers his predicament – he fears that Hoichi will be killed when he has finished performing for the ghosts – and, in order to hide Hoichi from them, paints the young musician’s body with holy texts from the top of his head to the soles of his feet... except for his ears, which they mistakenly overlook. When the ghost returns to escort Hoichi to his next – and final – performance, all he sees is a pair of floating ears, which he decides to take back to his masters, tearing them from the head that he cannot see.

This act of ripping off Hoichi’s ears positions the character, in a subtle way, as a representation of one of Japan’s greatest folkloric creations, the Three Wise Monkeys of the Koshin faith. Better known in the West as “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil,” the maxim actually has its roots in the Japanese credo, “*mizaru, kikazaru, iwazaru*<sup>35</sup>” (literally, “Don’t see, don’t hear, don’t speak”), most likely adapted from a passage in the Analects of

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<sup>35</sup> There is a linguistic connection between the Japanese suffix “*zaru*,” which is used to make a verb negative (as in “*mizaru*” or “don’t see”) and the word “*saru*,” (typically vocalized as “*zaru*”) which means “monkey.” Therefore, it is easy to see how monkeys became associated with the maxim, as a subtle, yet effective play on words.

Confucius which cautions the right-living to, “...if not right and proper, do not look, if not right and proper, do not listen, if not right and proper, do not speak” (Confucius, 559). As he is blind, Hoichi “sees no evil,” without his ears, he “hears no evil,” and as he speaks most eloquently through his *biwa*, by artfully reciting ballads of legend, he “speaks no evil.” As well, the connection to the Koshin folk faith, discussed earlier – it is believed that the monkeys in some way prevented the bad deeds a person did during the previous sixty days from being seen, heard, or spoken by the *sanshi* – strongly links this segment to the ghost-story tradition of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, created to keep believers awake during *koshinmachi*.

As in the previous segments, the color palette is dark and muted overall, with several important exceptions. The scenes in the monastery in which Hoichi lives, for example, are presented in dull greys and browns, creating a subdued, almost lifeless effect, broken only by the presence of a slice of very red watermelon that Yasaku and Matsuzo save for Hoichi. As red has been linked with the color of life in earlier segments, perhaps this act of “saving” the watermelon parallels the point later on in the segment in which Yasaku and Matsuzo drag Hoichi away from the ghostly gathering, thereby quite literally saving his life. As well, the placement of the watermelon inside the temple may suggest that Hoichi’s life is there, and not in the arena in which he performs.



**Figure 23: Hoichi in the monastery. Note the dull, muted color palette in this scene.**

This almost painterly emphasis on color is carried over into Hoichi's meeting with the spirits, when, as he plays, color is added to the scene, eerily transforming a cemetery into a temple and implying that his music brings life to the spirits by honoring and remembering them. As will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three, Japanese tradition places a great deal of emphasis on remembering the dead so that their spirits will find peace, an emphasis seen in the number of prescribed remembrance services held for the departed on a regular basis, lasting as long as fifty years after their passing. By performing the "Ballad of Dan-no-Ura," Hoichi honors and remembers the fallen, restoring them to life for as long as his music lasts. Once again, the scene is set in an extremely theatrical way, with vibrantly painted backdrops standing in for actual outdoor scenes, in order to create a *mise-en-scene* that suggests something extra-normal and supernatural.



Figure 24: As Hoichi performs, the scene changes, with color adding life and vibrancy to the proceedings.

The act of remembrance highlighted in this segment echoes the purpose of the Second Group of *noh* plays (*shura-noh*, or "warrior plays") in which the ghost of a warrior – frequently, but not always, of the Taira clan, the losing side in the Genpei War – appears and tells the story of his death to a mortal listener. In Zeami's play *Kiyotsune*, for example, the wife of Taira no Kiyotsune, upon learning of his death in battle, grieves for him. The spirit of Kiyotsune returns to her and tells her about the battle in which he died. Consider, as well, the play *Michimiri* by Iami, in which a priest travels to the town of Naruto in order to read sutras honoring the souls of

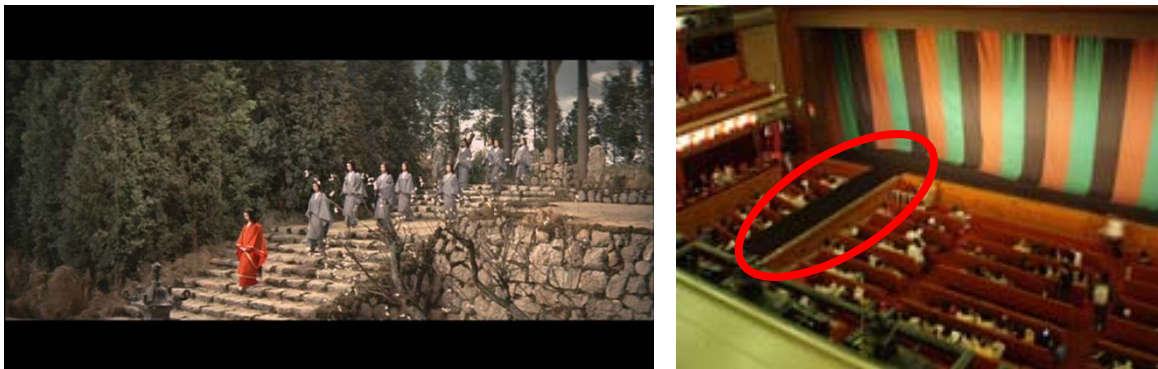


the Taira warriors who died. While there, he meets an old man and woman who tell him a story about a woman who drowned herself after hearing news of her husband's death. The couple promptly vanishes. As the priest prays for them, they reappear in their true forms as Taira no Michimoro and his wife and tell the story of Michimoro's defeat in battle. Finally, *Ikuta Atsumori*, by Zempo, is about a young orphan boy, raised by priests, who travels to the Kamo shrine in Kyoto to pray that he may see the father he never knew. After a dream, the boy and the priest travel to the Ikuta forest to meet the boy's father.

All of these plays have in common the explicit and implicit act of remembrance of dead warriors: explicit because remembrance, typically in the form of prayer, is a part of the plot of each play, the thing that brings the spirit to earth, and implicit in that the performance of the play itself is an act of remembrance. Thus, these plays, and this segment of *Kwaidan*, fulfill the original purpose of *noh*, and to a lesser extent, *kabuki*, which is to instruct the public both in the ways of moral behavior (in this case, the importance of remembering the dead), and in the history of Japan and its heroes (the recreation of the Battle of Dan-no-Ura).

One final element links this segment to the *kabuki* tradition, and that is the procession of nobles seen at the end, as an audience gathers to hear the now-famous Hoichi perform on his *biwa*. The entrance of these characters, single file down a marked path, brings to mind the traditional entrance of *kabuki* players along the *hanamichi* ("flower-way," so-called because of the tradition of placing flowers on the performer's path by grateful audience members), a platform that runs from stage right to a curtained area in the back of the *kabuki* theater, used for entrances and exits throughout a production. The *hanamichi*, "...much used for the entry of processions and groups" (Halford,418), is a defining characteristic of a *kabuki* theater, a unique element that serves to set the art of *kabuki* apart from virtually all other forms of theater.

Therefore, Kobayashi's oblique reference to the *hanamichi* in this scene is a final, subtle nod to the conventions of *kabuki*.



**Figure 25: L - The processional from “Hoichi the Earless.”  
R – The hanamichi (circled) at the Kabuki-za Theater in Tokyo (Itij.net).**

The final segment of the film, “In a Cup of Tea,” is, perhaps, the most enigmatic. At once intriguing and perplexing, this short piece is based on Hearn’s story of the same name from his collection, *Kotto: Being Japanese Curios, with Sundry Cobwebs* (1902). Hearn prefaces his story with an explanation of sorts, revealing that the story to follow is a puzzling fragment, likening it to the experience of, “... mount[ing] some old tower stairway, spiring up through darkness, and in the heart of that darkness [finding] yourself at the cobwebbed edge of nothing” (Hearn 1902, 11).

Although there are several presentational aspects of this segment that link it to the traditional theater (the setting of the main story in the feudal past, positioning it as *jidaimono*, as well as the use of freeze frame near the end to simulate the practice of *mie*, in which the actor strikes a significant pose and holds it to the delight of the audience), it’s hard to analyze this piece as an example of *noh*, *kabuki*, or *bunraku*, due to its fragmentary nature. Therefore, another approach must be considered.

First, however, a brief synopsis: the segment begins in 1899, “the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of the Meiji Era,” as the *benshi*-like narrator discusses the curious fragmentary tales that can be found in

Japanese literature, and raises questions as to why such tales would be left in such an incomplete state (echoing Hearn's own introduction to this story). The focus now shifts to a writer, busy on his latest manuscript, set 220 years earlier, about a samurai who sees the unexpected reflection of a young man in his cup of tea, although there is no one near him. He gets rid of the tea, and refills his cup, but the unusual reflection remains. Undaunted, he drinks the tea anyway. Later that night, as the samurai stands guard in his lord's home, the man whose reflection he saw appears before him, and chastises the samurai for doing him an injury. The samurai, sword drawn, charges the man and raises an alarm, but the strange figure vanishes. Later, the samurai is visited by three strange men, retainers of the young man who appeared previously, who challenge the samurai in the name of their master. As the samurai strikes each one, they disappear, only to reappear, seemingly unharmed, a fact that drives the samurai into a fit of madness. It is here, we are told, that the narrative ends, and, indeed, this is where Hearn's story reaches its conclusion, with the question of the young man's identity – and his presence in the cup of tea – a mystery that remains unanswered. Kobayashi, however, provides a brief coda for his tale. As the narrator informs the audience that the manuscript has abruptly stopped, the action returns to the writer's room in 1899. He is absent, his manuscript lying untended and presumably unfinished on the table, and although the camera pans through the house, there is no sign of the man. Until, that is, the camera focuses on a pot of tea in which the writer's disembodied reflection can be clearly seen.

And so the story does not so much reach a conclusion as much as it simply stops, with the result that this last segment is as enigmatic as Hearn's original story. While the first three segments – “Black Hair,” “Yuki-Onna,” and “Hoichi the Earless” – all betray their theatrical roots, “In a Cup of Tea” is harder to place. It possesses elements of both *sewamono* and

*jidaimono*, in that it deals with the affairs of common people and is set in a time long past, and it suggests the effects of karma, in that it is implied that the samurai must atone for his action of drinking the young man's soul and doing harm to him, most likely through personal combat. On the other hand, it might also draw from the Second Group of *noh* plays discussed above, if the young man is the ghost of a warrior, returned to earth to tell the tale of his death. It could, as well, relate to the Fifth Group of *noh* plays, which tell the stories of demons or supernatural beings and their conflicts with mortals. It also echoes the enigmatic ending of *Genji monogatari*, which concludes abruptly, with only a chapter title to imply the death of the main character rather than a more traditional ending to the narrative. It could be a comment on the viral nature of storytelling, suggesting that such stories deeply affect all who are touched by them<sup>36</sup>.

Of course, these are mere suppositions based on the portion of the story presented. As Hearn himself said, "I am able to imagine several possible endings; but none of them would satisfy an Occidental imagination. I prefer to let the reader attempt to decide for himself the probable consequence of swallowing a Soul" (Hearn: 1902, 17). In this way, it appears that this final segment owes less to Japanese theater, and far more to the tradition of Japanese poetry as embodied in the *haiku*.

The traditional Japanese *haiku* is a formal poem of three lines, each line containing five, seven, and five syllables respectively, which typically deals with issues of natural beauty and grace. Like virtually all poetry, *haiku* seeks to express the truth of an experience, but, true to its roots in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, it seeks to express that truth in suggestive, symbolic

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<sup>36</sup> The viral concept presented in this segment would become an important component of such neo-*kaidan* (or "J-Horror") films as *Ringu* (1998), in which a death curse is spread by means of watching a videotape, and *Ju-On* (2000), which posits a curse spread from person to person after coming into contact with a house possessed by restless spirits. It can be conjectured that, on a small isolated island nation so densely packed with people, the concept of viral transmission is a particularly horrifying thought to the Japanese people, making it a fitting subject for tales of terror.

ways, rather than in ways that are inherently explicit and factual. In Robert Frost's well-known poem, "The Road Not Taken," for example, Frost recounts the story of a journey in which he, as the traveler, chose one path over another, and uses that account to metaphorically examine the nature of life, in that every decision is a "road not taken," and thus irrevocably changes the road down which we travel. Throughout the poem, Frost uses concrete imagery – "... Because it was grassy and wanted wear," "... To where it bent in the undergrowth," "... In leaves no step had trodden black" – in order to paint a vivid scene of a lush landscape. Whether or not one is aware of the true meaning of Frost's poem, the imagery itself is compelling and memorable. The genius of Frost, then, is his ability to take such a mundane story – about a walk through the woods – and transform it into something metaphorically profound.

Consider as well the following *haiku* by Matsuo Basho (1644 – 1694), regarded by many to be the best known and most influential *haiku* poet. He wrote, "Loneliness - /Standing amidst the blossoms, /A cypress tree." In just a few words, Basho creates a scene of ineffable loveliness: a grove of cherry blossom trees, redolent in pinks and whites, surrounding a lone green cypress. Infused with a strong sense of *yugen*, Basho suggests an atmosphere of loneliness, of alien "otherness," of solitude in the midst of beauty. The concrete imagery in Basho's poem is so slight as to be near-nonexistent, but the mood he creates strikes a chord of beauty in the reader, who is instantly transported to this wonderful grove. The genius of Basho is his ability to suggest far, far more than the scene his simple words create, and to infuse that suggestion with meaning and emotion.

How, then, does this relate to "In a Cup of Tea?" Simply, this brief segment can be read as participating in this very Japanese style of poetry, in suggesting events and outcomes rather than showing them explicitly. Unlike the other segments, the point lies not in interpreting the

director's meaning, but in realizing that the experience of viewing is an internal one, one that asks for more from the audience than passive viewing. In that way, it is similar to the dramas of the *noh*, which also insist on audience involvement to derive ultimate meaning.

In conclusion, Masako Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* exhibits the quality of great art that Chikamatsu referred to when he said,

Art is something that lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal... It is unreal, and yet it is not unreal; it is real and yet it is not real... While bearing resemblance to the original, it should have stylization; this makes it art, and is what delights men's minds. (quoted in Tsunoda, 439-40)

It is this balance of fantastic versus mundane elements – the surrealistic backgrounds and the presence of supernatural beings versus the very real representations of common soldiers, woodcutters, priests, and artists – that sets *Kwaidan* apart as a compelling example of true Japanese cinema, one that draws its inspirations and styles from the Eastern tradition rather than the Western. From its slow, meditative pace – a quality derived from *noh* – to its *kabuki*-like stagings and its *bunraku*-inspired scenes of horror and violence, the film is a worthy summary of Japanese aesthetic traditions on film.

#### Kaneto Shindo's *Onibaba* (1964)

Made in the same year as *Kwaidan*, *Onibaba* (1964), directed by Kaneto Shindo, is set during the Sengoku period of Japan's history, a time of intense civil war that lasted from roughly the mid-fifteenth to early seventeenth centuries. The eventual resolution of this conflict, in 1603, would bring about the period of unification under the Tokugawa shogunate that marked the beginning of the Edo period.

Shindo's story focuses on a woman and her daughter-in-law who live in a grass hut in the middle of a vast field of wild *susuki* grass (similar to pampas grass), and survive by killing passing samurai and selling their armor after disposing of their bodies in a deep pit. Hachi, a

friend of the young woman's husband, returns from the wars bearing news of his friend's death, and begins a sexual relationship with the younger woman, threatening to change the situation for all three people. Jealous of her daughter-in-law, the older woman dons a mask – taken from one of the samurai she has killed – to scare the younger woman and keep her from meeting with her lover. For her sins, the mask bonds to the older woman's face as a punishment from Buddha.

The character of Onibaba<sup>37</sup> has a long and rich history in Japanese folklore, dating back hundreds of years. Conceived as a *yokai* that takes the form of a shriveled old woman – complete with wild, unkempt hair – who eats human children, she often appears in a pleasing form in order to lull her victims into a false sense of security. In this sense, she is related to the cannibal witches of many other traditions, including the Cannibal Witch Woman of the Pawnee, the Slavic Baba Yaga, Canrig Bwt of Wales, and, perhaps the best known, the evil witch who lures Hansel and Gretel into her home in order to eat them.

Onibaba is the central figure in the Fifth Group<sup>38</sup> *noh* play *Kurozuka* (alternately titled *Achigahara*, both titles referencing specific places associated with the character), possibly written by Zeami, in which a traveling priest and his companions beg shelter for the night at the home of an old woman. She initially refuses them, saying that she would be embarrassed to have them stay in such a rude dwelling, but, as hers is the only shelter in the vicinity, she eventually relents and invites them in. While there, she demonstrates her skill with a spinning wheel (a traditional element of the Onibaba legend), and soon leaves the hut in order to fetch more firewood. Before leaving, however, she cautions her visitors not to look into the hut's inner

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<sup>37</sup> Based on simple linguistics, there seems to be a link between the Japanese Onibaba and the Slavic Baba Yaga, both being evil women who feed on human children. In both Japanese and Slavic, the term “baba” signifies an old woman, and in both languages the term is considered somewhat pejorative. An in-depth analysis of the relationship between these two mythical figures would no doubt be a fruitful area of future study.

<sup>38</sup> A demon play, often classified as *kirinoh-mono* (final play) or *inori-mono* (exorcism play).

room. Not surprisingly, the temptation to do so proves too great for the monks, and they soon explore the forbidden room, much to their regret, as they find it full of rotted and decayed bodies, skeletons, and other gruesome effluvia. Seeing this, they realize that their hostess is none other than the demon of Kurozuka, and resolve to leave. Before they can flee, however, the woman returns, and vows to kill them for their betrayal. Only through devout prayers offered to Buddha are the monks able to vanquish the demoness and survive their terrible ordeal.

Related to this popular *noh* play is a Buddhist fable, written by Rennyō, a revered Buddhist priest who lived from 1415-1499. In his collection of didactic tales entitled *Ofumi*, Rennyō includes the short story, “Nikuzuki mon” (“A Mask with Flesh”), about a jealous woman, Omoto, who, wishing to prevent her daughter-in-law Kiyō’s nightly visits to the local temple, dons a demon mask in order to scare the younger woman into staying home. Omoto’s ruse fails, as Kiyō’s faith proves stronger than her fear. Omoto returns home only to find that the mask is affixed to her face and cannot be removed. Kiyō then returns home to discover the demon she encountered on the road now in her own home. After discovering the demon’s true identity – Omoto admits her deception – Kiyō suggests to her mother-in-law that she offer a humble prayer to Buddha and ask for mercy. Apparently, Buddha hears the woman’s supplication, and the mask falls away by itself. Afterwards, Omoto becomes a devout Buddhist and joins her daughter-in-law in her daily visits to the temple.

It was this tale, told to him by his mother, that Shindo identified as the inspiration for *Onibaba*. Obviously, the point to Rennyō’s tale was to encourage regular temple attendance, as well as to demonstrate the magnanimity of Buddha’s forgiveness. Shindo took the kernel of Rennyō’s story and adapted it for his own means. As he himself said, “Saint Rennyō’s fable



deals with the subject of worshipping at a temple, but my film deals with sexuality between men and women” (Shindo, 2).

Without embarking on a lengthy synopsis of the film, suffice it to say that Shindo builds on the important elements of the folktale that inspired him, retaining the dynamic of the jealousy between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and substituting an illicit sexual relationship for nightly devotions. It is this theme of jealousy and its consequences that informs much about the film, particularly the choice of the mask used to create the demon-image.

The mask which the woman dons is perhaps the strongest link between Shindo’s film and the *noh* drama that gave it form. To visually portray the demon, Shindo chose a traditional *hannya* mask, one of the most popular and recognizable masks in the *noh* repertoire. With its extended horns, open, staring eyes, and disturbing grin, the *hannya* mask represents the demon of female jealousy, depicting a woman so consumed by that emotion that she loses her humanity.



Figure 26: L – A traditional *hannya* mask (nohmask21.com). R – The *hannya* mask used in *Onibaba*.

The *hannya* mask is used in several important *noh* plays, including *Dojoji*, in which the spirit of a young woman, spurned years earlier by a priest, returns to the temple in the form of a

serpent to gain revenge; *Aoi no ue* (based on an episode from *Genji monogatari*), about the Lady Aoi, stricken with an illness caused by the jealousy felt towards her by her romantic rival, Lady Rokujo; and the aforementioned *Kurozuka*.

In all three instances, the jealousy of the women portrayed is a manifestation of romantic or sexual desires, an association that Shindo melds with the premise of the folktale he was told as a child to create a wholly unique tale of passion and retribution. Unlike the *noh* examples, the woman in *Onibaba* is not a true demon taking on human form (a *rikidofu*, or powerful type, according to Zeami), nor is she a mere mortal, transformed into the form of a demon as punishment for evil acts (*saidofu*, or “unsteady” type) (Hare, 232). Her downfall is the result of her own all-too-human actions, spiritual retribution for her acts of jealousy and psychological torture. The mask, combined with her long, unkempt black hair, creates a truly terrifying figure, embodying demonic jealousy and madness and bringing to mind the lowest pits of the underworld.

It’s important to note that the old woman in *Onibaba* is not punished for the acts of murder she commits, but solely for the actions motivated by jealousy. Indeed, Shindo displays a remarkably sympathetic view of his characters, commenting in an interview that the two women, “... kill people out of necessity... In the context of the film, killing is affirmed because it’s a necessary evil for survival.” Although Buddhism promotes non-violence, and is, in general, opposed to killing for religious reasons (i.e. holy war), or for reasons of personal gain, it is less explicit on the idea of killing for survival. Shinto is even more pragmatic, seeing the act of killing for survival as a necessary, if regretful, act, and one that requires the proper reverence for the dead soul’s sacrifice. Since neither faith embraces the idea of sin as an absolute, as the Christian faith does, the murderous acts the women commit are seen as regrettable but necessary.

But Shindo problematizes the simplicity of that concept in an intriguing way, by introducing the idea of the underworld and Hell early in the film, in the figure of the pit the women use as a place to dispose of the bodies of the samurai they kill. Even before the human characters, Shindo introduces the pit in the very first shots of the movie, showing it as a gaping wound in the earth and characterizing it as, “The hole – deep and dark – its darkness has lasted since ancient times<sup>39</sup>,” linking it to popular concepts of Gehenna or Hell or Sheol. It is, unmistakably, a gateway, literally and functionally separating the land of the living from the land of the dead. Following this reading, the scene in which the old woman descends into the pit to retrieve the mask and the armaments of the dead samurai takes on new meaning, as it emphasizes the fact that she enters Hell willingly, unlike the young woman and Hachi, who are caught up in a situation beyond their control. It’s worth noting that the action in the film takes place during the height of summer, and the oppressive heat is mentioned several times, suggesting that the world in which these characters live is Hell itself.

Despite the introduction of Christian mythology into the film – the old woman tells her daughter-in-law about the terrors of Hell, and the punishments that can be expected by those who follow lustful impulses – the film’s spiritual center is in the Buddhist concept of *karma*, or retributive justice. The woman herself expresses her belief in this concept when, standing over the pit in which she has just disposed of the body of the mask-wearing samurai, she states, “You caused others to die. You deserve this punishment.” It is further referenced when the daughter-in-law, aware of her mother-in-law’s predicament regarding the mask that has bonded to her face, tells the older woman, “... it’s Buddha’s punishment... You turned into a demon for meddling.” It’s the clash of these two competing belief systems that causes the two women to

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<sup>39</sup> In psychoanalytical terms, the pit might be read in terms of vaginal symbolism, in which the hole becomes an enveloping pit that literally swallows men, and into which they disappear forever, making explicit the male fear of female sexuality.

feel real terror, and it's significant that their fates are left ambiguous at the end, as if Shindo refused to make explicit the question of which philosophical system is the more accurate.

Perhaps most horrifying of all is the utter lack of respect shown to the dead by the murderers. Those that are killed are not honored as worthy adversaries, they receive no formal funerary rites, and their passage is not marked or remembered in any way. They are merely thrown away like garbage, cast into the underworld with no regard for the ultimate fate of their spirits. As will be more fully discussed in Chapter Three, Japanese custom places high regard on respect for the dead, with formal, required acts and services designed to ease the spirit's passing into the next world, and then to appease it thereafter. By ignoring these customs, the women in Shindo's film show themselves utterly at odds with the requirements of civilization, positioning them as more animal than human. Shindo emphasizes their degradation by the way in which they eat with their hands and fingers, their disregard for the propriety of appearance (like animals, they treat nudity in a casual fashion), and the fact that they live in a virtual hole in the ground, more reminiscent of a bear's den than a proper home. Indeed, during an interview, Shindo characterized Hachi, the husband's friend who becomes the young woman's lover, as "beastlike," and states that he worked with actor Kei Sato to bring out this aspect of the character. It's telling that neither of the two female characters are given names, further dehumanizing them, and Hachi is referred to as being, "...like a dog after a bitch." These are not the human characters caught up in unnatural situations presented in *Kwaidan*, but atavistic character types playing out a drama of ancestral humanity.

In order to properly tell his story, Shindo creates an unusual atmosphere in *Onibaba*, a sense of natural unnaturalness. The environment, set entirely in a field of waving *susuki* grass, is wholly foreign, with no houses or recognizable structures to provide a strong sense of place. The

characters in *Onibaba* live either in crude grass huts or in caves, emphasizing the fact that the world Shindo is showing us is far removed from our own. Through dialogue, we learn that it is an unnatural time, a time in which a horse has given birth to a calf, frost and hail appeared during the summertime, and the sun has been seen to rise black in the sky, making day seem like night. Additionally, the city of Kyoto has reportedly been burned to the ground, and there are now two Emperors ruling the land, an unheard-of situation. Shindo explicitly links these events to the war taking place, and suggests that the civil conflict that engulfs the country is responsible for time being out of joint.

As well, certain requirements of filming in a literal swamp necessitated some of the staged un/naturalness. Due to the frequent flooding, for example, it was not possible to simply dig a hole in the ground and use that for the pit, as the crew found that as soon as they dug a proper hole, it began to fill with water and was quickly unusable. In order to solve this problem, Shindo directed the building of five separate “pit sets” out of paper, chicken wire, and cement, supported by scaffolding. Therefore, the central element of the film – the gaping pit that serves as both repository for the dead and gateway to the underworld – is, in all respects, a false construct, perhaps implying (obliquely, as the falsity of the pit’s construction is never clearly referenced diegetically, like, for example, the obviously painted backdrops in *Kwaidan*) that Hell itself is illusory. In this way, the film participates in the tension between the real and the unreal identified earlier as one of the key elements of Japanese literature, a tension that plays out visually in both the worlds of *noh* and *kabuki* and emphasized in the symbolic nature of so much Japanese art.



(Figure 27: One of the “pit sets” constructed for *Onibaba* (*Onibaba* DVD extras).

Additionally, the crew – who lived on-site for the duration of the filming – found that it was impossible to film at night, as the setting of the sun brought with it the arrival of massive amounts of bugs and crayfish. Therefore, night scenes had to be filmed during the day, with massive blackout curtains shielding the shot from the sun. Each time the angle of the camera changed, the entire set had to be reconfigured. The effect of all this is an environment that is, at once, both real and unreal, both natural and unnatural, a quality that lends itself to the otherworldly nature of Shindo’s film.

Visually, Shindo utilizes expressionistic filming techniques, particularly the reliance on striking chiaroscuro lighting, to enhance and emphasize this otherworldly feel, and to draw the audience into the bizarre realm of his creation. According to an interview with the director conducted by Criterion for the 2004 release of the DVD, Shindo’s choice to shoot in black-and-white was entirely an artistic one, and not dictated by budget:

The industry standard was color, but I chose to shoot it in black-and-white despite that fact. And I did so since the film’s story is very simple and I wanted simplicity in its visual expression as well. If the film were shot in color, the vividness of color would be distracting and make it look more modern... I thought filming it in black-and-white would enable me to tell the story more vividly.

Here, Shindo succinctly sums up the quality of *wabi* that pervades his movie, that sense of antique, hand-crafted rusticness that gives the film its air of primitivism. Everything in the movie, from the clothes the characters wear to the implements they use to survive to the very construction of the homes in which they live, bear the stamp of hand-craftedness. Not only does it reinforce the primitive nature of their lives, forced on them by the reality of war, but it serves to separate them from society at large. Even Shindo's decision to keep dialogue to a minimum in this movie, and instead focus on imparting meaning through visual cues, serves to largely deprive the characters of human speech, further illustrating their slide down the evolutionary ladder.

On the other hand, the scenes of vast fields of *susuki* grass waving in the wind are certainly beautiful (another example of the artistic use of *yugen* in cinema) and the fact that nature provides for these impoverished people – whether in the form of fish caught in the river, a wild dog that provides much-needed meat, or the occasional passing samurai whose armor and weapons are traded for millet – reinforces the Shinto concept of working in concert with nature to survive. There is no attempt to “conquer” the land, as is the case in many American Westerns, for example, but a willingness to live with it, and survive through cooperation with the environment rather than in opposition to it. In this way, the soul of Shinto shines through the film clearly.

And so Shindo crafts a modern fable – that explores themes of sexuality, jealousy, and survival in the midst of war – from antique parts, resulting in a film that is both of its time and timeless. Of its time as it was released at the height of the Japanese New Wave movement, in which young directors were finding their individual voices and making confrontative, transgressive films about matters that had been taboo just a decade earlier. Indeed, Shindo saw

*Onibaba* as a chance to explore the role of sex in human relationships as a driving, fundamental force, using the waving *susuki* grass, for example, to represent the sexual desires and emotions of his characters. He once said, "... the swaying motions of the grass portrays sex indirectly," and made his theme even more explicit by filming unabashedly frank scenes featuring nudity and sex; heady stuff in 1964, when the American Motion Picture Production Code was still in force (although admittedly on its last legs), and such scenes were routinely censored, as the Code prohibited such things as "excessive and lustful kissing" and "lustful embraces." Of course, in a Japan in which *pinku* (soft core porn) films accounted for approximately 40% of domestic production by 1965 (Standish, 268), the prudery demonstrated in America was less of an issue.

But *Onibaba* is also a timeless film, as it deals with matters of jealousy, companionship, loneliness, and survival common to all times and all people. Although Shindo drew inspiration from ancient Japanese legends and revered *noh* and *kabuki* pieces, set his story during a specific period of Japan's history, and utilized visual cues that would most likely be lost on anyone from outside that culture – like the mask and its meaning – the film manages to speak in a voice that can be readily understood by anyone, anywhere. The themes which he examines – desperate people in desperate situations doing what they must to survive – are universal, and transcend culture. Shindo treats his characters sympathetically, their acts of murder shown as springing from necessity rather than greed or self-aggrandizement. In this way, Shindo takes the emphasis off the crimes committed, such as murder and robbery, and places the focus squarely on such moral failings as jealousy and a lack of respect for the dead. His message then becomes one of retaining spiritual purity even in the midst of hardship and despair, something that has a more universal application, removed from the specificity of time and place.

This sympathy for desperate characters can be seen in Shindo's earlier films, like



*Gembaku no ko* (*Children of the Atom Bomb*, 1952), about a young woman who returns to Hiroshima four years after the bombing, and *Hadaka no shima* (*The Island*, 1960), about a family eking out a precarious existence on a small island in the Setonaikai archipelago. In *Onibaba*, Shindo focuses on real, human drama in situations involving survival and hardship, using the fantastic elements as a lens through which to focus his tale, rather than as the focus of the tale itself, as is the case in *Kwaidan*. In this way, Shindo achieves what he describes as, “...the nameless vitality of my folklore that lived, lives, and will live in troubled times through the ages” (quoted in Sherper: 2005, 253). Like *Daimajin*, Shindo withholds even introducing the supernatural elements until the second half of the film, allowing the picture to be about something other than ghosts or demons, furthering his theme of ordinary people experiencing extraordinary hardship, and the ways in which they cope and survive. If the purpose of *noh*, as stated earlier, was to instruct and educate the theater-going public about matters of spirituality, Shindo takes that concept one step further, updating the formula for a modern age. He challenges his audience to look beneath the surface and confront the animalistic savagery that exists in every human heart. Where traditional Japanese theater concerned itself with furthering the soul’s goal of enlightenment through spirituality, Shindo’s films are about stripping the soul of all pretension and excess to find the true nature of humanity. Both seek to explore some form of universal truth, but they do so from opposite ends of the metaphysical spectrum.

As compared to earlier Japanese films, Shindo’s pictures surely have a raw, aggressive air about them. They approach the viewer in a visceral way, and demand a response. As noted earlier, this confrontative approach to filmmaking was part of a movement sweeping Japan, beginning in the late 1950s, and would have important ramifications for the future of cinema in Japan. Perhaps unwittingly, both Shindo and Kobayashi laid the groundwork for a new style of

filmmaking, the neo-*kaidan* (or J-Horror craze) that would emerge several decades later, a movement of its own that would ignite a world-wide interest in Japanese ghosts and demons.

## CHAPTER 4

### *TETSUO THE IRON MAN* (1989) AND *JU-ON* (2002): THE NEO-KAIDAN FILM AND ITS ROOTS IN *BUTOH* AND BEYOND

Although several commentators mark Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ringu* (*The Ring*, 1998) as the beginning of the currently popular "J-Horror" boom, further research reveals that the form has a much more extensive lineage, tracing back through the cinematic experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, the *kabuki*, *noh*, and *bunraku* stages, the *kaidan* literary tradition, and, perhaps most importantly, the transgressive post-war dance movement known as *butoh*. Although *Ringu* is significant in that it largely introduced the neo-*kaidan* film to Western audiences, it is only one step in the development of this popular form.

In the aftermath of World War II, and the ensuing American occupation, Japan found itself a socially and politically transformed nation. Gone was the rule of the Emperor, reduced now to a cultural figurehead in favor of a democratically elected Parliament, quickly followed into the mists of history by Japan's military, largely disbanded in the wake of the war. Filling the void in this strange new world were Western ideas and beliefs that quickly took hold among the ever-adaptable Japanese people. Whatever it would become, Japan would never be the same.

This was also true for the traditional arts of Japan, which also went through a period of transformation. Traditional theatrical forms such as *noh* and *kabuki* fell out of favor – indeed, *kabuki* particularly found itself at odds with the Allies' imposed codes of conduct, which forbade dramatic representations of "feudal loyalty"<sup>40</sup>, a phrase that describes elements of many *kabuki* plays – as audiences sought new ways of expressing their experience in this newly-formed,

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<sup>40</sup> It was this dictum that resulted in the banning of Akira Kurosawa's 1945 film, *Tora no o wo fumu otokotachi* (*The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*) - a story about a dispossessed lord who, with his band of disguised followers and retainers, must travel through a forest, all the time avoiding roaming border patrols – which

contemporary society. Thus, the Japanese people absorbed Western culture and ideas – as they had done with Chinese culture centuries earlier – and transformed them to suit the new society they found themselves living in.

Additionally, just as in America, the encroachment of television was being strongly felt in Japan, with the small screen drawing viewers away from the large screen at an ever-increasing pace. The number of television sets sold increased tremendously, matched by increasing numbers of movie theater closings. It was a dark time for the Japanese studios who were forced to look past such popular cinematic mainstays as Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Kurosawa, to newer, younger voices like Masamura Yasuzo, Nakahira Ko, and Yoshida Yosishige – artists influenced by such international film movements as the *Nouvelle Vague* – who brought a new vitality to Japanese film.

Yasuzo, who had served as a second-unit director under Kenji Mizoguchi, was one of the most vocal of these Japanese New Wave directors. He actively called for a break from cinematic traditions of the past that he felt subsumed the individual personalities of specific creators and drew too heavily from Japan's literary tradition (echoing some of the very arguments against post-War French cinema made by Francois Truffaut and his contemporaries in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema* that lead to the founding of the *Nouvelle Vague* movement). With the backing of the studios – desperate to keep their industry alive by any means possible – Yasuzo was able to make such confrontative films as *Kuchizuki* (*Kisses*, 1957), his first feature, which pioneered the use of such modern techniques as the hand-held camera and abstract long shots in Japan, and was to have a strong influence on later film directors, including Nagisa Oshima (*Nihon no yoru to kiri* [*Night and Fog in Japan*, 1960]) and Shohei Imamura (*Fukushū suru wa*

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was not released until 1952 following the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco, which formally ended the war and codified Japan's responsibilities to, and position among, the rest of the world.

*ware ni ari* [*Vengeance is Mine*, 1980]). His second picture, *Kyojin to gangu* (*Giants and Toys*, 1958), was a sharp critique of the television industry and its drive to “manufacture” celebrities, as well as a biting look at the increasingly ruthless (and Western) corporate culture that was taking hold in Japan at the time, as opposed to the more gentlemanly business culture of the pre-War, pre-Occupation years. Films like this were a clear break with prior cinematic practices, both in style and content, and would open the door for even more daring and provocative works. This period also saw a surge in experimental and underground cinema, including such films as *Hatsukoi: Jigoku-hen* (*The Inferno of First Love*, 1968), directed by Susumu Hani, which deals with a young man’s first sexual experience; Kazuo Kuroki’s *Nippon no akuryo* (*Evil Spirits of Japan*, 1970), which features *butoh* co-founder Tatsumi Hijikata in a prominent role; and Akio Jissoji’s *Mujo* (*This Transient Life*, 1970), a noted *avante-garde* classic, infamous for its portrayal of an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister. It is in these boundary-pushing efforts that the roots of the contemporary neo-*kaidan* (popularly called “J-Horror”) film can be seen, as they paved the way for the more transgressive style of cinema that would eventually culminate in films like *Ju-On* (*The Grudge*, 2002), *Kairo* (*Pulse*, 2001), and *Odishon* (*Audition*, 1999), as well as the infamous “Guinea Pig” series of torture-porn films that make up the backbone of the contemporary “J-Horror” tradition.

By the 1980s, however, Japanese cinema was once again an industry in crisis. The New Wave movement had passed, and the era of the major studios controlling production was also on the decline. Such well-known directors as Kon Ichikawa (*Genji monogatari* [*The Tale of Genji*] 1966; *The Wanderers*, 1973; *The Devil’s Ballad*, 1977) and Kinji Fukasaku (*The Green Slime*, 1968; *Tora! Tora! Tora!* [Japanese sequences], 1970; *Battle Royale*, 2000) were pressed into service to deliver Hollywood-style blockbusters, but their efforts were, at best, a band-aid on a

severely wounded industry. Japanese cinema's salvation would largely come from the new crop of independent filmmakers, like Shinya Tsukamoto – whose breakout film, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989) unexpectedly won the Best Films award at Rome's FantaFestival in the year of its release – whose new vision, influenced as much by international cinematic trends as by Japan's own history, would provide a much-needed influx of creativity into a largely moribund industry.

*Gt q/I wt q/Pcpugpuw and Dwwqj*

At the same time that cinema in Japan was being transformed, their theater was undergoing its own revolution. *noh*, *kabuki*, and *bunraku* were increasingly seen as old-fashioned, hopelessly mired in the stories and values of a now-extinct age. In the new Japanese society – in which the Emperor had been reduced to a mere figurehead, where three-piece suits had largely replaced kimonos, and that had survived not one, but two atomic bombings – what place was there for stories about samurai, feudal lords, gods, demons, and madwomen? Rather than focusing on their past, Japan instead largely turned towards the future, yearning for something new.

In 1959, Tatsumi Hijikata tapped into this cultural *zeitgeist* and debuted a new form of theater/dance, one that rejected the accepted modes of movement and presentation used in both traditional Japanese theatrical forms, and in Western drama. Additionally, this new form was conceived as purposefully aggressive and confrontative, in stark contrast to the understatement, didacticism, and subtlety of *noh* and the refined and opulent beauty of *kabuki*. The result, originally termed *Ankoku-Butoh*, or “Dance of Utter Darkness” – later shortened to simply *butoh* – was a subversive, disturbing, and highly challenging form of performance that drew its inspiration from, among other things, native shamanism, as well as the rural and backwater traditions with which Hijikata was raised. His performances were designed to give a voice to the

voiceless – the exploited, the poor, and the neglected – those who had never before been given a chance to speak, and to confront both Japanese and Western aesthetic assumptions in the post-War period. In that Hijikata created a new dramatic language, one whose effects are still being felt today, it can be argued that he largely succeeded.



**Figure 28: Two images of *butoh* co-founder Tatsumi Hijikata from *The Horrors of Malformed Men*. Note particularly the twisted and unnatural body postures, a staple of the *butoh* dance movement, and the long, disheveled hair.**

Hijikata began life as Kunio Yoneyama, the tenth of eleven children born to a poor family of farmers in the remote village of Tohoku, a poverty-stricken area at the time, widely believed to be a land of demons. His people tended rice fields; tedious, backbreaking work that resulted in a crouched posture, their legs bent from the strain. This deformed body type would become a central part of Hijikata’s dance language, and would be seen throughout his work and the continuing work of his disciples. As Hijikata himself once remarked, “Through dance we must depict the human posture in crisis, exactly as it is” (Hoffman, 123). Indeed, Hijikata’s first *butoh* performance – a piece based on the novel *Kinjiki (Forbidden Colors)* by Yukio Mishima – which was given at a dance festival in 1959. It was a shocking piece, dealing with such formerly taboo topics as homosexuality and pedophilia. At the climax of the piece, Hijikata’s partner in

the performance, Yoshito Ohno – the son of *butoh*'s co-founder, Kazuo Ohno<sup>41</sup> – held a live chicken between his legs while being chased off stage by Hijikata. The audience, believing that the chicken had been killed in the course of the performance, was outraged, and Hijikata was thenceforth banned from the festival. His reputation as a challenging, controversial performer, however, was secure.

The Japanese cultural aesthetic, as seen, for example, in their calligraphy, the tradition of *ukiyo-e*, and their various forms of theater, tends towards representations of simple but elegant beauty. Whether it's the perfect sweep of a brush in crafting a single *kanji* character, a *kabuki* actor caught in a perfect pose for an exquisite woodblock print, or the subtle grace of a *noh* dancer, beauty is the ultimate goal of Japanese art. *Butoh*, however, looks at the world differently, reveling in ugliness and creating a spectacle that challenges the audience. A *butoh* performance is not an easy thing to watch. Regardless, the form would prove exceptionally influential throughout the succeeding years.

Sadly, Hijikata would bring his unique style of movement to the screen only a handful of times, most notably in Teruo Ishii's disturbing 1969 film *Kyôfu kikei ningen: Edogawa Rampo zenshû* (*The Horrors of Malformed Men*), based, in part, on the writings of Hirai Taro who gained fame under his *nom de plume*, Edogawa Rampo, as a writer of weird and mysterious fiction in the vein of his literary inspiration, Edgar Allan Poe. The film tells the story of a young man who is drawn to a mysterious island on which horrific experiments are being conducted on human subjects. The mad scientist who runs the complex reveals himself as the young man's father, and insists his son, now a prominent surgeon in his own right, take his place in the family business. The film revels in the deformities brought about by the doctor's experiments, a visual

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<sup>41</sup> In their book, *Shades of Darkness*, Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine refer to Ohno as the "soul" of *butoh* and Hijikata as its "architect."



obsession that led to the picture being banned in Japan for more than 40 years, as it was deemed insensitive to the plight of handicapped persons.

*The Horrors of Malformed Men* – and, arguably, *butoh* itself – also draws heavily on the Japanese tradition of *ero-guro-nansensu* (often abbreviated as *ero-guro*), a tradition of popular culture dating back to Tokyo society of the 1920s and 1930s – a society that has been compared to Berlin of the same period – that focused on the erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical (hence the name), with Rampo hailed as one of the tradition’s foremost practitioners. The comparison with Berlin is apt, as both cities were the centers of their respective nations, both were beginning a slide towards fascism that would culminate in the Axis alliance of World War II, and both were deeply influenced, at least in cinematic terms, by films made in the German Expressionist traditions – native to Germany, imported to Japan – such as *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920), *Der müde Tod* (*Destiny*, 1921), and *Metropolis* (1927).



**Figure 29: Images from the *ero-guro* tradition: Untitled images 1 ([ero-guro.tumblr.com](http://ero-guro.tumblr.com)) and 2 ([kaarlaak.tumblr.com](http://kaarlaak.tumblr.com)) by Toshio Saeki; *The White Goddess* by Piet van den Boog ([anathema.tumblr.com](http://anathema.tumblr.com)); artist unknown ([ero-guro.tumblr.com](http://ero-guro.tumblr.com)).**

The *ero-guro* style focuses on images and representations of sexuality, eroticism, corruption, and decadence, but it is a mistake to limit the concept to purely pornographic terms. Although pornographic elements can be a part of the *ero-guro* experience, it is not exclusively

that. Also, even though contemporary Western usage of the term focuses almost entirely on the gory aspects of films made (supposedly) in this style, to pigeonhole these cinematic works as nothing but Eastern slasher films is a mistake, as there is more to them than simple bloodshed. Instead, the concept of “grotesque” within *ero-guro* refers more to the horrific, misshapen, and bizarre rather than the simply bloody, violent, or gory, as referenced in the title, *The Horrors of Malformed Men*. This is an important distinction to make when examining the concept of *ero-guro* in relation to the neo-*kaidan* film movement which often examines the horrific and bizarre, but rarely – except in the most extreme examples<sup>42</sup> – includes scenes of blood, gore, or sexual activity. Sadako, the “dead wet girl” in *Ringu* (1998), for example, can certainly be seen as horrific and “misshapen,” thus allowing the identification of the film with the traditional description of *ero-guro*, but the film contains virtually no bloodshed, and nothing that could be considered even obliquely pornographic. Instead, the horror that it creates comes entirely from the corruption of Sadako through death, and her subsequent bodily malformation. As well, the ghosts in *Kairo* (Pulse, 2001) – brought to life on screen by actual *butoh* performers – are terrifying because of their misshapen and degraded forms (often seen as smudged black shadows left on walls), not because they engage in acts of bloodshed. On the other hand, the *manga* sub-genre of *hentai*<sup>43</sup> (popularly known in the West as “tentacle porn”) began as an expression of *ero-guro*, but its immense popularity, both in Japan and abroad, has caused it to be recognized as its own distinct category of popular culture. In short, *ero-guro* does not necessarily equate to

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<sup>42</sup> It could be argued that such shockingly violent films as *Odishon* and the *Guinea Pig* series should not be classified as neo-*kaidan*/J-Horror, as they are fundamentally dissimilar to such genre exemplars as *Ringu* (1998), *Kairo* (2001), and *Ju-On* (2002), in the same way that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Friday the 13th* (1980) are fundamentally different from such horror classics as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Wolf Man* (1940), although they are all typically classed under the broad category of “horror” films.

<sup>43</sup> Although outside the scope of this project, it should be noted that the roots of *hentai* extend farther back than the early twentieth century, as the concept of tentacle rape is seen as early as the 1820s, in Hokusai’s erotic *ukiyo-e*, *The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife*, for example, which shows a Japanese woman being sexually pleased by a pair of octopi.

gore and pornography, nor does the inclusion of such elements define a film as belonging to the *ero-guro* genre.

The lure of *ero-guro*, and its wide appeal to a mass audience, is clearly apparent. People are inexorably drawn to the forbidden, the grotesque, and the appalling. This is the reason that people slow down to catch a glimpse of a traffic accident, and why erotic/pornographic images have fascinated mankind since virtually the beginning of human history. In terms of pop-culture, this fascination with the forbidden explains why such extreme societal transgressors as Ed Gein, Albert Fish, and John Wayne Gacy – as well as their fictional offspring Norman Bates and Hannibal Lecter – have become media superstars, and why cable channels like Discovery Health have found such ratings bonanzas in shows like *Strange Sex*, *Anatomy of a Giant*, and *Medical Incredible: Lobster Hand Disease*. All represent the desire to voyeuristically experience a side of life that is normally forbidden or otherwise unavailable to those of us in the sicionormative majority. As Hijikata was quoted as saying, “Being drawn to the erotic and grotesque is an essential part of human nature” (Macias, 3), and it was this sense of voyeuristic transgression that both he and his *ero-guro* brethren brought to their art.

Although the term *ero-guro* was at one time widely applied to a variety of pop-cultural forms, including books, paintings, theater, and even *ukiyo-e* prints, it was used mainly as a descriptor of film in the post-war period, often considered to be a subcategory of the *pinku eiga*<sup>44</sup> genre. During the 1960s, director Teruo Ishii became one of the best-known exponents of this highly experimental style. He is particularly noted for his series of Edo-period torture films, including *Tokugawa onna keibatsu-shi* (*Shogun’s Joy of Torture*, 1968), *Yakuza keibatsushi*:

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<sup>44</sup> *Pinku eiga* refers to a genre of Japanese softcore porn films most prevalent from the early 1960s through the mid-1980s in which, due to Japanese censorship laws, genitalia and pubic hair could not be shown, often necessitating clever camerawork – including the strategic placement of bottles, lamps, furniture, etc. – to avoid running afoul of the authorities. Although *pinku eiga* films are still being produced today, they have largely been superseded by the adult video industry.

*rinchi* (*The Yakuza's Law*, 1969), and *Tokugawa irezumi-shi: Seme jigoku* (*Hell's Tattooers*, 1969). These films, with their over-the-top violence, bring to mind such American splatter classics as Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963) and *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964), films that gained notoriety as some of the first to portray explicit brutality and torture on screen<sup>45</sup>.

Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1990)

The influence of the *ero-guro* aesthetic is strongly seen in Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1990), a brutal, frenetic film about a young Japanese salaryman who undergoes a bizarre transformation into a man/machine hybrid. If *butoh* focused on bodily deformities caused by unrelenting labor, *Tetsuo* took this concept one step further with bodily mutilation and transformation caused by the infestation of technology, becoming one of the most famous and recognized examples of the "body horror" film typified by such pictures as David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) and *The Fly*<sup>46</sup> (1986), both of which Tsukamoto identifies as seminal influences on *Tetsuo*.

In the film's opening scene, a "metal fetishist" (Shinya Tsukamoto) inserts a rusty metal rod into his thigh through a self-inflicted gash. Later, after a car accident, the fetishist "infects" the salaryman (Tomoworo Taguchi) with the "metal disease," which quickly takes over the young man's body. As mentioned previously, the idea of transformation is central to the Japanese dramatic tradition, but here it is an ugly, unnatural transformation, accomplished only through pain and terror. This is not the peaceful transformation of enlightenment, as in

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<sup>45</sup> One of the best examples of an *ero-guro* style Western film might be John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* (1972), with its aggressive blend of outrageous, bizarre, and downright nonsensical characters, unflinching eroticism and sexuality, brutal violence, and deliberately shocking and offensive imagery.

<sup>46</sup> The references to Cronenberg's *The Fly* are obvious, particularly in the scene in which the salaryman examines his transforming face in the bathroom mirror and pokes at an inexplicable hunk of metal on his cheek, resulting in a spurt of blood exploding from the wound. This scene is an almost beat-for-beat homage to a similar sequence in *The Fly*, in which Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldberg) first becomes aware of his own metamorphosis.

Buddhism, or the attainment of grace, as in *noh*, but the violent, penetrative transformation of a disease process that ravages and mutates the body beyond all hope of recognition; in a sense it is a representation of transformation as rape, rather than transformation as enlightenment.

Perhaps paradoxically (considering the repulsive appearance of the transformed characters), there is a strong erotic element in *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, a brutal sexuality that comes through even as the salaryman's body is changing in horrendous ways. Indeed, the idea of expressing a feeling of eroticism through technology<sup>47</sup> was central to Tsukamoto's original conception of the story. "The combination of metal and flesh came in part from the wish to express eroticism," he said. "I found it very difficult to do that in a direct way and I felt I needed a metaphor to express that aspect, which became the invasion and erosion of the body by metal. I tried to make an erotic film by way of science fiction, to express eroticism through iron" (Mes, 59). In a wider sense, and seen in the context of Tsukamoto's later work, metal becomes a metaphor for the contemporary urban experience – hard, cold, and unyielding – reflecting the way in which Japan had been transformed from a largely isolated, agrarian culture just a century previously, into an international techno-industrial center in the post-World War II era, just as the salaryman in *Tetsuo* is transformed into a man/machine hybrid. This historical shift was a radical one, as unsettling to many older citizens of Japan as the salaryman's transformation is to him. As Tsukamoto himself has said, "Probably the main theme of the *Tetsuo* films is the relationship between the human body and the city" (Mes, 208), reinforcing the idea of man and technology as two uncomfortable – and often incompatible – sides of the same coin. The terror in *Tetsuo* comes not so much from the bizarre transformation itself, but from the progressive loss of the salaryman's humanity as the metal disease irrevocably mutates his body from warm, soft flesh to

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<sup>47</sup> A similar theme is explored in director David Cronenberg's 1996 film *Crash*, about a group of young people who derive sexual pleasure from car accidents, a theme that can be viewed as a reflection of a key element of *Tetsuo*.

cold, hard metal. It's as if Tsukamoto is warning his audience of the dangers of becoming too reliant on technology at the risk of losing touch with humanity. To underscore this important metaphor, Tsukamoto includes an erotic undertone in the film that serves to highlight the increasing dehumanization of the salaryman. In effect, Tsukamoto insists that sex – intimate physical contact – is life, and metal – cold, unfeeling, and impersonal – is death. That life and death and sex often collide in *Tetsuo* only serves to further his metaphor. This theme – of the link between eros and technology – runs through the film in exactly the same way that the first four notes of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor run through the entire first movement of that famous work: always present and thus providing a unifying foundation as the piece develops, yet often transformed in intricate and subtle ways.

This sense of eroticism through metal/technology is perhaps most clearly seen in two important scenes. In one of the earliest scenes, the salaryman and his girlfriend, driving in his car, accidentally run over the metal fetishist, and, after dragging his body off the road, have sex as the seemingly dying man watches, a fact that seems to arouse the girlfriend enormously. This juxtaposition of sex and death – a death caused by metal/technology – sets the tone for the rest of the film, which largely revolves around this concept of life and death, meat and metal, human and inhuman, all tied together by a cord of sex/eroticism. To Tsukamoto, life is defined by sex, which in this film is very much seen as an expression of humanity. Therefore, the fact that the salaryman and his girlfriend have sex within the sight of the dying metal fetishist serves as an affirmation of life in the face of death. That the sexual act is parodied by machines – as in the dream sequence when the salaryman is anally raped by a woman/machine hybrid with a technophallus – only serves to strengthen this metaphor. It is this theme – of eroticism blended with

grotesquerie in a decidedly non-sensical way – that links *Tetsuo* to both the *ero-guro* tradition and also to *butoh*.

The other scene that displays this inherent link between eroticism and metal/technology is the film's infamous sex scene. Shortly after the salaryman's discovery of the initial stage of his transformation – a small bit of steel protruding from his cheek – he is shown making love to his girlfriend. He even feeds her (an act accompanied by grating metallic sound effects) culminating in her sensuously licking a proffered sausage before playfully biting it in half. Quickly, however, things get out of control as the salaryman's transformation accelerates, graphically demonstrated by the growth of a giant, whirling drillbit penis that explodes from his groin.



**Figure 30: An early stage of the salaryman's horrifying transformation.**  
He flees from his girlfriend and locks himself in the bathroom – demonstrating metaphorically the way in which the increasing growth of technology comes between and separates people, leading to the sense of urban alienation that is at the heart of Tsukamoto's thesis – but she forces her way into the bathroom in an attempt to comfort him. Horrified by what she sees, she panics and runs out of the room as the salaryman, now completely in the throes of transformation, pursues and corners her. In an explosive climax, the salaryman rapes/impales his girlfriend with his drillbit penis, splattering her blood all over the wall behind her. If the earlier scenes of the two fully human characters making love was an affirmation of

life, this grotesque parody of the sexual act is a biting reversal of that affirmation, demonstrating the way in which humanity has no hope of triumphing in the face of technology run rampant. Later, the now almost totally transformed salaryman places the girl's dead body in the bathtub, which he fills with water and flowers, literally enshrining her amongst the natural elements of water and flora as a stark counterpoint to his increasingly unnatural and inhuman existence. The almost ritualistic posing of her body acts as a memorial to the very humanity that the salaryman has lost.



**Figure 31: The salaryman's dead girlfriend, now enshrined amidst elements of the natural world, symbolizing his lost humanity.**

In the same way that Hijikata's original *butoh* performances forced Japanese audiences to confront, among other things, the plight of the poor and neglected, *Tetsuo* demands that its audience confront the increasing Westernization/Industrialization of Japan, a nation that has, since the end of World War II, relied on its technological superiority to find its place in the modern world. Both creations call into question fundamental aspects of the Japanese national character, making them uncomfortable performances to view. *Tetsuo*, likewise, is a difficult film to watch, as it revels in its hard-edged ugliness and its unrelenting focus on human degradation in order to forcefully confront the audience with Tsukamoto's themes of industrialization and urban alienation in as brutal and confrontative manner as possible. Just as Hijikata's initial



performances were a reaction to, and in some senses a negation of, traditional Japanese aesthetics as seen in the grace and elegance of the *noh* play, so too is *Tetsuo* a reaction to traditional Japanese cinema, as embodied in the stylish and subtle works of Mizoguchi and Ozu. Like Hijikata, Tsukamoto consciously eschews grace, beauty, and tenderness in order to violently confront his audience with what he sees as the dangers inherent in an increasingly urban/technological society<sup>48</sup>. In *Tokyo Monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953), for example, Ozu Yasujiro crafts a tender and elegiac film about the changing cultural mores in post-war Japan and the struggles faced by the older generation in accepting the new, more Western way of life adopted by their children. It is a graceful and meditative film, with a strength largely garnered from intense, yet underplayed performances, and the simple yet effective cinematography of a master filmmaker obviously in tune with the nature of traditional Japanese aesthetics. *Tetsuo*, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of *Tokyo Monogatari*, in that Tsukamoto visually and aurally assaults his audience from the beginning of the film, increasing the disturbing and confrontational aspect of the picture as it plays out. Where Ozu's camera remains still, Tsukamoto's moves in a jerky, random fashion. Where Ozu is content to tell a quiet story, much of it without musical score, Tsukamoto opts for a violent, screeching techno background counterpointed against sudden patches of silence, adapting the Expressionist preference for strong visual contrasts in light and shadow to the aural realm as well. Where Ozu's characters are quiet, understated and, above all realistic, Tsukamoto's are freakishly deformed, demented, and decidedly unrealistic. In short, Tsukamoto's film, by design, is everything that Ozu's is not, very much in the same way that *butoh* – in its bold, uncompromising, aggressive, and unflinching style – is everything that the refined and dignified *noh* is not.

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<sup>48</sup> It's worth noting that none of the characters in *Tetsuo* are given actual names, reinforcing the theme of alienation – not only from one another, but from one's very humanity – caused by the relentless advance of technology.

Also like a *butoh* performance, dialogue in *Tetsuo* is kept to a minimum, conveying meaning primarily through visual cues and the *avante-garde* music of Chu Ishikawa. Indeed, it's significant to note that when the film initially played in Rome, it did so without subtitles, apparently without ill effects. In designing *Tetsuo*, as mentioned earlier, Tsukamoto relies on the Expressionistic techniques pioneered by the likes of Robert Weine, F.W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang<sup>49</sup>, such as the intense contrast between light and shadow, as well as the choice to shoot entirely in grainy black and white film stock to suggest the color of metal. The result is a film that is both an homage to the past, and a bold step into the future.

Told in a non-linear, anti-narrative manner – *Tetsuo* switches abruptly from events in the present to flashbacks of the past without warning or explanation – the film is, like a *butoh* performance, less about telling a story and more about conveying meaning. To do this effectively, Tsukamoto employs the Eisensteinian technique of dialectical montage, cutting seemingly unrelated sequences of film together in order to build meaning out of their juxtaposition. This same juxtaposition can be seen in *butoh*: a beautiful young woman, for example, naked but for a simple loincloth, her face distorted in a horrible grimace – beauty and ugliness captured at once and in one body. This, then, becomes *butoh*'s expression of dialectical montage, achieved live and without editing.

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<sup>49</sup> The interdependence of man and machine in *Tetsuo* brings to mind the same theme in Lang's *Metropolis*, as in the scene deep underground when the workers who run and feed the machines are in turn fed to the master machine, Moloch.



**Figure 32: The beauty of this *butoh* performer’s body is offset by the disturbingly dead appearance she adopts – particularly in the eyes – thereby presenting an intriguing juxtaposition of life and death which forces the viewer to confront one in the face of the other. Photo by Ethan Hoffman ©1987.**

Perhaps most notably are the repeated, jerky movements of the characters in *Tetsuo*, especially as they are undergoing the transformation from human to machine. This is seen early in the film, as the salaryman writhes and contorts in a horrendous ballet, and later as the girl in the subway shambles after him, becoming less and less human with each step.



**Figure 33: Both the salaryman and the girl in the subway undergo the pain of transformation, dramatized through *butoh*-like movements.**

This was the very type of movement favored by Hijikata in his attempt to present “a corpse trying desperately to stand upright” (Hoffman and Holborn, 127), and can be seen in his performance in *The Horrors of Malformed Men*, as well as in such later neo-*kaidan* classics as *Kairo*, which employed actual *butoh* dancers to portray the spirits of the dead. By highlighting

these gross, unnatural movements<sup>50</sup>, Tsukamoto makes the point that transformation is a difficult, painful process, an assertion totally at odds with the Buddhist concept of transformation through enlightenment, which is seen as peaceful and serene.



**Figure 34: The salaryman, now fully transformed into Tetsuo.**

The finale of *Tetsuo* witnesses the birth of a new life-form as the salaryman actually absorbs the very substance of the metal fetishist into his own body, therefore undergoing a final transformation into an entirely non-human metal entity, the product of the union of both metal creatures. In this final scene, Tsukamoto demonstrates his world's new form of entirely asexual reproduction through adaptation and assimilation; a clever metaphor for the nature of the Japanese people, whose developmental history has consisted of numerous acts of assimilating and adapting ideas and concepts from other cultures: from the written language and Buddhist philosophy of the Chinese in times long past, to the social and cultural ideology of the West in more recent memory. Tsukamoto's view of this process takes a dark and sinister turn, however, as his metal monster declares, "We can mutate the whole world into metal... Our love can destroy this whole fucking world!" as if to say the dangers posed from the encroachment of technology on our daily lives is only beginning, and will only lead to tragedy. Notably, the

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<sup>50</sup> These jerky, grotesque movements unique to *butoh* can be seen as a counterpoint to the *noh* theater's tradition of *mie*, in which an actor will strike and hold, or "cut," a powerful or emotional pose in order to draw attention to a particularly important moment in the performance.

monster references “our love” – a twisted, inhuman version of love, to be sure – echoing for one final time the theme of eroticism through metal that has been Tsukamoto’s overriding subject.

One wonders what Tsukamoto makes of our current Internet age, a time when humanity is more dependent on, and plugged into, technology than ever before. This is a theme that has been taken up by a number of neo-*kaidan* films, such as *Kairo* (*Pulse*, 2001), in which computers are seen as gateways to a ghostly otherworld; *Chakushin an* (*One Missed Call*, 2004), about ghostly goings-on revolving around a cell phone and voicemail; and, perhaps most famously, *Ringu* (*Ring*, 1998), which tells the story of a cursed videotape that brings death to whoever watches it.

The theme of birth and rebirth is also taken up by such *butoh* artists as Kazuo Ohno, co-creator of *butoh*, who said, “*Butoh* is created in the mother’s womb as life is, and its energy and mechanisms should be the same... the world of *butoh* must be that of the mother’s womb” (Hoffman and Holborn, 14). Indeed, if there is an over-arching theme to Ohno’s *oeuvre*, it is that of creation and the cycle of life, realized in such works as *My Mother* and *A Dream of the Fetus*. Where Ohno’s work is largely life-affirming, however, Tsukamoto’s vision is much, much darker. In the end, however, both men, masters of their respective crafts, draw attention to such important questions of life, birth, humanity, and love by unusual, outrageous, and often controversial means. They force their respective audiences to confront and examine their own preconceptions and ideas through the use of shocking, and often bizarre visuals, stylized movement, provocative imagery, and a conscious poetic application of *avante-garde* and modernist techniques. Neither are bound by the constraints of the past, and it’s the very transgressive nature of their work that, in part, laid the groundwork for the neo-*kaidan* films of the late 1990s and beyond.

Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-On* (*The Grudge*, 2002)

The more recent neo-*kaidan* film, *Ju-On*<sup>51</sup> (*The Grudge*, 2002), directed by Takashi Shimizu, is a fascinating synthesis of many different concepts and influences, including Japanese theatrical and literary traditions, *butoh*, *ero-guro*, and Western suspense. It draws from the early *kaidan* literary tradition, as does *Kwaidan*, to present a story with strong Buddhist undertones, as in both the *kabuki* and *noh* dramas, but also incorporates more modern aesthetic techniques such as the visual stylings of *butoh* and the transgressive nature of *ero-guro*. Finally, Shimizu derives creative inspiration from such modern cinematic masters as Steven Spielberg, Stanley Kubrick, Mike Leigh, and Sam Raimi, making his work a true culmination of both Eastern and Western techniques, practices, and culture.

To begin with, Shimizu takes the kernel of his idea – that of a terrifying *onryu* – from the hallowed halls of Japan's literary *kaidan* tradition (as discussed at length in Chapter Two), but twists it, presenting a suburban Japanese house as the locus of horror, rather than a specific individual. The core conceit of *Ju-On* builds upon the Shinto belief that anyone killed wrongly, or as a result of maltreatment by another<sup>52</sup>, will die in a state of *urami*, a word that literally means “grudge” or “resentment.” The ghost of a person killed in this way, and beset by *urami*, is compelled to stay on earth until his or her revenge is accomplished, after which they are permitted to move to the next world.

The word *urami* is linguistically related to the word *ura*, which refers to the reverse of something: its hidden, private side. The opposite of this is *omote*, which means the outside of something: the face, or public aspect that is easily seen. *Ura* and *omote* are two sides of the same

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<sup>51</sup> The Japanese word “*Ju-On*” is typically translated as “curse.”

<sup>52</sup> As the film's initiating action, Shimizu reveals that both Kayako (Takako Fuji), the mother, and Toshio (Yuya Ozeki), the son, are murdered at the hands of husband/father Takeo (Takashi Matsuyama), when he discovers his wife has been having an affair.

coin, and virtually everything possesses qualities of both. Therefore, *urami* – the ability to hold a grudge or feel resentment – is not a quality limited to persons only, as everything has both a light, public side and a dark, hidden side. Objects can also exist in a state of *urami*. For example, crop failures and epidemics were once considered to be expressions of *urami* visited on people by vengeful *kami*. Following this example, it’s easy to see how a house in which a horrible act has taken place – the core of Shimizu’s story – could possess *urami*. Therefore, the “grudge” referred to in the title is not solely possessed by the murdered mother and child, but resides in the very structure in which they lived. This then allows for the “viral” nature of the events that take place, as the curse – or *urami* – is visited on anyone who enters the house.

Consider also the symbolism of the home. In virtually all cultures, the home is seen as a place of safety and security, a refuge not only from other people, but from the natural and elemental world as well. The home, with its walls and roof, protects us from rain and wind and sleet and snow, and provides us with a space secure from invasion or attack. In fact, the *kanji* character for “house” shows a figure with a roof over it, furthering this concept of home as protector.



**Figure 35: The kanji for “house.” Note the “roof” on top of the figure.**

Indeed, traditions surrounding the construction of a Japanese house are rooted in Shinto belief, including the placing of green bamboo poles at the planned corners of the site (to inscribe a sacred space that the house will inhabit) at the very beginning of the process, and the interpretation of the hearth/fireplace and water entrances as the home of *kami*. From these and

other important spiritual traditions, it becomes clear that the Japanese house is far more than a simple physical structure, that it is imbued with special properties entirely foreign to Western minds that tend to see houses merely as functional pieces of architecture.

It is also interesting to note the role that the Japanese house plays upon the death of an occupant, especially as these traditions impact Shimizu's *Ju-On*. When someone dies, important ceremonies are held in and around their house, and a special altar is established there, dedicated to the deceased. These ceremonies, which are typically led by a Buddhist priest, are repeated at proscribed intervals for as many as 50 years, in order to honor the dead (now a *kami*) and, presumably, to guard against the spirit's assumption of *urami*. Notably, these important services and observances seem entirely absent in *Ju-On* – there's no evidence of memorial services, and no special altar is seen – which one can assume has contributed to the restless and vengeful nature of Toshio and Kayako's spirits.

By omitting these ceremonies, one can see the house in *Ju-On* as “out of sorts,” possessing a disrupted and impure spirit (as discussed earlier, *kami* can be either animate or inanimate objects, and *urami* is not limited to human beings, so the concept of a house feeling resentment would not be foreign to the Japanese mind). At that point, one must ask, what happens when that house, that sanctified symbol of security and protection, turns against us, violating our deeply-held beliefs about the purpose and character of such a structure? It is within this question that the true terror of *Ju-On* is to be found.

By turning the very house against the humanity it has been constructed to protect, Shimizu elevates a mere “haunted house” tale to a chilling story of betrayal and aggression. Unlike the representation of haunted houses in such Western films as *13 Ghosts* (1960, remade in 2001), *The Amityville Horror* (1979, remade in 2005), and *The Sentinel* (1977), the house in *Ju-*



*On* is an active agent; in the Western films mentioned, the house in question is merely a site of possession or infestation, by demons, the devil, or other malevolent entities. We may be terrified by what goes on within the walls, but our core concept of the “house” as protector and refuge is largely left unchallenged, as we realize that it was an outside agency – e.g. Satan – that is responsible for the carnage, and not the house itself. Shimizu confounds this concept, turning the house itself into the agent of destruction, thereby immersing us in a world where we cannot ever be safe or secure. By making the house the active agent, Shimizu obliterates our sense of security, implying that we are utterly alone, without protection, in a cold and unfriendly universe. This is the core of his film, a horrific implication that cuts across cultural lines and affects us on a level so deep and basic we may not even understand where it is, exactly, that our sense of dread originates.

This concept of *urami* inhabiting an inanimate object has deep roots in Japanese folklore. In his collection of weird tales titled *In Ghostly Japan*, Lafcadio Hearn tells a story called “Furisodé,” about a haunted kimono that brings grief, pain, and ultimately death to all who wear it. As well, the concept of a grudge – or resentment – that survives after death is also a common theme in many *kaidan* tales. Consider, for example, Hearn’s story *Diplomacy*, contained in the book *Kwaidan*. In this story, a man is scheduled for execution, but pleads for his life before the samurai who is to behead him. When pardon is not forthcoming, the man swears revenge after death because, as Hearn explains, “... If any person be killed while feeling strong resentment, the ghost of that person will be able to take vengeance upon the killer.” (Hearn: 1904, 46). It’s this belief, rooted in ancient tradition, that provides the very core conceit of Shimizu’s film.

This concept of a vengeance that transcends death also figures prominently in the *kabuki* play *Iro moyo chotto karimane*, often referred to simply as *Kasane* after one of the lead

characters. In the second act of this play, the samurai Yaemon and his mistress Kasane are preparing to take their lives when a skull impaled with a sickle floats by in a stream near where they stand. It is the skull of a man, Suke, whom Yaemon murdered years earlier. The vengeful spirit inhabits Kasane's body and attacks Yaemon, who is forced to kill the young woman before being dragged back to the scene of his crime by the ghost of Suke. As well, Zeami's *noh* play *Aya no tsuzumi* relates the story of an elderly gardener who has the misfortune to fall in love with a beautiful and aristocratic woman. She tells him that if he can make the sound of a drum reach her, she will see him again, but his efforts are foiled when he discovers that the drumhead is made from damask and is thus silent. Inconsolable, he drowns himself in a nearby lake. Subsequently, his angry spirit appears to the haughty woman in order to express his feelings. *Fujito*, a *noh* play also by Zeami, concerns itself with the samurai, Sasaki no Moritsuna, who killed a fisherman in order to safeguard a military secret. Confronted by the man's mother, Moritsuna repents and offers prayers for the salvation of the dead man, who then appears before the samurai and says that the offered prayers have driven away his *urami*, thereby releasing his spirit from the earth.

And so, in constructing *Ju-On*, Shimizu draws on ancient folk traditions in order to ground his film in a culturally-specific framework. But, at the same time, he is clearly aware of, and conversant with, modern genre tropes, and incorporates more contemporary references and styles in his film as well, giving it a modern feeling while still maintaining its roots in the past. In this way, he walks a line between past and present that few directors – on either side of the world – have been able to successfully navigate.

Although a self-admitted devotee of 1980s splatter films, Shimizu refrains from overt blood, violence, or sexuality in his film, creating an atmosphere more akin to a *noh* or *kabuki*

play (indeed, *Ju-On* is less graphic than even many *bunraku* plays!) by carefully controlling both what is seen and what is not. Through careful attention to detail, such as camera placement, framing, and *mise-en-scene*, Shimizu manages to effectively provide a chilling atmosphere, rather than a horrific one, drawing a clear line between terror and horror. The difference between the two is brilliantly delineated by Boris Karloff in his introduction to the book *Tales of Terror* when he says, “Horror carries with it a connotation of revulsion that has nothing to do with clean terror... The essential element of true terror as opposed to so-called horror is lacking. That element is *fear*. Fear of the unknown and of the unknowable” (Karloff, 10-11). Compare Karloff’s statement with that of Zeami, writing about the most effective way in which to portray a demon character. He says,

In the case of a real demon from hell, however, even if the actor studies well, the performance is likely to be merely frightening... The essence of such a role is frightfulness, yet the qualities of frightfulness and enjoyment are as different as black and white... For the interest the spectator finds in the performance of a demon role is like a flower blooming among the rocks. (Rimer and Masakuza, 16-17)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Shimizu understands this distinction – between the merely repulsive/horrific and the truly enjoyable/terrifying – creating the essence of fear in such a way as not to offend the *kami*, as was the concern with the presentation of *noh* and *kabuki* plays. Alfred Hitchcock’s well-known shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) is a textbook example of the type of terror both Karloff and Zeami advocate. Unlike such scary movie auteurs as William Castle – infamous for doing whatever was necessary to make his audience jump out of their chairs, including installing vibrating buzzers in the seats during screenings of *The Tingler* (1959) – Shimizu never indulges in the jump-out-from-behind-the-door-and-yell-“Boo!” moments for which Castle and others were famous. Instead, he prefers a more subtle type of terror, in which strange shapes are seen obliquely and unexpected visitors accost the unwary in places of

presumed safety such as the shower or under the covers in one's bed. The result is an eerie film that terrifies rather than horrifies.

Visually, one of the most striking aspects of *Ju-On* is the appearance of Kayako and Toshio, the ghostly murder victims who spread the house's curse from person to person. With their chalk-white skin and dark, unkempt black hair, as well as Kayako's white funeral-like shroud, they at once suggest images of the dead, traditional Japanese *yurei*, and modern *butoh* dancers. Each of these aspects is worth considering.

The white make-up that both Kayako and Toshio wear, which marks them as otherworldly, can be interpreted in several ways. If one considers Hijikata's statement regarding his intent with *butoh*, "... to make the dead reenact once more their deaths in their entirety" (Hoffman and Holborn, 127), the deathly pallor which *butoh* performers often adopt becomes a visual representation of the lifeless and departed. An appearance of bloodlessness and desiccation, the white make-up represents the absence of life, volition, and will, allowing the performer to "make" the dead "reenact" their deaths. Hijikata felt a strong connection to the spirits of the dead – he once said, "...the dead are my teachers" (ibid) – and *butoh*, his "dance of utter darkness," was his way of connecting with those departed souls. This concept, of donning the accoutrements of the dead in order to connect with them, is a central theme in Doris Dorrie's 2008 film *Cherry Blossoms*, in which Rudi Angermeier (Elmar Wepper) dons clothes belonging to his wife Trudi (Hannelore Elsner) after her death in order to connect with her spirit. In Dorrie's film, *butoh* is literally a "dance of death," as Rudi performs a *butoh* dance in the shadow of Mount Fuji, finally and truly uniting with the spirit of his departed wife, as his final act before he dies peacefully, having finally found closure regarding the sudden death of his beloved. The

film is a touching statement about the power of *butoh* to both heal the soul and unite – at least spiritually – with the departed.

On the other hand, the *kabuki* actor treats his white make-up – the foundation of his physical presentation – as a mask, a blank slate upon which character is created. Although the highly stylized and artistic *kumadori* style of make-up – in which color is used in bold and striking patterns to visually represent heroes, villains, and special characters – is most associated in the Western mind with *kabuki*, it is common to see characters that sport far subtler appearances, particularly in common roles. According to Earle Ernst,

... the usual make-up is a dead white for men, women, and children. On this surface the eyebrows are painted in black, higher on the forehead than the actual eyebrows; the eyes are lined with black for men and red for women; lip rouge is used to produce a thin line of downward curvature for men's mouths and a small mouth in which the thickness of the lips is minimized for women. (Ernst, 196)



**Figure 36: L – Onnagata kabuki actor (flickr.com). Note the painted eyebrows and rouged lips. R- Kayako from *Ju-On*. Note the absence of any defining make-up, such as lips or eyebrows, unlike the *kabuki* tradition.**

As Ernst points out, the reason for the development of white make-up is, at its base, a practical one: since early *kabuki* theaters tended to be dim and poorly lit, the white make-up made it possible for the actors to project their facial expressions much farther than they could have without it. As with so much of the *kabuki* theater, the traditions remained long after the practical reasons for them disappeared.

The effect in the case of *kabuki* is of a mask, a representation of a specific character or

character type. Stylized and artful, to be sure, but a mask nonetheless. In *Ju-On*, however, as in *butoh*, the effect is that of an ambulatory corpse, disquieting and disturbing. Shimizu makes sure that not the slightest hint of life or humanity is left in the faces of Kayako or Toshio; that they are, in fact, clearly of another world. There is, however, nothing inherently grotesque or repulsive about either character; they are terrifying without being horrible, as befits Shimizu's overall aesthetic.

Kayako's hair is also worth considering. Since ancient times, hair, in the Japanese culture, has been an important marker of character, status, and rank, especially for women. Whether worn long, flowing, and unbound, as in the Heian Period (794-1185), or arranged in elaborate and complex designs supported by a vast number of pins and accessories (*kanzashi*) as in the Edo Period (1603-1868), the care and presentation of hair has long been a matter of much importance in Japan. Indeed, the "language" of hair became so refined and exact that a woman could announce her age, rank, social and/or marital status, availability, mood, the season, and much more by the way she wore her hair in public. Throughout this extended period of history, hair was typically kept long, but it was never dirty, tangled, unkempt, or in disarray.



**Figure 37: Ukiyo-e print [artist unknown] from the Meiji Period showing different hair styles of the Heian Period [L] and Edo Period [R] (author's collection).**

What, then, are we to make of Kayako's hair, and what message should we take from it? As Hearn notes in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, "Ghosts... are represented with hair loose and long, falling weirdly over the face" (Hearn: 1907, 152), providing an immediate cultural explanation for the appearance of Shimizu's ghost. Kayako's long, unkempt black hair is also a reference to the *noh* tradition of madwoman plays, in that, "... [t]he unkempt hairstyle of the female villains signifies madness or demonic possession due to its non-conformist associations" (Shen, 2009), recalling the ancient practice in which men's hair was worn long and loose, while women's hair was always elaborately and neatly tied up. When closely examined, it becomes clear that Shimizu's film, as modern as it is, borrows elements not only from *noh*'s *shunen* (revenge) and *shura-mono* (ghost) plays, but from *kabuki*'s *kaidan* (supernatural) plays, as well as *butoh*'s visual tropes.



**(Figure 38: Kayako in *Ju-On*. Note particularly the dead-white make-up and the loose, unkempt hair.)**

Additionally, "hairiness" in Japan carries specific cultural connotations, especially as it is associated with barbarism. During the initial period of contact between Japan and Europe, the Japanese regarded the foreigners – who they largely considered barbaric because of their eating habits, their lack of personal hygiene, their rude manners, etc. – as excessively hairy. As well, the more modern Japanese disdained the Ainu - the indigenous people of Japan, remarkable for the volume of hair on their faces - as hairy savages (the Western corollary to this seems to be the

legend of the werewolf, a human being who becomes monstrous by taking on the attributes of an animal/savage, including the growth of vast amounts of hair). Consider as well this quote from Hearn’s story, “Rokuro-Kubi,” from his book, *Kwaidan*:

What kind of a man can you be, good Sir, that you dare to lie down alone in such a place as this?... There are haunters about here – and many of them. Are you not afraid of Hairy Things? (Hearn: 1904, 85)

In this intriguing passage, “hairy” and “monstrous” are conflated, providing a shape and a context for an otherwise formless and vague fear. As well, many cultures see wild, unkempt hair as a sign of madness, as it represents a person who is unwilling – or unable – to care for their appearance in even the most basic sense (consider such characters as Charles Ogle’s monster in the very first *Frankenstein* film [1910], Werner Krauss as the titular character in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [1920], Alfred Abel as Rotwang in *Metropolis* [1927], or John Barrymore in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1923] for examples of the madman with wild hair; even the subway girl in *Tetsuo*, whose hair becomes progressively wilder as her transformation – and thus her descent into madness and inhumanity – progresses).



**Figure 39: L - Charles Ogle in Edison Studio’s 1910 *Frankenstein*. The wild hair in disarray helps mark this character as both monstrous and potentially mad (wikipedia.org). R – The subway girl from *Tetsuo*, in the midst of transformation. The unkempt hair marks her as outside of the socionormative mainstream.**



Shimizu draws from *butoh*<sup>53</sup> in creating a unique style of movement for Kayako as well. Rather than simply walk towards her victims, Kayako approaches in an animalistic fashion, even coming down a flight of stairs in a twisted, uncomfortable spider crawl that recalls the deformed and bizarre postures adopted by *butoh* performers<sup>54</sup>. The assumption of an animal posture serves to further position her as inhuman, removing her one step further from those who fall victim to the house's *urami*. In addition, and also like most *butoh* performers, Kayako is silent throughout the film, “speaking” only through body movement and facial expression. In this way, her entire performance can be seen as a dance, with movement as her means of communication instead of speech.



**Figure 40: Compare Kayako’s spider-climb down the stairs with this image of a *butoh* performer. Note similarities of make-up, hair, and posture. *Butoh* photo by Ethan Hoffman ©1987.**

Additionally, Kayako’s clothing provides a clue to her character as well. Whenever she is seen, she is wearing a simple white dress. In the Edo period, white was the color of mourning – in fact, until fairly recent times, it was customary for mourners to wear white to a funeral – and it was the custom to clothe the bodies of the dead in white. Even today, traditional families will

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<sup>53</sup> This is hardly Shimizu’s only flirtation with *butoh*: a story in *The Japan Times* about his then-latest film, *Rakudatsu Ai* (*Fatal Love*, 2008), comments on, “... a forest battle between Meg and a gang of her dead male admirers that resembles a *butoh* dance number...” (Shilling, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Consider also the infamous “Spider Walk” scene cut from the original release version of *The Exorcist* (1973) and recently restored to the Director’s Cut DVD version. The scene, in which Regan MacNeil (actually stunt double and contortionist Linda R. Hager) performs an upside-down spider-like walk down the stairs, was deleted by director William Friedkin because he felt it was technically inadequate.

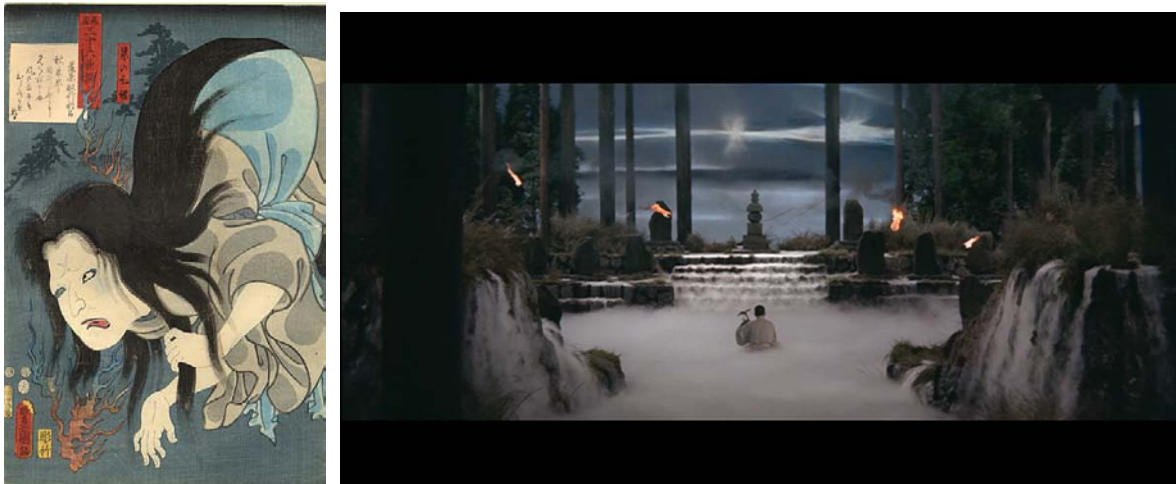
bury a white kimono with their loved one for use in the afterlife, as white is considered the color of purity, a color usually reserved for priests and the dead. Once again, this detail positions Kayako as something associated with death. Taken all together, her stark white make-up, her long, disheveled hair, her white dress, and her bizarre, *butoh*-like posture mark her as terrifying and otherworldly, a modern-day image of the *yurei*, the folkloric ghost made popular in the storytelling tradition of *hayakumonogatari kaidankai* discussed earlier.



**Figure 41: *The Ghost of Oyuki* by Maruyama Okyo, 1750. Traditional image of a *yurei*, showing the long, disheveled black hair, the white garment and skin, and the indeterminate lower body (wikipedia.org).**

Aside from the disheveled black hair, the chalk-white skin, and the white garments, there is one additional element that links Kayako and Toshio to the *yurei* tradition. According to legend, *yurei* are often accompanied by *hitodama*: floating balls of flame that often appear in brilliant colors such as blue, green, or purple. Rather than independent spirits, these *hitodama* function as parts of the *yurei* itself. *Hitodama* were considered to be the spirit of a newly dead person released from the body, and seeing a *hitodama* was considered a premonition of one's

impending demise. Cinematically, these bizarre creatures can be seen in the movie *Kwaidan* (1964), in the “Hoichi the Earless” segment.



**Figure 42: L – *The Spectre*, 1852, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (printsofjapan.com). The flames around the figure’s head are the *hitodama*. R – As Hoichi chants “The Battle of Dan-no-ura,” he is surrounded by floating balls of flame, the *hitodama*.**

The introduction of the concept of *hitodama* allows for an intriguing alternate interpretation of the film. If, in granting that the house itself is possessed of *urami*, we consider the house the *yurei* of Shimizu’s story, then Kayako and Toshio become the modern-day *hitodama* associated with the house. In this interpretation, the two formerly-human ghosts lose their centrality and assume a secondary role that purges the film’s antagonist – the house/*yurei* – of even the slightest shred of humanity. Kayako and Toshio, therefore, act as agents of the house, enabling the spread of the curse from one person to another. The use of such agents imparts an even more sinister character to the house, furthering our feeling of terror when confronted with a former protector and ally now intent on our destruction.

In addition to his disturbing images of Kayako and Toshio, Shimizu increases the tension in *Ju-On* by presenting the story in an entirely non-linear fashion, with short vignettes piled on top of each other in a confusing and unsettling manner. Like Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo*, Shimizu’s cinematic world dispenses with the concept of cause and effect, opting instead for a seemingly

random procession of events that end badly for all concerned. The progression of *Ju-On* from beginning to end is not simply a series of flashbacks/flashforwards – techniques that actually provide a grounding in linear time – but a more memory-like experience where one segment is juxtaposed against another for reasons other than chronology. Indeed, the events in the film seem to take place over several years, although an exact timeline is extremely difficult to determine. Shimizu's technique, as demonstrated here, is an extreme form of dialectical montage (what Eisenstein did with images, Shimizu does with entire scenes), but one that might be interpreted as the point of view of the house – who can say how an inanimate object might perceive time and the progression of events? – an interpretation that lends weight to the theory of the house as the possessor of *urami* and the key character in the film. Seen from that point of view, the non-linear narrative actually acts as a means of defining and explicating character for a presence in the film that is largely overlooked.

There is no comfort at the end of *Ju-On*, no sense of triumph, and no guarantee that the spirits have been defeated or the *urami* resolved, as there is in most Western movies of this type (the demon-possessed house in *The Amityville Horror* [1979] burns to the ground at the end of the film, for example, and the audience is reassured that the threat is over – until the sequel, of course). Shimizu builds upon the dark ambiguity created in *Tetsuo* – and in *Gojira* (1954) before that – delivering an ending that is not an ending, perhaps a natural conclusion for a post-war society that survived the explosion of not one but two atomic bombs, and must constantly look over their collective shoulder waiting for the next attack in an increasingly unstable and chaotic world. In the worldview of Tsukamoto, Honda, and Shimizu, there is no such thing as a happy ending, just a momentary cessation of terror, an eye of the storm, before something even worse

happens. No one “wins” at the conclusion of these films, the current story simply comes to an end, inevitably to be continued.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Visiting Japan, I was surprised to see how many people – both men and women – wore kimonos in their daily lives. Like most Americans, I had been led to believe that Japan was much like the United States in everything but language. While it's true that Western culture is predominant, especially in urban centers like Tokyo, there's no denying the fact that feudal Japan – the Japan of shoguns, samurai, geisha, and *kaidan* – lies right around any given corner, represented by beautiful and ancient temples, antique artforms, and traditional fashions. Indeed, even in modern cities like Tokyo, it is common to see contemporary high-rise buildings standing next to older and more traditional Japanese houses, the past and future inextricably mashed together in a jarring hodge-podge of architectural styles. America, a much younger country than Japan, with a history that doesn't even stretch back three hundred years, often seems lacking when it comes to our personal history, which perhaps makes us more sensitive to the panorama of the ages that surrounds us when we travel to a country like Japan.

Also unlike America, Japan's history is ever-present, a constant reminder of what the country is and where it came from. Legends live in Japan, and while they may be transformed and adapted to suit the particular needs of a given era, they are never entirely absent, never forgotten, and as such, provide a base from which new legends can be built by modern storytellers.

With these thoughts in mind, it's interesting to compare the earliest days of motion pictures in the West with the same period in Japan, and to note how the same technology was used to different ends from the very beginning.

In the West, many of the earliest motion pictures dealt with scenes of daily life:

*Roundhay Garden Scene* (1888) by Louis le Prince shows a group of people walking around an English country garden; Edison's *Kinetoscopic Recording of a Sneeze* (1894) was, simply, a few feet of film showing a man sneezing; and the Lumière Brothers' *La Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon* (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon, 1895*), shows, as the title indicates, a group of workers exiting the gates of the factory at which they are employed. These groundbreaking works capture reality, providing a valuable document, not only of life in the late nineteenth century, but also of the development of motion pictures.

Of course, not all early films were so literally derived. George Méliès, for example, pioneered the use of special effects in the movies, drawing upon his previous training as a stage magician. Pushing against the boundaries of the new technology, Méliès took his audiences to new and exciting worlds in which grown men and women appeared and disappeared, skeletons turned into beautiful women, and rocketships pierced the eye of the Man in the Moon.

Interestingly, few of these early films drew on themes of national mythology, although America successfully co-opted some of the folktales of Great Britain in the early years. The Edison Company brought the legend of St. George and the Dragon to the screen for the first time in 1910, and the first cinematic Robin Hood was shown to audiences in 1912, with Fort Lee, New Jersey standing in for Sherwood Forest. Whether turn of the century audiences were more interested in scenes they could easily relate to, or whether the ability to film elaborate set pieces was too cost prohibitive in a developing industry that had yet to find its full expression is a matter for another project. Suffice it to say that the vast majority of early Occidental films either explicitly participated in a proto-documentary realism, or created new material out of whole

cloth, expressly avoiding those legends that had found a home in folk literature, stage shows, and the written word.

As cinema developed in Japan, however, it took a very different path, appropriating stories and themes from Japanese tradition and translating them directly to the screen. As mentioned earlier, a number of the first motion pictures made in Japan were filmed versions of established *kabuki* plays. As the cinematic arts progressed in that country, filmmakers drew on a rich tradition of literature, especially such *kaidan* classics as *Shinen no sosei* (*Resurrection of a Corpse*, 1898), *Yotsuya kaidan* (*Ghost Story of Yotsuya*, 1912), and *Botan doro* (*Tales of the Peony Lantern*, 1914). Even during the 1910s, when cinema in Japan was criticized for being too theatrical, failing to take advantage of advances in technology enjoyed in other parts of the world, filmmakers resisted the urge to entirely abandon the concepts and themes that made Japan's cinema uniquely its own. As a result, Japanese films continued (and still continue) to draw extensively on a rich aesthetic, literary, theatrical, and cultural tradition dating back many hundreds of years.

This, then, is the thread that knits all of the films examined in this document together. Whether directly drawn from an antique tradition – like *Kwaidan* – or based on an updating of an established folkloric component – the appearance of the modern *yurei* in *Ju-On* – these Japanese films speak in a language that is both subtle and unique, using the ancient to comment on the modern. Even such films as *Gojira* and *Daimajin* diegetically implant the concept of legendary creatures, convincing the characters in the films – and the audience as well – that the monsters on screen have existed for untold millennia, and are just now being revealed to an astounded public at large. In this way, legend and folktale play a more important part in Japanese film than in virtually any other cinematic tradition.



As implied in the concept of *sabi*, things develop power over time; therefore legends that have existed for hundreds of years become powerful vehicles for comment and expression, making them particularly well-suited for adaptation into new storytelling forms. Japanese storytellers have recognized this fact for some time, incorporating legends and folktales into *noh*, *kabuki*, and *bunraku*, then into written stories to be shared among friends who sought the thrill of exploring the ghostly otherworld, and now incorporated into film. In this way, the legends that were born a thousand years ago gain new life and new immediacy, as well as the ability to speak to a new generation. If the current generation has turned from the tradition of *koshinmachi*, for example – no longer concerned about the three spiritual beings that live inside them and report their deeds, both good and bad, to a higher power, thus negating the necessity of the practice of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* – the fascination with stories of the supernatural has not diminished over time. Therefore, modern Japanese filmmakers turn to the ancient legends as inspiration for their neo-*kaidan* films that thrill audiences worldwide.

Japan itself is a monument to the way in which the ancient and the modern can live side by side: women in kimonos walking next to men in business suits, old traditional homes proudly standing beside the most modern architectural creations, time-honored *yakitori* restaurants situated across the street from McDonalds. Similarly, Japanese cinema has managed to develop as a synthesis of Japan's varied and diverse art forms, rather than as a replacement for those forms. Japanese films regularly draw on traditional forms and structures, as well as influences from other cinematic traditions, adapting them rather than overturning or rejecting them. In the West, the concept of modernism largely means the overthrow of traditional forms, theories, and media, as Pablo Picasso, for example, discarded such established aesthetic principles as perspective, proportion, and realism. In Japan, the trend seems to favor largely bypassing

modernism in favor of an eternal post-modernism, in which the old and the new can, and do, symbiotically exist and nurture each other, creating new forms without rejecting the old.

But it should not be implied that Japanese cinema developed in a vacuum, solely informed by the legends and traditions of its past. Ever since the first motion pictures arrived in that country in 1896, Japanese filmmakers have drawn inspiration from the West, eager to incorporate the visions of foreign voices into their own repertoire. As they had done so many times in the past, the Japanese took what was useful and adapted it for their own ends, rather than slavishly recreating what they saw on the screen. This process of adoption and adaptation has served the Japanese culture well over the years, and cinema was no exception to this successful practice.

Like its other art forms, Japanese culture has created a cinema that is uniquely its own, one both deeply entrenched in the millennia-old history and tradition of the country while remaining on the cutting edge of expression and vitality. If, as the holographic principle states, each piece of a thing contains the whole, then Japanese cinema can rightly be seen as a holographic presentation of Japanese culture, encompassing all the arts, philosophies, and traditions that have made that society distinctive and enduring. In this way, Japanese films offer a window on a culture that is at once both ancient and modern, in which the past and the present blend and meld to shape the future.

APPENDIX  
GLOSSARY

<i>Ai-kyogen</i>	In a <i>noh</i> play, the comic interlude during the <i>Ha</i> section, typically performed by minor characters who speak in colloquial language, as opposed to the more formal speech of the main actors. Also see <i>kyogen</i> .
<i>Anime</i>	Japanese animated cartoons such as <i>Tetsuwan atomu</i> ( <i>Astro Boy</i> ), <i>Eito man</i> ( <i>Eight Man</i> ), and <i>Jungle taitei</i> ( <i>Kimba the White Lion</i> ). Although early examples date back as far as 1917, the form flourished and developed in the 1960s and 1970s, becoming one of Japan's most important cultural exports.
<i>Aragato</i>	“rough business”; an acting technique in <i>kabuki</i> characterized by bombastic, declamatory dialogue, elaborate and outrageous make-up, and exaggerated physical gestures. Can also refer to a type of play that has these characteristics. Not to be confused with <i>arigato</i> , which means “thank you.”
<i>Ashizukai</i>	The manipulator who works the legs of a puppet in the <i>bunraku</i> theater.
<i>Aware</i>	A core concept in Japanese aesthetics, it typically refers to a sense of melancholy and sadness brought on by an acute sensitivity to the subtle beauty of things and the impermanence of their nature. Also <i>mono no aware</i> .
Battle of Dan-no-Ura	A major sea battle that occurred during the Genpei War between the Minamoto (Genji) and Taira (Heike) clans on March 24, 1185. The crushing defeat of the Taira forces led to the establishment of Minamoto Yoritomo as the first <i>shogun</i> of Japan, thus inaugurating Japan's feudal period, which lasted until the 19 <sup>th</sup> century.
<i>Benshi</i>	During the silent film era in Japan, these performers acted as interpreters/narrators for the pictures shown, introducing the film and then explaining and commenting on the action for the audience. An incredibly powerful position, <i>benshi</i> were often billed above the stars of the films upon which they were commenting.
<i>Beshimi</i>	A family of <i>noh</i> masks in which the lips are closed and pressed firmly together. <i>Ko-beshimi</i> : Denoting a sorrowful demon, the face is typically painted red. <i>Kuro-beshimi</i> : This mask is used rarely, and is distinguished by the entire face being painted pitch black. <i>O-beshimi</i> : Based on the traditional appearance of the legendary <i>tengu</i> , a type of <i>yokai</i>

<i>Biwa</i>	A Japanese lute-like instrument played with a plectrum.
<i>Bodhi</i>	In Buddhism, the state of enlightenment or awakening. Often translated as “to know.”
Buddhism	A philosophical tradition with roots in India that came to Japan via China in the sixth century. Buddhism was able to blend harmoniously with Shinto, the native faith, so that today many Japanese consider themselves followers of both systems.
<i>Bunraku</i>	Japanese puppet theater.
<i>Butoh</i>	A transgressive dance movement characterized by unnatural and contorted body postures that developed in the post-war period in opposition to traditional Japanese dance and theater forms. Founded by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, this controversial and confrontative form began to spread outside Japan beginning in the 1980s.
Chikamatsu Monzaemon	1653 – 1725. Considered to be one of Japan’s greatest dramatists, sometimes referred to as “the Shakespeare of Japan.” Wrote extensively for the <i>bunraku</i> and <i>kabuki</i> theaters, and was best known for his love-suicide plays.
<i>Dai kaiju</i>	“Giant monster.” Japanese giant monster films are widely referred to as <i>dai kaiju eiga</i> .
<i>Daigo fukuryu maru</i>	A tuna fishing boat that was inundated with radioactive fallout from the explosion of the Castle Bravo hydrogen bomb in the Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954, even though it was well outside the danger zone established by the United States government. As a result, a number of crew members died and the tuna on board was found to have been contaminated. A scandalous affair that resulted in a marked rise in anti-nuclear sentiment, many in Japan termed the incident “the second atomic bombing of Japan.”
Edo Period	1603 – 1868. Also known as the Tokugawa Period, after the name of the family that ruled Japan during this time. An era of unmatched peace and prosperity, the Edo Period saw the development of many of Japan’s most significant art forms, including <i>ukiyo-e</i> , <i>kabuki</i> , <i>bunraku</i> , literature, poetry, and the tradition of the <i>geisha</i> , as well as the growth of the <i>samurai</i> culture.
<i>Eiga</i>	“Film,” “Movie.”

<i>Ero-guro-nansensu</i>	Literally, “erotic-grotesque-nonsense”; although frequently expressed as “ <i>ero-guro</i> .” A literary and artistic tradition that flourished in 1920s and 1930s Japan, particularly in Tokyo (a culture that has been compared to Weimar Berlin of the same era) and which focused on eroticism, sexual decadence, and corruption, as well as things that were misshapen, malformed, or in some way horrific. Edogawa Rampo is considered a leading literary figure of this movement.
<i>Geisha</i>	A highly trained female entertainer who is proficient in music, dance, literature, poetry, and calligraphy, as well as such formal events as the tea ceremony. Contrary to popular belief, geishas are not prostitutes, a misconception fueled by the Japanese sex workers who styled themselves as “geisha” to appeal to the American occupation forces following World War II.
<i>Gendaigeki</i>	“contemporary life films”; the opposite of <i>jidaigecki</i> .
Genji	The hero of <i>Genji monogatari</i> . Also known as Hikaru Genji, or “Shining Genji.” An alternate name for the Minamoto clan, based on the Chinese characters for Minamoto family (Minamoto=gen; family=uji, or ji).
<i>Genji monogatari</i>	<i>The Tale of Genji</i> . Written in the eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, this is largely considered to be the world’s first novel, and stands as a foundational work of Japanese literature.
<i>Genzai mono</i>	“Contemporary plays of the era;” a type of <i>noh</i> play.
<i>Ha</i>	The second section of a traditional <i>noh</i> play.
<i>Haiku</i>	A traditional form of Japanese poetry, typically written with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third, for a total of seventeen. <i>Haiku</i> generally deal with natural or seasonal themes.
<i>Han</i>	A flute-like instrument traditionally used in <i>noh</i> .
<i>Hanamichi</i>	“Flower Way.” A platform that runs from the rear of the house to the stage on the stage right side of a traditional <i>kabuki</i> theater. It is used for entrances and exits by the performers, and is intended to bring them closer to the audience.
<i>Hannya</i>	A traditional <i>noh</i> mask representing a jealous female demon.

<i>Hatamoto</i>	A <i>samurai</i> in direct service to the <i>shogun</i> . <i>Hatamoto</i> had the right of audience with the <i>shogun</i> , a right lesser retainers did not possess.
<i>Hayashi</i>	The musicians in a <i>noh</i> play.
Heian Period	794 – 1185. Considered a high point in Japanese culture, noted for achievements in art, poetry, and literature, as well as the development of the <i>samurai</i> class.
Heike	Refers to the Taira clan. See Battle of Dan-no-Ura.
<i>Hentai</i>	Sexually explicit or pornographic <i>anime</i> or <i>manga</i> .
<i>Hidarizukai</i>	Also <i>sashizukai</i> . The manipulator who controls the left hand of the puppet in <i>bunraku</i> .
<i>Hitodama</i>	Floating balls of flame that typically accompany <i>yurei</i> . <i>Hitodama</i> were believed to be the souls of the newly dead; they are ghostly tricksters that are believed to live in graveyards or dark, gloomy forests.
<i>Hyakumonogatari kaidankai</i>	“A Gathering of 100 Supernatural Tales.” Participants would gather in a room and light 100 candles to tell ghost stories. As each tale was told, a candle was extinguished, with the belief that the last candle snuffed out would summon a supernatural being. This is the basis of the subsequent <i>kaidan</i> literary tradition.
<i>Inori mono</i>	“Exorcism plays.”
Japonism	The influence of the arts of Japan upon art and design styles in the West, particularly in the 19 <sup>th</sup> century.
<i>Jidaigeki</i>	“Historical (period) films.”
<i>Jidai mono</i>	“Historical plays.”
<i>Jo</i>	The first section of a traditional <i>noh</i> play.
<i>Joruri</i>	A type of narrative song associated with <i>bunraku</i> ; sung by the <i>tayū</i> with <i>shamisen</i> accompaniment.
<i>Kabuki</i>	One of the traditional theatrical forms of Japan, with roots tracing back to the earliest days of the Edo Period. Commonly thought of as “the theater of the people.”
<i>Kabuki horse</i>	A traditional <i>kabuki</i> character, created by two performers in a horse costume, but with very human legs.

<i>Kaidan</i>	“Ghost story.” From <i>kai</i> (“strange, mysterious; bewitching apparition,” and <i>dan</i> (“narrative”). The word itself is somewhat archaic, suggesting the Edo Period.
<i>Kaidan mono</i>	In <i>kabuki</i> , “ghost plays.”
<i>Kaidanshu</i>	Printed collections of ghost stories popular during the Edo Period.
<i>Kami</i>	Central objects of worship in the Shinto faith. Spirits, essences, or natural forces, often seen as being embodied in objects that cause awe or reverence, and are worthy of veneration.
<i>Kami mono</i>	A type of <i>noh</i> play in which the <i>shite</i> is human in the first act, and a deity in the second.
<i>Kamikiri</i>	“Hair cutter.” A <i>yokai</i> with scissor-like hands who was believed to shear the hair off of unsuspecting women.
<i>Kanzashi</i>	Hairpins and hair accessories popular during the Edo Period.
<i>Katsura mono</i>	A type of <i>noh</i> play in which the <i>shite</i> , performing as a female, offers a series of elaborate songs and dances.
<i>Kaze-no-kami</i>	“The <i>kami</i> of the cold.”
<i>Keiko-eiga</i>	“Tendency films.” Politically left-leaning films designed to encourage, or conversely, to fight against, particular social tendencies.
<i>Kiri no</i>	In <i>noh</i> , “final plays,” in which the <i>shite</i> appears as a demon or monster.
<i>Kizewamono</i>	In <i>kabuki</i> , “raw life plays.” These plays tend to bear a darker tone, and typically concern themselves with thieves, prostitutes, and murderers, as well as supernatural themes.
<i>Ko-beshimi</i>	See <i>beshimi</i> .
<i>Ko-kata</i>	In <i>noh</i> , child actors.
<i>Koshin</i>	A Japanese folk faith with roots in Chinese Taoism that was heavily influenced by both Shinto and Buddhism. Widespread throughout the Edo Period, <i>Koshin</i> lost popularity during the Meiji Period, especially after the passage of the “Shinto and Buddhism Separation Order” in 1872 classified folk beliefs as mere superstition.



<i>Koshinmachi</i>	“Koshin waiting.” A religious ritual in which observers would attempt to stay awake through the night to prevent spirits from within their bodies flying up to heaven to report on their bad deeds. To aid in wakefulness, the practice of <i>hyakumonogatari kaidankai</i> was adopted.
<i>Kotsuzumi</i>	A small shoulder drum used in <i>noh</i> .
<i>Kumadori</i>	Make-up used in <i>aragato kabuki</i> plays. It is characterized by thick streaks of color to visually represent heroes, villains, and special characters.
<i>Kuro-beshimi</i>	See <i>besimi</i> .
<i>Kurombo</i>	Black-clad stage attendants in a <i>kabuki</i> production. By convention, they are “unseen,” and assist with costume changes, prop handling, and more onstage. In more recent times, the word “ <i>kurombo</i> ” has taken on an alternate, derogatory meaning, equivalent to the English word “nigger.”
<i>Kuse</i>	A dance performed during the <i>Ha</i> section of a <i>noh</i> play.
<i>Kyogen</i>	(1) In a <i>noh</i> play, rustic or comedic characters. They frequently tell the story of the drama during the interlude in a two act play, referred to as the <i>ai</i> . They are therefore sometimes called the <i>ai-kyogen</i> . (2) The comedic play that occurs between two <i>noh</i> plays.
<i>Kyu</i>	The third section of a traditional <i>noh</i> play.
Lotus <i>sutra</i>	In Buddhism, a <i>sutra</i> is a canonical scripture, many of which are believed to derive from the oral teachings of Gautama Buddha. The Lotus <i>Sutra</i> , known as <i>myōhō renge kyō</i> in Japanese, is one of the most famous of the sutras, and concerns, in part, the eternal nature of Buddha and his continuing relationship with mankind.
<i>Manga</i>	Japanese comic books and graphic literature. Their modern form dates to just after World War II, but historical antecedents can be traced back as far as the twelfth century. One of Japan’s leading cultural exports.
Meiji Period	1868 – 1912. An important historical period marked by the dissolution of the shogunate in favor of a return to Imperial control, and the opening of Japan to the West. “Meiji” means “enlightened rule.”
Meiji Restoration	A succession of events that restored the Emperor to power in 1868 and marked the beginning of the Meiji Period.

<i>Mie</i>	A hallmark of <i>kabuki</i> performance in which an actor strikes a pose, and opens the eyes widely. In particularly dramatic situations, one or both eyes can be crossed to add power to the presentation. The entire action is referred to as “cutting” a <i>mie</i> .
<i>Miko</i>	In Shinto, a female shaman or spirit medium who receives messages from <i>kami</i> and passes them on to supplicants, much like the Greek Oracles. <i>Miko</i> can be attached to a specific shrine or not, and in earlier days, were often associated with the ruling class. Today, <i>miko</i> often assist with shrine functions, perform ceremonial dances, sell shrine souvenirs, and offer <i>omikuji</i> (strips of paper with fortunes written on them). Not to be confused with <i>maiko</i> , who are <i>geisha</i> -in-training.
Minamoto	Refers to the Genji clan. See Battle of Dan-no-Ura.
<i>Mono no aware</i>	See <i>Aware</i> .
<i>Mu</i>	The Zen Buddhist doctrine of “no thing.”
<i>Noh</i>	One of the traditional forms of Japanese theater, performed since the 14 <sup>th</sup> century. With deep roots in both Buddhist and Shinto philosophy, it is commonly thought of as the “theater of the upper class.” Also spelled <i>no</i> .
<i>Nuberu bagu</i>	A term referring to the Japanese New Wave period in cinema, from roughly 1956 to 1976. The term itself is a transliteration of the French phrase <i>Nouvelle Vague</i> .
<i>O-beshimi</i>	See <i>beshimi</i> .
<i>Omote</i>	The public face of a thing; that which is easily seen. The opposite of <i>ura</i> .
<i>Omozukai</i>	The main manipulator in a <i>bunraku</i> performance; controls the puppet’s head, facial expressions, and right hand.
Oni	Japanese folkloric creatures, typically seen as demons, devils, or goblins.
Oni mono	In <i>noh</i> , demon plays.
Onnagata	Also <i>oyama</i> . A <i>kabuki</i> convention, this is a male actor who specializes in playing female roles. The earliest Japanese films continued this tradition, until women started playing female roles in the 1920s.

<i>Onna-kabuki</i>	“Women’s <i>kabuki</i> .” This was the original form of <i>kabuki</i> theater, developed in imitation of O-Kuni, the founder of the form. Due to the widespread association of prostitution with this style of performance, <i>onna-kabuki</i> was banned by governmental decree in 1629.
<i>Onryo</i>	An “avenging ghost.”
<i>Onryo mono</i>	Plays about vengeful spirits.
<i>Otsuzumi</i>	Also <i>okawa</i> . An hourglass-shaped drum played at waist level and used in <i>noh</i> performances.
<i>Pinku eiga</i>	Soft core pornographic theatrical films originating in the early 1960s. Although the earliest productions were made by independent outfits, the larger studios, faced with declining theatrical revenues in the 1970s, soon took over production. Largely supplanted by the home video movement of the 1980s.
<i>Rikidofu</i>	“Powerful type.” A strong demon who takes on human form, according to Zeami.
<i>Saidofu</i>	“Unsteady type.” A human being transformed into a demon as a form of punishment, according to Zeami.
<i>Sanshi</i>	In the Koshin sect of Shinto, this refers to the three beings that live within the human body and report to Ten-Tei every 60 days regarding their host’s good and bad deeds. <i>Koshinmachi</i> is the ritual of staying awake to prevent these beings from leaving the body.
<i>Sashizukai</i>	See <i>Hidarizukai</i> .
<i>Senikyoyo-eiga</i>	“National policy films.” Designed to promote Japan’s militaristic policies. Beginning in 1939, the newly-passed Motion Picture Law required that all films produced in Japan be <i>senikyoyo-eiga</i> .
<i>Seppuku</i>	“Belly slitting.” Ritual suicide performed as an act of honor by men or women. Often referred to vulgarly as <i>hara-kiri</i> .
<i>Sewamono</i>	In <i>kabuki</i> , plays focusing on the joys and sorrows of the common man.
<i>Shamisen</i>	A three-stringed instrument played with a plectrum. A traditional instrument in both <i>kabuki</i> and <i>bunraku</i> .

<i>Shimada</i>	A hairstyle popularized during the Edo Period by the <i>geisha</i> class. Typically held together with decorative pins and ornaments ( <i>kanzashi</i> ).
Shinto	The indigenous faith of Japan. Animistic in nature, there are no central texts or figures. Existing alongside Buddhism in Japan, many Japanese people follow Shinto practices for day-to-day concerns, turning to Buddhism for more metaphysical, or “afterlife” matters.
<i>Shite</i>	In <i>noh</i> , the main actor upon whom the entire piece depends. An essential role in <i>noh</i> , there is one and only one <i>shite</i> per play.
Shogunate	Also <i>bakufu</i> . During the Edo Period, the shogunate was the seat of the military government in Japan, headed by the <i>shogun</i> , the supreme military dictator of the country. A hereditary position, the <i>shogun</i> was the true ruler of Japan, even though he ostensibly owed allegiance to the Emperor. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 largely eliminated the position of <i>shogun</i> , and returned control of the nation to the Emperor.
<i>Shosagoto</i>	In <i>kabuki</i> , dance plays.
<i>Shunen</i>	In <i>noh</i> , revenge plays.
<i>Shura mono</i>	A type of <i>noh</i> play in which the <i>shite</i> appears as a ghost in the first act and a <i>samurai</i> in the second. This type of <i>noh</i> play is designed to allow the “ghost” to tell the story of his death.
<i>Shura-noh</i>	In <i>noh</i> , warrior plays.
<i>Taiko</i>	A large drum with heads on both sides of the instrument’s body, struck with a mallet known as a <i>bachi</i> . Typically used in <i>noh</i> plays.
Taira	Refers to the Heike clan. See Battle of Dan-no-Ura.
<i>Tayu</i>	The chanter, or story teller, in a <i>bunraku</i> performance.
<i>Torii</i>	A traditional Japanese gate most often found at the entrance of a Shinto shrine.
<i>Tsure</i>	In <i>noh</i> , the secondary characters in a play. Not necessarily present in all <i>noh</i> dramas.

<i>Ukiyo-e</i>	“Images of the Floating World.” Japanese woodblock prints made popular during the Edo period. Depicting everything from illustrations of Japanese mythology and images of great warriors to scenes from the <i>kabuki</i> stage and renderings of nature and landscapes, they became popular in the West in the 19 <sup>th</sup> century (see Japonism), where they influenced the work of such artists as Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec.
<i>Ura</i>	The hidden face of a thing; that which is not easily seen. The opposite of <i>omote</i> .
<i>Urami</i>	“Grudge,” “Resentment.” Refers to the Shinto belief that the ghost of a person killed by mistreatment will remain earthbound until their revenge against the wrongdoer is achieved.
<i>Wabi sabi</i>	A tenet of Japanese aesthetics that refers to beauty that is impermanent, imperfect, and transient. It also refers to the unique hallmarks of a thing made by hand, those things that make a specific object utterly unique.
<i>Wakashu-kabuki</i>	“Young boy’s <i>kabuki</i> .” A form of <i>kabuki</i> that thrived briefly in the seventeenth century after the banning of <i>onna-kabuki</i> . Like its predecessor, <i>wakashu-kabuki</i> was quickly linked to prostitution, and was subsequently outlawed.
<i>Waki</i>	In <i>noh</i> , the character that supports – or sometimes opposes – the <i>shite</i> . An essential role in all <i>noh</i> plays.
<i>Yaro-kabuki</i>	“Men’s <i>kabuki</i> .” Developed in the mid-sixteenth century after the banning of <i>wakusha-kabuki</i> . This form gave rise to the popular onnagata style still in use today.
<i>Yokai</i>	Mischievous, supernatural entities, akin to the Western poltergeist. Often visualized as common household objects, such as an umbrella, for instance, that have been bizarrely transformed.
<i>Yugen</i>	A tenet of Japanese aesthetics that refers to a dark, hidden, subtle beauty that is often present even in things that would not typically be termed beautiful, as in Zeami’s “... blossoms on a dead tree.”
<i>Yurei</i>	A female ghost most often shown floating above the ground without hands or feet, typically linked to spirits bound to earth either through a sudden or violent act or because of a lack of remembrance by loved ones through proper ritual.

Zeami Motokiyo

c. 1363 – c. 1443. Japanese playwright, actor, and essayist. With his father, Kan'ami, Zeami is credited with the creation of the *noh* style of theater. Wrote *On the Art of the Noh Drama*, a handbook on style and aesthetics for the *noh* performer that is still considered an important, foundational work.

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