

Oh the horror!

Genre and the fantastic mode in Japanese cinema

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Ever since the emergence of the so-called J-horror in the late 1990s and early 21st century, Japanese horror cinema has been a staple of both Japanese studies and film studies. Researchers, critics and film directors alike have been keen to observe and analyze the popularity and roots of the phenomenon. While many previous studies work extremely well on a detailed case-study level, there are many moments of confusion related to the general understanding of what horror actually is. My aim in this essay is to point out the various contradictions and differing opinions and, ultimately, to propose that we take an alternative outlook altogether. I suggest we approach the subject matter from the viewpoint of the fantastic, which I see as a mode visible in various genres including but not limited to, horror. This will position Japanese horror cinema as one element within the long tradition of fantastic representations in Japanese (popular) culture, both offering a new approach to old works and introducing new works as interesting analyzable content.

Keywords: Japan, horror, fantastic, film, genre

Japan is a country with a long tradition of weird and mysterious narratives. Be they a written text, a folk tale, stage art, a religious belief or a film, these narratives have permeated the society for years as central cultural tropes. In this essay, I explore the world of the Japanese dark fantastic in what is commonly referred to as horror. I discuss how the concept of 'horror' is used both as a marketing tool and a means for academic research, even though the very notion is anything but clear.

I am primarily interested in the difficulties of categorization one is bound to encounter when studying Japanese horror cinema. My aim in this essay is two-fold: to point out various contradictions that have emerged in relation to previous research and, based on that, to offer a new framework for further analysis of the horrific in Japanese cinema, namely that of the fantastic. I argue that the fantastic in these films works not as a genre but as a possibly subversive narrational mode crossing generic boundaries. I call this mode by its Japanese moniker *kaiki*, which could be defined as 'suspicious and strange thing or being', 'uncanny and eerie shape and form' or 'grotesque'. But apart from these, what then is the fantastic?

Theories on the nature and meaning of the fantastic are plenty, starting with influential works such as Tzvetan Todorov's (1975) structural analysis or Rosemary Jackson's (1981/1988) psychoanalytically inclined framework. I propose that in tracing the definition and understanding of the Japanese weird, the framework provided by Susan J. Napier (1996) seems the most valid. Napier suggests that

the fantastic "exists as a site of difference, one that privileges the alien, the illusory, and the irrational in contrast to a vision of modernity that subsumes all difference under a bland rubric of homogeneity, materialism, and rationality", and that it is to be seen as "any conscious departure from consensus reality" (1996, p. 9, p. 223). The latter part of the quote comes as a modification of Kathryn Hume's definition of "fantasy as any departure from consensus reality" (1984, p. 21). In these 'consensus reality' means a reality that is generally agreed upon. Furthermore, I suggest that this reality is often an official, hegemonic and constructed reality of a particular society during a particular time. The fantastic, thus, is all about negotiating alternatives.

In addition, the fantastic is not a genre but a mode as suggested by Jackson: "the fantastic is a mode that assumes different generic forms" (1981/1988, p. 35); by Zamora and Faris in relation to magical realism as "a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries" (1995/2003, p. 6); and by Bowers in her realization that "all of these concepts are difficult to consider in terms of one unifying genre and that they should be seen as constituting particular narrative modes" (2004, p. 3). Strange might exist where horror does not and vice versa.

It is true that some works of a more gory nature might become unavailable in this context. Also, genres might still be the best way for the general audience to discuss films. It is, however, clear that utilizing the fantastic mode that is free from the restrictions of an existing genre not only yields a

new understanding of old material, but also promotes films previously considered an uneasy fit in the category of horror as suitable targets for analysis. Through its departure from ‘the real’, the fantastic actually helps us to understand these realities as portrayed in film. It is a viable new approach through which the subject matter in all its horrific, shape-shifting and mysterious forms can be observed. Ultimately the fantastic is about providing alternatives that can be quite terrifying from an official (=consensus) point of view (=reality).

Navigating the conceptual jungle

Cinema emerged in Japan towards the end of the 19th century, very soon after its initial introduction in the west. Given its long history, Japanese cinema has been one of the world’s most important national cinemas both historically and theoretically (Miyao, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, the introduction of this new art form overlapped with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when Japan opened its borders after two hundred years of national isolation. According to Napier, “in a desire to beat the West at its own game by transforming Japan into a first rate capitalist power, a new, ‘modern’, identity was implemented by the country’s own leaders under the slogan ‘Civilization and Enlightenment’” (Napier, 1995/2003, p. 452-453). During this period of rapid modernization, cinema too was utilized as a representation of Japan’s modernity and technological prowess. Kazuki Uchiyama (2008) argues that film was actually a link between modern rationality and traditional superstitious beliefs. According to him, in the dark of the theater, the spectator was whisked away to worlds previously unseen to the human eye. Even the techniques used were such as to portray supernatural phenomena: overlapping figures, stop motion and such continued to surprise spectators during the early periods of film (Uchiyama, 2008, p. 10). It was thus only natural to see famous tropes from folklore, like the avenging female motif, make their way into early cinema.

However, despite the popularity and prevalence of the fantastic in Japanese cinema, much of the research in both Japan and the west has tended to concentrate on altogether different genres or masters, such as Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu. Inuhiko Yomota’s (2010) fieldwork in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand provides an interesting counterpoint. In these countries, known for the richness of their own fantastic and supernatural storylines, Japanese cinema, too, has manifested itself in the form of films or series like *Gegege no Kitarō* (originally a *yōkai* [spectre] manga series, created by Shigeru Mizuki in the 1960s) or *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998). Notable here is that these two are rarely put together in Western studies, maybe because it is difficult to classify *Gegege no Kitarō* as “horror”.

In the wake of the success of the original *Ringu* and the various Hollywood adaptations of contemporary Japanese horror films, there was a newly-found scholarly interest in Japanese horror cinema (see for example McRoy, 2005; McRoy, 2008; Balmain, 2008; Harper, 2008; Wada-Marciano & Choi, 2009; Lacefield, 2010; Ōshima, 2010; Wee, 2014). However, in many of these works Japanese horror is often analyzed in relation to genres easily identifiable in the west, such as ghost, slasher or apocalypse films. McRoy, for example, suggests that postwar horror films generally conformed to two dominant genres: the vengeful spirit narrative and the disaster narrative, best exemplified by giant monster films (2008, p. 6). This division presents not only a simplified model, but also as a fairly reductive one.

Furthermore, a plethora of problems emerge in relation to the audience’s understanding of the genre. Based on my discussions with Japanese audiences, the Japanese are quick to debunk the claim that monster films are horror; rather they consistently point out that they are special effects films (*Gojira* [Honda, 1954] being an exception). *Kaidan* ghost stories that incorporate the avenging spirit motif can also be understood not as a subgenre

of horror, but rather that of period drama (Shimura, 2014), which is one of the most prominent Japanese film genres. It is also possible that both monsters and ghosts belong to the realm of the fantastic, as suggested by Napier (1996, p. 95). Thus, it is clear that McRoy's division offers a framework in which one can locate much of the earlier research on Japanese horror, if not the vast field of the subject matter itself. Culture-specificity does nothing to make the categorization simpler and thus, transcending the notion of a genre in the form of a mode would provide a beneficial point of departure for analysis.

Ghosts, monsters and WWII: The roots of Japanese horror?

As the J-horror boom took off at the turn of the 21st century, many films were labeled as horror in a bid to create a common body that could be analyzed academically and marketed profitably. I would like to highlight that no matter how sharp the analysis or how influential the work, there is a vague sense of arbitrariness of what is considered horror. However, once this acceptable body of works was canonized, only a few studies have been interested in approaching the subject matter in different terms.

'Japanese horror' often appears to be synonymous with 'J-horror'. The two should not, however, be confused. J-horror has commonly come to mean Japanese horror films from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, and even more narrow definitions are readily available. Critic Akira Asada (2000) has argued that the use of the letter "J" helps to anchor anything including it into a certain time of Japanese history. He sees the emergence of the so-called J-culture as a response to the postmodern cosmopolitan capitalism of the 1980s during the economically unstable Lost Decade of the 1990s. While Japanese horror has been around for several decades, even centuries, J-horror has its roots in the aftermath of the collapse of the studio system in the 1980s. A good explanation of J-horror is provided by Kinoshita (2009) who discusses it according to director Kiyoshi Kurosawa's writings

in Japanese. J-horror is not a genre *per se*, but rather a body of works with a definable historical background and thematic concerns; it may be described as a local movement from the late 1990s that comprised of films, TV series, and film critique from filmmakers, and which places particular emphasis on everyday life and media (Kinoshita, 2009, p.103). With regard to the latter, it is similar to the *nuuberu boogu* (Nouvelle Vague, The New Wave) movement of the 1960s where directors created thematically like-minded films that were informed by both changing Japanese society and film studio policies. J-horror, too, "specifically refers to a group of relatively low-budget horror films" which "concentrate aesthetically on the low-key production of atmospheric and psychological fear, capitalizing on urban legends proliferated through mass media and popular culture" (Kinoshita, 2009, p. 104).

As the above attests, filmmakers themselves were keen to analyze the new phenomenon. Similarities can be found between them and the writers of modern Japanese pulp fiction, who "gathered within the space of supposedly 'lowly' pulp not only to express their own opinions but also to exchange sophisticated and potentially subversive ideas with others" (Kawana, 2005, p. 119). It is not, however, solely the observations of the filmmakers that have provided boundaries for research. Japanese horror has metamorphosed from a folkloric notion to a multicultural commodity, in which profitability is more important than an accurate understanding of the nature of things. It is a site where research and capitalism mix with discursive J-horror becoming a viable marketing strategy and a distribution category of 'Asia Extreme', thus providing researchers with borders for what is considered horror. Asia Extreme, a DVD label from Tartan used for the release of Asian (cult) films to foreign audiences, is purposefully "loosely designated in order to include a range of Asian cinema that seems exportable" (Wada-Marciano & Choi, 2009, p. 5). Cult films and horror films, however, are not the same.

Scriptwriter Dario Fuji (2009) has suggested

that horror booms tend to appear within certain periods of time: with no imminent crises looming on the horizon people are able to enjoy fictional horror but, as horror films are often cheap to make, economic downturns also provide an opportunity for the production of these films. By contrast, Noël Carroll contends that horror and sci-fi films proliferate during times of economic and political anxiety because they allow the expression of the “sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession [...] galloping inflation and national confusion” (Carroll, 1981/1999, p. 159). Almost as an answer to Carroll’s assertion, Jay McRoy emphasizes that although horror cinema existed in Japan prior to the end of WWII, the Japanese film culture of the 1950s and 1960s was “a site for a virtual explosion of tales of terror and apocalypse” (2008, p. 6). Although accurate, this statement runs the risk of trivializing pre-war products of the horror genre and emphasizes the role of WWII in the creation of horror in Japan.

McRoy’s approach is internalized by many academics: Lowenstein (2005) sees *Onibaba* (Shindō, 1964) as allegorical to Hiroshima; Linnie Blake analyzes *Ringu* as set against and read in the light of both the classics of postwar Japanese horror and Gore Verbinski’s Hollywood remake, stating that it decodes “the traumatic changes wrought to Japanese society and hence national self-image by the militaristic build-up to the Second World War and its apocalyptic closure” (2008, p. 10). Colette Balmain, too, suggests that “perhaps most crucial are Japan’s experiences during the Second World War and the subsequent Allied Occupation, the trauma of which underlies many, if not all, Japanese horror films from the 1950s onwards, as demonstrated through the prevalence of the discourse of *hibakusha* [the victims of the A-bomb]” (2008, p. 7). National trauma is seen to manifest itself in a plethora of works but, interestingly, some works explicitly concerned with WWII, such as the *Henshin ningen* trilogy (Nakata & Fukuda, 1958-1960), are almost completely omitted. Interestingly, the *Henshin ningen* films have even

been distributed in the U.S., but as science fiction, not as ‘Asia Extreme’. This simple fact may be the reason behind their relative invisibility.

In addition to war and apocalypse, ghosts seem to provide an instant symbol for horror. The presence of a ghost might be horrific indeed, but it does not automatically make a film horror. I am yet to see Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece *Rashōmon* (1950) analyzed as horror even though a spirit appears. A real woman incorporating the motif of a vengeful spirit appears both in Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985) and Takashi Miike’s *Audition* (1999), but only the latter is considered horror. In Nobuhiko Ōbayashi’s *Ijintachi to no natsu* (1988), the protagonist spends most of his time with benevolent ghosts. There is a malevolent entity, but the overall tone of the film is not that of horror but that of mystery and nostalgia. In Kenji Mizoguchi’s classic *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953) a potter leaves his wife and child in order to work in the city. He is seduced by a beautiful ghost of an aristocratic lady. Benevolent and malevolent spirits are both present but in the case of *Ugetsu* it is clear that reality is actually much more horrible than any ghost. If we want to call *Ugetsu* horror, it is because of its unfair and totally horrible treatment of its women, not because of the emergence of a ghost.

Does genre deliver?

Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano argues that as Asia Extreme and J-horror were imported to the Western market and constructed as pragmatic categories in the DVD market, it ultimately led to a shuffling of media and history. For her the most blatant strategy has been to repack non-horror films of the 1960s as precursors to J-horror, which has led to a distortion of both the analysis of Japanese horror and the conceptualization many spectators have of it (2009, p. 33, 37). She explains that to analyze works such as Yasuzō Masumura’s *Mojū* (1969), Shōhei Imamura’s *Fukushū wa ware ni ari* (1979) and Nagisa Ōshima’s *Ai no koriida* (1976) as horror is not solely a matter of genre categorization, but a “failure to acknowledge connections among a text, its historical

context, and the discursive subject” (Wada-Marciano, 2009, p. 34). Jasper Sharp (2009) speaks of a similar feeling of frustration:

“Why so many studies so far have delimited the subject by looking at ‘the origins, themes and conventions of Japanese horror cinema from 1950 to date’ when works based on the *kaidan* such as *Yotsuya kaidan* were being made in the 1910s, early German precursors to the genre [...] were making it to Japan within years of their domestic releases, and the *ero-guro* literary genre led by writers like Edogawa Rampo thrived in the 1920s. And why, oh why, do so many insist on looking at Nikkatsu Roman Porno films [...] as being made for the horror market?”

Indeed, the violent erotic-grotesque torture films released in the 1960s and 1970s had less to do with war horrors and more to do with catering for the audience that during the time of their release could not afford TVs, namely young men who moved to large cities in the hope of finding a job.

Horror is often used as an instant canon, an easy category to include a random body of works that contains some horrific aspects. Sion Sono, for example, was branded a horror director before his recent output, which ranges from artistic drama to splatter musicals. Even though there are faint elements buried deep within the structure that can be said to have derived from supernatural films, it is difficult to label Sono’s films as horror (Calderini, 2012, p. 103-104). On the other hand, many of them are explicitly fantastic in their setting and narrative concerns. Recently, Hideo Nakata’s *Gekijōrei* (2015) was marketed as J-horror but, as scriptwriter Hiroshi Takahashi (2015) points out, it belongs more to the category of the strange and fantastic, *kaiki*. Also, discussing *Zan’e* (2015) in the terms of (J-)horror (see Schilling, 2016) does not give justice to the terrific sense of mystery in the film. Horror is but an end product. Further, what of Kiyoshi Kurosawa? Kurosawa is often called ‘a horror film director’, but in light of the expectations delivered by this moniker, these films are sure to disappoint: *Akarui*

mirai (2003) has weirdly multiplying medusas, but that does not make a film horrific. *Doppelgänger* (2003) almost becomes a farce when the battle of the minds between the protagonist and his alter ego accelerates, or when the protagonist gets chased by an enormous disco ball. What we have here is a double-edged sword. Genre is both a promise and a curse: fall too easily for its lure and it will only let you down with a false set of expectations.

Japanese horror has been much analyzed but, as I have shown, interesting case studies may be compromised because they lack attention to historicity and/or emphasize false intertextuality. We need a concept that will help us understand the subject matter in its various manifestations. The location of a genre is so difficult to pinpoint (Altman, 2005) that I am willing to turn away from it and rather introduce the fantastic as a mode that is present in works across various genres. All of the films mentioned above can be argued to incorporate a fantastic element or two and thus may be approached through the lens of the fantastic. To quote Laetitia Söderman, “in order to avoid ideas becoming stagnant we need to approach the subject matter of our research from a fresh and original angle, that enables us to shed more light on the questions that interest us” (2014, p. 105). It is clear that a more comprehensive category or framework, which takes into account both the historicity of the films as well as their true subject matter is needed.

Conclusions

As I have highlighted in this essay, genres work in mysterious ways. They are like monsters, shape-shifting and always on the move. They are a part of our everyday knowledge and often used for marketing purposes, but does this kind of classification really provide the best results for deeper discussion on the narrative and thematic concerns present in films? Does it even satisfy the audience? In addition, should we as academics yield to the lure of the ready-made categorization that is based on a marketing category created to maximize sales?

By utilizing the notion of the fantastic, it is possible to transcend the current focus of research on postwar Japanese society and instead draw a line between cultural products across different eras and media. In Japan, myths, legends and folklore manifest various grotesques and fantasies, as do the works of respected authors such as Junichirō Tanizaki and Natsume Sōseki. My aim is not, however, to argue that these motifs have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. This would paint a reductionist picture of a society that never changes, that never faces new challenges.

In addition, in order to avoid cultural essentialism, it is absolutely necessary to bear in mind that Japan is by no means the only country in the world with a rich fantastic tradition. Japanese fantastic cinema has been heavily influenced by western narratives and motifs throughout the times, and even the “Japanese” ghost story genre was originally introduced from China. As Torben Grodal (2009) points out, there are basic biological factors that affect our preference to see and experience expressions of monstrosity on screen. However, the meaning of these biological experiences can be said to change according to one’s cultural background knowledge and socialization. Certain topics arise during certain times in certain cultures. To negotiate the hidden aspects behind the official state of things, consensus reality calls for the intervention of the fantastic present in an array of cultural works, some of which are horrific, some of which only vaguely lament the contemporary human existence.

Modern Japan may have become civilized and enlightened but only at the cost of transforming itself into a country where outside harmony hides a variety of interior grotesques (Napier, 2003, p. 453). The contemporary, post-postwar, postmodern Japan fares no better. Cinema acts as a platform for directors to express their possibly subversive ideas about consensus reality in the guise of the fantastic. Studying the fantastic in Japanese cinema provides connections between previously unrelated times,

spaces and authors. Fantasy is, at times, more real than reality itself and cinema is but one in the long line of popular culture products that have been used to discuss what lies beneath the surface of the seemingly peaceful everyday life.

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