

A Theatre of Ghosts, A Haunted Cinema: The Japanese Gothic as Theatrical Tradition in *Gurozuka*

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars locate a Gothic tradition in Japan in the literary. However, historically an argument can be made for additional theatrical origins of the Japanese Gothic, locating it in the dramas and stage spectacles of *nō* and *kabuki* as much as literature. In turn, these forms shape and influence the Japanese cinema, creating a Gothic heritage of madness, ghosts, monsters, the erotic, death and the macabre through narrative and material culture. The film *Gurozuka*, through its depiction of a student film project adapting a *nō* play as a horror film, demonstrates how Japan's Gothic cinema is haunted by its Gothic theatre.

KEYWORDS: *kabuki*, *nō*, Gothic, *yūrei*, *Gurozuka*, cinema, haunting

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I. Introduction: The Japanese Gothic Tradition and the Stage

Many western scholars (as well as some Japanese) argue for viewing a Gothic tradition in Japan as rooted in the literary, citing such authors as Ueda Akinari, Izumi Kyoka, Akutagawa Ryunosuke, and even Mishima Yukio (Hughes 60). In fairness, the first hint of the macabre in Japanese literature comes from the eleventh century novel *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) in the form of Lady Rokujō, who becomes a vengeful ghost. However, this essay argues that it is Japanese theatre that is inherently Gothic, linked with the return and remembering of the dead in its origins and subject matter, frequently depicting ghosts, even as it grew out of memorial rituals for the departed (Gondō et al.). While its origins in funerary rites would seem to separate the Japanese theatrical Gothic from its western counterpart, there exists significant overlap in origin, style, and purpose of the Gothic in both cultures to argue for a theatrical origin of the Japanese Gothic and for its continuing influence on twenty-first century Japanese Gothic horror cinema.

In the west, especially in the United Kingdom, the Gothic was not confined to literature but also had a strong stage presence. Matthew Lewis, author of the formative Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796), also wrote eleven plays, including the highly popular *The Castle Spectre*, written in the same year as *The Monk*, and performed in London for half of the next before crossing the Atlantic to open in New York in June of 1798. The Gothic stage was full for much of the nineteenth century as well, with adaptations of *Frankenstein*, Polidori's *The Vampyre*, and other Gothic plays, continuing through to the present (Stuart; Anthony; Jones et al.).

This issue asks the question about the Gothic in Asia, as a debate exists as to whether the Gothic can exist outside of European origins, with individuals such as Henry J. Hughes arguing, for example, for the possibility of a Japanese Gothic rooted in literature. Others, such as Katarzyna Ancuta propose a cultural similarity between traditional and modern Asia and the Gothic period of Europe that allows one to see the Gothic in Japan as being quite similarly rooted in religion, the monstrous and, as David Castillo observes of Spanish Gothic, “the crushing weight of the past” (69). Nick Groom argues that in the United Kingdom, among other things, the Gothic is intent on uncovering how the past shapes national identity “and a cultural aesthetic that associates decay, nostalgia, melancholy, mortality, and death” (65). The macabre is linked to

national identity, rooted in that crushing weight of the past, which would seem to indicate that a Japanese Gothic is not only possible but necessary. Japanese folklore specialists Iwasaki Michiko and Barre Toelken observe, “death is not only a common subject in Japanese folklore but seems indeed to be the principle topic in Japanese tradition; nearly every festival, every ritual, every custom is bound up in some way with relationships between the living and the dead” (8). If the English Gothic concerns the past, England’s relationship to its former Catholicism, and a sense of aristocratic decay, alongside depictions of madness and death, then Japanese Gothic concerns the past, its relationship to Buddhism and Shinto, a sense of aristocratic decay, alongside depictions of madness and death. Ancuta herself agrees: Asia has its own ghosts, madness, disease, wars, revolutions, and the “individual and collective memories” of trauma, as that which formed the Gothic in Europe (218). Indeed, Hughes notes, “the Japanese Gothic shares with the West its subversion of religious and social norms, an obsession with sex and death, and a fear of the supernatural or the unknown” (60). “These are human qualities,” he concludes, “not the province of one culture,” reminding the reader that the Gothic, as defined by the West, is not strictly a western genre (60). Indeed, as this essay will argue, in Japan, for much of its early modern history, the Gothic is found in the *nō* and *kabuki* theatres as much as in its literature.

Hughes sees the Japanese Gothic as rooted in a literary tradition. Certainly, in the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa eras, Japanese Gothic was predominantly literary. Edogawa Rampo and Yumeno Kyūsaku were heavily influenced by western Gothic literature (indeed, the pen name “Edogawa Rampo” is a homophonic pun on “Edgar Allen Poe”). Yet in the same period one might also consider writers such as Izumi Kyōka, who, in addition to fiction, crafted *shimpa* plays, such as *Yashagaike (Demon Pond)*, *Kaijin Besso (The Sea God’s Villa)*, and *Tenshu Monogatari (The Tale of the Castle Tower)*, that exhibit Gothic characteristics (Poulton). I would argue that the origins of the Japanese Gothic tradition may thus be found in theatrical culture and its epiphenomena, most notably *nō* dramas, *kabuki/bunraku* plays, the *ukiyo-e art* inspired by them, and their influence on subsequent media, especially *ero/guro* (erotic grotesque), and these dramatic and performative origins should not be ignored by solely focusing on the literary. The Japanese Gothic tradition begins not only in its literature but also in the theatre, found in *kabuki/bunraku* plays such as *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (1825). This theatrical Gothic then shaped Japanese

cinematic Gothic culture. Kobayashi Kagami Jigoku's survey of early Japanese horror cinema, *Carnal Curses, Disfigured Dreams: Japanese Horror and Bizarre Cinema 1898-1949*, locates over twenty-five horror films in this fifty year period based on *kabuki* and *nō* plays. *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* itself was adapted for the screen no less than fifteen times between 1911 and 1935 (Kobayashi 15-131). In this essay, I propose to examine the Japanese theatrical Gothic, how it shaped and influenced Japanese Gothic cinema, and then offer a close reading of the film *Gurozuka* (2005, directed by Nishima Yōichi) in order to explore how postmodern, mediated Gothic culture recycles and repurposes the Japanese cinematic Gothic to show a contemporary Japan haunted by its cultural past. What is unique about *Gurozuka* is that it links Japan's performative history (through *nō*, not *kabuki*) to the western style slasher film, another type of modern Gothic, and thus may be posited as part of a global Gothic.

As has been argued elsewhere, Japanese theatre is a theatre of ghosts—*nō* especially, although *kabuki* has framed the contemporary visual image of ghosts, since popularized around the world by so-called J-horror cinema (Wetmore). Two playwrights considered among “*kabuki*'s most gifted ever,” Tsuruya Nanboku IV and Kawatake Mokuami, produced numerous horrific plays containing scenes of “sexuality (*nureba*), murder (*koroshiba*), torture (*semeba*), and extortion (*yusuriba*), to say nothing of insanity, incest and suicide” (Brandon and Leiter 3-4). What is this list if not a catalog of the Gothic? In the early eighteenth century, Tsuruya and Kawatake were famous for the new subgenre called *kaidan mono*, the ghost play. Similarly, *nō* is a Gothic theatre, a theatre of ghosts, of madness, and of “the crushing weight of the past,” as will be discussed below.

Hughes claims it was Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) who “created Japan's first definitively Gothic work” in *Ugetsu Monogatari (Tales of Moonlight and Rain)* (69) and whose work was responsible for “driving ghosts and demons of old Japan into the religious and erotic imagination of Edo people” (70). And yet the ghosts and demons of old Japan were already driven into the religious and erotic imagination by Zeami Motokiyo and his father Kanami in the fourteenth century, and again by Tsuruya and Kawatake, perhaps reaching a far greater audience than literary works which require an audience that is, frankly, literate, as opposed to stage performances, available to all. Later in his essay, Hughes does share that *kabuki* was part of the Edo-era Gothic culture, noting “the

Kabuki play Yetsuya Kaidan [sic]” tells the tale of a vengeful ghost (65, 66). The fact that he misnames *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* does not bode well for an understanding of the role of *kabuki* and *nō* in developing the Japanese Gothic.

Hughes does observe, “Gothic literature is characterized by its use of a barbarous past to dramatize uncontrolled violence and passion” (85), which could easily also describe *nō* drama.

Most of the *nō* plays concern the distant past, particularly the events during and after the Genpei War (1180-85). Many *nō* plays are inspired from the *Heike Monogatari* (*Tale of the Heike*, c. 1330), which narrates the story of the Genpei War and its aftermath, and the plays themselves are composed in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, two hundred years after the events.

Note Hughes’s use of the term “dramatize,” although referring to literature. It is also prudent to remember that the *Heike Monogatari* is an oral history of the military clans eventually transcribed. Thus the tales began as oral performance, were written down as literature, and subsequently inspired dramatic literature designed to be performed. It seems fair to say that the Japanese Gothic is rooted in performance traditions as much as written literature.

Where *nō* may not be Gothic is that it often does not challenge religious institutions in the manner that *kabuki* and the Western Gothic does. *Nō* is rooted in a Zen Buddhist aesthetic, which often remains unchallenged in the play. Like its Western counterpart, *nō* often features priests as central characters, but unlike in the West, where the clergy are corrupt, lustful and murderous, in *nō*, the priests are at worst ineffective and at best help the spirits and monsters achieve release from this life of suffering. Because Buddhist theology is based on the belief that we are attached to this world through desire and can only be released from it by relinquishing that which holds us to the world, the plays often require a Buddhist monk or priest to pray for the release of the ghost, which is exactly what happens in the play analyzed below, *Kurozuka/Adachigahara*. Yet the plays are rooted in a Gothic sensibility that simultaneously supports the dominant religious belief while also offering meditations on the horror of being a ghost, of dying in battle unfulfilled and remaining in this world in an incorporeal state. The claim of *nō* theatre on the Gothic is less rooted in its critique of religion than in its fixation on death and madness.

Umehara Takeshi argues that Zeami, who in addition to being a court dancer was a professional performer of ceremonies to pacify souls of the dead (a *chinkonsha*), used those rituals as a model for *mugen nō*—plays about phantasmal subjects (ghosts, demons, monsters and gods), as opposed to *genzai nō*—plays about living humans (Umehara). The majority of Zeami’s plays, according to Thomas Blenman Hare, are *mugen nō*, which implies that the creator of the form took an especial interest in presenting ghosts, monsters, and otherwise non-human entities on stage (297). *Mugen nō* dramas feature a two-part structure. In the first half, a wandering monk or priest on a pilgrimage arrives at an area of historic import and is told a legend about a historical figure of the place by a local individual, who is then revealed to be the ghost of that person or a demon or god, who then vanishes. In the second half, the ghost, demon or god appears in their true form and recounts their past life and their suffering for remaining attached to this world, whether because of an unrequited love, an undeserved death, or some other reason. The priest or monk then prays for that individual, seeking to aid them to achieve release and salvation. This structure is employed in the play discussed below, *Kurozuka*, with some variations. We might also note that the fourth of five categories of *nō* plays is reserved for plays about madwomen. In short, there is an entire category of plays centered around women driven insane by their existence and who live to terrify or harm those they believe harmed them (and anyone else who happens to cross their path). The fifth category, is comprised of miscellaneous plays, many of which involve demons or monsters. This category includes *Kurozuka*.

II. A Cinema Haunted by Ghosts of the Theatre

As noted above, the early cinema is a product of the theatre of Japan, and that is nowhere more true than in its Gothic cinema. As opposed to the West, where film was perceived as a kind of photography, the Japanese perceived film as a form of performance, and both the experience of viewing and the subject matter rose out of Japanese performing tradition. The first Japanese films were filmed productions of *kabuki* plays. When films were exhibited, the projector would sit on one side of the stage and the screen on the other, so even the act of projection was a part of the “performance.” A *benshi*, borrowed from *bunraku/jōruri* puppet theatre, sat to the side of the screen, narrating the film and performing character voices. The cinema emerged out of a live performance

tradition. And, as noted above, directors and scriptwriters sought out *kaidan mono* and other Gothic plays for source material to adapt to the screen.

While the twentieth century saw remarkable and important Japanese Gothic films, such as *Ugetsu* (1953, Mizoguchi Kenji), *Jigoku* (1960, Nakagawa Nobuo), *Onibaba* (1964, Shindō Kaneto), *Kwaidan* (1964, Kobayashi Masaki), and *Kuroneko* (1968, Shindō Kaneto), the close of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first saw an explosion of what came to be called J-horror, films exploring Japanese anxieties, particularly about new technologies, through more traditional ghost figures, in particular *yūrei* (ghosts, whose appearance was established by *kabuki* and cemented by *ukiyo-e* [Hunter]) and *onryō* (vengeful ghosts). The ghosts of Japan's past emerged in millennial Japan with the weight of the past crushing the present, sometimes literally (Davisson). The archetypal J-horror film is *Ringu* (1998, Nakata Hideo), based on the novel by Suzuki Koji, which set the standard for the flood of Japanese *yūrei* films which followed.

We might further note that previous scholars have found links between the traditional theatre and the cinema in general and specifically in horror cinema. Keiko McDonald, for example, in her excellent *Japanese Classical Theater in Films*, examines the role of the traditional theatre in terms of source material, performative elements, tropes and even the representation of the traditional theatre in a wide variety of films such as Kinoshita's *Narayama bushikō*, Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-jō* and *Ran*, Imai's *Yoru no tsuzumi*, and Mizoguchi's *Chikamatsu monogatari*, the last of which directly incorporates the elements of *bunraku* on screen, heightening the artificiality of an otherwise naturalistic film and constantly reminding the audience of the role that theatre itself plays in the story. Perhaps the best example of this, in what might be loosely termed a horror comedy, is Kinugasa's *Yukinojo Henge* (presented in English as *An Actor's Revenge*), in which a *kabuki* actor uses his skills as a performer to get revenge on those who wronged his family, including, at one point, appearing as a ghost to one of his victims. Similarly, other scholars have noted the similarity between Sadako from the film *Ringū* and Oiwa from the previously discussed *Yotsuya Kaidan*.¹ In short, contemporary Japanese horror cinema is already haunted by the traditional theatre, especially in terms of the representation of ghosts, source material, and the conception of demons and monsters. Horror cinema grows out of horror theatre, as seen in films such as *Ringū*, *Onibaba* (in which a *nō* mask

¹ Murguía 265; Hand 22-24; and McRoy 75, 99, to name but a few of many.

becomes a source of horror), and the silent and sound versions of *Yotsuya Kaidan*.

We might even note that *Gurozuka* can be read as an echo of *Onibaba*, as Shindō Kaneto's 1964 film also concerns women competing for attention and survival, and, after killing a disfigured *samurai* wearing a *nō han'nya* mask, the mask of a vengeful female demon, the older woman discovers it is impossible to remove the mask once put on. The mask disfigures the older woman, and she pursues the younger woman, who believes her pursuer to be a demon and falls into the pit trap the two have used to capture, rob, and murder fleeing *samurai*. As with *Gurozuka*, the *nō* mask becomes a mark of killing and danger, as well as specifically female jealousy and strife.

III. *Gurozuka: Mūgen Nō* as J-Horror and Slasher Film

Nishayama Yōichi's *Gurozuka* was released in Japan on 22 October 2005, seven years after *Ringu* was released, but did not receive international distribution until 10 January 2012, six years and three months later. Released in the wave of J-horror films in the years following the turn of the millennia, *Gurozuka* certainly echoes (or perhaps copies) *Ringu* with the idea of a cursed film. The film exemplifies Japanese cinematic Gothic repurposing the material and narrative culture of *nō* for postmodern Gothic, as it explores a Japan haunted by a cultural past that the millennial generation neither knows nor is particularly interested in. *Gurozuka* also echoes American slasher films, inasmuch as it concerns a masked individual killing a number of young people in an isolated location, which is perhaps why marketing materials compare it with *Scream* (1996), a popular meta-slasher film from a decade and a half before its American release. It also featured several J-pop idols in various roles, no doubt in an attempt to encourage a young audience to attend the film.

Gurozuka, with an all-female cast, offers an example of Castillo's "crushing weight of the past," particularly on Japanese women (69), as it combines the original *nō* play, discussed below, with the model of the slasher film, in which women's bodies are subjected to all manner of torture and death while also sexualizing them in the process. As Raechel Dumas observes, "the female body as an object of violence is a pervasive theme in Japan" (12); we might note, however, the female body as object of violence is also a pervasive theme in the Gothic.

The film is based on the *nō* play *Kurozuka*. The play, performed by all five *nō* schools, was inspired by a poem by Taira no Kanemori, a Heian poet and member of the imperial family. The play's author is unknown, although the work is traditionally ascribed to Zeami, the creator of *nō* and its most prolific playwright, or sometimes Konparu Zenchiku, Zeami's son-in-law (Baba 258). The Kanze school, however, calls it *Adachigahara* and the other four call the play *Kurozuka*. The film's title, as acknowledged by the characters, is a direct reference to the *nō* play. *Kurozuka* means "black mound" or "black tomb," while *Adachigahara* is a place name meaning "Adachi Moor." Performed over roughly eighty minutes, the two-scene play is set in autumn in the northern mountains, in a hut on a moor—a setting that resonates with British Gothic).²

The plot, as with much of *mūgen nō*, is simple. Yūkei, a Buddhist monk and *ajari* (senior rank among monks), leads his companions, a group of *yamabushi* (mountain priests) as they travel from Nachi up the coast and then towards the mountains in Mutsu province (present day Nihonmatsu, Fukushima Prefecture). They arrive at *Adachigahara* (the moors at the base of the mountain) as the sun sets and, far from any village, seek shelter for the night at a hut in the woods. The elderly woman who lives there encourages them to move on: "This is a place that even the house owner, who is used to the surroundings, thinks horrible" (*Kurozuka* 3). Yūkei convinces her they have nowhere else to go and she allows them to enter the hut. Yūkei spies a spinning wheel and asks the old woman for a demonstration. She spins thread while lamenting her life. We should note that the figure of the spinning wheel in this play links the old woman with *yamamba*, the Japanese mountain witch, a variation of which is found in Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-jō* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957). Noriko Tsunoda Reider sees the old woman of *Adachigahara* actually strengthening and spreading the association of *yamamba* with spinning in the medieval and early modern Japanese mind, and transforms the *oni* (demon) of the play into something more (49-50). An old woman announces she must go out for firewood and extracts a promise from the priests not to look in the bedroom while she is gone. She reluctantly then leaves for the mountain (further solidifying her identification with *yamamba*). As in the French story of Bluebeard, the warning not to look inspires one of the servants to look. The caution not to look, that there is danger in seeing, is yet another trope of the Gothic common to Japan and the West. The Gothic warns that once we have

² A pdf of the script of *Kurozuka* in English and Japanese is available at *The-Noh.com*.

seen the forbidden thing, not only can we not un-see it, but the very act of seeing has corrupted and endangered the viewer. This is obviously a major theme in *Ringu*, in which the viewing of a cursed videotape brings about the viewer's death after seven days.

Once the priests fall asleep, the servant looks in the bedroom and finds:

numberless corpses piled up to the eaves, the floor is covered in pus and blood, and the room is filled with the stench of decomposing. The corpses are swollen, and the dead skin and fat are putrefied. (*Kurozuka* 10)

Yūkei realizes their host is the *oni* that lives “at the place called the Black mound in Adachi Moor” (10). The priests panic and attempt to run, but the woman returns, transformed into a fierce *oni* and furious. She is less angry at having been discovered than at the priests having broken their promise and she swears she will “inflict revenge” (11). She attacks the priests with an iron bar, but their prayers successfully drive her away. “Although I have been hiding in the Black Mound [*kurozuka*] of Adachi moor,” she sings, “I was discovered” and she vanishes into the night storm (13). This pronouncement also links the play to the Gothic. As Howard Phillips Lovecraft notes in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, the strongest fear is fear of the unknown (12). Once the monster is “discovered,” that is to say, known, it loses its power to frighten in a sense, although sometimes the knowledge of what the monster is can render them more terrifying. In this case, however, the power of horror is derived first from not knowing they are being stalked and then from not knowing who is doing the stalking or why. Once these mysteries are revealed, as in any slasher film, the story becomes much more prosaic and involves how to escape or stop the killer. This fact holds true for the Gothic film as well, which is, at heart, a mystery. In the film *Gurozuka*, the mystery is the question of who is the masked individual killing the girls: one of the girls? The teacher? The students who disappeared or went insane seven years ago in the same place? The audience does not know the identity, motive, or location of the killer, or who will be the next victim. In short, the play demonstrates all the qualities of Gothic noted above.

As with Western Gothic, the environment is linked to the horrors experienced by the protagonists. As *The-Noh.com* summary and analysis states,

“[h]er horrendous transformation is perceived as even more fearful when it is linked with the atmosphere at the foot of the mountain in the lonely far north province” (“*Kurozuka*”). The monstrous woman summons and vanishes into a terrible storm on the moors. Location matters to the Gothic—the ruins, the old monastery, the collapsing castle, the crumbling structure that is both literal and also metaphor for the decaying aristocratic family, are all vital parts of the Gothic, as is the wind-swept moor and the dark forest. For Japan, the forest and the base of the mountain that define the theatrical locale of *Gurozuka* form the same associations—death, decay, and the Gothic.

Before offering a close reading of the film, we must note that by all accounts, *Gurozuka* is not a good film (Felix; Loomis; “*Gurozuka*”). Most reviewers found it to fail as horror and as a film. Felix argues the film spends too much time on the characters bickering instead of actual character development, and “takes way too long for the masked figure to do much menacing outside of quick jump scares and momentary ‘nightmare’ moments.”

Loomis posits that the direction is “competent but dull,” and the film contains a “general lack of drama or tension.” *Moria Reviews* also critiqued the direction, noting, “Nishimiya’s camera seems to be merely anonymously observing scenes with no interest in style or mood. In other words, what we have is a J-horror film that has been bled of all atmosphere” (“*Gurozuka*”). Loomis also observes that the script is structured as a *nō* drama, “and those steeped in Japanese theater may really get into it, but it’s far too obscure a thing in this culture to have much effect.”

The criticisms are valid; however they also point to the assumptions of the critics: that *Gurozuka* is meant as a J-horror film in the vein of *Ringu* or *Ju-on: The Grudge*. When one considers it as a meditation on how mediated Gothic culture recycles and repurposes the Japanese cinematic Gothic to show a contemporary Japan haunted by its cultural past, the film is much more interesting than its shortcomings would purport.

The trailer for the film opens with *hiragana* text: “*onna darake no kowai hanashi*” (*Gurozuka* Trailer 00:00:01-05) which the film subtitle translates as “[w]hen there is only women there is horror,” again, as noted above, tying the Gothic to the female. Similar to most horror trailers, the images show the killer menacing the characters, depict the victims screaming and running, and show some of the violence without much of the plot or story being revealed. Opening with an *Evil Deadesque* shaky cam shot, moving through the woods, onscreen

text states, “In a room on campus, it recorded an incident that occurred several years ago. The secret: something terrible happened in the woods. A mystery is about to unravel. I wish I had never watched it” (*Gurozuka* Trailer 00:00:06-37). This final line clearly plays on *Ringu* and fear of haunted technology, while also evoking Carol Clover’s morphology of the slasher film: the “terrible place” (often, but not always, the woods), the past incident that has emerged to haunt the present (“several years ago . . . something terrible happened in the woods”), and the emergence of an iconic killer (*nō* mask and *kimono*), with an iconic weapon (small hand ax), leading to a “final girl” (Clover).

The premise is simple: six school girls (not clear if they are in high school or university) and their teacher start a film club and head to a remote cabin in the woods to make a student film. The film opens with a precredit silent film-within-a-film. We see a woman in a white *kimono* and a *deigan nō* mask walking towards the camera in the woods. The film then cuts to her on a flip phone (interesting juxtaposition, also framing the film-within-the-film as being from the late nineties). The woman then does a dance, and the film cuts to a closeup of the mask. The film then cuts to a group of contemporary girls eating popcorn and watching the film-within-the-film.

Already the film has introduced its key cast—the young women eating popcorn while watching the amateur film, and has shown the viewing audience the bulk of the film-within-the-film, also called *Gurozuka*. At this point the film has announced its intention to interrogate cinema, but also to interrogate the relationship between cinema and *nō*, and how the current generation experiences mediated culture, not live performance. In order for them to engage with the *nō* drama at all it must be filmed. The filmmakers seem to be intentionally commenting on the disconnect between the millennial generation and the classical performing culture of Japan, and this impression is borne out by later moments in the film. In addition, the eating of popcorn introduces the larger theme in the film of consumption. The girls consume popcorn while consuming the original video. Later in the film the food will go missing (an inability to consume as there is nothing to consume), and finally several will consume poisoned mushrooms put in a salad by one of the characters. There is danger in consuming, says the film, especially when one does not know what one is consuming.

The title sequence follows, consisting of jarring music over a black and white montage of scenes of the woods and scenes from the film, along with the

credits and finally the title card, which imposes the film's title over a *nō* mask. The title sequence echoes music videos of the late nineties and early oughts, but also serves as a jarring disconnect. The electronic score is dissonant, filled with sudden loud sounds designed to set the viewer on edge. The images are black and white, as opposed to the corrected color of the film and the washed out color of the film-within-the-film, adding an uncanny element. The closing title card, containing both the title of the play and the *nō* mask, firmly situates the film within the world of *mūgen nō*, even if most casual viewers will not know this. As Loomis noted above, "those steeped in Japanese theater may really get into it," but most viewers would not catch the references and understand the larger context of the film unfolding.

The film follows the plot, as detailed above, of *mūgen nō*, albeit with a modern take. Instead of a group of priests on pilgrimage to some remote, rural part of Japan where a significant event took place in the past resulting in a haunting, *Gurozuka* presents a group of film students and actors on a pilgrimage to a remote, rural location: Yuai House, a rural cabin, where a significant event took place seven years ago when a group of students attempted to make a film in that remote location. Ms. Yoko (Itō Yūko), the teacher, was one of those students, and also Maki's older sister. Thus, as with Clover's theories of slasher cinema, she has returned to the terrible place, which also makes her a key suspect when the killings begin, as the present horrors are always somehow linked to the past horrors.

After the credits, the audience is introduced to the girls in the club: Maki (Mitsuya Yōko), the director of the film project; Ai (Morishita Chisato), her upbeat friend and producer of the film; Natsuki (Kurosawa Yūko) a vain actress who wants to leave when she learns that "you never see the killer's face," as she assumes that she will be the lead actress in this film about a *nō*-masked killer (*Gurozuka* 00:21:11-14); Yuka (Fukui Yukari), who is Natsuki's sidekick; Yayoi (Saitō Keiko), Natsuki's actress friend; and lastly, Takako (Andō Nozomi), a companion of Ms. Yoko. Takako will be suspected of being the killer since she is not in the club and perceived as dangerous and possibly lesbian; the threat of non-heteronormativity is often a marker of monstrosity in the Gothic. The other girls suspect Takako and Ms. Yoko of being in an illicit relationship, which both explains why Ms. Yoko brought Takako and justifies (to them) their suspicion of her being monstrous.

The women are introduced as they load the van that will take them into the house in the woods. A sequence follows in which the van leaves Tokyo headed into more rural and mountainous areas. The road narrows, the forest surrounds them. This shift in landscape occurs as the girls discuss the project. The school's movie club has been revived by Maki and Ai after having been shut down for several years. They plan to make a film as part of the club's first activity and have elicited help from actors from the school's drama club. Natsuki's father has bankrolled the student film project, which she believes gives her full authority to make decisions about the film. The girls also excitedly discuss the rumor that the film that the movie club previously made, the *Gurozuka* screened before the credits, resulted in one girl going missing and another being driven insane and placed in an asylum, and that is why the club was disbanded seven years ago. Ms. Yoko, who was a member of the club when she was a student at the time of the rumored events, dismisses them, but refuses to confirm or deny any details.

This brief sequence frames the narrative in the structure of an American slasher film, and yet also frames it as a Gothic narrative with rumors of an old, dark place, insanity and a missing person. For both Gothic narrative and slasher film, the girl in the asylum or the one who went missing are similarly likely to be encountered in the house in the woods. The original student film also continues the link between the cinema and the theatre as it takes its inspiration from the *nō* play of the same name, but develops a new sense of horror rooted in slasher cinema, not Japanese supernatural demons. The millennial generation is not frightened by *oni* but by cinematic serial killers such as Michael Myers, Jason Vorhees, and Freddy Kreuger.

Maki then announces her plan for the film—she has not, in fact, written a script but rather has created a scenario that the actors must improvise around. Their film is to be a meta-film, recreating the filming of the original film and telling the story of the girl who vanished and the girl who went insane. This adds a third level of mediation, from play to film based on play to film about film based on play, recreating the original film as well. Other than Maki, the students know the rumors about the film, but do not know the *nō* play at all. The idea that the students will improvise the film also seems to suggest that, just as with their other experiences, they do not value tradition, structure or art that follows form—instead they seek to make it up as they go along. Attention need not be paid to what has come before or conventional narratives. The film-

within-the-film Maki plans to make is, in many ways, the opposite of *nō*, which is highly structured, highly formalized, and carries with it necessary conventions and performance forms. These students have cast off the weight of the past in order to create their art. What is remarkable is that the film rather conservatively asserts that that past will come back and weigh down on them regardless, whether they are aware of that past or not.

The road ends and the group exits the van. “We’ll walk from here,” announces Ms. Yoko, as the group carries all of their film gear, food, and personal items up the mountain trail through the woods (*Gurozuka* 00:06:46-47). A sign identifies the trail to “Yuai House,” written out in *romaji* (Romanized letters). It is when they enter the woods, in keeping with horror tropes, that the uncanny and strange things begin to happen. Yuka is briefly separated from the group and becomes lost. She thinks someone is watching her, perhaps following the group. The film uses a standard jump scare of one of the group coming to find her, startling her as she approaches the dark area from which she believes someone is watching. The girls observe how distant the house is from the road and any help. The girls note as they enter the woods that they cannot get cellphone reception and they are indeed cut off from the world. This fact both isolates them and renders aid from outside impossible, in keeping with traditional horror tropes. It also, however, serves to further link the film to the Gothic, as does the observation itself.

Voyeurism is a significant theme in the Gothic—watching and being watched plays a significant role in many Gothic narratives. The danger of watching and of being watched links *Gurozuka* to, for example, *Ringu* in the Japanese cinematic Gothic, in which watching a cursed videotape will result in the viewer’s death. While being observed by a stalking killer is a common trope in the slasher film, *Gurozuka* reminds us of the larger trope of the danger of voyeurism. In the original *nō* play, the danger is at its greatest when the priests see things that alert them to the old woman’s true identity. Yūkei sees the spinning wheel and asks what it is. He asks to be shown how to use it. When the woman leaves, she repeatedly tells the priests “You must not look in my bedroom while I am out” (*Kurozuka* 8). When a servant disobeys and looks, they all see the corpses and blood of her previous victims. “What a terrible thing we have seen,” they cry (10). Yet, paradoxically, it is the seeing of the terrible thing that gives them the knowledge of what, exactly, they are facing, and

prepares them to combat it. *Gurozuka*, like its *nō* antecedent, cautions of the danger and necessity of looking and the danger of being watched.

As they walk, inspired by the forest, Maki asks Ai, “Do you think nature is rational?” (*Gurozuka* 00:07:21-22). The two of them discuss if nature can ever be truly rational. The conversation is both a signpost of the Gothic and a foreshadowing that Maki is indeed the killer. Maki, the director who has become obsessed with the film *Gurozuka* and the rumors and legends behind it, sees nature and art as being similar in that they are not rational, but different, in that art is a construction. Her intimation of the irrationality of nature, however, hints at her own disconnect from rationality. “Nature, in the Gothic, is often the symbol for that which is sublime and, accordingly, that which is transcendental and extraordinary” (Li). The world into which they have entered, Maki implies, is irrational and transcendent. Li notes, the “descriptive use of Nature in the [Gothic] text appears to recall a more ancient religion,” and *Gurozuka*, through its use of the *deigan* mask, *kimono*, and hand ax, represents its central monster in the mode of pre-modern, pre-technological Japan. They have entered a place in which the ghosts, demons, and madwomen of *nō* can exist as real entities. Cellphones cannot help them—nature is irrational and the monsters are real.

Once they arrive at the house, they clean up and cook a communal meal. Ms. Yoko and Takako choose to eat separately in their room as the other girls discuss the project over dinner. It is in this scene that the film firmly anchors itself as an exploration of the Gothic tradition inherited by the cinema from Japanese theatre. Maki explains the film’s title refers to the “black tomb” and is based on the *nō* play discussed above. The group watches the film again, this time on a videotape, suggesting the cursed VHS tape found in *Ringū*, arguably the quintessential J-horror film and embodiment of postmodern Japanese Gothic horror cinema. Canny viewers will note the transition here. In the opening scene, the girls watched the film projected on an eight-mm projector. Maki tells them she had it transferred onto video. With this brief announcement she reveals a few things. First, she discloses the iterative replication of this narrative from medium to medium: play to film to video. Second, her own obsession with the actual film itself is again revealed. Maki transferred the eight-mm film to video so she could watch it anywhere and no longer require a projector. A different technology is needed, albeit one much more readily available. Third, since she wants their film to be an examination of the original film made at Yuai House seven years ago, she has brought the film back to the

place it was made. The art has returned home, so to speak, where she will recreate it. She implies that the recreation will be on film (and it will), but Maki also plans to recreate the film as a live performance. She will wear the costume and mask and kill the other members of the club. Despite her announced intention of creating a film about *Gurozuka*, she plans instead to perform it herself. It is here where the film begins to move from cinematic creation back to the theatrical origins of horror.

Maki explains the title and the original *nō* play. Tangentially, the film-within-the-film uses *katakana* for the title card, not *kanji*, employing the Japanese syllabary for foreign words to spell “*Gurozuka*.” There is no need to do so, as the play has a title in *hiragana* and *kanji*, and the word itself is a Japanese compound word. By spelling it with *katakana*, the film renders the word foreign. It is a linguistic shift that adds to the uncanniness of the film, going back to the original German term “*unheimlich*”: “*Gurozuka*” is both familiar and not familiar, both home and not home, both Japanese and Japanese-made-foreign.

Maki proceeds to relate the tale of *Kurozuka/Adachigahara* to the group, explaining it as a tale of a “*kijō*” in Adachi Moor. The girls are unfamiliar with the term and Maki must explain the reference and the story:

An *oni* woman. Traveling monks spend the night in an isolated house deep in a mountain. When the owner leaves to gather wood, she tells them not to look in a room. One guy couldn’t resist. Inside the room was a mound of dead bodies of the travelers the woman ate. When the woman comes back, she turns into an *oni* and eats the monks. (*Gurozuka* 00:18:05-39)

The girls are suitably impressed and chilled. “A classic horror movie,” Yuka calls it (*Gurozuka* 00:18:05-43). Except it is not. It is a *nō* play. The other girls are unfamiliar with *nō*, *kijō*, and other elements of traditional Japanese culture, and can only interpret the past through their own lenses. Thus a *nō* play’s plot is a “classic horror movie.” The girls, unfamiliar with the distant past, only feel the weight of the recent past—the strange story of the film from seven years earlier. A fourteenth century story is so completely disconnected from their lives they are unaware of the story and of the tropes and elements of which it is composed. The film, however, posits that both recent past and distant past are

part of the same dark heritage for these students. Both pasts will weigh on the present, resulting in death, madness and the macabre.

Maki offers a fairly accurate summary, except, of course, the ending. In *mūgen nō*, the priest defeats the monster, and in most cases the spirit or demon desires to be set free from this life but does not know how, and the priests pray for mercy and release for them. Maki's version depicts the *oni* eating the priests. They do not exorcize it as in the play; they die, and this is yet another signpost of where the film is heading.

The characters discuss how the film-within-the-film employs a *deigan* mask. The *deigan* "was originally used for Bodhisattvas and women who had achieved salvation, but later came to be worn by vengeful women, like Lady Rokujō in *Aoi no Ue* (Leiter 300). Although Maki refers to the character in *Kurozuka/Adachigahara* as an *oni*, the film and the film-within-the-film do not present the killer as an *oni*. The mask employed, the one emblematic of the film, is a vengeful woman, not a ghost or demon, such as the *han'nya* mask would represent. The *han'nya* has fangs, sunken eyes in an angry expression, and horns. *Han'nya*-wearing characters are obviously supernatural in nature. Interestingly, in *Kurozuka*, the actual *nō* play, the *shite* (lead actor who plays the old woman/*oni*) wears either *fukai*, *ōmionna*, or *shakumi* masks as the old woman and then, after her transformation into an *oni*, wears a *han'nya*, or demon mask. The *deigan* mask of the film is not associated with the play in any way. Assuming this was a conscious choice, the use of the *deigan* in *Gurozuka* suggests that the killer is not a supernatural entity but a still living woman.

At the conclusion of the film-within-the-film, the masked woman seems to actually kill the other woman in the film, hacking at her body with a small hand ax. She then rises, blood on the ax, her hands and her *kimono*, and begins to walk slowly, almost *hakobi*-style (the slow, sliding walk of *nō*), towards the camera, or, more accurately, towards the camera operator, cutting to black just as she passes the camera.

At this point the film has blended elements of slasher films, J-horror, and Gothic cinema to create a meditation on the role of older Japanese performing arts on contemporary horror cinema. The entire *nō* narrative has been placed in the center by the film, setting up the second half of the film in which Maki begins to kill the other girls as part of a seeming performance art project.

The next morning, as they wake up and plan to start filming, the girls discover all the food is missing. Someone has taken it. They blame Takako

without any evidence that it is her. The girls then split up into groups. Natsuki, Yuka and Yayoi decide to go get some footage for Natsuki's promotional reel; Maki and Ai will look for the food and explore the forest for filming locations; Takako hides in her room; and Ms. Yuko walks back to the van to attempt to secure more food. The film hints that the girls are being stalked by someone from the previous film experiment. The *deigan*-masked individual is shown lurking in the woods, moving around the house, and otherwise attempting to find one of the girls alone.

One by one they begin to vanish. Natsuki films herself alone and then begins walking towards the camera. Nishiyama's camera is behind hers, so she approaches both cameras directly as the masked killer walks in from off-screen behind her and the film cuts just as the killer raises the ax above Natsuki's unknowing head.

The film has a minor subplot of the characters attempting to make soup from items they find in the woods and Takako, angry at the rest of the group for how they treat her, puts poisoned mushrooms in it, implying again that she might be the killer. Yayoi and Yuka grow ill from eating it, but recover. In the best of slasher traditions, however, one-by-one we see the characters vanish or die.

When, at last only Maki and Ai remain, Maki theorizes the assailant might be murdering the girls based on the categories of *nō* plays. The first student was killed seven years ago, symbolizing a *kami* or god play; Natsuki was killed and then burned, symbolizing a *shura mono*, man/warrior play, the second category. Yayoi's body was covered with flowers, suggesting *katsura mono*, a "woman play" "representing a spirit of flowers," the third category. "Two to go," says Ai (*Gurozuka* 00:59:33). Maki explains they will find bodies suggesting *kyōjo mono*, madwoman plays, the fourth category; and the fifth, final/miscellaneous/demon category, to which *Kurozuka/Adachigahara* actually belongs. While being a fascinating conceit (a serial killer inspired by *nō* categories), sadly the film does not carry this idea to the conclusion. This continual employment of *nō* as the slayer's motif, however, evokes the Japanese Gothic while demonstrating that the girls' ignorance of a cultural past does not stop it from weighing down on them, bringing to bear the death, eroticism, insanity, and monstrousness found in both the recent past and ancient past.

Ai watches the video Yuka made of Natsuki and sees the killer (again, the danger of watching and being watched echoes through the film). While

searching for the others, she and Maki then find the missing food, the *deigan* mask and the bloody ax. They return to the house to find the other bodies. All the others have been killed except Ms. Yoko. Maki then reveals that she is the killer. She became obsessed with the original film and wanted to recreate it. In other words, she has become the deranged madwoman of the *nō*. Maki tells Ai, “You’re such a little good girl. I want to be you, Ai” (*Gurozuka* 01:15:41-43). This statement is puzzling on the surface until one realizes Maki sees Ai as the heroine—the one who can exorcize the *oni* or madwoman and allow them to move on. Maki is the monster. This revelation also demonstrates that the film has been using the tropes of J-horror, namely that the killer is some sort of supernatural entity, awakened by technology. Instead, the film lands on the side of its slasher origins: the killer is a demented, obsessed young woman. Except for the coda.

In the final scene, Ai has dispatched Maki and returns to the house, where she finds Yoko still alive. The original student film, *Gurozuka*, plays on the monitor. Yoko announces her intention to “throw this tape away,” as “it makes people mad” (*Gurozuka* 01:19:37-44). As a survivor of the first filming, she knows firsthand not only what happened to the other students, but the ideas behind the film which make it compelling (in every sense of the word). She commits to get rid of the tape, but then sits watching it with Ai. She then turns to Ai and repeats Maki’s final words, “You’re such a good girl. I want to be you, Ai” (*Gurozuka* 01:20:39-50). Yoko was not present when Maki said this, thus implying there is something about the student film that actually does drive some people mad. Ai is the heroine, but like all good Gothic heroines she needs a monster to contend against. With Maki dead, the film begins to transform Yoko into the monster. The film ends at this moment. No closure, no exit, no sense of anything existing outside of the house. The two women just stay in the house as the film plays, evoking a kind of Gothic pessimism and resignation that now that the art has been created and released into the world its effects cannot be stopped. Hinting at a true Gothic narrative (there is no ghost in the attic, the family keeps the insane aunt there), the film at the ending moves back towards the J-horror model, suggesting a supernatural agency found in the film.

IV. Conclusion: Art Discourses on Culture, Even in Bad Films

Let us note, however, that unlike the haunted technology of the J-horror films, the film in *Gurozuka* is haunted just as much by *nō* and by traditional Japanese culture. This ending suggests the power of art to transform and remake reality. At the heart of the film-within-the-film is an acknowledgement both of the power of the traditional performing arts to haunt later arts, and of the power of these narratives, such as that of the play, to haunt us. Lastly, the film links the warning given to the priests to the experiences of its own characters: there is danger in looking and watching. When we look at the film, it changes us, we see the bodies behind the door and the world has become a much darker, more Gothic place.

Gurozuka is not a significant motion picture, but it is a fascinating one for its discourse on the relationship between millennials, J-horror, and the Gothic, particularly the Gothic found in the original performing arts of *nō* and *kabuki*. The current generation of Japanese filmmakers can only relate to these older forms through mediation, meaning the *nō* is, as Yuka says in the film, “a classic horror movie,” and not its own thing. The cinema is thus haunted by the theatre, which it cannot truly escape from, even if the filmmakers (and audiences) are unaware of the stories and sources. Ancuta observes, “Asian texts frequently turn to the Gothic grotesque to deliver social and political critiques” (219). In *Gurozuka*, however, the Gothic grotesque is used to deliver a critique of Japanese art and popular culture, alluding to ancient symbolic forms and practices behind them that lurk no matter how much we remain unaware of them.

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