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## **Abstract**

No abstract provided.

## **Keywords**

Japanese cinema, Japan, horror, thriller, national identity

## **Sifting Through Blood: Grotesquery as Culture in Post-WWII Japanese Cinema**

by Kylan Mitchell

Japanese cinema has many definitive features, and has an extensive history of unique filmmaking, ranging from Kurosawa's samurai epics to the modern day *onryou* (vengeful ghost narrative) films such as *Ringu*, a film later Americanized into *The Ring* (Blake 44). Within and in-between these notable film movements, however, are distinguishably grotesque representations of the human body. From the sexually perverse to the brutally shocking, Japanese national cinema has a history of objecting the human physique to numerous mistreatments. This paper will outline the varying degrees in which Japanese cinema accomplishes this, ranging from obsession, rape and violence, and finally with an evaluation of masochism and fetishism which are also situated as common motifs.

In the context of international cinema, the varying unique styles differing from country to country each act to embody the national identity of their culture as a whole. Definitively, national cinema approaches topics and themes that are specific to the experiences of its native people. This is exemplified in Brazilian cinema's attention to the conflict between its many diverse subcultures, or Iranian films focusing on unsatisfactory women's rights or educational barriers. These thematic targets (and how they are specifically portrayed) within Brazilian and Iranian national cinemas distinguishes their styles from other international genres, thus capturing and projecting their country's identity to a world-wide market of cultural representation. If the national cinema of a country is indicative of its cultural nuances, motifs within films of the same origin can be deconstructed to reveal undertones of social and political meaning therein. Therefore, using Japanese cinema as a focus in this study, particular thematic motifs within a select group of films will be dissected for meaning on a socio-cultural level. Resultantly, an understanding of stylistic intention may be applied to many of the films of this national cinema that share similar modes of representation. In order to successfully justify the following claims, cultural and historical elements will be called upon extensively.

Although many of the Japanese films that represent shockingly perverse or grotesque elements normally go beyond elements of obsession, it is common for idolatry to be, at the very least, an important foundation to many plotlines. This theme of obsession is a very adaptable one. Both woman and men can assume the role of obsessed observer (though more commonly the man), and the drive of their obsession can have multiple goals. Typically, an obsessed character's motive is that of some form of personal liberation, commonly from sexual frustration. Director Yasuzo Masumura's film *Blind Beast* is a strong example of such an intention. The film features a blind, isolated sculptor who is infatuated with the statue of Aki, an accomplished model. Michio, the former, becomes utterly enveloped by his desire for the attractive girl, leading to his kidnapping of her. This film, however, transcends the usual plot of obsession, as the liberation of Aki is not achieved by escaping the obsessed, but instead by joining him in relieving sexual tensions of her own. Despite Aki's initial fear and withdrawal from Michio, she herself had lived a life full of anger and sexual frustration (Mainon, Ursini 166). This mutual feeling of sexual estrangement is notably common with Japanese pop-culture. Shinya Tsukamoto, another director that uses strong obsessive themes, also portrays mutual sexual frustration in his 2002 film *A Snake of June*. Within this film, a lonely photographer who suffers from cancer becomes infatuated with a woman named Rinko, a counsellor he had been talking to through the phone. Iguchi, the photographer, begins

stalking Rinko, constantly taking photographs of her in public as well as her private masturbation at home. By threatening to show these explicit photos to her husband, Iguchi attempts to liberate Rinko from her sexual frustrations (her relationship with her husband is extremely distant). Ultimately, Iguchi's obsessive harassment and control of the situation does indeed liberate Rinko, having her embracing her sexuality openly, and reigniting her relationship with her husband (Mainon, Ursini 178).

The idea of sexual frustration stemming from social repression is not only a common motif in Japanese film, but is also one that is rooted within Japan's repressive culture. After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, enormous change was forced upon it by the victorious USA (Blake 46). Through a process of rewriting Japan's constitution to a near mimicry of the American Declaration of Independence, Japan began to slowly lose its sense of traditional identity. Extreme censorship was administered to many of Japan's traditional cultural products, especially those that represented any sort of militarism (46). This included early era samurai films and many *kabuki* films being banned, and even the censoring of Haiku poetry anthologies. Perhaps the most substantial change, however, was the abolishment of Shinto as the state religion (46). Sexual expressions in Shinto are ones of sacred, yet free reigning sexual opportunity (Ryang 10). Intimate performances within Shinto temples act as a sacred offering, and intercourse between strangers is a manner of celebrating gods and goddesses in thanks for their gifts of fertility and prosperity (10). Therefore, the elimination of Shinto as the prominent religious belief denounced the sacred sexual embrace of the Japanese Shinto worshippers in favour of much more sexually prude American ideals. The estrangement of the Japanese from their traditional identity at the conclusion of World War II and the subsequent forbiddance of the Shinto religion acted towards creating not only a confinement of individual expression in Japan, but also repressing the previously free-reigning sexual desires of many Japanese people. Resultantly, the themes of sexual frustration and obsessive desire in Japanese cinema reference Japan's difficulty in not only desperately trying to retain a sense of national identity, but also the Japanese peoples' past sexual and expressive freedom.

In many ways, obsessive fantasy in Japanese film is merely the gateway for more extreme manners of sexual expression. Often born from the desire of the 'victim,' the obsessed go to great lengths to fulfil their frustrations. The most common motifs indicative of obsession in Japanese cinema extend desire to that of rape and violence. The relationship between obsession and rape in Japanese shock cinema is surprisingly common, and even to the point that certain Japanese films comment self-reflexively on expectations of vicious idolatry. The Japanese anime *Perfect Blue* is one of these films, and the film features a popular Japanese celebrity idol dealing with the psychological effects of an obsessed stalker, although the entire event occurs entirely within her head. The connection between this film and films like *Blind Beast* are of striking similarity, particularly in the perceived unrelenting desire of the obsessed stalker and the initial fear and anxiety of the idol. However, within the discussed Japanese films and others, the concept of rape or forced sexual submission is the means in which sexual liberation thrives. The raping of women in these films often symbolizes the rape of the idealistic confines of the modern repressed Japanese woman, resulting in an embrace of unhindered sexual expression. As seen in *Blind Beast*, the forceful abduction of Aki by Michio ultimately results in the free reigning sexual freedom between the two of them. Additionally, in *A Snake of June*, when Iguchi forces Rinko to go out

in public with a vibrator that only he can switch on and off, the humiliating event conclusively sparks Rinko's own sexual liberation through dissolving of boundaries of self-control (Mainon, Ursini 178).

Rape and violence, however, are not always intricately connected. The representation of violence in its own right in much of Japanese cinema has separate influences from that of the sexually repressive. These representations are famously recognized for their characteristics of graphic blood and gore. Among the Japanese genres that are most exemplary of this brutality are anime and *yakuza* (Japanese mafia) films (Blake 56). The adult-oriented anime style in Japan is one of surprising gratuity in terms of excessively brutal and grotesque themes. Animes like *Akira* and *Ninja Scroll* freely portray disembowelments, mutilations, and stylistic methodology free from the expressive limitations of reality. However, realistic brutality is alternatively represented in Japan through the *yakuza* genre. Takashi Miike's 2001 film *Ichi the Killer* is one that is especially driven by the grotesque, featuring indescribable torture and crude, over-the-top special effects. Japanese cinema is also historically famous for its samurai epics, being films entirely based from the traditional representation of Japan as a warrior culture. The legend of the samurai in Japanese cinematic culture is one that has strongly influenced other film markets, Hollywood included.

The excessive violence in several of Japanese cinema's genres can in part be attributed to the dystopia of Japan following its defeat in the Second World War (Eckersall 99). The term dystopia, in Walter Benjamin's words, is when a nation's "self alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (99). This once again refers to the identity crisis within Japanese culture at the midway point of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Japan's disharmonious and often violent past (not only World War II, but also great historical infighting, including more than one civil war) had in many ways characterized Japanese culture as a whole (99). With militarism completely abolished with the rewriting of the Japanese constitution, film has become but one outlet of popular culture that attempts to revitalize the country's history of violence, one that has been overshadowed by imported culture and other domineering influences of the western world. This representation of violence as described within the definition of dystopia is indeed directed inwards within Japanese culture. Japanese genres such as anime and *yakuza* are ones that are very specific and unique to Japan (Blake 56). As such, these films do not often leave the Japanese market, and therefore the themes within the films are more applicable to a Japanese audience than an international one. This is particularly so in *yakuza* films where much of the violence is specifically between the Japanese, once again relating to Benjamin's definition, and particularly in experiencing self-destruction and inward violence as an "aesthetic pleasure" through the medium of film.

Beyond sexual obsession, rape, and violence in select Japanese genres is the truly shocking motifs of fetishism and sadomasochism. Representations of bizarre sexual stimulations and the gain of pleasure out of pain are common within Japanese horror, anime, and *yakuza* genres. In Masumura's *Blind Beast*, the progression of obsession to violence and forced sexual encounters finishes with sadomasochistic enjoyment and the enactment of disturbing sexual procedures. Beginning with sexual submission, the confined world of Michio and Aki soon leads to actions such as biting, cutting, bloodsucking, and finally culminating in fatal dismemberment (Mainon, Ursini 166). The representation of pain for pleasure is also prevalent in the Miike film *Ichi the Killer*, where the boss of the *yakuza* clan in

the film firmly displays himself to be a sadomasochist. The sequence where Ichi himself willingly slices off his own tongue to appease the boss exemplifies this, but Ichi's own desensitized, gruesome yet systematic butchering of his adversaries also greatly contributes to the themes of fetishism and sadomasochism. Tsukamoto as well displays fetishism and sadomasochism in his film *Tetsuo, the Iron Man*, where a man referred to as the "metal fetishist" suffers from a compulsion to stick scrap metal into his flesh. The grotesque fetishist and masochistic portrayals in both Tsukamoto's and Masumura's films are the climaxes of extreme expressionism in their styles, resulting in shocking visual experiences.

Interestingly, many of the sadomasochistic elements of Masumura in particular were already prevalent in the novels on which many of his films are based on. *Blind Beast* as an example is based upon a novel by Edogawa Rampo (a quasi-anagram of Edgar Allen Poe), who is one of Japan's premiere writers of S&M and horror stories (Mainon, Ursini 165). Masumura also adapted two novels by Junichiro Tanizaki, who was famous for writing freely about sadomasochism, incest, as well as the erotic fantasies of elderly men (Atkinson 37). Therefore, representations of the perverse and grotesque existed in post-war Japanese culture even before the successful film adaptations came to fruition. Such adaptations of horror from the Japanese imagination to popular culture have been a common occurrence in the last century, albeit with varying specific influences. Influences resulting perhaps from Japanese detachment from tradition, and the social alienation experienced from the American involvement with Japanese culture after World War II. Or, alternatively, self-inflicted grotesquery as an effort to punish oneself on account of cultural guilt, such as the horrific and condemnable actions of Japanese soldiers at Nanking in 1937 (many thousands of Chinese civilians were brutally raped and murdered) which ultimately led to the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings of 1945 (Blake 44). Sadomasochism and fetishism are extreme forms of expression that relate back to the theme of pleasure through punishment. On a grand scale, the self-mutilation of characters on screen could refer to the self-debilitation that Japan has inflicted upon itself throughout its history. Even deeper is code of self-sacrifice that is deeply rooted within Japanese warrior culture. Not only did World War II see the Japanese martyr themselves through acts of *kamikaze*, but samurai codes also emphasize *suppuku*, or, a ritual disembowelment performed on oneself to ensure an honourable death outside the hands of the enemy. The vast history of violence, war, and infighting in Japan suggests that despite the suffering and pain in the nation's past, the repetitive nature of it symbolizes an affinity for pain, and like the "metal fetishist" of *Tetsuo, the Iron Man*, perhaps even a compulsion to instigate self-destructive qualities.

Ultimately, the many representations of the obsessive, the sexually frustrated, the violent, and the extreme in Japanese cinema are rooted, like many other international styles, in the historical and socio-political ideologies of the nation itself. The representation of the shocking within uniquely Japanese genres may be motivated by a rich history of Japanese culture and how it has been adapted, for better or for worse, to complement the nation's condition. Examples of sexual repression and obsessive desire may furthermore be connected to the abolishment of Shinto as the state religion, which denied the people the once sacred sexual freedom they once had, and comments upon the resulting violent tendencies that develops from physical limitation; the films communicate that the repression of the simplest desires for long enough will eventually supersede self-control in the form of excessiveness. The motif of sadomasochism is a representation of the implacably destructive dystopia

that Japan became through its post-war self-alienation. Although the influences for each element of the perverse and gruesome in Japanese cinema may be several, it is undeniable that large changes to the country and specifically that of the effects of World War II are defining events that have contributed to the national cinema as a whole, distinguishing it substantially from other, differently influenced cinematic styles. In understanding the influences of a national cinema, an understanding of the country itself can also be formed to varying degrees. Such is the case for the particular Japanese genres that are extreme in graphic content, if one has the stomach and the psyche to endure them.

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