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Gun and Other Play: Takashi Miike and Fantasia Festival 2004

by Owen Livermore

ONE MISSED CALL (2004)

I liked to play with guns as a kid. Futuristic nonsensical ray-guns, traditional toy six-shooters— my favorite was a miniature pump-action shotgun that made a great *ka-chunk* sound when it was cocked and loaded. I spent hours running around the yard, killing my brothers and pretending to die in the most dramatic ways possible. I also enjoyed films. Wait… I still do, but it's more complicated now. At a festival like Fantasia, I now feel an obligation to approach films with deadpan determination, even in the lineup, and even as the teens in front of me are totally geeking out about the much-hyped KILL BILL series. Actually, most of my time at the festival was been spent in some form of queue, which is good for catching up on some reading but bad if you're a fan of social interaction.

Over the course of the month-long festival, there were a number of satisfying films shown, like Kiyoshi Kurosawa's uncharacteristically light-hearted DOPPELGANGER (2003) and a sampling from Satoshi Kon's elaborately woven anime television series PARANOIA AGENT (2004). I however was waiting to see one man, whose appearance in LAST LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE (2003), a film from Thailand featuring rising Japanese star Tadanobu Asano and a stunning use of colour by Christopher Doyle, garnered a spirited reaction from Fantasia-ites. [1] Thin, grumpy and wearing sunglasses, this yakuza boss had little patience for post-9/11 airport security. Takashi Miike didn't say much in his cameo, but he didn't really have to: his own films would do all the talking.

Takashi Miike has quickly established a reputation for outlandishly violent, unpredictable films made in Japan's lower-runs V-Cinema system (the "V" means mostly direct-to-video), all the while working at a Fassbinder-esque rate. This is fitting for a man who thinks that one can only be considered a director when one is actually directing. [2] Miike is perhaps best known for his 2000 film AUDITION, or to be more specific, the film's sickening final act, which served to solidify his status as *provocateur*. There was a time when one of the only venues to see Miike films in the West was at a film festival like Fantasia. [3] As I write this piece, releases from Miike's vast filmography (both bootleg and legitimate) are beginning to come out of the woodwork. Luckily, three of Miike's films, none of which had been readily available in North America, made it onto Fantasia's program.

DEADLY OUTLAW: REKKA (2002)

DEADLY OUTLAW: REKKA (2002) is yet another musing on the violent lives of yakuza and stars venerable V-Cinema veteran Riki Takeuchi, one of Miike's favorite players (see FUDOH: THE NEXT GENERATION (1996) and the DEAD OR ALIVE trilogy [1999-2002]). This time around, the hyperbolic Takeuchi plays Kunisada, an unstable gangster seeking vengeance on the rival gang that assassinated his boss and mentor. Takeuchi's character is volatile to the max and this is emphasized from the top. The first five minutes of the film consists of a montage orgy , as we cut back and forth between the boss's assassination (in which he obstinately refuses to go down), and the reaction of the jailed Kunisada, who builds up enough rage to burst through the protective glass confining him and take on a dozen police officers. This sequence is punctuated by a booming, unrelenting rock score, [4] which abruptly intrudes at key moments in the film.

In the film's quieter parts, distinctly long takes prevail. As much as Miike is known for rapid-fire montage sequences, like the overwhelming opening sequence of 1999's DEAD OR ALIVE, he is also adept at creating a sense of dynamism by orchestrating movement in largely static camera set-ups. A key gun battle in DEADLY OUTLAW: REKKA is fought on a forest road, which Miike chooses to shoot from dozens of meters away in a long take. The combatants are partly obscured by trees; the outcome of the fight is not apparent until the take ends. The effect, allowing us to hear but not see the action, is a tension that one could describe as both oblique and intelligent. In an startling turn, Miike leaps from this sobering, almost patient 'realism' to the brand of kinetic découpage he is known for in the film's hyperviolent climax, when Kunisada trades in his pistol for a rocket launcher and his arch-enemy answers by bringing out a weapon aptly described by one writer as "a cross between a heavy machine gun and a steadicam". [5] Not surprisingly, the final battle resulted in an appreciative ovation from the festival audience.

ONE MISSED CALL (2004) features Miike's take on the expanding so-called "J-horror" cycle made popular in the West with films like RINGU (1998) and JU-ON (2000). [6] In this production, Miike worked as hired gun for a big studio, something he has done before with varying degrees of success. The gimmick that drives the plot this time is cell phones, certainly an obsession for youth in Japan (and growing to ever-annoying levels here). Teenagers at a local high school start hearing an unknown ringtone on their cell phones– a creepy little tune which elicits comparisons to a host of creepy little films. Not answering the call means receiving cryptic messages from a mysterious source and, not surprisingly, those students that get the call end up pushing daisies not long after.

While the material may sound altogether too conventional for this iconoclastic director, the constraints of J-horror do not end up shackling Miike's signature audacity. He manages to bend the rules that make up the secretive "urban legend" aspect of J-horror (and 'regular' horror films as well). So often, the events in films of this kind unfold due to the dismissive aloofness of institutional authorities like the church, police, and mass media. This is certainly how ONE MISSED CALL begins, but Miike takes the material to the opposite extreme in the climactic moment in which gruesome events are broadcasted live on national television.

With Miike, anything is possible. While the ironies of the often implausible events are not lost, the sense that Miike blatantly sets up the viewer for shocks at a nonstop pace prevails and makes for an unyielding aura of obscenely pleasing anxiety. This feeling of happy dread was doubled by the effect of the audience reactions around me. The girl to my left started crawling up into the fetal position, and the girl directly in front of me started breathing in uneven, wheezing gasps. Beyond fear, the prevailing impression the film left is one of appreciation for the technical skill of a director who knows how to push the audience's buttons.

GOZU (2003)

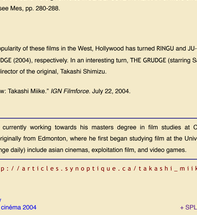
Roughly translated from Japanese as "cow's head", GOZU (2003) is a singular film not only within Takashi Miike's body of work, but that of his contemporaries as well. In a recent interview, Miike states that GOZU is the product of ideas gathered from American horror films. [7] Although he doesn't name names, I would include David Lynch as an inspiration in this case, if for nothing else than Lynch's tendency towards the automatism of the surreal. Other traits shared by these filmmakers call for comparison, including cinematography that mixes saturated colour and shadow and the establishment of an ambient, sonic atmosphere. However, the two directors go their separate ways in their presentation of the absurd; while events of LOST HIGHWAY (1997) and MULHOLLAND DRIVE (2001) are treated with an almost stolid seriousness, GOZU rolls about gleefully in the muck of its own outlandishness.

Hideki Sone plays the inexperienced young yakuza Minami, who is conscripted to put his mentor Ozaki, unforgettably played by Sho Aikawa, on ice. It seems that Ozaki has lost his grip on sanity; in the amazing and hilarious opening scene, Ozaki saves his boss from a tiny Pomeranian he suspects to be a killer dog trained to find and kill yakuza. Minami and Ozaki leave for a small town where Minami intends to quietly execute his *aniki*. There, Minami promptly runs into all sorts of strangeness, losing his mentor in the process. To find Ozaki, the befuddled Minami interacts with the strange townspeople, who seem bent on holding secrets from him. Minami eventually stumbles upon his mentor completely and inconceivably transformed, which sets up a climax that is at once shocking, unfeasible, and uproarious.

With GOZU, Miike effectively pulls the bait-and-switch, setting up an atmosphere of horror and replacing it with comedy via absurd surrealism. The "yinchpin" (pardon the pun) is Hideki Sone as Minami, who, as the only one who has his wits about him, reacts to the strange world around him with straight-faced fear, aggression and panic (not unlike Porky Pig in the land of the Do-Do). He of course does not see what we see— that the array of odd occurrences is tapping into his subconscious, into his fears and desires. Whatever he does, rational explanation always remains slightly out of reach.

A noteworthy congruence between the three films discussed here is their puzzling, almost curt, endings (which I will politely not reveal here). They're not really of the *deus ex machina* variety, even though there is not an ounce of plausibility or logic to the resolutions offered. It is as if Miike brings the narrative up to the point to where he is no longer interested and then lifts the curtain to expose the nature of the construct. In this way, Miike's denouements reveal *film as play*—as artifice, but maybe more importantly, as fun. It reminds me of those times in the yard as a kid. No matter how much fun I was having, at a certain point one of my parents interjected and told me that it was time to wrap it up and do something boring like go to church or eat supper.

I think that Miike will no doubt continue to be a big draw at festivals like Fantasia, in part because of the playfulness of his work. Indeed, to attend Fantasia is to ultimately rediscover the fun that ideally should accompany fervent cinephilia, an insight not lost on the yapping teens often found in the Fantasia ticket line.



Fantasia 2005 will be held July 7-24.

Owen Livermore wrote about the reception of STARSHIP TROOPERS in Synoptique 3.

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1 LAST LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE, directed by Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, ended up capturing a number of awards at Fantasia, including the Gold Jury Prize and the *Association québécoise des critiques du cinéma* Award.

2 Since his humble beginnings in V-Cinema in 1991, Miike has directed well over 55 films and a number of television series. For an enlightening commentary by Miike about the art of filmmaking, see *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike* by Tom Mes (Godalming: FAB Press, 2003).

3 Indeed, Fantasia is noteworthy as one of the film festivals in North America which helped to solidify Miike's international reputation, which took off in 2000 shortly after the release of his critically acclaimed AUDITION.

4 All of the extra diegetic music in the film is provided by a 70s Japanese rock group called The Flower Travellin' Band. Two members of the band were given roles in DEADLY OUTLAW: REKKA. For more on this significant dynamic in the film, see Mes, pp. 280-288.

5 Mes, p. 286.

6 Indicative of the popularity of these films in the West, Hollywood has turned RINGU and JU-ON into THE RING (2002) and THE GRUDGE (2004), respectively. In an interesting turn, THE GRUDGE (starring Sarah Michelle Gellar) was helmed by the director of the original, Takashi Shimizu.

7 Otto, Jeff. "Interview: Takashi Miike." *IGN Filmforce*. July 22, 2004.

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<<< :: Previous entry
Festival du nouveau cinéma 2004

Next entry :: >>>
+ SPLINTER REVIEWS VI

[Back to Top]

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