Kurosawa Kiyoshi

Profile prepared by Richard Suchenski
Articles translated by Kendall Heitzman

Profile

Born in Kobe in 1955, Kurosawa Kiyoshi became interested in filmmaking as an elementary school student after he saw films by Italian horror filmmakers Mario Bava and Gorgio Ferroni. He formed a filmmaking club in high school and made his first Super 8mm short film, *Rokkô*, in 1973. Kurosawa continued making short 8mm films as a student at Rikkyô University, where he began to attend classes on cinema taught by Hasumi Shigehiko, the most important film critic and theorist of his era. Hasumi's auteurist approach and deep admiration for American cinema of the 1950s deeply influenced a generation of Rikkyô students that, in addition to Kurosawa, included Suo Masayuki, Shiota Akihiko, Aoyama Shinji, and Shinozaki Makoto. While still a student, Kurosawa won a prize for his film *Student Days* at the Pia Film Festival in 1978. After presenting *Vertigo College* at Pia in 1980, he worked on Hasegawa Kazuhiko's *The Man Who Stole the Sun* (1979) and Sômai Shinji's *Sailor Uniforms and Machine Guns* (1981). Kurosawa was invited to join the Directors Company, an alternative to the major studios that offered creative freedom to young directors such as Hasegawa and Sômai. Under their auspices, he made his feature film debut with the pink film, *The Kandagawa Wars,* in 1983. Kurosawa next attempted to work directly for a major studio by directing a Nikkatsu Roman Porno entitled *Seminar of Shyness*, but the studio rejected the film, claiming that it lacked the requisite love interest. The film was eventually purchased from Nikkatsu and released as *The Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* in 1985, but the incident gave him a reputation as an idiosyncratic character and made securing funding for other studio projects difficult. Disagreements with Itami Jûzô, who acted in *The Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* and produced Kurosawa's horror film *Sweet Home* (1989), which eventually led to a court case over directorial rights, also made him a difficult figure to hire. Although he was able to make independently produced feature films such as 1991's *The Guard from Underground*, Kurosawa spent most of the next decade working on television programs and direct-to-video V-Cine films. His major international breakthrough occurred with the 1997 release of *Cure*, a stylistically vigorous thriller that crystallized many of Kurosawa's thematic tropes and formal concerns: ruined factories, toxic fields, childless marriages, subtly disquieting compositions, disembodied voices and auditory drones, and a preoccupation with the horror potential of invisible or inscrutable subjects. Kurosawa's new international stature was reinforced when, in 1999, he premiered new films at the Berlin (*License to Live*), Venice (*Barren Illusion*), and Cannes (*Charisma*) Film Festivals.

At a rate of roughly one film per year, Kurosawa has continued to work on innovative projects that straddle the ambiguous boundary line between horror/sci-fi genre cinema and art films, often starring Yakusho Kôji. Apart from writing and directing his own films, Kurosawa has also published several works of film criticism and has served as an instructor at the Film School of Tokyo. In spring 2005, he also took on the position of professor at the new Graduate School of Film and New Media at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, Japan's premier school for the arts.

Books by Kurosawa Kiyoshi

Kurosawa, Kiyoshi. *Cure*. Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1997.
Kurosawa, Kiyoshi. *Eiga no jugyô: eiga bigakkô no kyôshitsu kara*. Tokyo: Seidosha, 2004.
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Kurosawa, Kiyoshi and Shinozaki, Makoto. *Kurosawa Kiyoshi no kyôfu no eigashi*. Tokyo: Seidosha, 2003.
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Kurosawa Kiyoshi Filmography

1973   *Rokkô* (black and white, silent, 12 min., Super 8)
1975   *Violent Teacher: Great Massacre in Broad Daylight* (Bôryoku kyôshi: hakuchû

daisatsuriku, 20 min., Super 8)

1976 *A Record of an Uncertain Trip* (Fukakutei ryokôki, 25 min., Super 8)
*Traffic Signal Blinking (*Shingô chikachika, 13 min., Super 8)

1977 *Set of Fangs* (Shiroi hada ni kuruu kiba, 33 min., Super 8)

1978 *School Days* (45 min., Super 8)

1980 *Vertigo College* (Shigarami gakuen, 63 min., Super 8)

1982 *Night Before Escape* (Tôsô zen'ya, 8 min., Super 8

1983 *Deciding Humanity* (Ningensei no kejime, 3 min., Super 8)
The Kandagawa Wars (Kandagawa inran sensô, 60 min., 35mm)

1985 *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* (Do-Re-Mi-Fa musume no chi wa sawagu, 80 min., 35mm)

1988 *Girl! Girl! Girl!* (Fuyu no omokage, 3 min., Super 8)
Dangerous Stories (Abunai hanashi, 38 min., 35mm)
Sweet Home (101 min., 35mm)

1990 *Wordholic Prisoner* (Modae kurushimu katsuji chudokusha: jigoku no miso-gura, 57 min., TV)

1991 *Guard from Underground* (Jigoku no keibiin, 97 min., 35mm)

1992 *Whirlpool of Joy* (Yorokobi no uzumaki, 24 min., TV)

1993 *Watanabe* (four 24 min. episodes, TV)

1994 *School Ghost Story Hanako-San* (Gakkou no kaidan hanako-san, two 24-min. episodes, TV)
Yakuza Taxi (Yakuza takushi 893 TAXI, 79 min., V-Cine release [shot on 16mm and then released direct-to-video])
Men of Rage (Jan otokotachi no gekijyô, 80 min., V-Cine release)

1995 *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 1-4* (Katte ni shiyagare!, 4 films of 80 min. each, shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, V-Cine releases with brief theatrical runs). Individual titles:
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 1 – The Heist
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 2 – The Escape
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 3 – The Loot
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 4 – The Reversal

1996 *Door 3* (88 min., 35mm)
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 5-6 (Katte ni shiyagare!, 2 films of 80 min. each, shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, V-Cine releases with brief theatrical runs). Individual titles:
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 5 – The Nouveau Riche
Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 6 – The Hero

1997 *Cure* (Kyua, 111 min., 35mm)
*The Revenge – A Visit from Fate (*Fukushû: Unmei no homonsha, 83 min., shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, V-Cine release with brief theatrical run)
The Revenge – The Scar That Never Fades (Fukushû: Kienai kizu ato, 80 min., shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, V-Cine release with brief theatrical run)

1998 *Serpent's Path* (Hebi no michi, 85 min., shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, V-Cine release with brief theatrical run)
Eyes of the Spider (Kumo no hitomi, 83 min., shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, V-Cine release with brief theatrical run)
License to Live (Ningen gôkaku, 109 min., 35mm)

1999 *Charisma* (Karisuma, 103 min., 35 mm)
Barren Illusion (Oinaru gen'ei, 95 min., 35mm)

2000 *Séance* (Korei: ushiro o miru na, 97 min., shot on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, TV)

2001 *Pulse* (Kairo, 118 min., 35mm)

2003 *Bright Future* (Akarui mirai, 115 min., shot on digital video and released on 35mm)
Doppelganger (Dopperugengâ, 107 min., 35mm)

2004 *Ghost Cop* (Rei deka, 10 min., digital video)

2005   *Kazuo Umezu's Horror Theater: Bug's House* (Kyofu gekijo: mushi no ie, 51 min., shot on high-definition video, TV)
     Loft (Shi no otome, 115 min., 35mm)

Further Reading on Kurosawa Kiyoshi

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—Profile prepared by Richard Suchenski

What is Horror Cinema?

By Kurosawa Kiyoshi

Translated by Kendall Heitzman

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  What is cinema? Is it the visuals or the story? Who is a film's real creator? Is it the director? The screenwriter? The producer? Because we don't understand even these most basic things, there is no one who can accurately define genre in film. As a consequence, the dividing line between horror films and non-horror films only functions in situations of sheer convenience, such as marking the shelves at the video rental store. But I wondered whether we could really call this a convenience when—and this is a true story—I saw Andrzej Wajda's *Biesy* [Les Possédés/The Possessed, 1988] blithely shelved in the horror corner at my neighborhood video shop.

  So, would it be much better for film if things such as genre were to disappear? Perhaps. And yet, the trouble is, genre obviously exists. Genre is not on the video store's shelves or in the researcher's academic theories, but has always been there, perhaps from about the time of the birth of cinema. Even today, when someone attempts to make an extremely small-scale film production in some corner of Japan, they can use such words as "We can't do an action film on this budget, but maybe a romantic comedy instead." "I understand," someone says, and immediately sets about working on a script. But what exactly does he understand at that moment? It's a mystery.

  Now, there is the opinion that the problem is not that complicated when it comes to horror films. This is because, although it's almost a tautology, horror films are films that are scary. But is the story really so simple?

  For example, giant monsters flying down from another planet and rampaging through the streets is unarguably scary. People will probably be frightened and flee in confusion, and several among them will even lose their lives. I assuredly do not want to be in that situation. But it isn't horror. The reason being, this scariness is something that can be conquered. Sure enough, a brilliant scientist will locate the weakness of the giant monsters, and when the survivors join forces, the disaster will pass and at last peace will return. The situation is the same for monstrous mass murderers. When the criminal is apprehended or shot dead, life returns to normal. Maybe the stories don't play out so smoothly, but the

people act believing that such a bright future will come to pass. Even if it so happens that the Earth is destroyed, there will still be the final recourse of escaping into space by a rocket.

On the other hand, the scariness we're talking about when we say that horror movies are scary is of a completely different type. For example: On the other side of the fence stands the darkened figure of a human being. When you look carefully, it looks like a friend who has died. You gasp in surprise. In the next instant, the figure disappears. So, how do you overcome this fear? To put it bluntly, there is no way of escaping this fear as long as you live. Your life will undergo a great change from that moment on. Even if the trouble goes away—and in fact no trouble may occur at all—the shadow of the dead will cling to you even if you flee to the farthest reaches of the universe. It is nonsense to argue over whether giant monsters or dead people are scarier. How good or bad a film is isn't dependent simply on how scary it is. I just want to give the generic name "horror films" to that family of films that take as their subject matter *the fear that follows one throughout one's life*.

Therefore, the most typical horror film is *Yotsuya kaidan* [Yotsuya Ghost Story*]. The ghost of Oiwa unexpectedly appears. She doesn't particularly threaten to do anything. But to the people who come face to face with her, her appearance is the single most important thing affecting their lives. The same goes for Western demons; vampires and zombies have essentially the same effect. And yet, *Alien* [dir. Ridley Scott, 1979] is not a horror film because, however frightening it may be, it is possible to overcome an alien invasion theoretically speaking. In the same way, films such as *Psycho* [dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960] or *The Night of the Hunter* [dir. Charles Laughton, 1955] or *Silence of the Lambs* [dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991] are not horror. If that's the case, then what about *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974]? Somehow, it's horror. I've explained why in my essays on these works.

To take it one step further, the zombie films of George A. Romero are not horror. David Cronenberg's works are also not horror. Yet another separate genre of "action films" exists for that group of movies whose climactic battles are decided by firearms.

And what to do with the so-called mad scientist films, such as *Frankenstein* [dir. James Whale, 1931] or *The Fly* [dir. Kurt Neumann, 1958; dir. David Cronenberg, 1986]? Or the Grand Guignol films such as *Il Mulino delle donne di pietra* [Mill of the Stone Women, dir. Giorgio Ferroni, 1960] and *Les Yeux sans visage* [Eyes Without a Face, dir. Georges Franju, 1959]? If we suppose that what is being treated in these works is the madness of humans, how are they different from the mass-murderer films? The problem is whether or not they have the smell of death. That is to say, the decisive split between those films that are horror and those that are not is whether or not, when there is a dead body in front of you, there is a sign that it could possibly come alive and rise up. In that case, unfortunately, *The Fly* would be excluded. And do we exclude *The Wolf Man* [dir. George Waggner, 1941] as well? No, we'll include it. What about *Ugetsu monogatari* [Ugetsu, dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, 1953]? Or *Sinnui yauwan* [Chinese Ghost Story, dir. Siu-Tung Ching, 1987]? Or *Shock Corridor* [dir. Samuel Fuller, 1963]? Or *The Car* [dir. Elliot Silverstein, 1977]? Or Nakagawa Nobuo's *Jigoku* [The Sinners of Hell, 1960]?

No one knows whether these are horror or not. But just by uttering the word "horror," countless works that cross eras, nationality, and authorship loom in front of our eyes, buzzing "me too, me too" all together. Just like a crowd of zombies. Now that I think about it, since there are no works that have failed to change my life even a little bit, all films are horror films.

When people are trapped in the maze of genre, they arrive at this kind of reckless conclusion.

—Translated by Kendall Heitzman

* Translator's note: This story, first renowned as a Kabuki play, has been adapted to film numerous times, most famously by Nakagawa Nobuo in 1959 (*Tôkaidô Yotsuya kaidan*). Other versions include ones directed by Furumu Takuji (1928), Kito Shigeru (1937), Kinoshita Keisuke (1949), Mori Masaki (1956), Misumi Kenji (1959), Toyoda Shirô (1966), Katô Tai (1961), Mori Issei (1969), and Fukasaku Kinji (1994).

Horror Films After Aum: Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Cure*

By Abe Kashô

Translated by Kendall Heitzman

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Kurosawa Kiyoshi—who positions himself as a descendant of Godard, B-movie horror, and 1950s American filmmakers, beginning with the recently deceased Samuel Fuller—understands the subtle truth that stories, however trite they may be, become monstrosities as long as they are cinema. Film is not the same thing as story. Rather, the substance of film is in the difference between the two. To take it one step further, it is precisely because the story is trite that we can appreciate something intoxicating and even ominous in the sudden pulsation of films, including their narratives. In this way, the minutiae of film expand. This is a movement that exceeds the intentions of the director, and thus the director cannot be the subject of film. Hollow spaces, light in opposition to realism, the oddness of the characters, the wonderful landscapes and the momentary scraping of the shot—these motifs that are common to many Kurosawa films are organized in order to make cinema itself actually buzz and shake. Through such works, which lack coherence on the basis of construction, he never stops raising the incisive question, "Can we call this cinema?" That the peculiar desires of the viewers can recognize even (especially) this as cinema is what Kurosawa's films ultimately prove. Yet this is also something possibly essential to the existence of the media known as cinema.

His new film *Cure* is getting very good reviews. This is probably because the organic union of the work's details was seriously planned. A series of bodies are found with the letter X carved into them just below the neck. The various perpetrators are easily caught, but they have no connection to one another. Is there no one instigating these random incidents of murder? In due course, the detective played by Yakusho Kôji encounters a strange form of existence: a young man named Mamiya (Hagiwara Masato) with amnesia who cannot even remember things that happened seconds earlier, who disperses his entire interiority and says he is able to grasp everything exterior to himself. The detective, Takabe, in coming face to face with him, is consumed with fear that what should be an obvious boundary between pursuer (the one who investigates) and pursued (the one being investigated) is gradually melting away (the situation resembles the impossibility of treating schizophrenia). And so Mamiya's constant refrain, "Who are you?" is directed at both the characters in the drama and at the audience watching it. Through the film, the audience is shown its own intrinsically held "peculiar desires," subjected to a transference of Mamiya's schizophrenia. The audience is also left consumed with fear, that what should be "an obvious boundary" between film and self is gradually melting away. To that end, two attributes are operating in this film.

The first is "sociality." This is a horror film "after Aum."** Through hypnotic suggestion that utilizes Mesmer's study of animal magnetism, Mamiya draws out murderous intent from the depths of the unconscious of random targets. That intent is latent, but it becomes overt through blinking lights or the sound of dripping water, and then a murder occurs. And yet, no memory of Mamiya remains in the people who have thus committed murder. This is because he is completely empty. Mamiya has nothing except the ability to distribute those who act as his surrogates. It was Asahara Shôkô who caricatured—echoing Roland Barthes's *L'Empire des signes* [Empire of Signs, 1970]—the composition peculiar to Japan in which the center of power is nothing but a vacuum (with Asahara as the one pulling the strings to various people actually carrying out the crimes). Now, as the whole story behind the Aum Incident is becoming clear, people ridicule Asahara. But isn't that vacuum itself a necessary condition for "charisma"? Or, we can call the ominousness of the vacuum itself animal magnetism, following the lead of the film? Just like Hagiwara's character in the film, Asahara had the magnetism to make people schizophrenic.

The audience loses the ability to discriminate between self and other (film) through not only the shape of Mamiya's character, which echoes Asahara, but also through the intrinsic movement of the work. We can perhaps label this movement "modulation." First, there is the modulation of space. The spinning washing machine that is empty; the hollow spaces that are introduced; Mamiya's internal emptiness—from these, emptiness rumbles throughout the film as a system. Next is the modulation of time. Murders and jumps from rooftops happen quite easily, with no concern that they be branded important. These "instants" hit the viewer over and over again, and the viewer's subconscious balloons. But, if that's all there is, it isn't very different from a roller-coaster film. Yet Kurosawa casts into doubt the additive property of time itself. No matter what the other characters say to Mamiya, the amnesiac repeatedly asks them the same question, negating the flow of time. In a sense different from the one

mentioned above, the strangeness of the flow of time moves to the foreground. The fact that this kind of modulation of time merges with the modulations of light and sound forms the menace/marvel of this film. There is the repetitive shading of light, caused by the movement of the clouds at the moment when Mamiya first appears on the beach in Chiba; the screen full of darkness that barely accommodates visibility when Mamiya is present; the impression that light itself is being encroached upon when the video screen occupies the film screen. Even the horizontal tracking shot that produces filmic time is completely suspended in between human centered camera movement, which is motivated by character action, and the mechanistic tracking shot that occurs without regard for human subjectivity.

The audience comes face to face with the fact of Mamiya's mesmerism, which is gradually revealed. And so it happens that the audience shudders to think that it itself is mesmerized by Mamiya. The various blinking of lights and sounds of dripping water in the film then become even more threatening. These circumstances only have one meaning: More than simply attempting to portray fear as the subject matter, Kurosawa attempts to turn the film itself into something horrifying (here again, it has the same basis as the Aum news, which made us wonder if it wasn't making use of a subliminal effect in any given situation). But in making the film itself something horrifying, Kurosawa has cast off the yoke of the horror-film genre. As a result, he has faced real fear and is able to liberate the time of horror cinema, usually closed shut on account of being tied up by normal conventions (for example, remember Kurosawa's own *Jigoku no keibiin* [The Guard from Underground, 1992]). The major factor in that liberation is the aforementioned "sociality," which performed the function of tearing apart the pre-established harmony of genre.

But in this film Kurosawa is doing almost nothing complicated (if he does, it is only in the emplotted affinity in the film between Takabe's mentally-ill wife, played by Nakagawa Anna, and Mamiya, which is necessarily reflected in the interpretation of the narrative). If we make Takabe/Mamiya the axis, the film follows nothing but an unusually classical path, "from parallel montage to shot reverse shot" (but needless to say, the trap of "inserted images" intervenes). Yet despite this, it is open for debate whether, at the conclusion of the film, the "transmission" of the "gospel" from Mamiya to Takabe is completed or not at the "non-place" of the abandoned hospital, and the jury is out even on whether, ultimately, a cure/salvation comes to Takabe or Mamiya. But rather than endlessly pondering that, isn't it more important that even the shot in the commonplace family restaurant right before the credits roll—after the entire film has "passed"—itself had to become horrifying?

It is said that *Cure* required five years from conception to execution. Doesn't the model for it appear in "Kikaku kaigi *Karisuma*" [Planning Meeting: Charisma], included in *Eizô no karisuma* [Charisma of the Image]? Fans of *Cure* can verify this for themselves. Yakusho Kôji's name is also inscribed therein.

—Translated by Kendall Heitzman