

Godzilla vs. Dracula: Hammer Horror Films in Japan

Transnational studies of popular film genres too often impose a Hollywood-derived understanding of generic categories on another culture's cinema, or else conceive of national genres as essentially separate from Hollywood's hegemony. In practice, however, any given culture's popular film genres consist of a commingling of native traditions and international influences, with the generic corpus composed of foreign as well as domestic specimens. For example, the Japanese filmic category of frightening and monstrous material known as *kaiki eiga* – a phrase often translated as “horror movies” but more literally meaning “strange” or “bizarre” films – encompasses both domestically made adaptations of traditional Japanese ghost stories as well as foreign horror film series like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, contextualizing the genre within transnational pop culture.

In light of this, it is tempting to think of the *kaiki* genre as merely the Japanese analogue to the Anglophone “horror movie.” To date there has been little if any attempt in either English or Japanese scholarship to theorize a difference between *kaiki* and horror film, despite conspicuous cases in which the definitions diverge. Most notably, Western academics, critics, and fans continue to ascribe a privileged place to *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, 1954) as a seminal work of Japanese horror film despite the fact that the Godzilla franchise has historically not been understood to be part of the *kaiki* genre in Japan. To demonstrate how *kaiki* both aligns with and deviates from the Anglophone category of horror film – as well as the importance of examining the presence of foreign film in any discussion of “national genres” – I will consider the Japanese critical reception of *Godzilla* during the late 1950s in light of the concurrent and immense popularity in Japan of the United Kingdom's Hammer horror films – notably *Horror of Dracula* (1958). Peter Cushing's Dr. Frankenstein and Christopher Lee's Count Dracula took Japan by storm

at a time when the *kaiki* genre was going through an identity crisis brought on by atomic age science fiction horrors like *Godzilla*. The mass popularity of the Hammer films in Japan – with their period settings and shocking acts of personal, bodily violence – played a pivotal role in re-asserting the traditional gothic, suspenseful markers of *kaiki*, effectively banishing the more conspicuously postmodern *Godzilla* from the genre.

In 1957 a small British studio by the name of Hammer Films released *The Curse of Frankenstein*, a watershed (or perhaps we should say bloodshed) moment in the history of horror cinema and screen violence. The first of Hammer's innumerable Technicolor updates of classic Universal Studios monster movies, the international commercial success of *The Curse of Frankenstein* and its follow-up, 1958's *Horror of Dracula*, made global horror icons of stars Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee and ignited a worldwide revival of B-grade gothic horror during the ensuing decade, inspiring everything from Roger Corman's Edgar Allan Poe adaptations starring Vincent Price to the Technicolor fever dreams of Italian horror master Mario Bava. In the case of Japanese *kaiki* cinema, the Hammer films appeared simultaneously with the Shintoho studio's own lurid, colour updates of 19th-century ghost stories such as director Nakagawa Nobuo's *The Ghost Story of Yotsuya* (*Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, 1959), widely considered the pinnacle of domestic *kaiki* filmmaking.

Horror movie fans often reflect on this period as the dawn of “modern horror”, when films like *Psycho* (1960) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) drove a stake through the heart of the classic, gothic mode of horror first embodied by Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. As previous horror scholars have pointed out, however, such a teleological conception ignores the fact that such films appeared almost simultaneously with what was actually the zenith of popularity for the gothic horror movie

in terms of international production (Hutchings, *The Horror Film* 27-29). At a time when the definitions of the horror genre were being challenged, Hammer horror asserted the traditional gothic markers of period settings, creepy cobwebbed castle corridors, and monsters from a folkloric past stalking unwitting victims blinded by the rationality of the Enlightenment. But Hammer brought something new to cinema screens as well: splashes of bright-red Technicolor blood and a more overtly sexual Count Dracula in the persona of Christopher Lee – all of which seems rather tame today, but which at the time drew no small amount of critical outrage. Nina Hibbon's 1958 review of *Horror of Dracula* in *The Daily Worker* typifies the critical response of the time:

I went to see *Dracula*, a Hammer film, prepared to enjoy a nervous giggle. I was even ready to poke gentle fun at it. I came away revolted and outraged... Laughable nonsense? Not when it is filmed like this, with realism and with the modern conveniences of colour and wide screen... This film disgusts the mind and repels the senses. (qtd. in Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond* 9)

The British censors routinely gave the Hammer pictures an 'X' rating, and even then the gorier scenes had to be excised before granted a release. The American releases were similarly censored.

In Japan, however, Hammer films played uncut, and the critical reaction to their bloody displays was far more accepting than the cries of outrage heard elsewhere around the globe. *Kinema Junpō*, Japan's longest-running and most prestigious film magazine, said of *Dracula*,

Scenes that will likely cause weak-willed women and children to spontaneously scream and throw both hands over their eyes appear one on the heels of another. The reasons for this are exceedingly simple – Technicolor, and special effects... The script, the performances, the cinematography, every aim and effort is put entirely toward the single focus of creating a sense of gloom and instilling terror, and on this account, we can say the film is a total success. (Sugiyama 120)

Critic Sugiyama Shizuo zeroes in on the same elements Hibbon found so deplorable (the "realism" of violent special effects photographed in colour) but praises the film for just that reason, and neither Japanese critics nor censors expressed any objection to their presence.



Although there appears to be no truth to the rumor that Hammer routinely prepared a "Japanese cut" of each film that included extra bits of gore, the filmmakers were likely aware that scenes which would not make it past the UK censors would be able to be retained in the Japanese release. Indeed, the original, uncut version of their landmark Dracula film was thought lost until 2011 when a print was discovered in the Tokyo National Film Center archive, Japan being one of the few places in the world where the film had screened in its complete form.

As mentioned, Hammer horror invaded Japan at a particularly pivotal moment in the history of the discourse of *kaiki eiga*, a phrase most often rendered in English as "horror movies", although quite a bit of nuance is lost in translation. Nowadays *kaiki eiga* means something more like "gothic horror" and is reserved for classic B-pictures based on traditional Japanese ghost stories as well as imported period horror pictures like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Since the 1980s, more recent, contemporarily-set films like American slasher movies or the homegrown but globally successful and influential "J-horror" pictures like *Ring* (1998) have been referred to as *horā eiga*, using the English transliteration of the word "horror." But in 1957, the year Hammer unleashed *The Curse of Frankenstein* on an unsuspecting world, *kaiki eiga* was experiencing an identity crisis in Japan, even as the notion of the "horror movie" itself was in flux globally during the 1950s. Films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Them!* (1954), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), and arguably the most well-known example, Japan's own *Godzilla*, were immensely popular, and their distinctly of-the-moment fears of nuclear Armageddon blurred the boundaries of horror and science fiction. Universal Studios even tried re-branding their classic 1930s and 40s horror cycles as "science fiction films" (Altman 78-79), but although a case might be made for *Frankenstein's Monster*, it was difficult to see the sci-fi in

Count Dracula, The Mummy, or the Wolf Man.

While Hollywood publicity departments toyed with dropping the horror label altogether, Japanese critics debated whether the meaning of *kaiki* allowed for the inclusion of science fiction. In the summer of 1957 *Kinema Junpō* ran a feature series of articles collectively titled “The World of *Kaiki eiga*,” and authored by leading film critics of the day including Izawa Jun and the world-renowned Japanese film historian Satō Tadao. Leading off the feature is Izawa’s “What is *Kaiki*?” which is largely an elegy for traditional Japanese ghost story movies. Izawa performs a bit of self-orientalism when he argues that the Buddhist cosmologies of these tales of karmic retribution – which usually involve the ghost of a murder victim seeking vengeance on their tormentors – are the only variety of *kaiki* film that truly resonate with Japanese audiences. Of the science fiction films that were threatening to supplant the ghost story adaptations in popularity, Izawa finds the Hollywood product admirable enough, arguing that *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* works not because it plays on contemporary fears of atomic radiation, but conveys the conviction of its culture’s Judeo-Christian “Wrath of God” motif. Domestic films in the same vein as *Godzilla* supposedly lack this dimension and can never rise above the level of pale imitation, making them unfit heirs to the *kaiki* label in Izawa’s eyes (44-46).

In the same feature Satō Tadao takes the opposite stance, arguing that science fiction is the future of the *kaiki* genre. In “The Appeal of *Kaiki*” Satō decries the same ghost story adaptations Izawa found admirable as outdated relics, unable to speak to (or frighten) a young, postwar Japanese audience. Children of the day were not scared by Buddhist karmic retribution, but instead the threat of nuclear holocaust which Japan had uniquely and unfortunately had a firsthand taste. This threat was embodied most obviously in the radioactive form of *Godzilla*. In stark contrast to Izawa, Satō boldly declares “what must be considered the modern-day ghost story is the science fiction film” (46-48).

Twelve years later *Kinema Junpō* revisited the world of *kaiki*, this time devoting an entire special issue to the genre in 1969. A glance at the cover reveals the extent that the transnational nature of popular commercial cinema must be considered in defining any particular culture’s film genres. While science fiction had loomed large over the *kaiki* debate in 1957, this time *Godzilla* and his radioactive ilk were completely absent from the discussion. The cover of the issue features a full-size illustration of Christopher Lee as Dracula, and the pages within are devoted exclusively to gothic pictures in the Hammer mode and their Japanese ghost story

counterparts. No sense of the generic identity crisis from 1957 lingers; the entire issue assumes an implicitly understood definition of *kaiki* that excludes Japan’s most famous monster. Clearly Satō Tadao’s prediction that science fiction was the future of the genre had not come to pass. Yet *Godzilla* and other Japanese sci-fi horrors had continued to flourish throughout the 1960s. What had happened to make *Kinema Junpō* rethink their inclusion in the *kaiki* club?

It turns out the magazine’s 1957 feature had unwittingly predicted the real future of the genre when it placed a publicity photo of Peter Cushing in Hammer’s just-released *Curse of Frankenstein* directly above the title “What is *Kaiki*?” The film was apparently too new to allow much discussion of it in the articles that made up the feature, apart from a mention that the film’s emphasis on the doctor over his monstrous creation hews closer to Mary Shelly’s original novel than previous Hollywood versions (Shimizu 48-49). However, *Frankenstein*’s imminent success in Japan – as well as the subsequent slew of Hammer horrors – demanded a place of prominence in the discourse of *kaiki*. Appearing concurrently with a grand revival of traditional Japanese ghost story adaptations helmed by director Nakagawa Nobuo – widely considered the greatest domestic *kaiki* filmmaker – Hammer played an instrumental role in reasserting the gothic definition of the genre, whose hallmarks were far removed from the everyday world, period settings where ghosts or vampires stalked their victims through shadowy moonlit corridors. Science fiction horrors like *Godzilla* would no longer be considered as potentially part of the *kaiki* genre, instead given their own category to inhabit, the *kaijū* or “strange beast” movie, although in the West *Godzilla* continues to be considered as a prime example of Japanese horror cinema (Balmain). When asked about the difference between the Japanese conception of *kaiki* and the Anglophone concept of horror film, famed “J-horror”



director Kurosawa Kiyoshi specifically invokes Hammer as an example of the former, saying, “*Kaiki’s* nuance might be termed ‘gothic horror’ in English. It’s things like Hammer movies and *The Ghost Story of Yotsuya*, period pieces in which ghosts or mysterious figures like Dracula appear, and the whole movie has a sense of taking place ‘not now,’ but ‘long long ago’” (Kurosawa).

It was not only the surface trappings of Hammer horror that distinguished them so utterly from something like *Godzilla*. Their infamous acts of violence, which incensed British and American censors but thrilled the Japanese critics, were also instrumental in redrawing the boundaries of the *kaiki* genre in a post-sci-fi world. The central act of violence in *Godzilla* is the creature’s rather one-sided rampage through the streets of Tokyo, which leaves the metropolis in utter ruin, while the combined might of the Japanese self-defense forces leave nary a scratch on the monster. In Hammer’s *Dracula* the violence is peppered throughout the picture’s runtime, and is comparatively tit-for-tat. For the first time in cinema history Count Dracula’s feasting on his victims actually draws onscreen blood, but the most transgressive acts of violence are the multiple stakes driven through the hearts of the vampires by their human hunters with spurts of bright red blood, screaming, and writhing. In fact, it was the violence directed against the vampires, not their victims, that drew the most critical outrage in the UK and America. In the case of Dracula’s female minions this could take on an uncomfortably sexual subtext, as in an infamous scene from 1966’s *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* in which nightgown-clad actress Barbara Shelley is pinned down spread-eagle by a group of monks while their leader drives the phallic stake through her body. But whether it was Dracula draining the blood of a victim or Professor Van Helsing driving a stake through his heart, the violence in Hammer horror was bodily and personal, depicting attacks on the flesh of the films’ central characters. *Godzilla’s* rampage, on the other hand, is rather impersonal, and his victims are the anonymous masses: the film’s four main characters all observe the destruction of Tokyo from a safe distance. While the body count presumably numbers in the thousands, apart from one fleeting shot of a group of people caught in *Godzilla’s* radioactive fire breath, there are no onscreen depictions of *Godzilla* physically harming anyone. We never see him step on anyone; we never see him picking up and devouring a person (compare this to 1933’s *King Kong*, which includes both trampling and devouring shots). The onscreen acts of violence in *Godzilla* are almost entirely collateral, and their depicted victim is the architecture of Tokyo more so than its denizens.

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Perhaps the most important role these differing aesthetics of violence play in banishing science fiction from the definition of the *kaiki* genre lay in the contrast between two distinct expressive modes of fear: panic versus dread. *Godzilla* and other 1950s science-fiction horror hybrids like *Them!* (1954) and *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (1956) juxtapose their depictions of impersonal and unfocused carnage with shots of crowds fleeing as buildings collapse behind them. There is rarely a suspenseful build-up to these shots, no tense moments of people huddled together praying the monster passes them over before they are forced to flee for their lives. The emotional tenor of these sequences is sudden, mass panic. Indeed, panic replaces dread as the main expressive mode of fear in the apocalyptic sci-fi/horror hybrid. While playing on timely fears of a surprise nuclear holocaust, this also had the unintended consequence of demarcating dread and suspense as an older, “classic” mode of horror – and *kaiki* – filmic expression.

Dread, which relies foremost on suspense, returned to cinema screens with a Technicolor vengeance in the Hammer films. Compare the mass panic of *Godzilla* to a typical moment in a Hammer *Dracula* film: the young heroine, alone in her bedroom, stares frozen in wide-eyed terror as Christopher Lee appears at the window, the vampire slowly slinking toward his prey before sinking his fangs into her throat. The sense of horror relies on a careful, protracted development of suspense in anticipation of Dracula’s violent attack. Suspense is not exclusive to horror (or *kaiki*), of course, but as Noël Carroll notes in his work on the horror genre it has proven to be an effective and venerable tool in the horror filmmaker’s repertoire. Carroll identifies suspense as “an emotional state that accompanies such a scene *up to the point when* one of the competing alternative outcomes is actualized” and goes on to argue that, in the horror genre, the “alternative outcomes” are weighted towards a likely evil resolution (137-138, emphasis added). The

sense of dread in *Dracula*, then, lies not in the actual act of the vampire's bloody attack but in the protracted anticipation of it. In fact, as the scene just described plays out in *Horror of Dracula*, the camera abruptly fades out the moment *before* Dracula bites his victim's throat, a quintessential example of what Stephen Prince

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notes as the “spatial displacement” of violent acts in classical Hollywood style filmmaking (208). In contrast, the effectiveness of *Godzilla* in evoking sudden panic is such that it reframes fear as a reaction to a violent event rather than an anticipation of it. Compared to the Hammer films we find far less suspense in *Godzilla*; in its place we witness the protracted destruction of Tokyo. The sequence is horrific, but stylistically enough of a departure from the classic mode of *kaiki* depictions of dread and suspense embodied in Hammer's gothic revival that Japanese film critics, publicity departments, and mass audiences eventually came to perceive *Godzilla* and *Dracula* as two completely different generic species.

As mentioned earlier, Japan's own *kaiki* film production reached a peak of excellence concurrently with the appearance of the Hammer films. In 1959, one year after Hammer's *Dracula*, director Nakagawa Nobuo created the most acclaimed of many film versions of Japan's most famous *kaiki* tale, *The Ghost Story of Yotsuya*. It was the first widescreen, colour version of the legend – just as Hammer's *Horror of Dracula* was the first widescreen, colour adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel – and like its English counterpart, the film introduced a shocking amount of onscreen bloody violence. In their 1969 special issue devoted entirely to *kaiki* film, *Kinema Junpō* named Nakagawa's *The Ghost Story of Yotsuya* one of the two supreme masterpieces of the *kaiki* genre. The other was *Horror of Dracula*, highlighting the crucial role a minor British film studio and its bloody acts of violence played in defining a genre of Japanese popular film, and reminding us that any discussion of national cinema must account for the transnational nature of the medium.

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The Ghost Story of Yotsuya (1959)

大東宝が放つ空想映画の巨篇

水爆大怪獣映画

ゴジラ

東宝
原作・香山滋
監督・本多猪四郎

津絶敵異、死の放射能を
奈する吾紀の怪獣ゴジラ!!

宝田 明
河内 桃子
平田 昭彦
志村 喬

堀 雄二
山村 聰
上原 謙
木下 敬
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