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Patterns of Shadows: Japanese Crime Gothic as Neo-Gothic

Abstract: Contemporary Japanese crime writers frequently resort to gothic themes and conventions in their works. This is hardly surprising, since Japanese detective fiction, which dominated Japanese popular literature in the early twentieth century, began as a reaction to nineteenth-century gothic crime stories of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle. This article discusses crime novels of Otsuichi, Natsuo Kirino, and Fuminori Nakamura as examples of Japanese crime gothic, focusing on the Japanese conceptualization of monstrosity in relation to the figure of the criminal, complementarity of the victim and killer characters, and aestheticisation of violence in the context of Japanese aesthetics of impermanence and imperfection.

Keywords: Japanese Crime Fiction; Japanese Gothic; *Ero guro nansensu*; Monstrosity; Gothic Aesthetics.

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Within the growing scholarship on Asian Gothic, Japan seems to hold a special place and the links between the gothic and Japanese culture have more or less been accepted as set. In 2000, Henry J. Hughes drew attention to the long history of gothic inclinations in Japanese literature and called for the recognition of the specific socio-cultural conditions under which Japanese Gothic had evolved. Hughes argues that to understand the distinctive positioning of Japanese Gothic texts, where good and evil are inseparable, universal harmony is sustained by accommodating rather than eradicating evil, and the final aim of the hero tends to be the renunciation of suffering through becoming one with the sublime nothingness (*mu*), it is necessary to evaluate them against the Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian philosophical frameworks within which these texts were created.¹ Similarly, Charles Shirō Inoue observes that “Japanese culture is profoundly Gothic”² if one is to consider Gothic as a “continuously evolving set of aesthetic values”³ rather than a fixed form tied to its Eurocentric formula. For Inoue, Japanese Gothic is therefore part of a broader, more inclusive phenomenon he calls Pangothic that can accommodate its

animistic model of reality, where fear is inclusive of both reverence and horror, gods and monsters are both ambiguous and commonplace, and the barrier between the living and the dead is porous.⁴

Much of this discussion invokes the need of recalibrating the perception of the supernatural to the animistic worldview informing Japanese texts that assumes a different relationship between human and non-human characters than that described in Western Gothic. Interestingly, however, it is the realistic and non-supernatural Japanese Gothic texts, most notably exemplified by the works of Edogawa Rampo, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, or Jun'ichirō Tanizaki that have frequently been found more obviously "Gothic". Subverting social norms, obsessively fascinated with sex and death, and occasionally refuting logic, such texts have sometimes been known as *ero guro nansensu*, or erotic grotesque nonsense, the label that Sadami Suzuki claims characterized Japanese mass culture in the late 1920s and early 1930s⁵ but continues to thrive till this day. Additionally, the focus on crime and criminal mysteries and modern, often Western-influenced stylization of such texts (particularly in the works of Rampo), invites comparisons with nineteenth-century Western authors like Edgar Allan Poe, or Arthur Conan Doyle, whose interest in depicting bodies and minds of devious criminals made them influential for the development of both Gothic and crime fiction.⁶

Suzuki argues that the sophisticated and Westernized trend of *ero guro nansensu*, as well as the general turn to mysticism in the Taishō period (1912-1926), developed as a reaction to "the boredom of everyday life ... a boredom only the urban

middle classes could afford."⁷ Mark W. Driscoll observes that the erotic-grotesque imparts a fascination with murder and suicide, and concludes that "[w]hat begins as a desire to overcome the declining rate of pleasure ends up as an orgy of human annihilation."⁸ Unsurprisingly, many of the texts that fall under this category contain themes connected with crime and some, like the works of Rampo, are also considered prime examples of early detective fiction. The popular author Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889-1936) described detective fiction as a combination of "nonsense, humor, adventure, grotesque, mystery",⁹ which differs slightly from the way the genre is typically viewed in the West. Japanese detective fiction, divided into realistic *honkaku* (also translated as "authentic" or "regular", showcasing scientific deduction methods) and alternative *henkaku* strands ("inauthentic" or "irregular", incorporating the fantastic and anticipating science fiction), was partial to the *ero guro* stylistics hiding "profound philosophical questions underneath the ostentatious displays of flesh, bad taste, and silliness."¹⁰ The moral ambiguity of criminals and detectives operating beneath the surface of reality, and the general structure of detective fiction where "the present is overdetermined by past events, and where the detective's activities inevitably function to reveal the secrets of the past"¹¹ are also a familiar concern for Gothic.

While it is hard to ignore Driscoll's arguments that the erotic-grotesque and its pursuit of stimulation through suicide and murder are part of the commodified eroticism that capitalism uses to replace the basic human desire for life,¹² it is also possible to see the decadence of such texts in the light of the Japanese aesthetics of

imperfection and impermanence, that foreshadows Gothic's interests in liminality and difference. Writing about the Japanese sense of beauty, Tanizaki remarks:

We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates. ... Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.¹³

Since in Japanese Gothic, good and evil are intrinsically connected and darkness is inseparable from light it is not unusual to find that Gothic texts, "draped in darkness, where submerged monsters may safely surface, where rape and murder may be carried out unseen"¹⁴ find their beauty in shadows. But while the hedonism or decadence of such texts can be seen as a mindless pursuit of pleasure spurred by boredom and idle curiosity, or a form of rebellion against socio-cultural norms, they can also function as the extension of the Japanese aesthetics "deeply rooted in the glorious imperfection of the present moment and its relationship to the realities of the past."¹⁵

This article focuses on contemporary Japanese crime gothic fiction, i.e. texts that invite gothic interpretations and are structured around crime plots. Some of these texts have been constructed as puzzling criminal mysteries, while others use the motif of crime to focus on broader social issues. The article discusses selected works of three prominent Japanese authors – Otsuishi, Natsuo Kirino and Fuminori Nakamura – that are available in English translation. Each of the novels resonates with Gothic sensibilities employed in the

construction of characters, plots, and settings, and views death and murder as an inseparable part of being human. Unlike in classic detective novels, the purpose of these texts lies not as much in solving the mystery and bringing perpetrators to justice but rather in identifying with the victims and the killers, who – it is implied – are linked by a strong invisible bond and often very much the same. While dealing with monstrous acts and monstrous people, all the discussed texts adopt the same attitude as the supernatural texts discussed by Inoue and Hughes – demonstrating the fluidity and permeability of such categories, their interdependence, and their mundane ordinariness. This article will therefore focus on the Japanese conceptualization of monstrosity through the portrayal of the serial killer, the complementarity of the victim and the villain characters, and the anesthetization of violence.

At Home with Monsters – Everybody Can Be a Serial Killer

Written in 2002 with a follow-up in 2008, *Goth (Gosu)* by Otsuichi is by far the most obvious place to start. Categorized as a "light novel" (*raito noberu*) – a serialized pulp magazine style novel, often existing in a close relationship with manga and targeting young adult demographics (middle and high schoolers) – the book is an excellent example of the *goshikku* style and the Gothic novel in one. The transliterated term *goshikku*, which Inoue speculates was first introduced during the Meiji era (1868-1912) in relation to foreign literary and artistic trends,¹⁶ today refers predominantly to various pop-cultural phenomena, such as the Gothic Lolita (*gosu-rori*)

fashion, J-Goth bands, gothic video games, or dark manga, and is mostly expressive of their visual stylistics. Otsuichi's stylization of his main heroine, Morino, as a light-detesting, anti-social, black-clad Goth who "frequently expresses an intense interest in torture methods and execution devices"¹⁷ matches his personal experience of the subculture he describes as inspired by "Victorian Gothic horror novels" and characterized by "a fascination with the dark side of humanity."¹⁸ The book conforms to several well-known Gothic formulae pertaining to the choice of locations and imagery, character design, plot elements, and framing devices that fragment the narrative and invoke multiple narrators to tell the story. Otsuichi also explains that the structure of the book was modeled on the *honkaku* mysteries that showcase deduction skills and lead to a surprising discovery, which Satomi Saito describes as "authentic" modern detective fiction that celebrates scientific reasoning.¹⁹

The novel links its seemingly unrelated narratives through the ubiquitous presence of its two central characters – Kamiyama Itsuki and Yoru Morino – two teenagers bonding over their common interest in the morbid and the macabre. The two also share a deeper connection, that of predator and prey, a future victim and a future killer, although this is obvious only to one of them. Despite his young age, Itsuki is a full-blown psychopath quick to learn that his survival depends on the ability to remain undetected and not attracting attention to himself. He recalls with a sense of amusement that while "coloring in a doll's face with black marker and cutting off its arms and legs"²⁰ raises a lot of concern in adults, drawing rainbows and flowers puts

them at ease. Through his narratorial voice, he explains: "By understanding the value system the world preferred, remembering and feigning it, I was able to convince others that I was free of problems."²¹ Morino, on the other hand seems to be a magnet for serial killers, as we learn that her "deviant" behavior is just a pose and a protection mechanism employed in the aftermath of a childhood trauma. Drawn to Itsuki, whose otherness she finds appealing, she mistakes his "inner darkness" for a sign of sensitivity, unable to see the markings of a monster.

Itsuki remains firmly convinced that "[t]here are two kinds of humans: those who kill and those who are killed"²² The killers may try concealing their true nature but "one day, they would have no choice but to kill. They would have to leave their acceptable lives and go hunting."²³ He identifies with such "hunters" and is consequently portrayed throughout the stories aiding and abetting murderers or interfering with them to save Morino. It is clear that Itsuki's interest in her is purely instrumental, driven by his curiosity of her ability to attract predators and his desire to control her fate and exercise the exclusive right to her person. He alternates between saving her and putting her in danger to secretly assert the ownership over her life. Throughout the novel, Itsuki only kills one person – a teenage serial killer from the same school whose narcissism-driven recklessness he finds threatening to his own well-being. The boy Itsuki kills is infatuated by his own difference: "I was destined to kill. That's the only way I can look at it. Just as a vampire has no choice but to drink human blood, I have no choice but to kill people."²⁴ This sets him apart from other killers described in the book, whose acts of

cruelty are part of a mundane routine, as ordinary as their lives and professions.

The novel's collection of serial killers is intriguing, especially as we are given insight into their thoughts through various narrative devices. While the narrative perspective used in the book is likely a nod to the popular form of "I-novel" (*shishōsetsu*), a form of autobiographical fiction whose main aim is "to convey the author's self authentically through the transparency of language"²⁵ dominant in twentieth-century Japanese fiction, Otsuchi's use of multiple narrators has other consequences. The narration in the novel is carried mostly by Itsuko, but we also have the first-person perspective of Natsumi – the sister of a victim and the next target of a killer; a photographer who kills schoolgirls to recreate a picture of a child-saint he once saw; and a dog trained to kill his owner's abusive step-father. The stories of two deviants – the hand-collecting chemistry teacher Mr Shinohara and the police officer Saeki who buries children alive in his garden – are told by the omniscient narrator with access to their thoughts. Additionally, the reader gains insight into the mind of the first killer – a barista who creates macabre artwork from the bodies of his victims – through his notebook, while the teenage murderer mentioned before brags about his work in conversation with Natsumi, his potential victim.

The teenage killer describes his murderous urge as vampiric, tapping into the common gothic mode of narration and visualization that links violence with monstrosity. As Caroline Picart observes, "Male serial murderers are typically construed as having vampiric qualities and display the primordial evil that such murderers seek to

inspire, assuming the status of a vengeful deity in relation to their victims."²⁶ While the character's self-recognition as a modern "vampire" matches the general gothic aesthetics of the novel, it also stands out, as the vampire is a singularly non-Japanese creature typically positioned as both monstrous but also super-human in Western Gothic texts. The unassuming personalities and mundane lives of the remaining "monsters" in the novel – a coffee-shop owner, a high-school teacher, a policeman, and a photographer, and the reverse doubling of Itsuko and Morino – a monster masquerading as a human and a human hiding behind the mask of a monster, and more in sync with the characteristics of Japanese Gothic, which implies a different conceptualization of monstrosity.

Otsuchi's claim that "the killers that appear in GOTH are not human, but youkai. And the male protagonist is also a youkai, with the same power as the enemies, whereas the female lead has a powerful psychic gift that attracts youkai"²⁷ is significant for the construction of the novel, as he believes this eradicates the need to explain the characters' motivation and behavior. The *yōkai*, most commonly translated as "monsters" are notoriously difficult to define various strange creatures and phenomena that can be found in Japanese folklore, literature, film, and popular culture. Some have highly unusual bodies, while others are spirits, objects or events; some are considered divine, others are completely unremarkable; they can be malevolent, or simply mischievous, benevolent, or indifferent; and while often perceived as "fantastic", or "extraordinary", within the Japanese animistic framework they are also seen as perfectly natural and their existence is rarely

questioned. Judith Halberstam has argued that “in the Gothic, crime is embodied within a specifically deviant form – the monster – that announces itself ... as the place of corruption.”²⁸ While Otsuichi’s monsters can obviously be read as criminal deviants from the Western Gothic perspective, Japanese conceptualization of monstrosity shifts the perspective from the difference between humans and monsters to the co-existence and complementarity of the two.

Such co-existence tends to be accepted as a fact of life in Otsuichi’s works. The plot of the main part of his short novel *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse (Natsu to hanabi to watashi no shitai, 2000)* focuses on the attempts of two children to hide the body of their dead friend and avoid taking responsibility for her murder. Nine-year-old Yayoi kills her schoolmate Satsuki (age 9) unable to tolerate the girl’s affection for her brother Ken (age 11), whom Yayoi is infatuated with in a rather un-sisterly fashion. She then pretends Satsuki’s death was an accident and asks for Ken’s help in hiding the body in order not to “upset” their mother. Frightened by the sudden appearance of the police officers investigating several cases of missing children in the neighborhood the couple searches for a convenient place to dispose of the body to avoid capture. In the climax of the novel, the kids are discovered by their neighbor, nineteen-year-old Midori who unexpectedly decides to help them. Yayoi is aware that Ken has a crush on Midori but she is in no place to refuse her kind offer. Midori places Satsuki’s corpse in a refrigerated room in the abandoned ice-cream factory where she works, the room, it is revealed, Satsuki shares with all the missing boys

Midori kidnapped and killed. The novel ends with the message of hope – Midori hopes that Ken’s growing admiration for her will finally satisfy her urges: “*Maybe now I can finally stop...*”,²⁹ Yayoi hopes she will now be able to lie about Satsuki’s death, while Satsuki is no longer lonely, as she makes new friends with the dead kidnapped boys whose “faces may all be a pale blue, but we can still have lots of fun”.³⁰

The anonymous killer in Otsuichi’s story “Seven Rooms” from *Zoo (Zū, 2006)* may not be an adolescent but his actions are also left unexplained and the conceptualization of the character as “the God of Death”³¹ once again places him beyond human judgment. The story, told from the perspective of a ten-year-old boy who escapes the killer thanks to the sacrifice made by his older sister focuses on the method of killing, designed with a precision of an infernal death machine. Kidnapped on their way to a department store, the children wake up inside a barren concrete room with no windows. Its heavy steel door is locked and cannot be opened from inside and there is a suspicious-looking sewer-like trench filled with murky water cutting the room in half. Since the boy is quite small he can travel alongside the stream and it does not take him long to discover that their room is the fourth is the succession of seven identical ones. The killer kidnaps one person each day and puts his victim in an empty room, then proceeds to kill the person in the consecutive room. At any given time six rooms are occupied and the seventh is awaiting the new victim. This also means that every person is given exactly six days to live before being dispatched by means of an electric saw and flushed into the sewer to make room for

the new arrival next day. The killer fails because his decision to kidnap two children instead of one allows the boy to escape and lock him in the room while the man is busy mutilating his sister. But there is no sense of victory or justice in this act and as the remaining prisoners are freed by the boy it is clear that no attempt will be made to save the dying girl or prosecute her murderer. All that remains is acceptance and the memento of the boy's sister watch, whose hands stopped at the moment of her death.

Invisible Bonds – Without One There Is No Other

One of the characteristic features of Gothic is its dependence on formulaic character types: most notably the victim and the villain. Early Gothic texts tended to contrast the two. Anne Williams describes the victimized Gothic heroine as “inordinately sensitive”,³² helpless, passive, and prone to hysteria, masochistically enduring whatever patriarchal horrors “the plot imposes upon her”.³³ The Gothic villain, as David Punter points out, is a much more complex character: “awe-inspiring, endlessly resourceful in pursuit of his often opaquely evil ends, and yet possessed of a mysterious attractiveness ... manipulating the doom of others while the knowledge of his own eventual fate surrounds him”.³⁴ Japanese Gothic texts problematize such distinction, as the boundary between the victim and the villain is replaced by the bond between the two. Both the victims and their oppressors appear to share similar characteristics and their placement as one or the other is often incidental and could easily be reversed. The victims are

neither “pure” nor “innocent”, and the villains are hardly ever simplistically “evil”. The characters are seen as complementary and the final confrontation between the two is therefore not as much the battle of the opposing forces but rather the mutual recognition and acceptance of the roles they are expected to play.

Fuminori Nakamura's *Evil and the Mask* (*Aku to kamen no ruuru*, 2010) comes close to constructing a perfect Gothic villain in Fumihiro Kuki, a man born to fulfill a family custom to deliver a “cancer” into the world: “Under my guidance you will become a cancer. A personification of evil, you could say.”³⁵ The Kuki family tradition began sixty years before to satisfy the desire of the dying patriarch that “If his life was going to end, then everything must perish.”³⁶ In order to do that he raised a child “to be a negative force, to make the world as unhappy as possible”³⁷ and the relish with which the boy took to work made the ancestor capable to accept his death in peace. Sixty years later, Fumihiro learns he is another “cancer” in training but then things do not go exactly as planned. Raised with a girl, Kaori, adopted by his father for the entire purpose of breaking his son's spirit, as he is meant to fall in love with her and then see her destroyed, Fumihiro kills his father to save the girl instead. This pushes him in the same direction his father envisioned for him. And yet confronted with “ordinary” men who go about their everyday business – industrialists instigating wars and armed conflicts for profit, con artists hooking women on drugs to control them, bored youth who orchestrate terrorist attacks to create chaos, or soldiers engaging in acts of rage and cruelty – this Gothic villain proves to be an impossible

character as any actions he takes seem unremarkable against the sea of evil that engulfs him.

Crime fiction often features plots describing harm done to women and children, traditionally considered as “weak” and in need of protection. Japanese texts are not different in this respect, yet their treatment of such characters is significantly more ambivalent. Otsuchi captures this ambivalence well in *Goth*, introducing his characters as “cruel, reptilian high school kids”,³⁸ each of them potentially capable of killing, being killed, or indifferently observing the suffering of others. Morino steals the handbag of a victim of a serial killer and begins to dress like the dead girl because she thinks it is “Fun, isn’t it?”³⁹ She travels to murder locations to take pictures of herself posed like the corpse: “No light lived in her eyes in the photos. I had captured a corpse. She seemed to like that.”⁴⁰ Natsumi willingly gives up her life in exchange for the tapes with the voice of her sister recorded minutes before she was killed by the same murderer: “For two days now, I had guessed I would be murdered. And now I knew for certain. . . . I could no longer understand what separated life from death. But I knew I was standing right on top of it.”⁴¹ Itsuki identifies a serial killer who buried one of his classmates alive but instead of exposing the man to the police he assists in the girl’s boyfriend’s suicide burying him with her corpse: “Inside the coffin, a male voice was calling the name of his lover over and over again. A quiet voice, choked with sobs, it echoed the girl’s name again and again.”⁴² The teenage killer explains to his would-be victim: “I wasn’t abused by my parents and scarred mentally. I have no ancestors that were murderers.

I was raised in a very ordinary household. But whereas ordinary children play alone with imaginary friends and pets, I spent my time staring at imaginary corpses.”⁴³

Otsuchi’s young characters are cruel in their indifference and strangely replaceable. Saeki intends to kidnap Morino but ends up taking a completely different girl because they look indistinguishable in the dark. Morino allows for her twin sister’s accidental death and then assumes her identity out of guilt. In “Kazari and Yoko” (*Zoo*, 2006) two twin sisters receive a different treatment from their mother – while Kazari is indulged and spoiled, Yoko is abused. The mother’s behavior rubs off on Kazari who begins to bully her sister as well without even realizing this fact. When Kazari accidentally destroys their mother’s computer, Yoko manipulates her into swapping their identities to avoid punishment anticipating that her sister is going to be killed. Teenage indifference is also used against adults the young heroes detest and resist. In “So-far” (*Zoo*, 2006) a boy fearing his parents’ divorce imagines one of his parents being dead and alternates between living in two worlds where either his mother or his father have died and appear only as a ghost. Eventually, he makes a choice and loses an ability to see his father altogether. The hero of “Words of God” is capable of imposing his will on living things by the sole power of his voice. While initially he uses this skill to a comic effect when he wishes his mother “couldn’t tell her pet cat from a cactus”,⁴⁴ by the end of the story he kills practically the entire population of the planet. Triggered by a TV commercial for “a cleanser that gets things really clean”⁴⁵ that to the boy represents everything that is wrong with the adult world he wishes for

his family members' heads to fall off and for everybody who sees that to follow. In the end the only person left alive is a blind girl and the boy decides to forget the entire incident and imagines that his life goes on unchanged.

Indifference and detachment characterize also the protagonists of Natsuo Kirino's crime fiction: schoolgirls, career women, and housewives, equally likely to cause and receive pain, always inevitably drawn to death, but never passive, retaining agency until the end. Kirino's women seem to live by the assumption voiced by Izanami, the Goddess of Creation in *The Goddess Chronicle* (*Joshinki*, 2008) that "It's always the woman who dies."⁴⁶ Kirino uses the figure of the Goddess, who gave birth to the islands of Japan and ended up betrayed by her husband and imprisoned in the realm of the dead, to debate the contradictions of being a woman. As a goddess, Izanami is immortal and yet she dies because she is also a female. As a female she also suffers – as a Goddess of Death, she takes lives, but as a woman, she feels the pain of everyone she kills. Such contradictions form the stock of Kirino's heroines whose lives in the world run by men seem to be pre-determined from the start.

Kirino's women are defined by their relationships to men. Most of them take subordinate positions: exploited by gangsters, bullied by male colleagues at work, sexually harassed by strangers on public transport, robbed of their life savings by gambling husbands, and hated by their estranged sons. There are also those who disturb this balance of power by identifying as lesbians, living as virgins, or offering themselves to all men to deny the right of ownership to just one. Kirino's heroines

commit crimes and end as victims of violence but both turns of events are the result of their choices. In *Real World* (*Riaru warudo*, 2003), four schoolgirls are drawn to a teenage killer on the run after he brutally murders his mother for no apparent reason. Motivated by curiosity, yearning for a rebel-hero, boredom, or sympathy and understanding the girls interact with the killer, which leads to an accident that claims the life of an innocent bystander, kills one of them, and provokes the suicide of another. In *Grotesque* (*Gurotesuku*, 2003), two privileged women turn to prostitution – one apparently to satisfy her nymphomaniac desires, the other to reject the social constraints that define her life as a successful corporate worker. Both end up dead, killed by the same man. In *Out* (*Auto*, 1997), three night-shift workers in lunch-packaging factory step in to help a friend dispose of the body of her husband she killed out of mounting frustration. When a gangster is wrongly accused of the man's murder his investigation leads to the confrontation with the women none of them leaves unchanged.

Kirino does not judge her protagonists, although throughout the novels she frequently describes them as monsters. In *Grotesque*, she defines a monster as "a person with something twisted inside, something that grows and grows until it looks all out of proportion."⁴⁷ In the novel, monstrosity is fuelled by the characters' ambition, conformity, self-love, spite, and resentment. Kazue turns to prostitution seeing that she will never be able to compete with those more privileged than her. Mitsuru's need to blend in makes her follow her husband into a terrorist religious sect. Described as "terrifyingly beautiful"⁴⁸ Yuriko sees herself

as “a natural-born whore,”⁴⁹ while her sister’s contempt for those around her turns her into a bully. Zhang, the Chinese-immigrant killer, uses his resentment against the Japanese and rage against his sister who rejected his incestuous love to reclaim control he has been denied in life through murder. Yet he does not see this act as a form of aggression but rather identifies his motivation to kill as a response to women’s innate desire to die: “So whenever I meet a woman who says, ‘Kill me,’ I’m only too happy to oblige. If she just can’t deal with her life, I’ll step up to settle things for her.”⁵⁰ This sense of murder as a response to the female need to die returns also in *Out*, where the gangster Satake feels insulted by the suggestion that he tortured and killed a woman out of “pleasure”: “The pleasure has come from sharing in the woman’s death. At that moment he’d felt nothing but love for her.”⁵¹ Death, in this context, is the only meaningful human relationship men and women can share.

Unsurprisingly, Kirino’s heroines express their desire for self-disintegration. In *Grotesque*, Yuriko seeks freedom in absolute submission:

No matter how violent a man might be or how ugly, at the moment we’re in the act I cannot help but love him. And what’s more, I’ll grant his every wish, no matter how shameful. In fact, the more twisted my partner is, the more attracted I will be to him, because my ability to meet my lover’s demands is the one way I can feel alive.⁵²

For the protagonists of *Out* liberation comes in many forms: Yayoi strangles her

husband who gambled away their savings, Kuniko betrays her friends to avoid the settlement of her debt, Yoshio sets fire to the house with her bedridden mother-in-law inside tired of being a slave, and Masako joins in a body dismemberment racket to make money for a new start. Before this can happen, however, Masako confronts the killer and finally understands what she has been looking for all along. Assaulted, raped, and tortured by Satake, Masako recognizes that “something in him was unhinged and impelling him toward an explosion. That same thing was inside her too: it was the part of her that had secretly thought she might be willing to die as long as it was at his hand.”⁵³ The desire for death – for killing or being killed – is aligned with the tendency of Japanese Gothic to save the troubled self by emptying it of desire rather than eliminating external threats. We are reminded that “The self is regained as *emptiness*, *nothingness*, *mu*.”⁵⁴ Kirino’s heroines are acutely aware that living is equivalent with suffering. Toshio’s response to Worm’s matricide in *Real World* confirms that:

I think I know how he feels. Probably he just felt his mother was a pain. A real pain. If you told adults that was the reason you killed your mother, they wouldn’t believe you. But it’s the truth. The whole world’s a pain. Such a pain, you can’t believe it.⁵⁵

The novels of Kirino differ from standard detective fiction in that the identity of the criminal is always known. The mystery lies not in who and how committed the crime but in the circumstances surrounding it. The novels also do not concern

themselves with whether the killers have been brought to justice: Worm survives the accident having “contributed” to three more deaths, Zhang gains sympathy in court with his story of poverty and exploitation, Yayoi loses her insurance money, and Satake dies killed by Matsuko and is mourned by her afterwards. Japanese Gothic, Hughes argues, is not a battleground for God and the Devil. It does not depict “a mission against some perceived singular evil but the discovery of an undivided world of good and evil.”⁵⁶ In this world light and darkness meet halfway in the shadows and the victims and the killers share a bond.

Beauty to Kill, Beauty to Die For

The aesthetics of shadows Tanizaki praises in his essay invokes several types of traditional Japanese conceptualization of beauty. Popularized in the Heian period (794–1185), the aesthetics of *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *ma* are all appreciative of impermanent, perishable beauty said to convey a unique Japanese sensibility. Notoriously difficult to define, *mono no aware* describes a melancholy type of beauty tinged with pity for the object inevitably lost. Here beauty comes with an expiration date as it can only be enjoyed in a specific period of time. It is a “fleeting beauty in an experience that cannot be pinned down or denoted by a single moment or image.”⁵⁷ *Wabi-sabi* relates “a crude or often faded beauty that correlates with a dark, desolate sublimity,”⁵⁸ appreciated for its flawed and raw quality. Finally, *ma* seeks beauty in “emptiness or formlessness, something that cannot be conveyed by a tangible object or through description.”⁵⁹ Typically found in

artistic and architectural forms, these types of aesthetics can take a more sinister turn in Gothic or *ero guro* context.

The appreciation of such gothic aesthetics was the theme of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s story “Hell Screen” (*Jigokuben*, 1918), in which a painter, Yoshihide, is commissioned to paint a folding screen depicting the eight Buddhist hells. Complaining that he can only paint what he has seen, and that inspecting prisons, examining corpses, and tormenting his apprentice can only yield limited results, Yoshihide requests to stage a macabre spectacle to finish the remaining scene depicting The Hell of Searing Heat he envisions as a blazing carriage falling from the sky with a richly dressed voluptuous lady writing in agony consumed by flames inside. His Lordship obliges but as the carriage is lit on fire, Yoshihide discovers that the “sinful woman” trapped within its walls is none other but his beloved daughter. He instinctively steps forward to help her but then stops and picks up the brush instead. Having created his masterpiece, Yoshihide quietly hangs himself at home. Although it is possible to interpret his suicide as a sign of guilt or regret, a more likely explanation is that he knows that he has reached the peak of his art – he will never be able to surpass the perfection of its beauty and as such his life has reached its end. He is ready to embrace the nothingness.

Akutagawa spares no effort describing the scene:

The fire engulfed the entire carriage. The purple roof tassels blew aside, then clouds of smoke swirled aloft, stark white against the blackness of the night, and finally a shower of

sparks spurted upward with such terrifying force that in a single instant the blinds, the side panels, and the roof's metal fittings were ripped off and sent flying. Still more horrible was the color of the flames that licked the latticed cabin vents before shooting skyward, as though – might I say? – the sun itself had crashed to earth, spewing its heavenly fire in all directions.⁶⁰

The intensity and dynamic nature of the fire creates an ever-changing and impossible to capture spectacle that can only be appreciated in a fleeting moment. As we watch the flames, the knowledge that the object they engulf is about to be consumed and disintegrated never leaves us. The sublime quality of fire is emphasized through its destructive force, most poignantly expressed when set upon the vulnerable flesh of a young woman.

And the girl in the carriage – ah, I don't think I have the courage to describe in detail what she looked like then. The pale whiteness of her upturned face as she choked on the smoke; the tangled length of her hair as she tried to shake the flames from it; the beauty of her cherry blossom robe as it burst into flame: it was all so cruel, so terrible!⁶¹

The effect is both horrifying and erotic, as the depiction combines traditional markers of Japanese female beauty – pale white skin, long hair, cherry blossom robes – with the macabre imagery of torment. The image combines the gothic aesthetics of the Poesque “death of a beautiful woman” theme with the aesthetics of

impermanence – the melancholy appreciation of a dying moment and anticipation of the emptiness that follows. It foreshadows also the advent of the *ero guro* stylistics that took hold of Japanese mainstream culture in the decades to come.

The eroticization of death and aestheticisation of violence are common themes in Japanese crime gothic, one of the most popular being the conceptualization of the criminal as a deranged artist. The majority of killers in Otsuchi's *Goth* fall under the category of artist/collector but none more precisely as the first and the last serial killer in the book. The first killer, who also happens to run a coffee house, poses his victim's mutilated bodies in remote mountainous location creating morbid eco art installations:

Between the forest and the cliff, in the shadow of a very large tree, the girl sat naked in the dim summer light. Mizuguchi Nanami sat on the ground, her back leaning against the tree, her legs and arms flung out listlessly – nothing above her neck. Her head was inside her split-open belly.

Her eyes had been gouged out, and one was resting in each hand.

The empty eye sockets had been filled up again with mud, and rotting leaves had been stuffed into her mouth.

Something had been wound around the tree behind her ... everything that had been inside Mizuguchi Nanami's abdomen.

There were dark patches of dried blood on the ground, and her clothes lay nearby.⁶²

The careful arrangement of the body in its environment demonstrates

intentionality, although the exact purpose of the act is never revealed in the story. The placement of the victim's body parts seems symbolic and yet the exact meaning of the symbols remains elusive. As a narrator of his story, the second killer is a lot more reflexive and introspective, treating the reader to a long inner monologue on the nature of photographic arts, their symbolism and affinity to religion, his dissatisfaction with the artificiality of human expression, and his fascination with the "perfect" photograph of the two-year-old Rosalia Lombardo, "The most adorable corpse in the world,"⁶³ whose preserved body is on display in the Capuchin catacombs of Palermo in Italy. As the body of the dead girl, known affectionately as the Sleeping Beauty, has shown no signs of decomposition over the years, she is often regarded with the reverence akin to that given to a minor saint.

Otsuichi's characters are fixated on creating symbols, unaware of the fact that "the symbol itself has no intrinsic meaning"⁶⁴ because "its true weight is in the context hidden in the gap between symbol and object, the world on the other side of the symbol."⁶⁵ "The White House in the Cold Forest," is by far the most symbolic of the stories in the *Zoo* collection, written as a darkly surreal fairy tale. The narrator lives in the stable that belongs to his rich relatives. He lives alone, imagining that the stones in the walls are human faces. Disfigured in an act of bullying by his cousins, he is shunned by everybody apart from a little red-haired girl who brings him books. Eventually she stops coming as well. Expelled from the property by his aunt the man sets out to look for face-like stones to build a house. Unable to find stones

he resorts to killing people and collecting their corpses instead: "I built my house of dead bodies. I built up the walls by stacking up corpses."⁶⁶ – "It was a small white house in the quiet forest. The skin of the corpses was a cold, frightening white; when bathed in moonlight, the house gleamed as if draped with a veil."⁶⁷ A young girl comes to the house asking to replace the body of her brother that supports the load-bearing wall. She continues to live within the wall as a companion of the man until she gets crushed by the weight of the bodies on top of her. The man returns the bodies of the children to their mother (his forgotten red-haired childhood friend) in a fruit box but she refuses to accept it thinking the fruit is rotten. The man disposes of the bodies and returns to live in the stable. At first glance, the tale bears an uncanny resemblance to the stories of the brothers Grimm, but upon a closer inspection, its symbols appear to be empty signs and the story itself pure grotesque nonsense. Similarly, the symbolic quality of the grotesque erotic "art" of Otsuichi's serial killers cannot move beyond the identification of their symbolism. Created to meet undisclosed private needs of the killer, such "artworks" remain closed texts inaccessible to the audience.

Aesthetics, however, does not concern itself with meaning and Japanese aesthetics finds beauty in impermanence, flawed desolate sublimity, and inexpressible emptiness. In Gothic / *ero guro* settings, this can be taken to extreme conclusions. If Yoshihide partakes in the anguish of his daughter as a spectator, Kirino envisions a more immersive experience. In *Out*, Satake feels "pity and delight"⁶⁸ as he orgasms together with the woman he kills, invoking *mono no aware* in the most brutal of contexts:

It had been hell on earth. He stabbed her body here and there, then worked his finger into the wounds. But the more he tried to find a way in, the more impossible he realized it was. He held her then, wild with frustration and desire, willing their flesh to melt together, seeking a way to crawl into her, whispering all the while that he loved her, he loved her. And as they lay there, joined together in this bloody union, hell had gradually become heaven.⁶⁹

While it is unlikely that Heian philosophers conceived of their aesthetic values in such contexts, Gothic / *ero guro* stylistics has re-appropriated them for its needs. Fuminori Nakamura's *Last Winter We Parted* (*Kyonen no fuyu, kimi to wakare*, 2013) evokes Akutagawa's "Hell Screen" in its investigation of artistic frustration, erotic obsession, revenge and grief. Written in fragmented narrative involving letters, transcripts of recordings, a student assignment, a collection of tweets, and first-person account of journalistic investigation, the novel focuses on a case of Yudai Kiharazaka, an artist sentenced to death for burning two women alive as an "inspiration" for his artwork. Kiharazaka is a photographer best known for his awarded work showing a medley of black butterflies swirling wildly inside a white room, their moving wings obscuring a human figure from view. Although it is impossible to say whether that person is a man, woman or is completely genderless, most viewers tend to ignore the facts and see what they want to see. The photograph reveals their hidden desire.

The narrative blends several plots – the story of an artist who cannot resist

the temptation and takes pictures of his burning blind model instead of helping her escape the fire; the story of the artist's predatory sister who drives men to ruin; the story of the doll maker who creates doll-like representations of the dead to help their loved ones with grieving; the story of the editor whose obsession makes him frame the artist for murder he did not commit; and the story of the lawyer who fuels this obsession to destroy the woman who humiliated and rejected him. Echoing Akutagawa, Kiharazaka does not kill his models himself but he cannot resist wanting to capture their agony in pictures; the second victim is in fact his sister (although it is unlikely that he knows that at the moment of her death); and despite knowing that he did not commit murder, he accepts the court verdict and awaits the impending execution. Unlike Yoshihide, however, Kiharazaka's renunciation of life is not motivated by the feeling of artistic accomplishment but rather by his realization of failure. Although publicly the artist denies that he ever took pictures of his victims, in truth, he did but the results turned out to be amateurish and mediocre. He will never achieve Yoshihide's greatness and die as a bad artist.

The novel evokes two more gothic stories of creation. In the first, we hear of a doll maker who abandoned his wife to illness obsessing about creating the perfect doll replica of her. The dying wife cursed his creation and died coughing blood on the doll. The artist realized that "The doll, her skin stained blood red, had taken on a maddening beauty."⁷⁰ He retreated from the world, lost his ability to produce any other work, and finally died of madness. The second story ultimately frames the

novel, as it deals with the editor who commissioned the novel's narrator to write about Kiharazaka's case, knowing that this will lead to the discovery of his involvement and the murder and fraud he committed. Together with Kiharazaka's photographs for Nakamura these works should never have existed but ultimately, the novel poses a different question. If the creation of a forbidden work that drives the artist insane is to a certain extent justified by the work's beauty, what happens if the artist fails in his endeavor? The ending of the novel which leaves Kiharazaka in prison awaiting his execution despite all the evidence proves that such transgression is unforgivable.

Conclusion: Japanese Crime Gothic as Neo-Gothic

Although critical examinations of Japanese Gothic commonly trace it back to early medieval literature, scholarly interest in the inclusion of non-Western texts in the study of Gothic is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, systematic academic evaluations of Asian Gothic texts and contexts have only become a feature of general Gothic scholarship since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This itself makes Japanese Gothic a Neo-Gothic category, as the "Gothic" label was never consciously employed by either the writers or the academics studying Japanese literature before the late twentieth century. Reading contemporary Japanese crime fiction in the context of Neo-Gothic allows us to examine the persistence and permeability of gothic conventions at the time when our understanding of Gothic needs to be adjusted to keep up with the changing world.

Crime and Gothic fiction has always shared a special relationship. As Spooner concludes: "Gothic narratives are driven by crime, whether the misdeeds of earlier generations, the sins of the secret self or the aesthetic murders of monstrous hero-villains. Crime can be presented as 'Gothic' through the themes of the returning past, the psychologically unstable protagonist, the celebration of excess, and the emphasis on surfaces."⁷¹ Contemporary Japanese crime fiction often resorts to Gothic tropes and mode of narration to distinguish itself from run-of-the-mill detective fiction. At the same time, Japanese detective fiction, and related to it *ero guro nansensu* stylistics, were both to some extent created in response to nineteenth-century Western Gothic texts of writers like Edgar Allan Poe, or Arthur Conan Doyle, or Wilkie Collins. Contemporary Japanese crime gothic is then an excellent opportunity to extend the existing discussion of Japanese Gothic into the twenty-first century.

The three authors discussed in this article are among the most popular writers of contemporary crime fiction in Japan. While Otsuichi's stories have occasionally been classified as "horror", neither Kirino nor Nakamura have ever been promoted as "Gothic" writers despite the fact that their novels abound in gothic themes. One obvious reason for that is that Gothic has never been internalized as a critical or literary category in Japan. It is also significant that the recognition of Japanese Gothic as part of indigenous literary tradition depends on the shift from understanding Gothic as a fixed genre or form that evolved under specific socio-cultural and historical conditions in Europe, to a more contemporary reading of Gothic as a mode of aesthetics,

which has ultimately allowed it to transgress its original Eurocentrism. As part of Japanese Gothic tradition, Japanese crime gothic fiction is also a cultural legacy of Eastern philosophical and aesthetic traditions, and our reading of these texts is enriched by acknowledging their hybridity. While resorting to the common Gothic conceptualization of criminals as monsters, these texts evoke Japanese animistic construction of monstrosity as natural and beyond moral judgment, describe the world where victims and oppressors are complementary

characters joined by an invisible bond, and good and evil balance itself out, and where the purpose of the hero is not the elimination of external threats but rather liberating oneself from desire and dissolving into emptiness. In describing cruelty and terror, and aestheticizing violence, they invoke the Gothic sublime and pay homage to the Japanese aesthetics of shadows. A Gothic reading of these novels exposes them as literary and philosophical hybrids and makes a case for the recognition of the transnational and transcultural Neo-Gothic.

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