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Suffocated But Screaming

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This video essay explores how the ageing woman is made monstrous in *kaibyō eiga* (Japanese ghost cat films). The supporting statement reflects on the scholarly rationale for, and the making of, the video essay and then makes a case for its original contribution to horror studies and videographic criticism.

Research Statement

The origins of the *kaibyō eiga* (ghost cat films) narrative can be found in Japanese folklore, particularly the pivotal moment when 'a cat which laps the blood of a murder victim has the power to take on the person's *urami* or hatred, giving the animal the ability to seek revenge against those responsible for the crime' (Crandol 2018: 17). The vengeful cat's connections to the female body were explored in kabuki theatre throughout the nineteenth century, and the female cat monster materialized on film from the 1910s onwards (Crandol 2018: 17; Hayes 2017: 40). There is an archetypal narrative structure to these films, as film scholar Daisuke Miyao explains:

> A samurai is killed by his despotic lord, causing the end of the familial lineage. The samurai's wife commits suicide after she begs her cat to avenge the family. The cat that licks the blood of the samurai's dead wife turns into a ghost cat that can freely possess any women. At the climax of ghost cat films, women possessed by ghost cats always display monstrous actions. (2016: 91)

And yet, despite such an established trope and an extensive body of *kaibyō eiga*, particularly the wide international circulation of *Kuroneko* (1968), only a handful of academic articles exist in English on this subgenre. As one of the only English language studies available, it is especially significant that Miyao's essay (cited above) is not a simple historical overview of the *kaibyō eiga*, but rather, a close analysis of the female body.

As an example, Miyao focuses on Irie Takako[1], an actor renowned in the silent era for her beauty, but who, by the 1950s, was performing in ghost cat films that negatively

[1] All Japanese names are written in Japanese naming convention—family name followed by given name—with the exception of scholar Daisuke Miyao who is cited for works published in English.

focussed on her ageing face and body. Miyao explains that 'while the image of ghost cats has been connected to that of elderly women since the Edo period', it was not until the 1950s that ghost cat films 'fully utilized the connection with the ageing face and body of the declining star' (2016: 91). Through his work, then, we see that the device of the supernatural presence (the ghost cat), the emotional drive of the phenomena (vengeance), the physical vehicle at the intersection of the two (a woman's body), and how those are all packaged by the film industry (the financial leveraging of an ageing star) are inseparable.

Ruminating upon this, I rewatched *Bōrei kaibyō yashiki/Black Cat Mansion* (1958), and was drawn to the performance of Fujie Satsuki, who plays the mother of a tyrannical shogen, and who is then possessed by a ghost cat as vengeance for her son's crimes. At the time of production, Fujie was in her 60s, and - like Irie - spent the 1950s playing horror film monsters. As an ageing woman in academia, I was spellbound by Fujie's performance. I loved how the possession gave her power (albeit temporarily), and I took pleasure in her scenes of *neko jarashi* (cat toying) during which 'the ghost cat possesses the body of one or more of its victims, forcing them to perform a series of acrobatics before sinking its teeth into their throats' (Crandol 2018: 24).

Perhaps I too became possessed: I decided to create a video essay through which I could connect with Fujie's performance. To find the form for this audiovisual idea, I used a Ways of Doing videographic exercise, 'Making Materiality Matter', which contains the following parameters: the 'presence of the process within the final piece; integration of original footage and/or sound; a focus on materiality, for example physical contact with your media object' (2024). I worked through the materiality requirement first, exploring audiovisually *how* I undertook the research for the project. I integrated original footage of myself working, of my books, papers and written notes, depicting the material rendition of my research process. But by bringing my physical body into the work, I knew I needed to address embodiment, directly.

Johannes Binotto has proposed (via Michel Serres) to think of the video essay as a 'mingled body', a body in which, 'separations are constantly overstepped, shifted and remapped' (2024: 60). I asked myself, then, what if my body is no longer separated from Fujie's? What if they mingle? What might happen? How might I manifest this interaction? Although the simplest way to mingle would have been through visual juxtaposition, to place both of our bodies on screen and to cut or dissolve between them, I was far more interested in configuring embodiment through sound. How might Irie and I be connected through sound despite our linguistic differences? Given that the Ways of Doing exercise is an homage to Binotto, I turned to his Practices of Viewing series and integrated ideas from 'Muted' (2021), in which he argues that muting images draws us closer to those voices that we do not usually get to hear. For Binotto, the conscious

act of muting creates space for those voices that are ‘suffocated but screaming’ (2021). In my video, my proximity to Irie is made manifest through silence, which I found to be an evocative way of thinking through the careers of women like Irie and Fujie, who remained determined to work, despite the patriarchal strictures placed upon them in the Japanese film industry.

My video essay highlights the position of Japanese women film stars who had the ‘misfortune’ to age and so were reduced to playing monsters. This proposition speaks to the recent turn in videographic criticism to explore women’s ageing on screen (Ceuterick 2023), as well as attempts to demonstrate how video essays might be eminently suited to creating ‘interventions that denounce gendered configurations of ageism within audiovisual cultures’ (Zecchi 2024). Furthermore, by putting myself into my video essay, my work also connects with recent feminist makers in videographic criticism who deploy their bodies on screen as a way of questioning social and cultural representations of identity (Bird 2023; Lacurie 2024; Lenay and Gay Mazas 2024; McLeod 2024; Santiago 2024a; Zecchi 2023; Paranyuk 2024; Quraeshi Shepard 2024; Santiago 2024b).

That said, my body, mingled with Fujie’s, embodies how *I* read, how *I* watch, how *I* hear the older woman on screen. Binotto suggests that when we mingle, we can create a ‘more vulnerable academia, an academia not so much of competition and ratings but of unsettling exploration’ (2024: 68). There is certainly an unsettling quality to the intermingling of bodies in my work, an intermingling that could be understood as vulnerable. One may wonder though, even as I find strength in Fujie’s ‘monstrosity’ as an act of resistance, where does this leave Fujie?

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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