



# BLIND WOMAN'S CURSE

## 怪談昇り竜



## CAST

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Akemi Tachibana

Aiko Gôda

Tani Shôichi

Jôtârô Mitsui

Shôta

Dobashi Gang Boss

Senba-tatsu

Kankichi

Chie Mitsui

Aozora

Jô

Hunchback

Meiko Kaji

Hoki Tokuda

Makoto Satô

Yoshi Katô

Yûzô Harumi

Tôru Abe

Shirô Ôtsuji

Hideo Sunazuka

Yôko Takagi

Ryôhei Uchida

Akira Takahashi

Tatsumi Hijikata

## CREW

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Directed by

Teruo Ishii

Written by

Teruo Ishii

Chûsei Sone

Produced by

Hideo Koi

Shirô Sasaki

Music by

Hajime Kaburagi

Cinematography by

Shigeru Kitazumi



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# MEIKO'S ADVENTURES IN PROFESSOR ISHII'S EROTIC-GROTESQUE WONDERLAND

BY TOM MES

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“My aim is to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.”

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

When one reads up on the Japanese director Teruo Ishii, particularly his interviews, one gets an image of this sorely missed filmmaker that corresponds closely to the image of his films: daring, mischievous and stylish, but not too concerned with connecting all the dots or about leaving things a little rough around the edges.

Teruo Ishii at his best is arguably the man who directed taut crime thrillers like *Abashiri Prison* (*Abashiri Bangaichi*, 1965) or the *Line* (*Chitai*, 1958-'61) series – the latter with its *cinéma-vérité*, back-alley slices of post-war Tokyo nightlife, the former solid masculine action cinema that deftly overcame a climate most inhospitable to film shoots: the snowy wastes of northerly Hokkaido.

Ishii's international reputation, however, rests on a later cycle of period pieces that gleefully mix nudity, sex, torture, mutations and other lurid matters into heady big-screen brews that are never short of entertaining, even when they are less than accomplished. The oft-cited *Joys of Torture* series (1968-'69), for example, includes the instalment *Hell's Tattooers* (*Tokugawa Irezumi-shi: Seme Jigoku*) whose abundant skin-and-ink shenanigans culminate in a parade of nude beauties covered in psychedelic decorative patterns that not only have very little to do with Edo-era tattoos but are very obviously painted on. (As an aside, with the recent worldwide revival of tattooing, particularly the Japanese *irezumi* tradition, this film's shoddiness stands squarely in the way of it being rediscovered and achieving the status of genuine cult item – ironic, given its director's nickname, “The King of Cult”.)

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Such slapdash characteristics are not always to the films' detriment, however. Often they add a supplementary attribute: the uncanny. The director's Edogawa Rampo mishmash *The Horrors of Malformed Men* (*Edogawa Rampo zenshû: Kyôfu kikei ningen*, 1969) may be highly uneven and noticeably rickety in spots, but it also possesses an oneiric quality that penetrates the viewer's subconscious in ways similar to the 1933 *King Kong* or the 1953 *Invaders from Mars*.

## ISHII'S CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

In speaking about *Blind Woman's Curse*, Teruo Ishii once confessed: "As far as being coherent, I feel the movie was nonsensical." In the same interview with Chris D. he claimed that Nikkatsu had ordered him to include ghost story elements in the film after he had already started shooting. The film is a bizarre potpourri indeed, not only for attempting to shoehorn a *bakeneko* (ghost cat) horror story into a classic yakuza template of honourable gang versus crooked gang, but also for Ishii's decision to further spice up the resulting concoction with a generous addition of ingredients from yet another tradition: the erotic grotesque.

Naked female torsos writhe ecstatically above the entrance to a travelling sideshow, where a longhaired hunchback performs erratic dances against a backdrop of preserved disembodied heads; a blind female avenger collects tattooed skins sliced from the backs of yakuza maidens; an evil gang boss's hideout is decked out with multi-coloured stained glass windows and equipped with trap doors and torture dungeons; the sky becomes a phantasmagorical canvas of angrily swirling cloud as the blind avenger and her gangland nemesis finally confront each other with blades in hand.

While the ghost story elements may have been dictated by the higher-ups, the presence of such colourful components as those described above is entirely the director's doing. He naturally lights it all with the most garish of palettes and drenches his actors in geysers of blood whenever blades slice skin. Add a number of jarring jump cuts and the effect is complete: this is nonsense.

But nonsense, mind you, of the Lewis Carroll variety: "a collection of words or events which in their arrangement do not fit into some recognised system in a particular mind," according to Elizabeth Sewell in *The Field of Nonsense*. Not a vacuity of sense, but a

parody of it, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot. The kind of nonsense that makes the viewer feel "like a museum visitor in front of a showcase that lacks a description," as German scholar Klaus Reichert voiced it in his study of Carroll – though his words ring equally true for Ishii's cabinet of curiosities.

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

But Alice, sweet Alice – were her adventures not intended for children? Dutch researcher Wim Tigges notes in his *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* that "violence, death and physical deformity are important nonsense themes". The term 'erotic grotesque' and its abbreviated form *ero guro* may be widely used in studies of the stylishly violent and saturnine exponents of Japanese film and literature, but the phrase originally had three constituents: erotic grotesque nonsense. Where most artists working in the genre – from its Taisho-era leading light, the novelist Edogawa Rampo, to such latter-day practitioners as manga artist Suehiro Maruo – created works that are decidedly dark and morbid, few embraced this third component, nonsense, as readily as the ever playful Ishii did in his films of the late '60s and early '70s.

Witness a most peculiar individual who, on one or two occasions during *Blind Woman's Curse*, pops up to make a nuisance of himself. Played to the hilt by an amusingly out-of-character Ryôhei Uchida – veteran of countless straight-laced yakuza melodramas – he wears a gold waistcoat, a bowler hat and a particularly "cheeky" red loincloth. This film's Mad Hatter, his presence and his guise are as bafflingly random as any of the residents of Carroll's Wonderland. Similarly the hunchback (*butoh* dance pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata), whose personality veers from eerily sinister during his hunt for victims to blithely girlish as he lovingly washes his blind mistress's svelte legs.

Meiko Kaji, then, could well be considered the film's Alice, venturing cautiously into the topsy-turvy realm of Professor Ishii. In the first lead role of her career, the top-billed Kaji still comes off as somewhat demure when compared to her later signature roles in *Female Convict Scorpion* and *Lady Snowblood*. But her relatively modest and sober presence gives ample room to the manifold manifestations of the director's taste for the weird and wonderful, at the centre of which she stands dignified – even if she doesn't exactly hold all the disparate ingredients together.



As incongruous as the presence of Kaji can occasionally seem (then again, what isn't incongruous in this film?), casting her was something of a masterstroke. Who better to play the antagonist of a blind avenger than the woman of whom *Lady Snowblood* creator Kazuo Koike would later say: "Meiko Kaji's strongest point is her eyes, her stare. They are literally the eyes of the netherworld: powerful, glamorous and dark"?

Indeed, Kaji's eyes, which she later employed to such great effect in her almost wordless performances as Matsu the Scorpion, bring to mind the phrase from Yasunari Kawabata's novel *Snow Country*: "The beautiful eyes that so pierced their object." Eyes fulfil a central function in *Blind Woman's Curse*: blinded, bleeding, or blue-ringed, curiously bespectacled, savagely unhinged, or defiantly intense. Hoki Tokuda's vacant gaze (nonsensically devoid of the slightest scar or other sign of the sword cut that rendered them sightless in the first place) is the ideal counterpoint to Kaji's resolute stare.

It is worth noting in this regard the persistent presence of mirrors: as two-way features of the evil kingpin's house of pain, as stage props further distorting Tatsumi Hijikata's already twisted dances in the sideshow arena, or as media for creating disorienting points of view. The mirror was a recurring motif in the stories of Rampo, never more prominently than in his 1926 novella *The Hell of Mirrors* (*Kagami Jigoku*, adapted for the screen by Akio Jissoji in 2005 as part of the *Rampo Noir* omnibus film), in which a narcissistic millionaire goes mad when he locks himself up in a giant ball whose spherical interior is one large funhouse mirror.

Alice of course went through the looking glass rather than let it drive her mad, emerging unscathed and quite comfortably seated in an armchair, with a black cat purring in her arms. Kaji also retains her dignity at the centre of all the madness that Ishii conjures up around her, precisely because of the nonsensical nature of it all. Had the proceedings been limited to the erotic and the grotesque, in a way similar to, say, Yasuzô Masumura's Rampo adaptation *Blind Beast* (*Môjû*, 1969), then "the simultaneity of the laughable and the [...] disgusting" (Philip Thomson's description of the grotesque) would hardly leave any room for the actress's powerful, dark glamour – a quality that is all about dignity and that would make her a star just two years later.

An example of nonsense that actually bolsters Kaji's charismatic presence in a way pure *ero guro* would not, would be the yakuza maidens, a quintet of bouncy, pig-tailed young



women who act more like characters out of a contemporary youth film (*seishun eiga* – not coincidentally a genre in which the Nikkatsu studio specialised) than the solemn, demure types that normally populate the fringes of more traditional yakuza movies. Aside from the characters' anachronistic personalities, Ishii and his scriptwriter Chusei Sone add a further outlandish touch in the shape of a shared, sequential tattoo – the dragon that is only complete when the ladies line up either for an official greeting or in combat formation, with a young male gang member providing the tail end (“an unresolved balance between meaning and absence of meaning,” wrote Tigges as characteristic of nonsense) and Kaji proudly sporting the mythical creature's fierce head. The Tattooed Girls Club, the honourable Meiko Kaji presiding.

## STOP MAKING SENSE

While many of the quotes used above are from studies on literary nonsense, the link with Ishii's films is not as far-fetched as it may sound, and certainly not a case of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole (although this would be a suitably nonsensical exercise in itself). The nonsense comedy has been a genre in Japanese film since at least the late 1920s. These nonsense films, wrote Donald Richie and Joseph Anderson in their seminal study *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, “were just that, films which made little or no sense whatever, amusing happenings, one thing tacked onto the other, something ludicrous [...] for its own sake.” The authors go on to point out that the genre later “drifted off in the direction of erotic comedy”, from which it is of course but a small step (or “the space of one sheet of paper,” as one Japanese film critic wrote in 1931) to the grotesque.

Amusing and ludicrous for its own sake, *Blind Woman's Curse* best reveals its nonsensical nature when the viewer abandons any attempt at connecting its incongruent components or following a story that was doomed never to make sense from the moment Nikkatsu executives hired Ishii and then told him to turn a yakuza film into a ghost story – to, in short, tack one thing onto another. I recommend watching it without subtitles. Perhaps that way the viewer will discover why a hunchback is like a gangster clan. Because I haven't the slightest idea. Another cup of tea?

*Tom Mes is the founder of the leading website on Japanese film, MidnightEye.com, and the author of Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike, Iron Man: The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto, Re-Agitator: A Decade of Writing on Takashi Miike, and a forthcoming book on actress Meiko Kaji.*







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## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

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*Blind Woman's Curse* was transferred from original pre-print material by Nikkatsu Studios in Japan. This was delivered on a restored master tape to Arrow Films. The film is presented in the 2.44:1 widescreen aspect ratio with mono audio.

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## PRODUCTION CREDITS

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Disc and booklet produced by Francesco Simeoni  
Production Assistant: Louise Buckler  
QC and Proofing: Ewan Cant, Anthony Nield  
Authoring: Utd. by Content  
Subtitling: IBF Digital  
Artist: Gilles Vranckx  
Design: Jack Pemberton

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## SPECIAL THANKS

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Chihiro Abiru, Alex Agran, Tom Barrett, Stephen Ford, Takako Hirayama, Graham Jones, Simon Jones, Emico Kawai, Sigrid Larsen, Tom Mes, Jasper Sharp, Tom Walker, Marc Walkow, James White

Other films starring Meiko Kaji available from Arrow Video include the *Lady Snowblood* collection and the *Stray Cat Rock* series.

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