

“KURONEKO” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

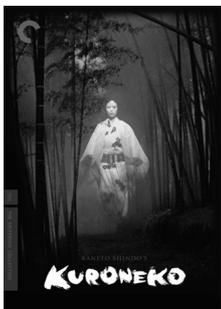
Written by Michael Koopmans

Wednesday, 19 October 2011 16:07



Japanese cinematic horror fables have a rich history of sardonic worldviews, sexual and psychological overtones as well as feminist undertones. ONIBABA (1964) and KURONEKO (1968), two films directed by Kaneto Shindô (who, at 99 years old, is still writing and directing), fit very snugly into this category. The former has been available on DVD from Criterion for a few years now, while the latter makes its DVD and Blu-ray debut this week from the same company. Wait, did I mention the feline vampires?

The film opens with a noiseless and nauseating sequence depicting a band of starving samurais descending upon a remote farmhouse. Inside, they encounter a mother, Yone (Nobuko Otowa), and her daughter-in-law Shige (Kiwako Taichi) who have been stranded there for three years since the man of the family was unwillingly recruited into the army. As they are thus unprotected, the merciless raiders eat their food and gang-rape the pair. The repulsive act occurs off camera, but the filth- and food-covered, drooling faces of the samurai waiting their turn is more than disturbing enough.



As the brigands continue their journey, smoke spews out of the house, and it becomes apparent it was set ablaze with the women left inside to burn. When the smoke clears, a black cat curiously investigates the wreckage and begins to lick the wounds of the semi-charred bodies. The scene ends with slight signs of life coming from the mother's recently licked

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We cut to a pitch-black night outside the local nobility's gate, where a lone samurai is approached by a young woman dressed in all white. The viewer recognizes her as the deceased Shige, but the man only knows her by the innocent and helpless way she comports herself. After escorting her through the reeds and back to her house, she convinces him to come inside, where the mother is waiting to give him sake. After they inebriate him, Shige brings him into the bedroom, where she rips his neck open with her teeth and drinks his blood; all the while, a black cat is near. After a few others fall prey to the couple, we are introduced to Gintoki (Kichiemon Nakamura), a celebrated samurai who barely survived a battle that culminated in a duel between him and another, much larger warrior. Upon returning home with said foe's head in hand, he's promoted by his master (Kei Satô) and commanded to destroy whoever or whatever is killing his men.

Essentially, KURONEKO is not unlike the rape/revenge films that would become abundant during the decades to come, here with a supernatural twist. It also slightly resembles Shindô's earlier ONIBABA, in which a similarly abandoned pair of women make their way by killing passersby and stealing their armor. However, the return of the son/husband in that film exposes the crimes and shifts the drama into macabre directions; in KURONEKO, a similar development has somewhat of an opposite effect, temporarily shifting the film's tone from gory revenge to a heartfelt love story before it goes back again. Also reminiscent of Shindô's previous effort is the underlying patriarchal challenge woven throughout.

Considering what an immensely interesting, well-paced ghost story this is, it's also an exercise in true directorial prowess. Shindô concocts an ambient platter of swift, time-lapsed cuts, disorienting angles and double exposures that are sure to please fans of art-house cinema and character-driven horror alike. The death sequences are surprisingly gruesome without going overboard, and the few quick shots we get revealing the ghosts' true feline forms are chillingly memorable.

As always, Criterion took great care with this release, offering a 1.77:1 restoration that's almost as stunning as Kiyomi Kuroda's award-winning cinematography. Special features include a 1998 interview with Shindô conducted at the Directors Guild of Japan, a one-hour segment that stands as a definitive evaluation of the director's life, influences and résumé. In addition, there's a 15-minute video interview, conducted in 2011 exclusively for this release, with critic Tadao Sato. He's able to pack more info than you'd imagine into that timeframe, touching upon the history of Japanese ghost films and the cultural significance of Shindô's oeuvre as well as offering his expert analysis of KURONEKO. The interior booklet contains an essay by film critic

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Maitland McDonagh and an excerpt from film scholar Joan Mellen’s 1972 interview with Shindô; both basically condense what’s available in the discs’ supplementary section.

This eerie tale of lost love and revenge is breathtaking on multiple levels, and will make a fine addition to any and all serious collections.

MOVIE: 🍷🍷🍷

DISC PACKAGES: 🍷🍷🍷