

Example of the horror of audition research paper

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



One of the most fascinating recent outputs of horror film are those coming from Japan; the specific cultural anxieties and attributes present in that country have produced some of the most eye-opening works of horror cinema in the past few decades (Dew, 2007). Given its long history of warfare, destruction and current cultural preoccupations with sex and show business, Japan is in a unique place to produce horror films like Takashi Miike's *Audition*. Telling the tale of a shy, unassuming widower (played by Rya Ishibashi) and his quest to find a new girlfriend in the wake of the death of his wife, *Audition* pulls the rug out from the audience in many surprising ways.

The young woman the widowed Aoyama falls for is named Asami (Eihi Shiina); her true nature, as revealed by the end of the film, is the major source of the horror of the film. Takashi Miike utilizes a dreamlike sense of composition, atmospheric mise-en-scene, and deeply affecting and anguished performances from its lead characters to paint the darker nature of Japanese relationships in the light of the disconnected face of Japanese culture (Hantke, 2005). Gender roles and divisions are challenged, as is the romanticism of show-business and soap opera ideas of relationships.

Furthermore, *Audition*'s linking of pain to pleasure gives it a sadomasochistic bend, offering a deep sense of the uncanny in a way that is rarely broached with such quality by films like these.

Audition's biggest and most effective element is its incredible and deliberate plays on genre – for the vast majority of the film, *Audition* plays out just like your normal 1990s Japanese romantic drama, complete with its slow pace, romantic characters, sweet music and cheesy premise (Buckler, 2008).

Looking at the first half of the film on paper, you would not be able to guess it is a horror movie; the pretense for the plot is Aoyama, a cute grieving widow, concocting a scheme to find a girlfriend by 'auditioning' them for a fake movie his friend helps him set up. This kind of high-concept drivel is normally reserved for chick flicks and sweet date movies; Audition gives us that movie with a horror twist. If one were to go into the movie blind, one would expect the film to end with some mild emotional drama, followed by a reconciliation and Aoyama finding his true love in a spirited young girl who gives him the strength to love once more. Miike holds his cards close to the chest for quite a lot of the film, only really going south about a half hour before the credits roll. That the ending still feels like an organic part of the story speaks to a natural reaction to the problematic nature of such drama films – such a blatantly manipulative scheme should not work for Aoyama, and in this case it really does not.

This sense of trickery, deception and two-facedness is a consistent move on Miike's part, following along with the story of the film. The audience is fooled, just as Aoyama is, into expecting one outcome, only to be surprised when Asami turns out to be a deeply disturbed, murderous and torturous young woman by the end. This desire to subvert expectations is one of Miike's greatest strengths; he is effectively 'punishing' the audience giving us a romantic drama in the first half, making us sit through an ostensibly dry, slowly paced and immensely trite story to get to the bread and butter of what horror films want – the gore and tension.

The filmmaking for this first half does away with Miike's signature style to film it exactly like a romantic drama: flat camera angles, flat, disaffected

performances with little energy, bland, uneventful dialogue, etc. While this can seem tedious to a first-time viewer, understanding the metatextual implications of playing with the romantic drama makes these scenes much more rewarding on second watches, or even simply in retrospect after the twist is revealed. Miike is a master of keeping his audience off its guard, making it that much more shocking when we see horrifying sights of Grand Guignol grotesqueries.

The film's vacillating between the innocence of the romantic drama framework and the dark horror undertones of its climax is personified in the character of Shigehiko, Aoyama's son, who becomes the emotional core of the film (and of Aoyama himself). In the opening sequence, we are given a birds eye glimpse of a piece of arts and crafts that Shige made for his mother, who is dying in the hospital. Seeing this picture of innocence holding an expression of said innocence in the dank, sterile walls of the hospital acts as a potent visual symbol for the ending of that innocence by the death of his mother. By the time Shige carries his gift to his mother, the mother has passed away – an interesting parallel and contrast to his role in saving his father's life at the end. By setting up this initial expectation of the son getting to their parent in time before death, his actual arrival at the end of the story to kill Asami and save Aoyama's life is incredibly cathartic. The fact that Shige is the main catalyst of action in the beginning and end of the film is interesting, and plays to Miike's love of subverting the audience's expectations.

This is not to diminish the character of Aoyama, whose relatable straightforwardness makes him a perfect horror movie subject/victim. His

romantic journey is foreshadowed by an early scene in which he is literally attempting to catch fish in the sea – this cute little visual joke is a reference to the popular idiom about finding love. At one point, he says to his son, “I’m only after the big ones,” indicating his exceptionally high standards for women, choosing not to settle despite Shige’s own dialogue (he is a teenager now, and implied that he is also searching for affection from girls). Even here, the *mise-en-scene* manages to sneak in little bits of the uncanny and disturbing reality of the film – when Aoyama catches a fish, Miike snaps to an extreme close-up, the whizz of the fishing rod becoming incredibly loud and jarring as the rod bents violently. This subtle image of violence in the middle of this peaceful scene appropriately foreshadows the violence that is to come.

Loneliness and isolation is also a recurring theme in *Audition*, which is personified by poor, doltish Aoyama. He is the perfect example of the mild-mannered salaryman of Japanese culture – an unassuming, shy person who does not really have the time or the knowledge to date. He is unambitious and does not try to get much out of life, which makes him a case study for the socially stunted Japanese man. Even his friend Yasuhisa admits that “All Japanese are lonely,” just like Aoyama, cementing the cultural expectation that Japanese men simply do not know how to behave as social creatures in their increasingly crowded, segmented and highly technologically-minded culture (Hantke, 2005). Even the idea of searching for a new wife is pushed on him by Shige, who takes the initiative and gives him his blessing to start looking for someone new.

One of *Audition*’s greatest strengths, however, is its treatment of Asami as a

character, and her role as the conduit for the film's themes about patriarchal oppression, gender roles and sexual domination of women by men.

Throughout the film, women overall are essentially treated like pieces of meat; this is made clear in Aoyama's well-meaning search for a new girlfriend through the ruse of an audition. While the gimmick may seem okay to a movie audience, what the character is inadvertently doing is manipulating and lying to get a date; none of these women will get a role, which is their expectation, since the movie doesn't exist.

In the end, this makes Aoyama's scheme incredibly arrogant and selfish, which speaks to the implicit privilege that men have in Japanese society. Aoyama's criteria for selection involve young, pretty girls, speaking to the social acceptability of older men dating younger women. Aoyama clearly does not know much about women; in one line jokingly inserted into an early scene where he and his son clean fish, he says, "I don't know much about ovaries." (The harsh close-ups of the cut up fish in this scene – having been likened to a woman – also foreshadows his own mutilation later in the film.) His attraction to Asami is partially because of her demureness and submissiveness; he wants someone who will not be too complicated for him, much less prove herself more interesting or assertive as he; this is almost the criteria for a sado-masochistic relationship, which he will most certainly get later in the film (LeDrew, 2006).

Aoyama's insecurity about love and relationships extends to his other relationships with women, as well. His relationship with his secretary, who is eager to please and is clearly shy and awkward around him, is clearly painted at first as an unrequited love situation. When she first appears in the

film to talk about his appointments, clear looks of longing and attentiveness are shown toward Aoyama, of which he seems blissfully unaware. Her later bursting in on him in the elevator to announce her engagement is also a clear romantic-drama tactic meant to make him jealous. However, we learn the dark truth of this ostensibly quirky exchange later in the film, as Aoyama has a nightmare experience; in the past, he and the secretary did have an affair, but he was unwilling to take it further while she loved him unrequitedly. This dismissal of women in relationships is Aoyama's chief shortcoming, and it comes back to haunt him in the end.

While *Audition* spends most of its time as a romantic drama, saving the gory bits for the end, there are nuggets of mystery sprinkled throughout the film's runtime that keep the viewer intrigued. While Asami waits for a phone call from Aoyama, Miike's signaturely dark style returns as we see her apartment for the first time. Instead of showing Asami, the camera focuses on a burlap sack on the floor, sitting motionless in the foreground while we see Asami out of focus in the background. By cementing this sack as the focus, this macabre shot instills in us a sense of dread – we wish to know what is in the sack. The music starts to turn ominous, with discordant tones entering the soundtrack. Aoyama starts to have macabre dreams of her, as well – in one striking image interspersed with the phone scene, she stands partially behind a tree in the distance.

Several scenes later, this initial scene is paid off – Miike pans the camera up her spiky vertebrae, cuts to close-ups of her mouth creeping up in a slight smile, and more. This serves to segment Asami's body in the frame, showing us just how little we know about her. Eventually, we get the same shot of the

burlap sack as we did previously, as she receives and engages in the phone call. However, the audience receives its first overt scare at the end of the phone call, as the burlap sack jolts into motion, rolling slightly while a man moans in pain within the sack. The shot cuts to the next scene abruptly, not letting the audience linger on the image; this is an extremely effective editing style, as it allows the audience to stay off guard and understand the unconventional nature of Asami's mental deficiencies.

The dream imagery and transitional editing found in these sequences successfully ratchet up the tension in the audience, and make them feel increasingly ill at ease. Aoyama's nightmares are more than just his, however; Miike makes us share the nightmare with him. Aoyama sees images he could not know, like the burlap sack or the appearance of Asami's apartment, learning the truth of Asami along with the audience. All of the women in Aoyama's life flash through his eyes, revealing his sexual desires for all of them – from his secretary, to Asami, then to Shige's teenage girlfriend. This sequence reveals Aoyama's treatment of women as sex objects, perceiving the women around him as people he would like to eventually sleep with, regardless of age or propriety. By confronting Aoyama with his own latent sexism, *Audition* holds its own victim up as a target for criticism. Once Aoyama is confronted with the reality of who is in the burlap sack (a previous victim, who has been turned into a lapdog by Asami, a dismembered animal who eagerly laps up her vomit as food), Asami is revealed as the ultimate reaction to this kind of patriarchal sexism – she must lash out and assert herself the only way she knows how: through violence.

The most notable sequence of the film, and the one that is virtually identified with *Audition*, is the torture scene after he wakes up. In this scene, Miike utilizes incredible tension, pace and sound to horrify his audience to great extremes. Here, all of the abstract discoveries we have learned about Aoyama and Asami as individuals come to a head; Aoyama's subtle predation of Asami has been turned on its head, as it turns out the abused and psychotic Asami wishes to punish him for his lack of commitment by dismembering him. The slow, methodical procedure is done at an excruciating pace, allowing each movement and action to have incredible and disquieting effectiveness. Asami's leather garb makes her look like a sadomasochistic nurse, an image that is both intensely sexual and horrifying at the same time (LeDrew, 2006).

As Asami proceeds to torture him with metal wires pushed into his chest and eye sockets, Miike obscures just enough of the action so as to let the audience fill in the blanks with their imagination – we cannot see the point of contact, but we can feel it, especially given Asami's eerie “kiri-kiri-kiri” she utters with each push. The POV shot of Asami pushing a wire into the eye is particularly affecting, torturing the audience with these unsettling images just like with Aoyama. Here, the subject and the audience are one and the same, which is an effective metric for horror.

Following that up with the use of the metal piano wire to saw off Aoyama's leg, Miike doesn't show the leg being cut – just Asami's face and arms as she grunts and struggles to work through the leg with the wire. Her face is one of extreme pleasure, and her straddled position over him could just as easily be a sexual position; this moment further blurs the line between sex and

violence in the film (Hantke, 2005). Only the disturbing sawing sound is heard in the soundtrack, Miike allowing the sound to take precedence over the visuals. This entire sequence is a masterclass in tension and horror, since it achieves maximum effect while showing the audience just what it needs to assume the worst in their heads. By showing us the complete opposite extreme of the sweet Asami we saw earlier in the film, our horror is amplified as we do not know what to make of her (Choi, 2008).

Through its unflinching dedication to subverting audience expectations and pushing the lines of acceptability in its depiction of violence, *Audition* manages to discuss the horrific implications of misogyny and damaging male-centric views on relationships, while also criticizing the isolated and socially stunted nature of Japanese culture. The couching of a gory horror film in the sweet banality of a romantic drama allows the disturbing parts of the film to stand out all the more, and Miike plays with sound, camerawork and tone expertly to make these dichotomous elements feel like part of the same film. In the end, *Audition* is a film about love, abuse, and the dangers of reaching out to other people, told with a deft hand by a daring horror filmmaker.

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