

# *Eternal Sunshine Of A Spotless Miike: A Review of Izo*

**Andrea Ariano**

Just when I had the fleeting suspicion that Takashi Miike would become as predictable as J-Horror (see 2003's *One Missed Call*), he almost literally smacks me upside the head with *IZO* (2004). Though many reviewers have deemed the film inscrutable, I believe it is the actual experience of the film that is difficult to express. Yet if I had to describe the film in one word, it would be "Izo." After seeing this movie, the name Izo should be a verb.

Since I must provide a premise for the film, I must first establish that the character of Izo Okada is the embodiment, the essence, and the epitome of violent revenge. After opening with stock footage of a sex education film (complete with moving diagrams depicting male ejaculation), the film cuts to the year 1865 where Izo endures a torturous execution and is grotesquely crucified at 28 years-of-age for servicing the anti-shogun rebel Hanpeita Takeuchi. Thereafter, Izo rematerializes in present-day Japan with one vow: to avenge his death on various planes of existence.

Meanwhile, gods and government officials alike brace for the coming of Izo, anticipating the rivers of blood that will be spilled throughout the film. True to his vow, Izo kills everyone in his path from the average Tokyo Joe Businessman to every physical manifestation of a Jungian archetype imaginable. Throughout Izo's rampage, he kills his mother, innocent children, wise gods, school girls, Buddha, the embodiment of Shinto even Mother Nature itself. At least, this is what *seems* to happen: archetypal character representations in *IZO* are seldom explained outright.

Among many of the films highly anticipated cameos, Beat Takashi (Takeshi Kitano) makes a brief appearance as the Prime Minister awaiting Izo's wrath in a boardroom among other officials. As Izo transcends space and time, these gods and government officials ponder the meaning of Izo's vengeance: they state that he is irrational and unpredictable; a blemish to be expelled from Japan's perfect system.

Though Miike seems to be complicating the audience's pursuit of relevance and significance in *Izo*, since Izo is characterized as "irrationality" itself, I would like to investigate the use and importance of violence coursing through the film. I could begin by discussing the film's grotesque nature or the monstrous phallic symbolism of a female character that draws a sword from her bloody vagina. However, the most intriguing aspect of Miike's *IZO* is the frequent shift in tone between violence and humor. Or rather, it is the particular combination of hyperbolic bloodand- gut wrenching violence with odd and absurd humor which creates many of the film's unexpected moments. I should specify here that Izo's vengeance goes to lengths that are beyond the stretches of the imagination. Every time Izo leaves one scene drenched in blood, he literally opens the door to a new setting for crass destruction. This violence is often punctuated unsettlingly by a folk song that seems non-diagetic until Kazuki Tomokawa- a real-life star who is the Japanese equivalent of Bob Dylan- emerges from the background singing with his guitar in hand. Though the timing of Tomokawa's sporadic appearances are oddly humorous, his music remains poetic and almost angelic since the lyrics often contradict Izo's violent rampage.

The most unique aspect regarding Miike's use of violence and humor is the fact that Izo is both literally and figuratively bound to a search for truth in a world of exaggerated fantasy. Miike personifies violence, through Izo's character, in order to make claims about humanity's cosmic relationship to anger, strife, and violence. As the violence and absurdity escalate, Izo becomes a demon among gods, and even the female personification of his soul cannot save him. Izo remains indestructible, yet always mutable. Thus, violence is merely a stage within a shifting and cyclical human existence (hence the stock footage of the male reproductive system and the sporadic stock footage of WWII). The message is that stock footage of one war will merely be replaced by the digital images of a new one: Izo's war against universal archetypes is as experiential as any other artist struggling to express the meaning behind senseless acts of violence. Miike is constantly challenging how viewers experience violence in his films. Yet, of all Miike's films, *IZO* is the most ambitious in its representation of violence and cinema, or perhaps, violence in cinema. The film's genre references range from documentary, to Japanese art house cinema, to b-horror film, to classic samurai films; and these are complemented by a barrage of cameos. Ultimately, Miike's non-linear narrative, which has a variety of formalistic styles, seems to be strongly influenced by the experimental pink films of Koji Wakamatsu (*Ecstasy Of The Angels*, 1972).

With all the twists and tangles of symbolism and themes within this film, Miike truly is a master of violent irony. On a very literal level, *IZO* is a typical revenge film, though unlike others in the sub-genre, Izo takes his roaring rampage of revenge to a subconscious level. Izo is Japan's nightmare: he is the imperfect violent stain on Japan's history, a stain that refuses to disappear. Because those in power in the film see Izo as a return of something that must be repressed in order for society to work, the demon still retains the qualities of humanity. Daring to fight the gods for the right to be a monster, to experience and express the absurdity of waiting for karma, judgment, death and renewal, Izo is the explosive passion and anger of all human strife and injustice.

Miike could very easily be regarded as a senseless and irresponsible ultraviolent filmmaker, and it is very plausible that *IZO* will be another stain on Miike's violent reputation for those who have an aversion to his filmmaking. However, this film will likely be just as much a frustrating and fascinating experience for those who are intrigued by Miike's affinity for ultraviolence. I believe that Miike's various representations of violence

are far more responsible, mythical, and tangible than they might at first seem.

Ultimately, Miike's film investigates not only violence but also the forces of emotion, energy, and the human spirit. Perhaps *IZO* is a film about the myth of the eternal return. Miike might only wish to remind us of the absurdity of violence that is part of the human condition since in Buddhism "the only possibility of escaping from time, of breaking the iron circle of existence, is to abolish the human condition and win Nirvana."<sup>1</sup> In the end, Izo never attains nirvana as he never escapes karma. Miike remains trapped in the iron circle of human existence since he is a vulture for violence. The same could be said of Takashi Miike fans since they too are vultures for Miike's various renditions of violence, something which makes *IZO* an intriguing film. *IZO* is an experimental/folk version of violence that leaves viewers affected and pensive. It is a truly experiential film that must be seen to be believed. I dare you; I double dare you to get "Izo-ed."

*Andrea wrote about Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events in Synoptique 7.*

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## ENDNOTES

**1** Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954. 116.

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Andrea Ariano is a student in the M.A Film Studies program at Concordia University, Montreal.

*Edited by Laurel Wypkema*