

Part 2
Cinema &
Noh

The World of Noh Dramas

As Seen in Ozu/Kurosawa Films, Iranian "5-Five"

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Photos: Kameda Kunihei

Similarities in Noh/Cinema Techniques

I have decided to write this article on the relationship between the classical theater of *Noh*, which was perfected as an art form in Japan 600 years ago, and the cinema, which is a product of the latest in modern technology. In so doing, I am aware that I might be criticized for making a "forced" comparison. The two art forms have the following characteristics in common: 1) They represent a slice of life in a certain framework (the stage in the case of *Noh* dramas and the screen in the case of cinema) or choose materials from a world that exists in a sphere different from ours and embody them for our appreciation; 2) effectively employ their unique methodology and technology; and 3) a production lasts for one hour to two hours.

A frequently seen opening in a *Noh* drama of the first group of plays shows a traveler (who is often a monk) on the stage. His long journey from a remote countryside to the capital is expressed through a "*michi-yuki*" (journey) chant, which tells about the scenery and scenic spots he has passed. When he makes a step forward, saying, "I have arrived," this means he has traveled hundreds of miles. In cinema, the cinematographic technique of overlapping many scenes to represent a journey from spot A to spot B, designed to make the viewer feel as if he or she has actually made the trip, reminds one of this *Noh* technique. (I have to admit that this film technique is rather banal, however.)

The expression of sorrow, "*shioru*," is said to be the most representative gesture in *Noh* dramas. "*Shioru*," or crying, is expressed by a simple gesture of the actor looking slightly downward and placing his hand in front of his eye. At this moment, the viewer focuses all his or her attention to this gesture and empathizes with the protagonist. In films, the emotion of "crying" is emphasized by, for example, alternately showing or making close-up shots of teary eyes and trembling hands of the protagonist. Again, this technique has something in common with the technique of expression in *Noh* dramas.

In a *Noh* number called "*Kantan*," the moment its protagonist, *Rosei*, lies in bed to dream a dream, the curtain at the far end of the stage rises and out comes a slow procession of children and noblemen. The quick change from the real world to the world of dreams like this reminds one of flashback shots in cinema.

A long-nosed goblin called "*Tengu*" in *Noh* is a goblin who lives deep in the mountains. He descends on the human world to do evil and "flies away by stepping on clouds." On the stage, it never jumps or runs. Instead, it walks on the stage corridor so slowly as his movement is barely perceptible and disappears behind the curtain. This has the same effect as the ultra high-speed cinematography that shows a jetliner flying in the skies remaining motionless when observed from the ground. There will be no end if I begin citing these comparisons between the expression techniques of *Noh* dramas and cinematography.

Noh Felt in Iranian Film "5-Five"

An Iranian film with an enigmatic title, "5-Five," by director Abbas Kiarostami, who is called a maestro in the Iranian cinema world, is a film that appears to be either a documentary or an experimental work. It was one of the works presented at the Asian Film Festival in 2006. It was produced in 2003 as an international joint project by Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK). This film was dedicated to the late Japanese film director Ozu Yasujiro, whose centenary of birth fell in 2003. In his films, Ozu never deviated from his theme of love between father and son and between mother and daughter and from his style of shooting from low angles. As Ozu was the director who directed the most "*Noh*"-like films, perhaps in making his "5-Five," Kiarostami was conscious of the fact that a *Noh* performance, in its original form, consisted of five plays. The Iranian director's five parts were as follows:

Part 1:

A quiet shoreline of the sea. A piece of driftwood carried there by waves is tossed about and rolls here and there. Finally, its tip breaks off and the fragment continues to roll for a while.



Part 2:

A path on the same beach. People cross the scene from right to left and from



(left) "*Kurotsuka*: In this *Noh* drama, there is a scene where a poor old woman is spinning thread with a wheel in the corner of her house. The scene is very similar to that of an old woman in the film "*Kumonosu-jo*."

left to right. It seems to be twilight time and long thin shadows stretch. Four old men stand together and chat for a while and are gone. Only the sound of waves remains.

Part 3:

A distant shot of the shoreline. Several dogs are crouching. Several water fowl toddle on the sand. Eventually, the dogs get up and are gone.



Part 4:

A procession of ducks. They walk single-file from left to right. There are more than 150 of them. After a while, they change directions and run back from right to left.



Part 5:

Night. The moon is reflected on a pitch-black surface of water. With the movement of waves, the reflection of the moon flickers, warps and disappears, and reappears. Lightning and rain. The cries of a night bird. The chirping of an insect. The quacking of a duck. The rain stops and the reflection of the moon on the surface of water is seen again.



As in the works of Ozu, the camera remains stationary. No words, just sounds and music. What Kiarostami tried to appeal or express through these scenes is unknowable – like *Noh* dramas that refrain from making

any superfluous explanations and leave it up to the audience to interpret them.

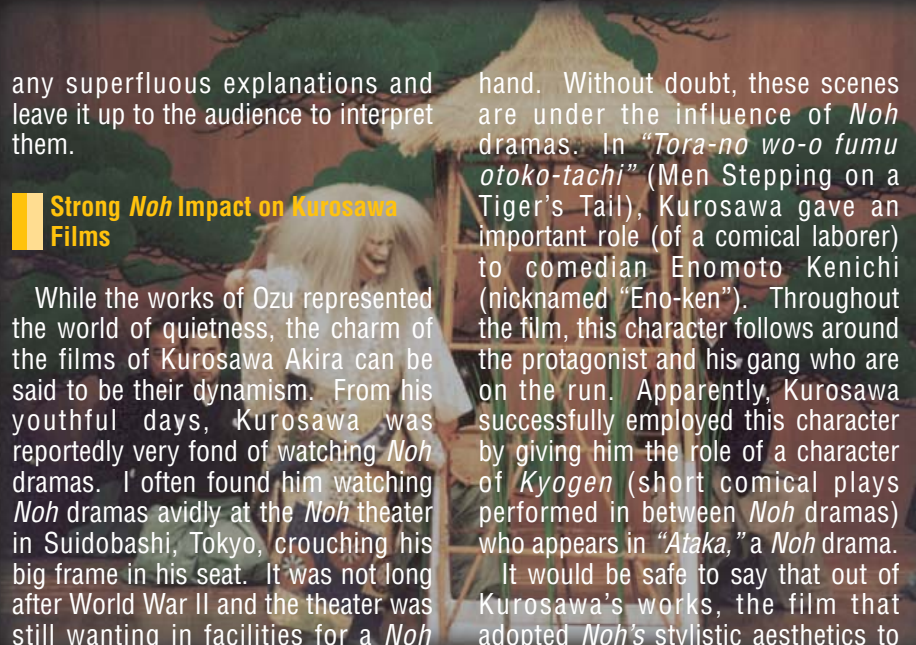
Strong *Noh* Impact on Kurosawa Films

While the works of Ozu represented the world of quietness, the charm of the films of Kurosawa Akira can be said to be their dynamism. From his youthful days, Kurosawa was reportedly very fond of watching *Noh* dramas. I often found him watching *Noh* dramas avidly at the *Noh* theater in Suidobashi, Tokyo, crouching his big frame in his seat. It was not long after World War II and the theater was still wanting in facilities for a *Noh* stage. I cannot imagine what kind of inspirations Kurosawa got for films from the dancing figures of master *Noh* performers like Noguchi Kanesuke.

However, in watching Kurosawa's works, I remember the quiet scene in which *judoist* Sanshiro, the protagonist of Kurosawa's first film "*Sugata Sanshiro*," spends the night holding onto a pole in a muddy pond and, as he watches a lotus flower open in the dawn light, attains enlightenment. The stop-motion shot in which Sanshiro hurls his archrival Monma Saburo to his death and the close-up shot of the face of his daughter O-sumi, staring at Sanshiro with abhorrence. And in a sequel to "*Sugata Sanshiro*," brothers Higaki Tesshin and Genzaburo storm into Sanshiro's *dojo* (training hall) and the younger of the two is decked out to be a madman, with his unruly hair flowing to his shoulders and his face painted chalk-white, clad in white *kimono* and white *hakama* (skirt-like trousers), and clutching a branch of bamboo grass (called "madness bamboo grass" in *Noh* dramas) in his

hand. Without doubt, these scenes are under the influence of *Noh* dramas. In "*Tora-no wo-o fumu otoko-tachi*" (Men Stepping on a Tiger's Tail), Kurosawa gave an important role (of a comical laborer) to comedian Enomoto Kenichi (nicknamed "Eno-ken"). Throughout the film, this character follows around the protagonist and his gang who are on the run. Apparently, Kurosawa successfully employed this character by giving him the role of a character of *Kyogen* (short comical plays performed in between *Noh* dramas) who appears in "*Ataka*," a *Noh* drama.

It would be safe to say that out of Kurosawa's works, the film that adopted *Noh*'s stylistic aesthetics to the greatest extent is "*Kumonosu-jo*" (Spider Web Castle), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a Japanese period film. The scene in which the two warrior protagonists, Washizu Taketori and his colleague Miki Yoshiaki, stray into a wood and come upon an enigmatic old woman, who predicts their future, is nothing but a scene from "*Kurotsuka*" (Black Grave, aka Adachigahara), a *Noh* drama, in which the protagonist asks for a night lodging at the house of a demon-woman. The film's scene produced a unique illusionary vision. Actress Yamada Isuzu, who plays the role of Asaji, the wife of Taketoki, who instigates her husband to murder his lord as well as Yoshiaki, made up her face exactly like a female *Noh* mask. Her movements were identical to those on the *Noh* stage. It is said that before Yamada performed the scene in which she goes mad, Kurosawa had a *Noh* mask "*Shakumi*" representing a middle-aged woman delivered to him and showed it to Yamada in directing her. This was an experimental work attempting to fuse *Noh* with cinema. [TS]



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(right) "In later scenes: The old woman turns into a man-eating demon."