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"Like Oil and Water": Adaptation as Textuality, Intertextuality, and Metatextuality in Lady Snowblood (Fujita, 1973)

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Abstract

Toshiya Fujita's 1973 film adaptation of Kazuo Koike and Kazue Kamimura's manga series *Lady Snowblood* is a case study in the challenges inherent in adapting a complex graphic narrative to film. A sprawling episodic story of assassination and revenge, the original manga text offers challenges to any adapter in terms of content, form, narrative construction, and media affordances, challenges that Fujita and his screenwriter Norio Osada gamely take up in their film. In their attempts to adapt their source material, Fujita and Osada rely on three adaptation strategies—textuality, intertextuality, and metatextuality—that reveal both their nimble thinking about adaptation as an aesthetic process, but that also demonstrates the limitations of these strategies for containing and assimilating the capacious source material upon which the film is based. Ultimately, Fujita's film is a fascinating text that both reworks and revises its source material while also allowing it to remain a legible contesting presence within its own narrative.

Keywords

"Like Oil and Water": Adaptation as Textuality, Intertextuality, and
Metatextuality in *Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973)

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Adapted from Kazuo Koike and Kazuo Kamimura's manga series *Lady Snowblood* (*Shurayuki-hime*), Toshiya Fujita's 1973 film of the same name is a case study in the complex array of tensions inherent to adaptation as an aesthetic project. These tensions, as encoded in this cult action thriller, are made explicit in a recent interview with *Snowblood* screenwriter Norio Osada, included by Criterion Collection on their recent Blu-ray restoration of the film. Throughout the short interview, Osada identifies no less than four important oppositions, sometimes characterizing these as fruitful and other times as in conflict. First, Osada notes that the idea for the film came from producer Kikumaru Okuda, an enthusiastic reader of the manga who imagined a successful combination between its narrative and the protagonist, played by young actress Meiko Kaji, of the previous year's film *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* (Itō, 1972). According to Osada, "Okuda wanted to carry the persona Meiko Kaji developed in *Scorpion* over to a world adapted from a graphic novel and make her even more flamboyant, more . . . what? More grandly entertaining on a large scale" ("Killer Construction"). Second, perhaps further inspired by the possibilities of a hybrid between the *chanbara* (sword-fighting) vengeance plot of the manga and the women-in-prison genre of *Scorpion*, Okuda suggested a further tension: placing Osada's expertise writing *yakuza* films for Toei Company into dialogue with Fujita, a novice director at Nikkatsu Corporation "who'd been making films about restless young people teeming with energy and with nowhere to go" ("Killer Constructions"). Osada notes in the interview that, because of their radically different narrative interests, "we were like oil and water, and that could yield interesting results."

Turning away from the film's inception, Osada develops the third and fourth oppositions as inherent to *Lady Snowblood*'s construction. The third tension, one of perspective and scale, is revealed in Osada's decision to drastically increase the role of a reporter from his relatively marginal presence in the manga to Snowblood's accomplice in her vengeance quest. Commenting on the function of this increased role, Osada explains that films "should examine the human heart with a microscopic gaze, and then take in the context with a macroscopic view" ("Killer Construction"). He refers to these two perspectives as "a bird's eye view and a worm's eye view" and notes that the former—as articulated through the reporter's more developed point of view—is "a catalyst to give that personal revenge a much larger meaning." I'll discuss the reporter's increased role below, but this tension between the bird's eye and the worm's eye, then, serves the fourth and, to Osada,

most important opposition: a thematic opposition between Japan's Edo and Meiji periods. Osada describes Japan's cultural transformation into a modern state—"a rich country with a strong army"—as bringing with it "both light and shadows":

> What are those shadows? As Japan made leaps and bounds toward becoming more like Europe and America, it discarded something valuable about Japan, about being Japanese. And that which had been discarded in the process of modernization wreaks vengeance on the establishment that has discarded it. ("Killer Construction")

As Osada describes it, Snowblood's quest for vengeance is not just about her four specific revenge targets; rather, "the conceptual foundation" of this vengeance plot is "the revenge visited by that which is indigenous upon those who built the modern nation as they pleased to serve their own interests." The bird's eye perspective of the reporter thus reveals the analogy between Snowblood's quest for bloody vengeance and the marginalized left-behind of the Meiji era.

These tensions that Osada identifies over the course of the interview—*chanbara* and women-in-prison films, a writer of yakuza films and a director of young *ennui*, a bird's eye and a worm's, modern Japan and the avenging ghost of its feudal past—cut to the heart of the production and structure of the *Lady Snowblood* adaptation, a film successful enough to immediately spawn a sequel (*Lady Snowblood: Love Song of Vengeance*, 1974) and to have a lasting influence on genre filmmaking, most recognizably to Western audiences in its profound influence on Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004). But the tension that goes strangely undiscussed by Osada is the tension that precedes all of these details: the fundamental tension between the media affordances of manga and cinema. For *Lady Snowblood* is a film adaptation that is strikingly hybrid and self-aware in its adaptation practices, making legible for viewers not only its status as an adapted text, but also its struggles and perhaps its failings in its attempt to wrestle a manga that stretches well over a thousand pages into a film of less than a hundred minutes.

I want to take the tensions Osada outlines—and especially his thematic interest in the avenging ghost of an earlier time wreaking havoc on a more advanced era—as a metaphor for the ways in which the formal features of the original *Lady Snowblood* manga resist adaptation, foiling attempts at assimilation and absorption and ultimately remaining a legible palimpsest beneath the surface of a fascinatingly hybrid film that attempts to quote, replicate, revise, transform, and finally reveal the limitations of its own narrative coherence and closure. By examining three adaptation strategies adopted by Osada and Fujita—textuality, intertextuality, and metatextuality—we will be able to see the source manga's influence, resistance, and ultimately its "vengeance on the [film] that has discarded it."

Textuality: Villainous Portraits, Airborne Avenger

By textuality, I refer to Osada and Fujita's attempts simply to replicate the form and content of the original manga onscreen in a one-to-one relationship that calls no attention to the processes of adaptation or the film's status as an adapted text—or indeed, any kind of text other than itself. For reasons I will explain below, this strategy is ultimately not particularly interesting and is fundamentally flawed. However, in order to address that, we first need to examine briefly the narrative contours of the source text itself.

The manga *Lady Snowblood*, published in the early 1970s in *Weekly Playboy*, written by Koike, and illustrated by Kamimura, tells the story of Yuki, the titular Lady Snowblood whose quest to avenge the deaths of her family spans the series.[1] Her father and older brother were murdered by four criminals—three men, Takemura Hanzo, Shoei Tokuichi, and Tsukamoto Gishirō, and a woman, Kitahama Okono—and her mother Sayo is raped by the three men. Sayo later murders Tokuichi and is placed into a women's prison, where she then seduces a series of men in order to have a child who will carry out her vengeance in the outside world. This child—Yuki—wanders the land as an assassin, eventually enlisting the aid of a brigand named Matsuemon in order to find her three targets. Matsuemon leads Yuki to Okono, whom she frames for murder but does not kill. Her vengeance quest is then stymied, however, as Matsuemon is unable to locate Gishirō and Hanzo. Yuki enlists the help of Miyahara, an author who publicizes Yuki's story in an effort to flush out the two remaining villains. This effort is successful, and, having killed them both, Yuki throws her umbrella—the covert sheath for her deadly blade—into the sea.

This quick summary of the central narrative of the *Lady Snowblood* series, however, does not convey the enormous narrative and formal complexity of the work. Republished in 2005 and 2006 by Dark Horse Press, the English translation of the series runs to four volumes and over one thousand pages, and its length and structure belie the simple summary above. In fact, the central revenge narrative described above is scattered throughout the series, appearing only elliptically. It is not, for instance, until the third chapter of volume one—"Episode 3: Love, Hate, String of Blood, and Confession" in *The Deep-Seated Grudge, pt. 1*—that readers discover Yuki's name, her past, and her vengeance quest. Her quest is not mentioned again until the first chapter of volume two—"Episode 6: Hojicho and Precious Flowers" in *The Deep-Seated Grudge, pt. 2*—and Yuki does not claim her first victim, Okono, until the third chapter in the same volume, "Episode 8: Pawnshop of Life and Merciless Disposal." Likewise, she does not enlist the aid of Miyahara until the last chapter of volume three—"Episode 11: Master Crook, the Wanderer" in *Retribution, pt. 1*—and does not actually kill any of her victims until

the final two chapters of the last volume—"Episode 14: An Account of How Gishirō Strikes Back" and "Episode 15: Bamboo's Tears" in *Retribution, pt. 2*.

So what is going on throughout the rest of this sprawling narrative? As my description above suggests, Yuki's central serialized vengeance narrative is fragmented and mixed among a host of other, more episodic storylines. Take, for instance, the opening chapter of *The Deep-Seated Grudge, pt. 1*, "Episode 1: Sumida River Loincloth Cutting Board." Readers are first introduced to Yuki—though the audience will not know her name for some time—infiltrating a gambling ring in order to get close enough to the *oyabun* (the head of a yakuza family) to kill him. It is only in the last pages of this chapter, after Yuki has assassinated the *oyabun* and his men, that she reveals her name to be Lady Snowblood, standing naked and covered in her enemies' blood in the falling snow (see Figure 1). Similarly, after introducing Yuki's backstory in its third chapter, *The Deep-Seated Grudge, pt. 1* sets her revenge quest immediately to the side to end with another isolated story, "Episode 5: Rokumeikan Murder

Figure 1: from *The Deep-Seated Grudge*, pt. 1

Panorama." Here, Yuki uses a series of assassinations to frame a cabal of high-ranking government officials into shutting down the Rokumeikan, a real Meiji-era social club that was criticized for abandoning Japanese culture in pursuit of Westernized parties, dancing, evening dress, and cuisine. In fact, much of the *Lady Snowblood* manga is devoted not to Yuki's revenge narrative, but instead to these one-off episodes wherein she hides out in a mental hospital posing as a nurse ("Episode 12: Bloom of Youth, White Uniform, and Song of Tears" in *Retribution, pt. 2*), assassinates a yakuza boss in order to make way for the construction of a museum ("Episode 10: Unveiling of a Pretty Woman and a Strange Story" in *Retribution, pt. 1*), and slays a photographer who rapes his subjects and then blackmails them with photographs of the assault ("Episode 13: Indecent Photographer's Confession" in *Retribution, pt. 2*).

What even this cursory description of the *Lady Snowblood* manga reveals is that it is a profoundly convoluted and complicated narrative—complicated in ways that propose a serious challenge for the filmmakers adapting it. Rather than

trying to encapsulate such a massive narrative into a feature-length film, then, Fujita and Osada make only brief and local attempts to replicate the text of their source material without comment. These attempts largely take the form of either recurring plot elements—largely elements from her central vengeance narrative recombined with the episodic one-offs, which I discuss below—or single images from the manga that are recreated in live-action. To offer only one example, the manga repeats images of the four targets of Yuki's vengeance several times, first in flashback when readers first are told of her central quest and later as a way of reminding readers of which targets have been eliminated, marked with Xs across their faces (see Figures 2 and 3). The film recreates these images with freeze-frames

Figure 2: from *The Deep-Seated Grudge*, pt. 1

Figure 3: from *Retribution*, pt. 2

and on-screen text as Yuki's father is murdered, and later with still photographic portraits of the villains on a black background, replicating the content and style of the manga without rendering the image's status as adapted object legible to the

Figure 4: from *Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973)

Figure 5: from *Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973)

audience (see Figures 4 and 5). Similarly, the grotesqueness of Matsuemon and his men in the manga is, to a certain degree, replicated by costuming, make-up, and acting in the film, and several action tableaus—especially Kaji's airborne flips over her enemies—recreate the stylized combat from the manga (see Figures 6 and 7).
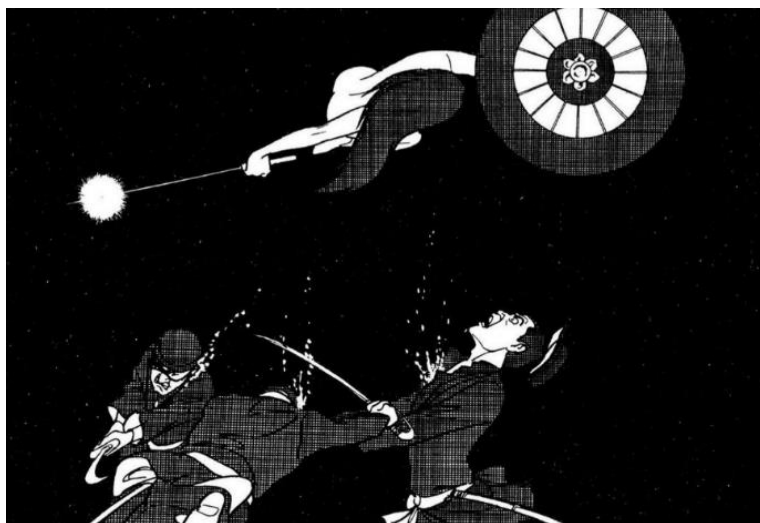

Figure 6: from *The Deep-Seated Grudge*, pt. 1

Figure 7: from *Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973)

Ultimately, though, these momentary recreations of the manga's images are simply that—momentary images, and ones that do not call attention to themselves as recreations of the manga text. The problem with textuality as a strategy for adapting the *Lady Snowblood* manga is that it can only go so far. While Fujita and Osada can replicate on screen individual images and moments from the source material, these isolated images and moments do not constitute an adapted narrative.

And perhaps we shouldn't find this limitation all that surprising, given the specific affordances of manga as a medium and a genre. In *Making Comics*, Scott McCloud notes eight distinctive qualities of manga as a genre: iconographic characters with "simple, emotive faces and figures"; "a strong sense of place" which, when combined with iconographic characters, contributes to a masking effect that prompts readers to more closely identify with characters; wordless panels with an emphasis on aspect-to-aspect panel transitions; subjective motion illustrated with blurred or streaked backgrounds; a mature and capacious sense of genre; a wide range of character design; attention to closely-observed mundane details; and expressionistic effects used to indicate character emotion (216). It is telling that, of these qualities, most—particularly those related to the stylized representation of character and place, as well as the spatial layout of different panels in relation to one another—depend specifically on manga's status as comics and cannot be replicated formally by live-action film. This is not to say that the rhetorical ends produced by manga's formal features cannot be reproduced using different cinematic means, but it does suggest that the simple replication of formal features does not, in and of itself, constitute a meaningful adaptation strategy—in this case in particular, and, perhaps, ever.

Intertextuality: *Jidaigeki* Pathos, Whirlwind of Focus

One way that Osada and Fujita attempt to answer the problem posed by textual replication is through intertextual reference to both the manga and to other kinds of texts. By intertextuality as an adaptation strategy, I mean that Fujita and Osada incorporate forms of narrative, media, genre, and text other than the cinematic, doing so in ways that are legible to the audience, but that do not destabilize the coherence of the narrative itself or render explicit the processes of adaptation. Indeed, Osada indicates his interest in the kind of dialogism inherent in intertextuality when he refers to the worm's eye and the bird's, noting that films that combine both are "the most interesting"; in the same way, *Snowblood*'s adaptation strategies become more "interesting" when Fujita and Osada bring other narrative forms into intertextual dialogue with cinema. This strategy appears throughout the film, most importantly in using Yuki's revenge as a central organizing narrative, adopting chapter titles and voice-over narration, and

employing a deliriously complex focalization structure as a rhetorical analogy for the manga's visual and chronological convolutions.

Perhaps the most obvious intertextual adaptation strategy Osada and Fujita employ is the rearrangement and recombination of their source material into a more concise revenge plot, creating a more novelistic organizing principle than the manga's serialized meandering. In essence, Yuki's pursuit and execution of the four villains is rearranged and brought to prominence as the film's central narrative concern; this newly centralized revenge plot then delivers the main narrative thrust of the film, while also providing a single storyline to which several of the *manga*'s more recognizable episodic set pieces can be attached. For instance, after a short pre-credit sequence in which Yuki kills a yakuza boss and his men—an episodic moment never again referred to in the narrative proper—Yuki immediately arrives at Matsuemon's village to beg for his help. The first act of the movie relates her backstory, and she then immediately pursues and kills Banzō (Hanzo in the manga), slaying him on a beach as he begs forgiveness. This assassination appears more or less intact from the manga, but with two important changes. First, this episode is combined with the gambling narrative from "Episode 1: Sumida River Loincloth Cutting Board," making Yuki's infiltration of the gambling ring a ploy to flush out Banzō. Second, this episode has been moved from the very last chapter of the manga to become Yuki's first successful act of vengeance, with consequences I will discuss below. After killing Banzō, Yuki learns that Gishirō died years before in a shipwreck, and then the trail goes cold. Yuki engages the services of Ryūrei Ashio, a reporter, to tell her story in the newspapers as a way of flushing out her final living target, Okono. Okono reveals herself by kidnapping and torturing Ashio, and Yuki stages a dramatic assault on Okono's compound, though her vengeance is thwarted when Okono hangs herself rather than face Yuki. Finally, the last act of the film features the dramatic reveal that Gishirō is, in fact, alive and supplying arms to the Meiji government. Yuki's final act of vengeance is then combined with the Rokumeikan episode mentioned above, setting the stage for Gishirō, Ashio, and Yuki to paint the walls of this Westernized palace red with their blood. Having succeeded in killing Gishirō but mortally wounded herself, Yuki stumbles outside the Rokumeikan, where, after being stabbed in a sudden appearance by Banzō's vengeance-seeking daughter Kobue, she collapses into the snow.

The rearrangement of the manga's storyline in order to prioritize the revenge narrative may seem at first to be less an aesthetic strategy and more a practical necessity brought on by the need to condense such a large and unwieldy source text and render it coherent. While it certainly accomplishes this, however, this rearrangement has three important effects that render a level of intertextual dialogue legible, making meaning in ways that go beyond the mere replication of textual details discussed above. First, making the revenge narrative the central organizing principle of the film activates a revenge script that audiences will enter

the theater already familiar with. As John Kerrigan has it, revenge is a kind of proto-narrative structure, the "simplest yet most fraught way to mesh [two characters]" through an interplay of injury and retribution (4). Because "[r]evenge is a building-block, the seed from which something larger can grow . . . as blood calls for blood and the symmetries of action extend into plot," revenge acts as a kind of urtext, an "impulse towards structure" which replicates narrative's need for a beginning, middle, and end with "the pattern of injury, anticipation, and reaction" (Kerrigan 5). Put another way, by reorganizing the manga's diffuse episodic narrative around the structure of revenge, Fujita and Osada imbue their film with a teleology of violence, one that invites the audience to anticipate a narrative structure in which all of Yuki's efforts are directed toward a coherent, bloody end.

Further, and more specifically, Osada and Fujita are not just mapping the *Lady Snowblood* narrative onto a vengeance narrative, but a particular kind of revenge story that serves their thematic needs. Their film engages specifically with the *jidaigeki* genre familiar to 1973 Japanese audiences. While referring more generally to historical dramas set in Japan's feudal past, *jidaigeki* films frequently depict a lone warrior seeking revenge against a band of enemies, often in response to the dishonoring or death of family members. These particular narratives usually carry a sense of loss and inevitability to them, often expressed in the mortal wounds the avenging warrior suffers in the pursuit of her vengeance. Jean Ma refers to this as "the degenerative mythos of *jidaigeki*," as opposed to American Westerns' myth of regenerative violence. According to Ma,

> even when avengers succeed . . . their success is contained within [a] larger horizon of entropy and decline. Insofar as vengeance consists in the consecration to a memory of the past, the identity driven by this memory can only undergo a negation with the achievement of retribution. An aura of tragic irony clings to the heroes of revenge dramas, for whom there is no escape from the past, only the dead end. (65-66)

Audiences familiar with this genre will not only recognize from the opening scenes that Yuki's goal is the destruction of the four villains who destroyed her family, that she will encounter obstacles over the course of this journey, and that she is ultimately likely to be successful; if they are familiar with *jidaigeki* narrative structure, they are also likely to anticipate that the successful execution of her vengeance will almost certainly be simultaneous with her own annihilation and erasure. Not only does this give Fujita and Osada an intertextual teleology that imbues their film with causality and coherence, but it also renders this teleology thematically significant. Recalling Osada's comments about the film being about "that which had been discarded in the process of modernization wreak[ing] vengeance on the establishment that has discarded it" ("Killer Construction"), the

"degenerative mythos" to which Ma refers ensures that Yuki will simultaneously be successful in her individual vengeance but also subsumed by the inevitable march of time.

Reordering the manga narrative to emphasize the vengeance narrative also serves Osada's theme by ensuring that the climax of the film occurs at the Rokumeikan, the symbol of Meiji-era modernization and Westernization. Recall that the manga ends with Hanzo's assassination on a lonely beach, followed by Yuki tossing her umbrella into the sea (see Figure 8). Over the image of the falling umbrella, the following lines appear:

> In the dead of morning
> The rumbling ocean wails.
> The woman on her shore of fate
> Has thrown away her tears long ago.
> The woman on her path of vengeance
> Has thrown away her heart long ago (*Retribution, pt. 2* 292).

Figure 8: from *Retribution*, pt. 2

Placing Banzō's / Hanzo's assassination at the beginning rather than the end of their film means that that Osada and Fujita's film does not conclude with images of nature and a woman throwing away her weapon, her tears, and her heart. Instead, the film ends with the image of a woman—the only one present in a kimono, rather than Western-style dress—bleeding and screaming in the courtyard of the Rokumeikan, a metonym for the essence of traditional Japan being subsumed by and raging against Westernization and modernization in the film's closing moments.[2]

Finally, it is worth noting tangentially that this reordering to engage intertextually with the vengeance and *jidaigeki* narratives serves as another intertextual reference, this time to *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion*. Recall

that the producer of *Lady Snowblood*, Okuda, was interested in making the film as a way of combining the narrative of the manga he enjoyed with the character Kaji played in *Female Prisoner*. Without rehearsing the plot in any detail, suffice it to say that Shunya Itō's film, released the year before the *Lady Snowblood* film, features Kaji in another vengeance role, this time in a contemporary story featuring Kaji's character Matsushima falsely imprisoned, having been set up by her detective boyfriend. The film depicts Matsushima first tortured in prison and then escaping to wreak her vengeance on her boyfriend and the yakuza to whom he sold her out. Viewers of *Lady Snowblood* a year later would not only be familiar with vengeance narratives and *jidaigeki* as broader forms of intertextuality, but—should they share Okuda's taste in popular culture, at any rate—may also be able to recognize *Snowblood* as a historical reworking of *Female Prisoner*'s contemporary tale of a specific kind of female vengeance, embodied in Kaji's two performances.

We've explored how the simple reordering and reworking of the manga's narrative structure serves several different kinds of intertextuality, but before moving on, it is worth noting two other ways that Osada and Fujita use intertextual reference to attempt to replicate the rhetorical and formal experience of the manga, separate from its content. First, the film curiously injects several kinds of non-cinematic texts as part of the narrative. For instance, early on, Yuki tells Matsuemon of the Blood Tax Riots, the political context in which her father and brother were killed and her mother raped. As she relates the story, the female voice-over narrator immediately cedes to a male voice-over narrator who takes over the narrative while the visual track displays a variety of pen-and-ink drawings illustrating this historical context (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: from *Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973)

While I have not been able to identify the origin of these drawings, they are surprisingly not from the *Lady Snowblood* manga; instead, the film resorts to a third text, combined with the sudden inclusion of two voice-over narrators, to relate Yuki's backstory as she communicates it to Matsuemon. (More on the male voice-over narrator presently.) Additionally, the film uses black-and-white stills at various points to illustrate other aspects of this history, invoking photography as a kind of mimetic effect and adding a documentary quality to Yuki's flashbacks.

Second, despite its relatively limited and local attempts to recreate details from the manga, the film is also divided by Osada into chapters. However, even though these chapter titles evoke a (graphic) novelistic intertextual reference, the titles themselves are not, in fact, from the manga, but are original to the film itself. These evocative titles—"Chapter One: Vow of Vengeance," "Chapter Two: Bamboo Wives and Tears of Wrath," "Chapter Three: Blood-Soaked Umbrella, Grief Scattered Like Flowers," and "Chapter Four: The Pleasure Palace, Final Scene of Carnage"—appear on the screen itself and subdivide the narrative into an expository introduction to Yuki's background, followed by the pursuit and execution of the three living villains. Commenting on the chapter titles, Osada notes that

> In Japanese film, either the *jo-ha-kyu* (slow-medium-fast) structure, or *ki-sho-ten-kentsu* (introduction-development-twist-conclusion) are the most common. When the writer deliberately divides the story into chapters, with hyperbolic titles like you see in graphic novels, in an elevated "classical Chinese" style, plastered on the screen . . . I think this was the first time that was done in popular film. ("Killer Construction")

Here Osada suggests not only an intertextual reference in the form of "hyperbolic titles like you see in graphic novels," but also suggests a transnational and historical effect in the form of "classical Chinese style." In sum, these intertextual references, though not as sweeping as the centralization of the revenge plot, nevertheless serve to alert audiences to the complexity of *Lady Snowblood* as a film in dialogue with other forms.

This complexity is perhaps seen most clearly in my final example of intertextuality, the film's extraordinarily complex focalization structure.[3] This example is not as explicit as those above, and it is not immediately obvious as a reference to a plot structure, genre, or medium in the ways that those discussed above are. However, the film's braiding of memory, flashback, and narration can be read as analogous to and serving as a rhetorical replacement for the chronological, spatial, and visual convolutions of manga narrative, pushing the

limits of my definition of intertextuality. This example also pushes these limits in another way, in that while not yet metatextual, the focalization structure of the film is complex enough to threaten to destabilize the entire narrative. While it does not break the narrative cohesiveness, this structure exuberantly bends it, and as such, this final example of intertextuality might be also seen as the beginnings of metatextuality.

As mentioned above, when Yuki begins telling her story to Matsuemon, her image is replaced by pen and ink drawings and first a female voice-over narrator, then a male. These pen and ink drawings are then replaced by a live-action dramatization of the 1873 murders with no narration, ending with Yuki's mother Suya kneeling over her dead husband and looking up at his four killers, framed side by side in portrait. The camera then takes us to 1894 (with no indication of this date) and to an adult Yuki looking up at her master Dokai (the first time he appears in the film). A conversation occurs in voice-over between the two as he encourages her to leave her training and begin her vengeance quest. As the voice-over continues, a series of edits between the two appears to shift time from dawn to day, and the camera shows us Yuki at her parents' graves, while the voice-over conversation between Yuki and Dokai continues unbroken. The camera then takes us to a women's prison in 1874, where Suya gives birth to Yuki; the grammar of the edit suggests that, improbably, Yuki is recalling her own birth. After Suya's agonizing labor, the camera returns to her glaring at the villains, a shot that undermines the viewers' assumption that we have been watching Yuki relate her quest to Matsuemon (and strangely remembering her own birth); instead, this bookend suggests that these images depict Suya recalling the tragic death of her family, or, alternately, that everything between the doubled shots of Suya's glare is Suya anachronistically recalling her daughter's birth and quest for vengeance, before they actually occur. We then see Suya raped by the villains, followed by a return to the prison birth, with a masterful edit that rhymes the screams of Suya's assault with her agony during the birth of her daughter. The camera then gives us the still black and white documentary photographs discussed above as Suya relates the story of her family's destruction to the women attending her birth. These photographs suddenly come to life and gain color as Suya murders Tokuichi, the first of the villains to die. Viewers are then taken back to the prison, only to immediately shift into another flashback, this one an expressionistic montage of the many men the Suya slept with in order to conceive a child to carry out her vengeance. Once again we return to the prison, only to skip then to 1882, when the eight-year-old Yuki is delivered to Dokai, narrated now by the male voice-over narrator we thought we had left behind. A training montage follows, during which Yuki ages, until we return to 1894, as the male narrator tells us that she sets out on her vengeance quest twenty years after her mother's death. Perversely, we do not return (and never return!) to the inciting moment of this focalization—Yuki telling

her history to Matsuemon—but instead launch immediately into the next chapter of the story, as Yuki hunts Banzō after an unspecified amount of time has passed.

This short passage is, to say the least, dizzying, radically shifting time, place, focalizer, or some combination of these at least fifteen times over the course of this scene. In less than twenty minutes of screentime, the viewer encounters at least six distinct temporal moments: 1) the 1873 death of Yuki's father and brother; 2) the unspecified moment between 1873 and 1874 when her mother kills Tokuichi; 3) Yuki's 1874 birth; 4) her training, beginning in 1882; 5) the day in 1894 when she leaves Dokai to begin her quest; and 6) Yuki's telling of her story to Matsuemon. Likewise, this scene contains three different voice-over narrators—the female voice-over narrator who immediate disappears, a more pervasive male voice-over narrator, and Suya herself—as well as a voice-over of the conversation between Yuki and Dokai. Additionally, the film's image track focalizes, at minimum, through both Yuki and Suya.

While this virtuoso demonstration of narrative complexity is the flashiest and most complicated in the film, it is also indicative of the ways that Fujita and Osada's narrative offers remarkably complex focalization and narration as a rhetorical replacement for their source material's visual, spatial, and chronological complexity. While not explicitly intertextual—aside from the pen-and-ink drawings that begin this section—this segment ably demonstrates the lengths to which Osada and Fujita go in attempting to wrangle the manga into a coherent and cohesive film, both by pushing the limits of the cinematic conventions of editing, narration, and focalization, and by relying on intertextual reference to give their film a comprehensible structure. But the segment also reveals that these attempts push the boundaries of these conventions to their breaking point, ultimately ushering in Fujita and Osada's final adaptation strategy.

Metatextuality: Broken Endings, Scream in Snow

Intertextuality as a strategy goes only so far, and Fujita, Osada, and the film seem to know it. The reorganization of the manga source material is as much a necessary revision to accommodate feature film length as it is an intertextual reference to other revenge narratives—e.g. *Female Prisoner*—and the chapter titles, while more explicitly intertextual, are also momentary and local effects in a larger narrative. As for the complexity of focalization, narration, and chronological structure, this is certainly more interesting than direct textual quotation and is analogous to the manga's spatial narrative complexity, but it is also only analogous. We have seen the ways that this analogy strains the affordances of cinema as it attempts to approximate the complex spatial and temporal structure of its source material. Despite Osada and Fujita's attempts, the *Lady Snowblood* manga still

resists assimilation, and it is here that we turn to the third strategy the film employs in wrestling with its source material.

By metatextuality as an adaptation strategy, I refer to the moments when *Lady Snowblood* appears to comment on its own status as a specifically filmic and adapting text, calling attention to the unstable processes of its own creation or interrupting its own narrative progression and expectations and questioning its own status as the central text. To begin with the most obvious example, when Yuki's search is stymied after Banzō's death and her (mistaken) discovery that Gishirō is dead, she begins working with the reporter Ashio to publicize her story in order to flush Okono out. Here a surprising thing happens: Ashio's story, it turns out, is a manga-style telling of Yuki's revenge quest—depicted on screen using images taken directly from Koike and Kamimura's *Lady Snowblood* manga. Rather than attempting to adapt their source material, Fujita and Osada literally project that material onto the screen, transforming it by turning the entirety of that source text into a plot device within their own film.[4] Even if the individual images are forgotten by *Lady Snowblood* readers, the distinctive style of the art and the specific representation of Yuki herself will be immediately legible as a metatextual reference to readers, making explicit the film's status as a cinematic text simultaneously adapting a graphic text and attempting to appropriate it as a text within in its own diegesis.

This example points further to a significant narrative change, as Ashio himself is a much more important character in the film than his counterpart Miyahara is in the novel. This expansion of the writer's role has a number of consequences in the plot. Ashio turns out, for instance, to be Gishirō's son, though he was unaware that his father still lives. He also joins in the final Rokumeikan adventure with Yuki, ultimately dying after first being shot by his father, then entangling his father long enough for Yuki to stab through Ashio's body into Gishirō's. These changes make Ashio a more prominent part of the story, but it is also revealed late in the film that the male voice-over narrator—first heard in the Blood Tax Riot flashback described above—is, in fact, Ashio, whose voice entered the film's discourse several acts before his character appeared in the story. In an ontologically disorienting discovery, viewers realize that the writer has also been narrating the entire film that we have been watching, implying that a character in the film is not only creating a manga in the film which the film itself is based on, but that he is also responsible for the narrative structure of the film in which he himself is a character.

This is, perhaps, most striking when, after Yuki's vengeance is foiled by Okono's suicide, Yuki treats Ashio's wounds—sustained as he was tortured by Okono's men—while they rest in a boat. In voice-over, the two have the following conversation as Yuki tends to Ashio:

> Ashio: It's all over, Yuki—your vendetta, your revenge.
> Yuki: Can it really be over? Is this how it ends?
> Ashio: Yes, it's all done now. Forget it all. Can the bloodied snow return to its gentle purity? Born in prison, a child of vengeance, can you return to a normal life?

While Yuki's quest is not actually finished and Gishirō still lives, this is nevertheless a remarkable moment: viewers are listening to the protagonist of the film discuss with its narrator what it means for her story to end. The ontology of this moment is, in fact, so disorienting that the viewer hardly notices when the visual track then cuts back to the prison as Yuki narrates what is apparently a memory of her own birth, an unexpected segue in keeping with the dizzying focalization discussed above.

The premature closure that appears in this discussion between character and narrator points to the final metatextual strategy employed by Osada and Fujita that highlights the refusal of their source material to be contained by its adaptation: the commentary upon, interruption, and abnegation of closure that appears more and more frequently as the film progresses. The first example of this strategy occurs at the moment of Yuki's greatest frustration, when Otomo escapes Yuki's vengeance by hanging herself immediately before the scene in the boat described above. When Yuki and Ashio discover Otomo's hanging body, she stares at it with dissociative rage before decisively slicing the body in two at the waist. As blood rains down onto the floor and Yuki bows her head, the soundtrack plays a single strike of an *okawa* drum—a sound like a woodblock common in kabuki theater—and a curtain is literally lowered on the scene as Ashio and Yuki stand frozen. Nothing like this happens before or after in the film, and the explicit theatricality of the moment goes uncommented on by the characters. Indeed, despite the theatrical gesture, this isn't even the end of the chapter. The metatextual commentary on the film's own processes of narration is as jarring and violent as the bisected body hanging from the rafters of the scene, and it calls attention to the film as a created text, contested by both the question of Yuki's vengeance and the question of how to present it.

After calling the audience's attention to closure in this overt way, the film then interrupts and erases closure as the film enters its final act. Shortly after the curtain falls, and after Yuki and Ashio discuss the meaning of endings, the audience is shown Ashio's brush in extreme close-up, writing the words "Chapter Four," but pausing over the subtitle—and perhaps over what it means for Yuki's story to continue when it has so clearly come to an end. As he reflects, Gishirō, the final villain believed to be dead, suddenly makes his dramatic entrance into the film, demanding that his son cease his writing and "forget about all that." As he says these lines, Gishirō takes Ashio's brush and paints over the chapter title Ashio has written, announcing that "your Lady Snowblood tale is over. It ended with Otomo's

death. There's nothing more to write." The newly-revealed final villain literally uses the narrator's brush to blot out the final chapter of Yuki's story, then departs, only to have the film itself contest his erasure by restarting the final chapter, this time with the proper on-screen text, titling it "Chapter Four: The Pleasure Palace, Final Scene of Carnage." Again, we see here narrative coherence struggling to contain its characters, as villain and hero take turns writing and erasing and rewriting the story.

Perhaps the most striking moment of metatextual contestation between the characters in the story and the story that attempts to contain them comes in the film's final moments. After Yuki has killed Gishirō, she is stabbed by Banzō's daughter Kobue and wanders into the snow to die the tragic death appropriate to the *jidaigeki* hero. At the moment Yuki pulls Kobue's blade from her side, the film's theme song begins—sung, appropriately to the metatextual moment, by Kaji herself, using lyrics from the manga. Audiences watching will no doubt pick up the obvious signals of closure encoded in the narrative moment; the rising music as Yuki collapses into the snow is an indication that the film is coming to an end and credits are about to roll. But here a shocking refusal of that mounting closure emerges, as Kaji's song abruptly stops, interrupted suddenly and loudly on the soundtrack by the slow crunch of Yuki's bloodied fingers grasping a fistful of snow and bringing it up to her cheek (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: from *Lady Snowblood* (Fujita, 1973)

Yuki then lets out a scream—of rage? agony? fear? grief?—that echoes her mother's doubled screams of first rape and then childbirth. As Yuki sinks into the snow, the theme song again rises on the soundtrack—but this time with Kaji's voice erased—and the film ends as Yuki attempts to rise.

Osada describes his thinking about this moment at some length in his interview:

> I wrote just one line for that scene in the script. There were no other lines. That one line simply said . . . "Tears." Normally the word "tears" wouldn't be spoken as dialogue. You'd just see a single tear roll down a cheek. I wanted to see how the director would handle that. It wasn't a stage direction. She was supposed to say it: "Tears." I did it playfully, but also as an experiment. I wanted to do something no one else had done. But in the finished film, that line was cut out. ("Killer Construction")

It is telling here that Osada's playful ending for the film was cut, but he does not say by whom. Rather than Osada's ending—which would call attention to his masterful agency as a screenwriter—audiences are instead presented with an ambiguous and disorienting ending where Yuki's agency comes to the forefront, literally interrupting and erasing Kaji, the actress playing her, as Kaji attempts to introduce the closing credits. Here, we see the film's most explicit example of *Lady Snowblood*'s refusal to be contained and assimilated into another form, forcing to end the film not on the strong narrative closure of Kaji repeating the song that began the film, but instead on Yuki's ambiguous scream, one that refuses audience comprehension and rejects even the closure of her death.

Conclusion

In this ending, we can see how the *Lady Snowblood* manga makes good on Osada's intentions to tell a story about "the revenge visited by that which is indigenous upon those . . . pleased to serve their own interests," but with more than just the political commentary Osada intended ("Killer Construction"). While Osada and Fujita attempt to adapt and assimilate Koike and Kamimura's sprawling graphic narrative, first by representing the text on screen, then by attempting to contain it in other intertextual patterns and forms, and finally by rendering their film as a vertiginous whirl of metatextual commentary, it is ultimately that original text—"that which had been discarded" in the process of adaptation—that returns to "wreak[] vengeance on the establishment that has discarded it" ("Killer Construction"). The scream at the end is not Osada's, or Fujita's, or even Kaji's, despite the fact that it emerges from the actress's body. Instead, it is the primal scream of the original Yuki and the original text, resisting and refusing the assimilation into an adaptation that ultimately cannot contain them—a scream that reveals the bloody struggles of adaptation without effacing them. Adaptations always have to wrestle with the inexorable presence of their source materials; *Lady Snowblood* is simply an adaptation that renders its struggle with its discarded source

material as a central element of its discourse. It turns out that the discarded Lady Snowblood's vengeance is visceral not only in its body count, but in its aesthetics as well.

Notes

1. The original title of Lady Snowblood (*Shurayuki-hime*) is a pun on Snow White (*Shirayuki-hime*) that translates poorly into English. Yuki is Japanese for snow in both names, but "shira" (white) becomes "shura," a reference to *asura*, spirits addicted to violence, wrath, and vengeance. In his interview on the Criterion release of the film, writer Kazuo Koike notes that of the five paths of Buddhism, "the path of the asura"—Snowblood's path—"is the most grueling. To attain their goals, they'll even kill their own father or mother. If they meet a friend, they'll kill the friend. Even if they meet the Buddha, they'll kill him" ("A Beautiful Demon").

2. That this reordering also allows Fujita and Osada to create a second vengeance-seeking woman, Banzō's daughter, to continue the cycle of violence by pursuing Yuki throughout the film is icing on the thematic cake.

3. While this complexity goes unmentioned in the secondary literature, Wikipedia, of all places, notes this peculiar feature of the film. At the time of this writing, the entry on *Lady Snowblood* includes a section on story structure, which reads, in its entirety: "The scenes of this film do not appear in chronological order. Each paragraph [in the summary] below represents a passage of the film in the order it appears." With characteristic clarity, the summary then presents the events of the film in chronological (though not discursive) order, leaving the hapless reader to wonder just what "in the order it appears" could possibly mean.

4. In the manga, the novelist Miyahara also publicizes Yuki's story, but Koike and Kamimura depict this story as a prose narrative, illustrated with occasional paintings. It is not a graphic novel, and certainly not the graphic novel that readers are holding in their hands.

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