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The *onryo*, or “vengeful ghost,” is a popular Japanese horror trope that this life-long fright fan never fully jumped on the bandwagon for. It’s a genre convention that reached its peak of popularity during the early 2000s (at least here in the U.S.), however films of its nature are still cranked out on a semi-regular basis, most of which are unavailable in the Western market. Which brings us to Japan Flix, a new digital distribution venture that makes never-before-released Japanese films available for the first time via their streaming website. While scanning the first batch of films available, one immediately stood out from the pack: 2009’s TEKE TEKE. Seriously, could I really turn down a movie with such an off-the-wall concept? Well, upon deeper digging, it turns out the premise isn’t actually as unique as I originally thought it was.

TEKE TEKE further exhibits director Koji Shiraishi’s interest in adapting Japanese urban legends, coupled with 2008’s CARVED, based on the “Slit-Mouthed Woman.” This particular one, more or less spread by children, tells of a young woman who is split in half by a train and very, very slowly dies. As a result, her legless ghost creeps around train stations, crawling on her elbows making the “teke teke” (sometimes spelled “tek tek”) sound as she pursues her victims. Upon hearing the strange noise, one is said to turn in curiosity, setting their sight on the ghost, whereupon she swiftly cuts them down to size with a scythe, rendering them to look like her. It’s a clever little tale and probably the main reason I was at all interested in checking out this onryo film.

Kana (played by J-pop star Yuko Oshima) is a mildly awkward high school student, and Ayaka is her very run of the mill, kawaii-obsessed friend. Utsumi is their super-cool classmate on whom Ayaka has a crush on, but is too shy to ask out. Like any good friend would, Kana asks him out for her in exchange for a week of free lunches. He hasn’t a clue who Ayaka is, but inevitably agrees to the date in order to get closer to Kana (unbeknownst to her). After the initial date goes over well, they agree to meet again, this time with Kana tagging along to lighten the air a bit. Not the best idea, because Utsumi makes his interested in Kana apparent, causing tension between the girls. The subject of “teke teke” is brought up during conversation, and we are first introduced to the legend, this time with the added stipulation that if you see the ghost

and survive, you will still die in three days time. The date concludes and the two have an argument while walking home causing Ayaka to take a different route home, one that causes her to cross under the train tracks. You can probably guess that Ayaka stumbles upon the ghost that night, becoming yet another victim. Now it is up to Kana, Utsumi and a few others to discover the horrifying origin to what was once considered a child’s fable and try to somehow put and end to this curse!

With more than half the film’s short 70-minute running time given over to character development, the wait to actually see the ghost makes up a good chunk of the suspense. Considering special FX artist Yoshihiro Nishimura (TOKYO GORE POLICE, MACHINE GIRL) led the creature design team, I was quite surprised by the restraint exhibited. Many of the same FX shots are reused, showing the ghost scampering along a dark corridor and the darkness of those shots makes the ghost difficult to see. We get a total of maybe two or three still, close-up looks at the ghost which deliver the goods. However, the moments are marred by poor CGI when she starts to move around.

Low budget director Shiraishi, also responsible for the 2009 UK-banned torture flick GROTESQUE, certainly isn’t averse to excessive violence and gore in his films, but again, I was quite surprised by the restraint exhibited! But films like RINGU, JU-ON and DARK WATER had little to no gore, so TEKE TEKE does stand out of the pack a bit. You get a few scenes involving freshly segmented bodies that contain a mix of CGI arterial spray and decent practical FX. So gorehounds beware, this film tends to flaunt its atmospheric and creepy attributes, while only sprinkling on a bit of the red stuff. To Shiraishi’s credit, this works just fine and proves he’s not just a one trick pony looking to interact with his audience through splatter.

I honestly enjoyed my time spent with this film, really, but I cannot help pointing out one particular issue I had with it. My main gripe is that it follows genre conventions so closely that you can practically predict how the plot will advance. I’m a big fan of any and all slasher films,

so I’m used to watching the same movie over and over again, but I’ll admit, it does grow tiresome knowing a movie from start to finish before you watch it. I distinctly remember slapping my forehead when it is revealed that any person who sets their eyes on teke teke and survives the initial attack will inevitably die in three days. Roughly half way through the film, one of the main characters sees the ghost and survives. From then on the back half of the film plays out like a blatant rip-off of RINGU, just like many post-RINGU Japanese horror films have.

Far from being a figurehead for horror cinema, Japanese horror cinema or even just horror films from 2009, TEKE TEKE was still a somewhat pleasurable experience. However, many horror fans will overlook its use of atmosphere and anticipation while scoffing at its all too familiar plot elements. So I won’t try to argue that TEKE TEKE’s a precursor to the future of Japanese horror, but I do think there are far less entertaining things you could do in 70 minutes.

{jcomments on}