

On the Potent Randomness of Miike's Visitor Q

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Takashi Miike's *Visitor Q* (2001) opens with a father having sex with his fledgling prostitute daughter while she's filming it. The movie closes with that same father and daughter nursing from the lactating breasts of their wife and mother, wrapped in a blue plastic tarp, posed like babies in a medieval painting. The only conduit between these moments is *Visitor Q*, an expressionless mystery man in a red shirt and tight leather pants, who shows up in the second scene to smash the father in the head with a rock, apropos of nothing. From here he becomes an honorary member of the family, guiding them through Boschian frenzy toward ultimate grace.

Miike's art films, like *Ichi the Killer*, *Gozu*, *The Box*, and this one (he's also an amazingly prolific director of everything from action thrillers to children's comedies, which must contribute to the storytelling prowess he brings to everything he does) are truly and uniquely bizarre, hard to categorize and describe even in terms of the Bizarre as a genre. Freely mixing documentary-grade realism with lurid surrealism and slapstick with ultraviolence, these films are not invested in any aesthetic – or even any concept of character and story – aside from their own.

Nevertheless, if you take them on their own terms, they make complete sense. They're not opaque or hermetic; they are, to a surprising degree, enlivened with a power that rewards emotional investment. This power, in *Visitor Q*, comes from the way that Miike inserts an unrefined figure from his subconscious (or that of the film's characters) straight into the more banal story on the surface. He does this inexplicably, but with such clarity and authority that you buy it on face value.

The other characters in *Visitor Q* have undergone a translation process wherein the director's conscious mind shapes them into figurations that an audience of strangers can relate to. We understand the roles they play, and the relationships they have to one another. But *Visitor Q* is outside this. Like a dinosaur suddenly let loose among humans, he bypasses all dramatic evolution to infuse the film with what, for lack of a better term, let's call "potent randomness."

To access potent randomness in this way, you have to draw from the roots of the story – the shapeless impulse that demanded you tell it in the first place – rather than just following things along as they develop, linking each occurrence to the one before. At the same time, to accommodate this intrusion, the surface story has to be ironclad. Otherwise it falls apart, succumbing to randomness rather than coming alive with it.

Q's appearance hijacks what would otherwise have been a dark but technically plausible rumination on wayward teenagers and social ruin, a Japanese adaptation of *Kids for the Reality TV Age*.

The opening incest scene (where the daughter tries to charge her dad extra for coming too soon, and he lamely reasserts his dominance by telling her to study in her spare time) is gross, but it's not illegible as human behavior. Even the next scene, when Q smashes the father in the head, makes some sense if read as cosmic punishment for the act preceding it. But in Miike's world no action/reaction pair is matched according to such rote logic. Rather than purging the father of his transgression, the attack serves to usher Q into his world (as if breaking the father's head were Q's means of hatching from a shell), giving physical shape to a disturbance that had until then only been spiritual.

In other words, the real onset of potent randomness is not when Q smashes the father, but when he turns up at the dinner table. "This is my friend. He'll stay here awhile," the father, in a full head bandage, informs his son. "Go ahead, don't mind me," is all Q has to add. The son responds by going off to beat his mother while the father and Q sup from their bowls, listening to her scream and tear through the paper walls of the house.

This is the segue from perversion within reality to perversion of reality.

Everyone in the family is fueled by the underground place that Q emerges from, but until now it has only manifested in a cycle of misbehavior and shame. By rendering their inner chaos apparent, Q is a prophet, sent or summoned from the depths to show how much further down the disturbance on the surface goes.

The appearance of such a prophet expands the possibilities of the rest of the film, but it does not render them infinite. There is never the feeling, no matter how wild things get, that anything goes – if Godzilla roared into the kitchen and stomped everyone to death in the final scene, we'd feel cheated as viewers, and rightly so. That would be impotent randomness, a breakdown of the consequences that make drama mean something. Miike is successful as a purveyor of the ultra-weird because he knows and respects this, using randomness to dig up and show us the emotional roots of the story, rather than to deny their value or to break free of them. His prophets tell the truth.

The story from here on out is that of Q saving the family from itself. We see him giving the sadistic son a pep talk, acting as a sort of wingman to the father as he follows his loneliness and frustration into rape, murder, and necrophilia, and, most strikingly, inducing milk to spray out of the abused mother's nipples, soaking first one room and then most of the house. He even finds time to smash the prostitute daughter in the head with another rock (or the same one), which somehow results in her deciding to return home.

But the actual way in which he saves the family is metaphysical. By the beatific conclusion, he's brought about a kind of deliverance not by purging or explaining the sexual violence at the family's core, but simply by making it overt and therefore no longer taboo. Their behavior doesn't change, but their attitude toward themselves and one another does. As a figure of the subconscious embodied in the conscious realm, Q shows the family what they look like when the truth about them isn't hidden.

"It's just like a festival!" shrieks the mostly-naked father, as he saws through the face of one of the bullies who tormented his son. The mother throws a screwdriver through another bully's head, sharing this orgasmic bloodlust with her until-recently estranged husband. Something like love is evident between them.

The son, facedown in his mother's milk, asks, "Why did you really come to our home? You came here to destroy it, didn't you?" Q nods, smiling slightly. "Thank you," the boy replies, his only calm, sincere line in the film.

The boy, so unhappy until now, seems to get it. Q came to destroy the sham home that held these four people in a state of scandal; this destruction reveals the true home beneath, the foundation that no one could bear to look at but upon which they can now begin to live.

The basic conceit of the unexplained visitor infiltrating and sexually liberating a dysfunctional family comes from Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), but where that film is a meticulous if open-ended study of class and Christian mystery, Visitor Q is purely visceral and psychological; its religious dimension is ecstatic, not moral.

These final moments are, in every literal sense, impossible, but this in no way compromises the feeling that Q's visit is the only resolution this family could have found. Without him, things would've gone on

and on, wearing down to nothing. The family had reached a breaking point, birthing Q out of their escalating tension: all he did was pick up his rock and rupture a membrane that was already stretched thin.

His appearance thus isn't random at all. It couldn't have been expected, but neither could it have been avoided. You get what you need. I think potent randomness, when it succeeds in making a work stronger, is always paradoxical in this way. Miike is frequently disgusting, but he doesn't hate humanity. He just understands what we really are beneath what we seem to be, and has cultivated an ability to show that thing without adornment or explanation.