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Kuro

A film by Joji Koyama and Tujiko Noriko

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2017 - Germany, UK, Japan.

84 minutes - 16:9 - 5.1

Japanese and French.

English subtitles.



Logline

A Japanese woman living in Paris tends to her paraplegic lover, passing time by recounting a story of the time they once spent together in Japan, rich with anecdotes, myths and an unexpected dark turn.

Synopsis

Romi, a Japanese woman living in Paris, works in a karaoke bar. At home in the suburbs, she tends to her paraplegic lover Milou. To pass the time she recounts to him a story alluding to a period they once spent together in Japan. Soon, the mystery of a man named Mr. Ono begins to unsettle everything. Weaving together personal history, anecdotes and myths, the story takes a dark turn.

Directors' Statement

Kuro is a film about our need for narrative to make sense of our lives. We were interested in how stories become a kind of architecture of our understanding of the world, as well as protection from what we fear and do not understand. However much we protect ourselves with stories, the ways in which we construct, use and interpret them are in constant flux. Perhaps our film is also about the ways in which narrative ultimately tries to articulate the unknowable and how in spite of this, the unknowable always returns to haunt us. We wanted to make a film that plays with and at moments unhinges the mechanisms of storytelling in order to produce a cinematic experience that allows for space and ambiguity for the audience to explore.



Bio

Joji Koyama

Joji Koyama is a Berlin-based filmmaker, animator and graphic artist. His short films, animations and music videos (including *Four Tet*, *Mogwai* and *Coldcut*) have screened internationally, winning awards at the London Short Film Festival and British Animation Awards. In 2015 he began *Toupée*, a small publishing imprint, and published his first book of short visual stories, *'Plassein'*. This was followed by *'Elsewhere'*, an illustrated colouring book published by Penguin Books. Working in a wide variety of media and contexts, he has collaborated with musician Matthew Herbert, as well as theatre maker Ant Hampton.

Tujiko Noriko

Tujiko Noriko is a Paris-based musician, singer, songwriter and filmmaker. To date she has released over seventeen highly regarded albums for labels including Editions Mego, Tomlab, Fat Cat and Room 40. In 2003 her album *'Hard Ni Sasete'* received an Honorary Mention at the Prix Ars Electronica. Tujiko has written music for films, dance, animations and art installations, and has collaborated with renowned musicians Peter Rehberg, Nobukazu Takemura and Lawrence English. In 2005 Tujiko began directing films, which has resulted in the two films *'Sand and Mini Hawaii'* and *'Sun'*, both of which have screened internationally, including the Foundation Cartier in Paris. Her most recent musical project was the solo album *'My Ghost Comes Back'*.



In Conversation with Joji Koyama and Tujiko Noriko.

How did you decide to work together on Kuro?

Tujiko Noriko- When we started to write together we had already been friends for about 10 years. Joji knew my music and short films, and he had also read a script that I was writing. I in turn knew his work in short films, music videos, as well as his drawings, and had also read a script that he was writing. So we knew each other very well, we felt we shared a certain sensibility and were also stimulated by our differences. I'm not sure exactly how it came to be but we thought it was a good idea to work together.

How did the project evolve and the film come to be made?

Joji Koyama- The ideas went through a number of phases, which is partly why there are different layers to the film. The story that Romi narrates was in fact the film we originally wanted to make. Certain ideas in the film, like the need to create narratives around a trauma, or the need to visualise and tame what is unknowable and unrepresentable - became apparent in our very early drafts of the script. We wrote it with no constraints in mind, so it quickly became impossible to realise, especially with our very limited means. At the start we even intended to visualise the Kuro character. So the form of the film came about through a combination of having to adapt the story into something realisable, and also a feeling that maybe it was more interesting to allow space for people to visualise Romi's story for themselves.

TN- We chose to make the film without taking so much time and energy to find producers and finance- doing it ourselves was another kind of freedom we chose- but for this we had to adjust the script and the structure of the film drastically. This was quite challenging and exciting at the same time - and ultimately good, in that I think it made this film quite unique.

Could you talk about your decision to mainly incorporate a voiceover throughout the film, as opposed to dialogue?

TN- Joji came up with the idea to make two layers in the film- one that is the oral story and the other visual- something that became very important for the film. As a songwriter, I use my voice to tell stories, and I had also made a short film where I narrated and voiced all the roles myself- so we were attracted to use voice distantly from the images, creating gaps between them. Joji's almost still images were often without any human presence, so it echoed this idea very well.

JK- I like to think of the two layers of narratives moving along at the same time and at certain points synching or somehow resonating together, only to slip out again. We wanted to create space for the audience and to not fill in all the information. I like how the artist Philippe Parreno talks about using narrative as a device - that it can be like sitting in the back of a car- where you're not driving, but are free to look out the window and take in whatever you want and to make your own connections. One of the things that I found most surprising when people who've seen our film talk to me is how they sometimes describe scenes or events in the film that for us did not happen definitively. I think this is wonderful, and hopefully it's facilitated by the space between the narration and the images in the film... I also always loved the way Noriko would narrate on her songs and films that I was sure that this would be a significant part of the film.

Your method of making a film as a duo is fascinating. How do you make it work?

JK- It does feel to me that we made this film as friends, and all the dialogue, the up and downs of a friendship are wrapped up in the making of this film. It was very intimate. To give you an example, we wrote the film mostly in Noriko's small apartment and we ended up shooting most of the film there. There are some scenes in the film where it was just the two of us- myself behind the camera and Noriko in the shot. It also felt quite holistic- I think we were both equally involved in every part of the film to the point where I sometimes don't remember who did what. Having said that, we both have our different artistic backgrounds to draw from.

TN- Joji's very quiet but daring approach for images coloured this film a lot. In general, I can tend to be too quick and a bit loud with my ideas, whereas Joji is more considered which maybe brought a balance. My musical background probably informs the sound design and music of this film. Being a singer also helped, in that my voice is what binds the film together... It was a lot of fun to build the story together- we laughed a lot during the writing process, in spite of the darkness of the film!

There is a significant amount of ambiguity in terms of how the characters are presented in the film. The narration for example, at times shifts from third to first person. What was the thinking behind this?

JK- I think we became quite obsessed with the idea of nurturing the ambiguity of the Kuro character- not for the sake of being ambiguous but to maintain its presence as an unknowable thing- to not let it fully become one thing or another, because that's essentially what haunts the film- this unknowable person/object that looks back at you..or is maybe not looking back at you! We also wanted there to be an uneasy fluid sense of the 'place' of characters- that somehow the positions of the characters, and the structure of narrative that's being built as the film goes along, is at risk of falling apart at any moment or becoming unhinged. In this way, I think the film is partly about the fragility of narrative and the struggles involved to maintain it.

TN- Actually, I honestly didn't think it will make it an uncomfortable feeling to have these shifts. In fact, it might have to do with the particularities of the Japanese language, but I thought it's more natural for Romi to begin situating herself differently in the story, as though she is making things up as she goes along. My hope was that this would actually bring Romi's narration closer, allowing people to feel the fragility of the narrative, but not in a disruptive way.

Kuro incorporates a combination of scene-setting shots, close-ups and empty spaces, that the film almost feels like a chamber piece at some points. How did this come about?

JK- We were both attracted to the idea of minimising what you see on the screen, to allow room for the bigger things that unravel in the narration. Formally, I tried to think about certain photo-books I admire - how even though a photo-book inevitably becomes sequential, the pace and rhythm is decided by the viewer. It's harder to do this in film, but using an enclosed kind of visual setting allowed us to create gaps between the pages so to speak. Perhaps there is also a sub-theme in the film, from the idea of us being expats and looking back to our country of origin. By coincidence, we had both shot footage of homes of our relatives that were in disregard in Japan. We combined these spaces in the film to evoke a psychological state but also used them as spaces to project onto.

TN - I was also thinking of my musician and photographer friend Aki Onda's series called 'Cinimage' - we wanted there to be a hypnotic, musical quality to the way the images and the voice worked together.

How did you make the casting decisions?

JN- Jackie is an incredible musician and singer, and I had seen him perform in Berlin and was transfixed by him. I just had an intuition that he would be amazing for this role. We were not concerned about the semantics of him acting like a paraplegic- he interpreted the role in his own way, which was exactly what we wanted.

TN- We were both drawn to Jackie's presence and his ability to convey silence in his face. Maybe him also being a musician and performer made it natural for him to be in front of the camera.... In terms of playing Romi myself, I'm also used to performing in front of audiences- and I was so preoccupied with making this film that it seemed to me like just another part of working on the film, so it felt quite natural for me.

Did you shoot in one go?

TN- We shot for two to three weeks in the suburbs of Paris and then we separately shot the derelict spaces in Japan.

How much of the actual narrative was conceived in the editing suite as opposed to before the shooting?

TN- In terms of the actual narrative as such, we had the narration and the script of the couple in Paris in place before we shot and edited. During editing, we reduced Romi's narration as it was too long, and decided to use Romi's voice completely separately from the image, when in fact we had originally shot some scenes where Romi had been talking 'in real time'.

JK- We did play and improvise with the way the layers of narrative work together during the editing. Since the narration itself was in place, there was a certain amount of freedom we had in how we 'housed' it during editing.





Directed by
Joji Koyama and Tujiko Noriko

Produced by
Joji Koyama
Tujiko Noriko
Gilles Chaniel

Cast
Tujiko Noriko
Jackie

Director of Photography
Joji Koyama

Music
Tujiko Noriko

Sound Production
Coda to Coda

Audio Supervisor
Tanya Auclair for Coda to Coda

Re-Recording Mixers
Will Worsley
Sam Britton
Steve Bond

Post Production
Time Based Arts

Colourist
Jack McGinity at Time based Arts

Post Producer
Jo Chounta

Camera Assistants
Elisa Franck
Antonin Le Guay

Sound Recordists
Marc Thill
Stan Bertin

Graphic Design and Typeface
Dinamo



Toupée

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