

Japanese Horror: The Last Hold-Out in the Globalization of Japanese Pop Culture

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I. Introduction

Critical works focusing on the recent impact of Japanese horror in Western cinema invariably point to the success of *The Ring* (2002, Gore Verbinski), a Hollywood remake of the Japanese film *Ringu* (Nakata Hideo, 1998), as the seminal work. While the subsequent onslaught of remakes which has followed¹ clearly points to the growing influence of Japanese horror in the global film industry, it is significant to note these films continue to find success in the West through remakes rather than direct importation. Unlike other forms of media, such as *anime* and *manga*, where overt signs of the Japanese origins of these products have become the very hooks which lure fans in,² remakes of Japanese horror are altered to such an extent that their national origins are completely erased. This suggests that at least some aspects of Japanese horror rely on indigenous intertextual frameworks, making successful direct exportation to a mass foreign audience difficult if not impossible. Through a brief examination of *Ringu* and *The Ring*, this paper reveals the un-importable aspects of Japanese Horror which continue to make this one of the last holdouts in the infiltration of Japanese pop culture in the Western market.

II. Conventional Arguments

At a pragmatic level, there are two obvious explanations for the general tendency of Hollywood to remake successful foreign films. First is the fact that subtitled films have found little success in the American market historically.³ Second is the vast discrepancy between film budgets in Japan and the United States. *Ringu*, made on a shoestring budget of just \$US 1.2 million, should not even be expected to compete with a higher budget remake such as *The Ring*, produced on a budget of approximately US\$ 40 million. Julian Stringer notes that 'With *The Ring*, therefore, it is possible to claim that Hollywood continues to do what Hollywood has always done - namely, absorb world culture and sell it back to the rest of the world in a more expensive version' (2007, 301). This analysis suggests that many critics see these remakes as simply higher quality versions of the originals; in *The Japan Times*, for example, *The Ring* was described as 'the almost-unheard-of case of a Hollywood remake that didn't manage to butcher the life and soul out of the original' (2006).

III. Defining the Scope of Horror

But what exactly is the 'life and soul' of the original? In order to determine whether *The Ring* might be considered a higher quality but faithful rendition of *Ringu*, it is first necessary to examine exactly what constitutes a horror

film. Unfortunately, with a genre as old as the history of cinema itself, there are no clearly definable boundaries which neatly encompass all the films conventionally classified as horror. From early science-fiction monster movies such as *Frankenstein* (J. Searle Dawley, 1910, USA) and *Gojira* (Honda Ishiro, 1954, Japan) to the reality-based horror of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999, USA), there is little linking these films beyond the obvious goal of eliciting feelings of horror and fear from the audience. While the previously unexplored plots and themes of contemporary Japanese horror may indeed be revitalizing Hollywood horror with new blood, so to speak,⁴ it does not necessarily follow that a remake such as *The Ring* uses the same strategies and techniques to elicit horror as those found in *Ringu*. Paul Wells proposes that the most constructive approach for defining the horror genre is to consider the ‘distinctive elements of any one text within a particular moment,’ a strategy which suggests that context is indeed highly relevant to insightful analysis and understanding of international horror (2000, 7-15). In Jay McRoy’s six categories based on the distinctive features of contemporary Japanese horror, *Ringu* is classified as a ‘kaidan/avenging spirit film,’ a subgenre which deals with a wronged female spirit seeking vengeance and frequently draws upon religious themes from Buddhism and Shinto as well as theatrical devices from Kabuki and Noh (2005, 3-9). Clearly, such themes and strategies place *Ringu* firmly outside the intertextual framework familiar to an audience versed in Western horror themes and techniques. In order to create a compelling film capable of eliciting fear, *The Ring* therefore relies on enhanced special effects and greater attention paid to cohesiveness of plot and character development. In other words, the success of *The Ring* is ultimately predicated upon its ability to rotolescope out the intertextual references which provide the very basis for the success of *Ringu* among Japanese audiences, as will be shown in the following sections, and replace these with familiar aspects of Hollywood horror.

IV. The Films

To briefly summarize the plot of the two films under discussion, both the Japanese version *Ringu* and the Hollywood remake *The Ring* center around a videotape with a deadly virus. Depicted initially as a kind of urban legend, it soon comes to light that anyone who watches the video will immediately become infected and die of heart failure precisely one week after viewing it. The creator of the tape and cause of the virus is eventually revealed to be the spirit of a young girl seeking vengeance for a prolonged and cruel murder. A female journalist investigating the deaths of several teens, one of whom is her niece, hears the rumors and soon stumbles upon the videotape in a rental cabin at a resort where the teens were known to have stayed. She watches the videotape, thereby becoming infected. She then has one week to solve the mystery and save her own life by unraveling the meaning of the series of seemingly unrelated images presented in the videotape. Other main characters in both films include the journalist’s former husband/boyfriend, whom she takes into her confidence in order to gain his assistance in solving the mystery, and the journalist’s young son, who accidentally watches the videotape and also becomes infected.

The two films are remarkably similar in terms of plot construction, cast of characters, and even parallel presentation of scenes. Through a closer comparison of individual scenes, however, the differences between the two films start to become apparent. One such scene is the journalist’s first viewing of the videotape. The first and most striking difference is that the Hollywood version is over twice as long, an indication of a greater attention to detail as a key difference distinguishing the remake from the original. Indeed, the Hollywood film itself is longer overall as well (115 minutes compared to 96). Second, while the video which the Japanese journalist views in *Ringu* is quite grainy, presenting images that are difficult to discern at times, the Hollywood version of the videotape contains clear, well-focused images, most notably the ring which appears at the beginning of the video. This is not the only overt ring image to appear in *The Ring*: Aiden, the journalist’s son, is seen hypnotically filling page after page of a drawing pad with rings after becoming infected, and Noah, the journalist’s ex-boyfriend, also sees a ring in the form of a coffee cup stain just moments before his death. Such explicit, symbolic images, which tie all of the characters and the virus together quite clearly in the Hollywood version, never appear in the Japanese version. In this way, the enhanced visual imagery and greater detail in *The Ring* creates a much tighter and more cohesive plot than *Ringu*.

This brief comparison of these two short clips may lead to the conclusion that the Hollywood version offers a more pragmatic, factual depiction of the storyline for Western audiences, who may be more accustomed to movie plots that progress logically with clear explanations. Japanese audiences, this would seem to suggest, are more willing to tolerate loose ends and ambiguity. While this may be true to some extent, such an analysis does not explain why many Western fans of anime and manga fail to embrace Japanese horror with the same enthusiasm.

In short, the notion that Western audiences are not up to the sophisticated level of ambiguity and psychological horror reflected in the Japanese version is an unsatisfactory, or at least an incomplete, explanation.

V. *Yūrei* and the Japanese Tradition

When considered in the context of a Western target audience, however, it becomes clear that overt use of symbolic imagery and a tighter plot line are key to the success of *The Ring* because these elements compensate for the missing framework of Japanese folklore, particularly the notion of the *yūrei*, or avenging female ghost spirit, which is so integral to the success of *Ringu*. The tradition of the *yūrei*, frequently an innocent victim unjustly murdered, can be traced back hundreds of years in Japanese folklore, theater and woodblock prints from the early Edo Period (1600-1867). *Yūrei* are typically depicted with long, black, unbound hair and a white gown, reflecting the way in which a corpse is prepared for burial. As spirits which remain bound to the world until revenge can be exacted, *yūrei* are not yet part of the other world but instead remain connected to this world. One of the best known *yūrei* legends is that of Okiku, a beautiful young servant who is thrown down a well when she refuses the advances of her samurai master, Aoyama Tessan. After her death, she returns as a *yūrei* to haunt her murderer.

Sadako and Samara, the two girls in *Ringu* and *The Ring* respectively, are also murdered when they are pushed down a well where they eventually die, a scenario which clearly recalls the story of Okiku. Also like Okiku, Sadako is an innocent victim, although not because of love, but due to her unique mental abilities which cause her to be ridiculed and exploited. The attempts of Sadako's spirit to seek vengeance through the videotape can thus be seen as a response to the ongoing and undeserved suffering which she endured during her life. Samara, a young girl murdered by her own mother, may also appear to be an innocent victim, but ultimately she is revealed as the embodiment of evil itself, as her own father tells the journalist just moments before killing himself. Her mother's painful decision to kill her is thus an effort to end the chaos and destruction which affects all those who come into contact with her. Unlike Sadako, however, Samara is not a victim turned monster, but rather a monster from the moment of birth. The enhanced level of blood, gore and special effects in *The Ring* contributes to the image of Samara not as a vengeful ghost or a spirit, but as a monster.

Another key element linking Sadako but not Samara to the *yūrei* tradition is Sadako's disfigured eye. Throughout most of the film, Sadako is normally depicted with long dark hair entirely covering her face. It is not until the end of the film that her face is finally revealed, and even then the audience gets only a brief look at the gruesome eye peering through matted strands of hair. This image directly recalls the Edo-period legends surrounding a young woman/*yūrei* named Oiwa. According to the early 19th century kabuki version of the story, Oiwa's husband Iyemon falls in love with another woman whom he wants to marry, and so resolves to murder Oiwa. Unfortunately, the poison Iyemon gives Oiwa does not immediately kill her, but only disfigures her face, resulting in a loss of hair on one side of her head, and a hideously mutilated eye. Later, when Oiwa finally does die and is then thrown in the river by her husband, she returns as a *yūrei* in this mutilated form to haunt him with a vengeance.⁵ The legends surrounding Oiwa, which invariably highlight her disfigured eye, have carried into twentieth century Japanese media as well. Nakagawa Nobuo's 1959 film version of this story, *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*, or *The Ghost of Yotsuya*, for example, also focuses on the disfigured eye as a defining feature of Oiwa.

Compared to Sadako, Samara appears more frequently throughout *The Ring*, and even has a number of speaking parts. Her entire face is generally clearly revealed, but with no particular focus on any particular feature. Instead, she recalls a more typical Western image of the evil girl found in Western films, such as Regan, a young girl possessed by a devil, the central character in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). While Sadako's image comes nowhere near the level of gore and pure evil depicted in Samara's character, the single and final, focused image of Sadako's eye speaks volumes about her status in the *yūrei* tradition. Samara's similarities to *The Exorcist*, on the other hand, suggest a girl possessed rather than one seeking vengeance. Thus, it is not simply a question of psychological horror and tension as opposed to enhanced blood and gore, but rather the cultural signifiers that both images evoke which provides the intertextual framework which makes these characters effective.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, given the intertextual signifiers which run throughout *Ringu*, it is not difficult to understand how this seemingly low budget Japanese horror film could indeed have greater appeal in its domestic market than its more high budget Western counterpart. While special effects and tighter plot construction might give *The Ring*

greater mass appeal, to imply that the remake embodies essentially the same tone and spirit of the original is to ignore the intertextual context which produced the story, most particularly the character of Sadako. Unlike anime and manga, whose authenticity frequently resides in the high level of technical detail and innovation, the horror film is an area in which Hollywood already holds the top spot technologically. Although Japanese horror may be infusing Hollywood horror with new life for now, direct importation of Japanese horror as an authentic cultural product appears resistant and unlikely to change in the near future.

Endnotes

¹ Well-known examples include Shimizu Takeshi's 2004 *The Grudge*, a remake of the 2003 film *Ju-on* by the same director, as well as the more recent film *One Missed Call* (Eric Valette, 2008), a remake of *Chakushin ari* (Takashi Miike, 2004).

² For an in-depth discussion on the spread of manga and anime through both Asia and the West, see Wong, Wendy Siuyu. (2006), 'Globalizing Manga: From Japan to Hong Kong and Beyond', in Lunning, Frenchy (ed.), *Mechademia 1: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, pps. 23-45.

³ For an in-depth discussion, see Nornes, Abe Mark (2008), *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, especially pps. 11-15.

⁴ This has been discussed by numerous critics. See, for example, Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams's introduction in Schneider, Steven Jay and Tony Williams (eds). (2005), *Horror International*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pps. 1-12.

⁵ For a brief summary of the stories of Okiku and Oiwa, see Jordan, Brenda. (1985), 'Yūrei: Tales of Female Ghosts', in Addiss, Stephen (ed.), *Japanese Ghosts and Demons*, New York: George Braziller Inc.,) 25-33.

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