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The Transnational Episode of America's "J-Horror" Remake Phenomenon, The Circumstances
of its Production and its Cultural and Formal Representations of Shared National Fear

by

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requirements for the degree of

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Introduction

In 1991, Japanese author and stay at home dad Koji Suzuki's second novel, *Ringu*, would be published and released for general audiences. The story, an investigation into the deaths of four teenagers after a viewing of a haunted VHS tape, would become a bestseller, earning Suzuki the nickname "The Stephen King of Japan." (Yamato) Seven years later, the book would be adapted into a film of the same name by cult director Hideo Nakata, gaining a large underground following in Japan. Soon after, its popularity would reach beyond national borders to find an equally ecstatic reception in America. This popularity would lead to the 2002 release of the Gore Verbinski directed remake *The Ring*, and result in a filmmaking trend that would American cinemas for most of the 2000's. Between 2002 and 2008, Hollywood studios such as Dreamworks and Columbia Pictures would release an expansive series of remakes of East Asian horror films. While some of them were of Thai or Korean origin (examples including *The Eye* and *Shutter*), the majority were adaptations of Japanese films, earning the phenomenon the colloquial title of "J-horror" buzz, craze, or explosion. This essay will refer to this phenomenon of adaptation as the J-horror trend.

Beyond Nakata's *Ringu*, notable examples of Japanese films which contributed to this trend, both in their narrative and aesthetic design are as follows. *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002) tells a non linear story of a haunted city home, and the hapless residents which fall prey to its violent ghostly denizens. *Kairo* (2001) details a quietly apocalyptic tale of a haunted computer virus, and restless spirits trapped within the pathways of the internet. *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, translating to *From the Bottom of Dark Water* (2002) displays a more straightforward story of a

mother and son moving into an apartment with mysterious water leaking from the roof, and other supernatural occurrences. Finally, *Chakushin Ari* (2005) tells the story of a group of young adults who begin to receive voice mails from themselves, containing recordings of their own deaths in the near future. Additional similarities tying these films together are their depictions of female ghosts, dependence on suspense and psychological dread rather than graphic violence in their execution of cinematic fear, modern urban settings, and the incorporation of technology into their supernatural narratives. Each of these films were profitable and popular in Japan, with *Ringu* and *Ju-on* spawning lengthy franchises. Each film would also be remade by an American studio over the course of the adaptation trend's popularity, and each contributed to the trend's transnational identity as focusing on the combination of technological and supernatural anxieties. The J-horror trend will be referred to as transnational, as opposed to international, due to the symbiotic nature between Japanese filmmaking practices and its American reception, which, over the course of the trend's popularity, began to influence the production of Japan's genre filmmaking. Simultaneously, formal genre filmmaking techniques specific to Japanese genre films (cinematography/sound design evoking psychological dread) began to manifest within American studio's genre filmmaking, resulting in a transnational relationship based off of the reception, reinterpretation, and reclamation of genre filmmaking technique.

This transnational exchange of genre also serves as a temporally specific episode in a history of tales retold in various formats since Japan's Edo period. These Japanese ghost stories exist in a manner similar to Europe's penny dreadfuls, as a nationally specific reflection of cultural fear contained within the framework of easily accessible genre fiction. They differ however, in their enduring appeal and continued evolution into modernizing formats (in this

case, film). Where the former grisly short stories were limited in both the cultural relevance of their content, and their paperback presentation to audiences, the supernatural tales composing the J-horror phenomenon have retained their staying power since their origin into the twenty first century. This is due to their continued reflection of anxieties and fears of the destruction of order, and the unknowable chaos wrought in response. They are, as horror fiction, an allegorical reflection of cultural and national fears, changing their presentation with social and technological advancements at the turn of the century to project traditional cultural insecurities onto the changing landscape of a globalized Japan. This allegorical presentation is the strength of genre filmmaking in presenting its cultural themes. While a ghost story, or horror film is generally perceived as an easily digestible piece of generic media, the (formal) presentation of its objects of fear often provides insight into the cultural atmosphere which dictates the demonization of said object of fear. Ghosts are seldom just ghosts, but a reflection of a greater cultural anxiety.

The success of these films, and their remakes by American studios, provides an insight into the transnational, cultural, and commercial interactions between Japan's national genre filmmaking and America's studio filmmaking institutions, as well as America's film-pop culture sphere. This essay examines the cultural and commercial context of the creation of these remakes, as well as investigating the formal and generic differences of their construction, how they relate to their allegorical depictions of culturally informed fear, and their status as a culturally reinterpreted product.

Historical Context of Japanese Ghost Cinema

The ghost story is a universal example of the intersection of genre and allegory. It is allegorical in that it is representative of subtextual themes through the narrative application of recognizable symbolic elements. It is generic in that it contains a recognizable narrative iconography and structure: in this case, the ghost and its relationship to the living. The intersection of these elements result in stories that serve as an interpretation of cultural anxieties concerned with death and the unknown. As such, the ghost as an allegorical symbol provides a vast array of narrative flexibility. It can act as a sympathetic storytelling device, bringing into question the nature of life after death, or contextualizing living characters' fear or misunderstanding of death as an abstract concept. Alternatively, ghosts can act as embodiments of formless horror. A malevolent ghost is an ubiquitous expression of fears of the unknown, and acts as a perversion of normalcy and the natural order of life and death. A ghost, put into the correct context, can symbolize most anything. It is ironic then, that the modern trend of J-horror cinema, with its thematic combination of ghosts and electronic technology, takes its most basic storytelling roots from a type of national ghost story dating back to Japan's Edo period (1603-1867) (Wee 30) To understand the relation of modern J-horror cinema to allegorical expressions of cultural fear, it is necessary to identify the cultural origin of the type of storytelling found in these films.

The *Onryō* are a specific type of *yurei* (ghost) defined by their vengeful nature and animosity towards the living. Shinto faith dictates that a human becomes a spirit directly after death, and proper purification rituals and prayers are necessary to appease those who died angry, or were wronged in their death. Left unappeased, those spirits who continue to suffer from jealousy or anger can return to the world as a ghost to enact revenge upon the living. These are

the creatures that inhabit *Kaidan* stories, a “supernatural story/film which is a subgenre of Japanese horror cinema that revolves around an unquiet spirit (almost always female, with a few distinct exceptions) that haunts the world of the living, driven by anger and thirst for revenge.” (29) One notable example of this kind of story is *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*, in which the ghost of a woman returns to haunt her murderous husband, now remarried. In another, *Bancho Sarayashiki*, a housemaid murdered by her master returns nightly to haunt her killer, eventually driving him mad. A third example, *Kurenoko*, tells the story of a woman and her daughter in law, who are murdered and raped by roaming samurai. They return as demonic cats to vengefully kill any samurai they encounter. (30) The most prolific of these stories is *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*, having been iterated on and retold since its origination in 1825, into the 21st century with multiple film adaptations. It may be this particular narrative that is responsible for the preservation of the Kaidan in its various forms into the twenty first century, and its eventual transformation into the contemporary J-horror format.

Yotsuya Kaidan was written as a play by Nanboku Tsuruya, with a title translating to *The Ghost of Yotsuya*. The earliest recorded film adaptation possessed a 1912 release date, (IMDB) placing it at the birth of silent black and white cinema, and predating the iconic german film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* by eight years. While the latter film is attributed with pioneering cinematic implementations of expressionism and filmic horror, the earlier release of Yotsuya Kaidan displays a century old combination of generic storytelling within the medium of cinema. The Kaidan, in this case, has been uniquely compatible with film since near its inception. Adaptations and reinterpretations of the iconic folk tale would continue to be filmed throughout the 1900’s, including releases such as *Shinpin Yotsuya Kaidan* (1927), *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1946),

Thou Shalt Not Be Jealous (1959), *Illusion of Blood* (1965), *Curse of the Ghost* (1969), *Yotsuya Kaidan Yori* (1981), and *Crest of Betrayal* (1994). (wierdwildrealm) These releases have spanned the entirety of filmmaking's evolution since its establishment at the turn of the last century, and represent the enduring popularity of Yotsuya's ghost story while also demonstrating how the passage of time has affected the story's formal interpretation. To elaborate, the straightforward gothic tales of the earliest films on the list contrast greatly with the execution of the 1956 release (considered by some to be the iconic film retelling) (TurnerClassicMovies). These differences reinforce the Kaidan as a story with an adaptable context. While the framework of a ghost story is consistent throughout the history of its telling, the way the story is presented marks it as specific to the cultural attitude of its time. This is demonstrated by the ways in which the formal presentation of the story change over time.

Masaki Mori, director of the 1956 release, begins his adaptation in imitation of theatrical presentation. The framing evokes that of a stage, and much of the set design acknowledges a heightened sense of reality that would appear more at home in front of a live audience than one witnessing it from the intimate perspective of a television screen. The use of color and cinematography, however, are much more specific to the time of the films release, with Kaidan films of the 50s and 60's often employing technicolor to heighten the disturbing aesthetics of their ghosts. Yotsuya Kaidan, along with films like *Jigoku* (1960) and *Onibaba* (1963), are notable for their depiction of supernatural elements incorporating more gruesome details, such as decay and physical torment. Combined with the grainy, sometimes uncanny presentation of technicolor, the ghosts of the mid twentieth century's Kaidan films can rival modern releases more sophisticated effects in terms of chilling visual impact. This cinematic image is reflective

of a specifically Japanese folk culture describing such visual and thematic combinations of the grotesque and tantalizing. The pallid, rotting figure of Yotsuya, or the jerky inhuman movements of Ringu's ghost, Sadako, combined with the enthralling mystery of their undead presence can be categorized as *ero guro nansensu*, or "erotic, grotesque nonsense." (Wee 90) The use of color and additional cinematic techniques also takes influence from Western releases of the same era, like *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), and *Horror of Dracula* (1958). (TurnerClassicMovies) This implementation of Western formal filmmaking into traditional Japanese ghost story is an early example of a kind of transnational creative exchange that would be reignited with America's J-horror fascination half a century later.

As the century progressed, and the Second World War took its place in global history, the more abstract cultural anxieties represented through Japan's national horror cinema (the Kaidan in particular, representing fears of death and the unknown) were replaced, or at least influenced by modernizing allegorical interpretations of national trauma. With the tragedy of Hiroshima, Japan's national filmmaking found a historical allegorical icon, with such ubiquitous cultural exports as *Godzilla* renowned for their representation of that particular national trauma through the means of genre. Within a science fiction disaster film, themes of trauma concerning widespread destruction were expressed symbolically through the image of a towering radioactive lizard. While the execution of the film as sci-fi-horror has aged, now recognized as more campy than terrifying, the imagery within the film is still representative of the temporally specific fears of a nation dealing with this trauma.

This approach to depicting such a widely recognized tragedy is not without criticism, as the value of allegory in the context of a particular historical event is called into question.

Godzilla in particular has been cited as an inferior engagement of the national traumas associated with the event, representing Japanese films' tendency to "engage in a fantasy of futuristic monsters at the cost of confronting the monstrous realities of the past." (Lowenstein 85) The value of allegory, however is in its ability to represent itself through an unrestricted bevy of storytelling mediums, with the Kaidan among them. One particular film temporally distinguished by its allegorical treatment of Hiroshima is the previously mentioned *Onibaba*, directed by Kaneto Shindô.

Onibaba's historical narrative deals with two women roaming the countryside of a wartorn Japan, killing samurai and selling their armor. After the younger of the two women begins to fall for a peasant escaped from the military, the older attempts to frighten her from her union with the use of a stolen demonic mask. The mask, carrying a curse, fuses with the woman's face, and horribly disfigures her upon its removal. As the mutilated woman chases after her fleeing young companion, she attempts to console her, crying "I'm not a demon, I'm a human being!" The film functions allegorically in its representation of the old woman, with her burn like scars signifying victims of Hiroshima. The allegory is unconventional, however, in that it does not engage with themes of trauma in a traditional and recognizable sense: identifying the burned woman as purely being a victim. One possible interpretation of the "burned" woman's pleas to her companion to be recognized can be read as the director combating notions of national pride in acceptance of widespread victimization, or "valorized victim experiences as a service to the state" (88) It is a distinctly counter-cultural message, going against the traditional victim narratives of similarly subtextual Hiroshima treatments (such as *Godzilla*).

This change in interpretation is significant in that it demonstrates how allegorical depictions of fear change over time, and how films dealing with similar subject matter can evolve in both their interpretation of trauma, and how that trauma is applied in a modernizing context. As time progresses, the formal presentation of horror cinema changes to better represent the cultural anxieties of its time. Godzilla is an example cinematic horror representing a particularly traumatic moment in Japan's history. Onibaba views the same moment from a temporally separate viewpoint. Altogether, this exemplifies how allegory, even when dealing with familiar subject matter, can evolve over time to reflect current attitudes towards fear, anxiety, or trauma. In the case of the Kaidan, while the modern iterations of its storytelling structure (such as all of the films exclusive to the J-horror trend) retain the core details of a vengeful female ghost, the presentation has evolved in both its narrative construction and formal presentation from its Edo period predecessors to fit the post industrial, globalized anxieties of the time in which the stories are told. The Kaidan's retention of relevance is expressed in the way its allegorical subtext has evolved within its generic framework.

Apart from its temporally specific allegorical status, Onibaba also marks a transition in Japanese filmmaking movements. Growing away from the theatrical roots of studio films imitating Western design, alternative and art films began to identify a larger place in Japan's national filmmaking culture. Onibaba offered a combination of experimental, and more straightforward genre film. This kind of synthesis, of arthouse and genre, provided the basis for the kinds of underground "cult" film which would perpetuate the earliest examples of international exchange with small American film fan communities.

Defining J-horror in an American context necessitates a connection to cult filmmaking, and the means with which they were distributed to these small, dedicated American audiences. J-horror, as a phenomenon preceding and intersecting with the more widespread studio releases owes some of its more enduring appeal to smaller scale cult films with release dates ranging from 1977 (*Hausu*) to more contemporary releases like *Noroi* (2005). Due to the extreme variety demonstrated by the genre in both its subject matter and temporal spheres of influence, putting a conclusive definition on what J-horror means to American audiences is a difficult, possibly pointless task. Based on the statements of fandom community members, what Hollywood constitutes as J-horror may have nothing to do with American releases at all. In fact, in order to qualify as J-horror to the certain communities, any film in question must not have entered the Western mainstream at all. (*It Came from the East*) The term J-horror then, in the context of American remakes, is restrictive, relegating the expansive genre filmmaking culture of an entire nation to a specific subset of releases deemed marketable by a handful of trend savvy producers.

Prior to the 2002 release of *The Ring* and the subsequent saturation of remakes, the American subcultural fascination with Japanese horror imports was perpetuated through more underground modes of circulation, such as fanzines, free media, internet downloads and individually distributed DVDs. (*It Came from the East*) It is ironic that methods of fan communication utilizing new avenues of electronic interconnection were essential to the perpetuation of a new subgenre of horror fiction that would go on to make monsters of those same modes of communication. These pockets of cult film fans were likely significant in the eventual discovery of J-horror as a viable commercial product. Just as Hollywood producers began to identify popular scripts through internet forums, similar forums were being used to

perpetuate the transnational exposure of media among fans. It was in this environment that the first American forays into adapting J-horror would find a place in American pop culture, and begin to influence the direction that American studio horror would take in years to come.

Cultural/Critical Retrospective

Identifying the lasting impact of a film is impossible to do in the moment of its release. It is clear as a film is received by the public whether the nature of its reception is immediately positive or negative, but the lasting impact of an influential film (or series of films, in this case) is only truly notable in retrospect. For example, John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* were released in the same weekend of 1982 to widespread critical and public distaste. *The Thing*, in particular, was lambasted by critics for its distasteful use of special effects, now recognized as groundbreaking, to the effect of pornographic and gory excess. The practical effects work was "let loose on us by the bucketful, and satiation rather than horror is the result" wrote Derek Malcolm of the Guardian, with William Parente continuing that "The only avenue left to explore would seem to be either concentration camp documentaries or the snuff movie." (Bilson) Retrospective, in this case, reveals a monumental change in attitude towards John Carpenter's film, with no clear time apparent at which the shift in opinion occurred. The J-Horror trend, compared to the evolved perception of *The Thing*, has experienced a kind of inverse reception. J-Horror exploded into American theaters, and while many of the trend's films weren't quite critical darlings, its appeal was obvious due simply to the sheer number of films adapting its style, both onscreen and behind the scenes in producer's rooms. It was only after an

extended period of release saturation that public interest in the subgenre would wither. As the freshness of imported thematic and cinematic technique declined at the end of the 2000's, the latter installments of the remake trend began to reveal themselves as results of film as a capitalist endeavor; they were attempts to garner profit based off of previously established audience response to a genre trend that had worn out its bombastic welcome.

While the films composing America's J-horror trend are significant due to their reflections of cultural dread, their modern contribution to the transnational creative relationship between Japanese and American studios is due to their identity as franchise installments just as much as works of allegorical representation. Film is a capitalist enterprise just as much as it is an artistic one, and while art may be created during the production of a studio film, it is always with the intention of securing a profit. This is a unifying factor of American remakes such as *The Ring* and *The Grudge*: their presentation of a culturally informed ghost story has influenced the formal presentation of future American films due to an artistically unique approach to storytelling, but has done so within the context of a trend based on transnational studio interactions intent on securing a profit. *Ringu* may have found a following in Japan due to its artistic sensibility, but its recognition and subsequent remake by an American studio is due to the financial return that that popular sensibility generated. To successfully examine the immediate and lasting impact of this phenomenon on American filmgoing culture and filmmaking practices, it is necessary to review the critical and cultural reception of the films at the times of their release, as well as a current retrospective on the films' release, reception, and decline.

Gore Verbinski's *Remake of Ringu* opened domestically at number one with an opening weekend gross of fifteen million dollars. It's lifetime domestic gross would end up at 129

million, with a foreign lifetime gross of 120 million, resulting in a fifty two-forty eight percent split. (Box Office Mojo) The Ring earned mostly positive critical reception, with most critics citing its Japanese origins, and remaining split on whether the film denoted an improvement in quality from Hideo Nakata's original. Universally praised were the film's look and "unsettling" atmosphere. (Phipps) "The more the mysterious pieces fall into place, the less sense The Ring makes. But most horror fans will happily sacrifice coherence and plausibility for some good otherworldly jolts." (Ansen) Variety's review is set apart by the website's status as catering its content more towards business insiders, and leans towards favorable overall, with praise for Verbinski's direction and the effects work by Charles Gibson and Rick Baker. "[The] Pic emerges in the end as a low-impact suspenser that sustains a certain mood but doesn't approach the full potential of its premise." (McCarthy) In spite of its healthy reception from audiences, The Ring, on its own terms, wasn't truly a game changer in the eyes of critics. As part of a larger trend though, The Ring was already gaining attention as a harbinger of things to come for studios and audiences.

In September of 2002, one month before the US release of The Ring, The Guardian published an article written by Steve Rose On the viability of Asian films suffusing Hollywood, and UK cinema's as a form of fresh, inspiring material in an time of lackluster horror offerings from franchises "squeezed dry." (Rose) Rose observed production practices that would go on to influence the next half decade of studio horror releases before the trend could become truly established, citing historical precedents of American filmmaking aping Japanese styles "just as in earlier decades the American Western was reinvigorated by Kurosawa's samurai movies and the Hollywood action movie by Hong Kong cop thrillers." (Rose) At the time, the Thai film The Eye

(2002) was being released in UK cinemas, with remake rights being secured by Tom Cruise and Paula Wagner's production company, and Hideo Nakata's Ring follow up Dark water had been released in Japan. While Nakata had directed other films since Ringu's 1998 release, Dark Water was significant for its status as an adaptation of a Koji Suzuki novel, just as Ringu had been. The remake rights, even prior to the October release of The Ring in the U.S., had been bought by Bill Mechanic for his studio Pandemonium films. (Rose) All this was compared against the common perception of Hollywood's horror environment as being devoid of any revolutionary or even frequently dependable talent. Slasher horror franchise juggernauts *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* had given way to franchise fatigue with diminishing critical and commercial returns. Friday the 13th in particular released its twelfth installment in the same year as The Ring to critical disdain, and the franchise's lowest box office return to date (a miniscule 13 million lifetime gross) compared to The Ring's superior opening weekend alone. (BoxOfficeMojo) This can be attributed to the West's perceived "freshness" of the intersection of Japanese filmmaking and genre coding. (Herbert) In lieu of the worn out slasher narratives lumbering at roughly the same repetitious rhythm since Halloween's release in 1978, movies like The Ring frightened audiences through a psychological approach to horror, with new aesthetics layering supernatural themes onto the unsteady but inevitable integration of technology into modern society. The Ring is a film very much tied to the turn of the century by its story of a curse distributed through a haunted VHS tape, whereas the recent Japanese release Kairo (remade in 2006 by Distant Horizon studios as *Pulse*) similarly tied technology to the ghostly and unknowable by telling a story of hauntings accessible through the internet. All of these films were notable for taking a formal approach to cinematic terror, using "dread-filled silences,

mysterious off-screen noises, grainy video and ambiguity, all building up to a devastating climax. The horror is achieved through editing, sound, composition, lighting and drama.” (Rose) Rose considered *The Ring* to be a test run for what could turn out to be a revitalization of American horror through a Japanese lens, and in the following years, his predictions would be affirmed by a plethora of remade Japanese titles, and a collection of isolated American sequels.

In 2004, Takashi Shimizu’s remake of his original *Ju-on* (the remake sought to emulate and simplify the third film in Shimizu’s series) was released for American audiences. The film would turn out to be the most successful of all of the American remakes, opening at number one with a thirty nine million dollar weekend domestic gross. (BoxOfficeMojo) With the release of *The Grudge*, the trend for horror releases of the next five years was established. *The Grudge* had outperformed the previous years “landmark” title *Freddy vs Jason*, which had only managed to gross thirty six million dollars in its opening weekend, and would go on to have an inferior lifetime domestic gross as well. (BoxOfficeMojo) A remake of a foreign film from a foreign director outperforming a crossover of two widely recognized horror brand icons was a clear signal to American producers, and both franchises would go on hiatus until being revitalized at the end of the 2000’s with respective franchise reboots.

The success of *The Grudge* among its contemporaries is likely due to its early placement among other films of its ilk. Buoyed by the success of *The Ring*, audiences were ready for further exposure to foreign horror, and had yet to tire of the repetition of themes and scares that would become apparent with releases in years to come. *The Ring Two*, the sequel to Verbinski’s remake, was helmed by Nakata of the Japanese original, and though it failed to garner the same critical attention of the previous entry, it easily surpassed it at the box office, with a 35 million

dollar opening weekend gross. 2005 and 2006 would see the releases of remakes *Dark Water* and *Pulse* respectively, with both films failing to capture the same attention that *The Ring* and *The Grudge* had commanded. *Dark Water* grossed nine million dollars in its opening weekend, while *Pulse* would only gross eight million. *Pulse* would be considered a box office flop, as its lifetime gross failed to make up for the film's 20.5 million dollar budget. (BoxOfficeMojo) The J-horror buzz would creak to a halt with *One Missed Call* in 2008, as there are few notable adaptations or remakes of its style of Asian horror following its release. The original film (*Chakushin-Ari*), directed by Japanese auteur Takashi Miike, had already failed to distinguish itself with mediocre to unfavorable reviews, many of which pointed to similarities in themes and story elements with previous films such as *Ringu* and *Kairo*. Its remake received incredibly poor critical attention, and though it outperformed both *Dark water* and *Pulse* with a twelve million dollar opening weekend, its number five opening spot gave it and its supernatural subgenre a black mark among producers. For nine years, studios avoided involvement with remakes of Japanese horror films, until the delayed 2017 release of *Rings*, a soft reboot and continuation of the American *Ring* franchise began by Verbinski. The film was barely successful at the box office, with a domestic total gross of 27.5 million dollars just surpassing its twenty five million dollar budget. The film was critically panned, and prompted speculation on the purpose and viability of attempting to revive a trend a decade out of favor.

It's safe to say that the recently renewed interest in the *Ring* and *Grudge* franchises by American studios are not fueled by any resurgence of audience interest. The novelty of experiencing a culturally unique approach to cinematic horror is a phenomenon that can only ever occur once, and so it can be inferred that the release of *Rings* and planned *Grudge* reboot

are dependent on two separate factors. The first is a return to established American franchises in the vein of Friday the 13th and Elm Street, both of which received reboots after diminishing critical and commercial returns. The 2009 Friday reboot opened to a strong forty million, though it only accrued sixty million in its lifetime. A year later, the Elm Street reboot would open to thirty million, and end up matching Friday's disappointing lifetime gross. (BoxOfficeMojo) While neither of these films track records are ideal, their impressive opening weekends (for horror films in particular) may have inspired a similar tactic in reviving a recognizable horror mascot in the form of The Ring's Samara Morgan in order to secure a quick hit.

The second factor mirrors the circumstances which led to the discovery of the Japanese properties in the first place, as Japanese audiences had reacted positively to a recent revitalization of the Ring and Grudge franchises. These film, due to their international success, hold a different place in the Japanese pop culture pantheon than has been observed in the U.S. The Grudge in particular has commanded an impressive franchise release schedule since its inception with Shimizu's short films. The Ring franchise in particular was receiving public attention in Japan due to the release of Sadako 3D, which functioned as a continuation of 1998's Rasen. While recognizable to American audiences, the character was iconic enough to Japanese audiences to warrant a viral marketing stunt involving appearances of actors performing the characters at a baseball game, with "Sadako" herself shambling up to the pitcher's mound to participate. (Yamato) The subsequent release of Sadako 3D 2 likely served as a sign to American producers, and so Rings, now under the banner of Paramount pictures, was released as a response to the apparent revival in Ring popularity.

Production History

The popularization of J-horror for American audiences walks an unsteady balance between artistic and capitalist enterprise. The subdued pacing, deliberate framing, and the unnerving soundscapes of these films all signified an exciting new turn in auteurial distinction within a well worn genre. The methods with which these developments were brought into mainstream recognition however, were dependent on the role of the producer within the studio system. The producer, in contrast to the cinematic pursuits of the director or cinematographer, enacts a much more executive role, and in the context of large studios such as Dreamworks or Columbia Pictures, often signifies the financial incentives which dictate the release of any given film at a specific time and cultural atmosphere. It is the job of the studio producer (more specifically the executive producer) to observe and react to the ebbs and flows of pop cultural interest in order to influence the release of films that resonate with the pop cultural zeitgeist, and ensure a profitable audience turnout.

The production of American remakes of Kaidan film exemplifies this balance between creativity and capitalistic institutionalization. By perpetuating the popularization of cinematic techniques specific to Kaidan films in American cinema, the producer acts, in a way, as a creative. To identify why the trend of American remakes of Japanese horror films occurred with the frequency, and within the time frame that it did, it is necessary to understand the specific role of the producer that resulted in the distribution saturation of such a specific type of film. J-horror is easier to examine in this regard because of one consistent, unifying factor of its production. This factor is the involvement of Roy Lee.

Lee is an American producer, executive, and head of vertigo studios working out of Los Angeles. He was born in New York to South Korean immigrants in 1969, grew up in Bethesda Maryland, and graduated law school at American University in 1996 (Friend) Eight months later, he drove to LA, and began working with scripts as a “tracker” at a production company called Alphaville. After twenty two years, some of his production credits include *The Ring* and its sequel, *The Grudge* and its two sequels, *Dark Water* , *The Eye*, *One Missed Call* , *Rings*, and the as of yet unreleased reboot of *The Grudge*. Roy Lee, as an individual, is likely the most important factor contributing to the success of remakes of Japanese films in American cinemas. This is due to his innovations in the way screenplays are bought and sold, and his choice to capitalize on an untapped source of potential production business by working as an intermediary between American and foreign (primarily Asian) studios, such as Golden Circle. (Herbert)

There is a symbiotic, cyclical relationship between film producers and consumer trends, and it is important to understand the role of the film producer as they both influence, and are influenced by pop cultural trends. In Lee’s case, the trend in question was the emerging American fascination with Japanese media. It was not the first example of this kind of Asian American media exchange (Toho pictures’ *Godzilla* films had found success within the American pop cultural sphere in the 70’s and 80’s), but it was very much of its own time. The market was already there for Japanese media imports, but Lee’s influence brought his particular horror niche to a new level of popularity. For example, the J-horror phenomenon undoubtedly owes some of its popularity to an amalgamation of cultural and consumer trends specific to the late 90’s, with the success of the *Ring* and *Grudge* films following in the footsteps of the 90s’ “anime boom.” This was a period of time when the American Cartoon Network began featuring

programs like Sailor Moon and Dragonball Z within its own “Toonami” segment, finding immense success with younger audiences, and leading to the licensing of anime for American consumption from companies like FUNimation and Bandai Entertainment. (FlowJournal) It was within this environment of transnational media excitement that Lee was able to successfully transfer so many Japanese genre films into the hands of American studios and ignite another, more specific trend, both with the moviegoing public and within American studios.

Lee’s rise to success began with his employment as a script supervisor at Alphaville in LA. The company, at the time, was responsible for the the preproduction of remakes of American films such as *The Mummy* (1932/1999) and *The Jackal* (1973/1997). Lee’s decision to move to Hollywood in the first place went against the career path he had set for himself in college, and contradicted his parents’ vision of a life with a steady income practicing transactional law in a corporate firm. It was during his studies as an undergraduate that Lee first dabbled in film. He made early attempts at screenwriting, transcribing *Pulp Fiction* (1994) but changing each line, altering the script into an almost entirely different movie. He attempted the same thing with a *Seinfeld* script, sending it in to a talent agency to no avail. (GoldSea)

In an interview with Daniel herbert, Lee denies any correlation between his legal schooling, and his success as a businessman. “I feel like it's all common sense. If there's a person willing to sell and there's a person willing to buy, there's always a way to make a deal. I don't think that it's something you need to go to school or practice law to realize.” (Herbert) Lee’s career goals weren’t specifically linked to film when he made the drive to california. His intention was to work in entertainment, whether it would turn out to be music, television, or other mediums. Getting hired as a tracker for film scripts was the first job available to him, and

his eventual success in the industry was due more to entrepreneurial instinct than a passion for movies or filmmaking.

During his time at Alphaville, Lee's work as a script tracker involved him communicating with other trackers about available, and potentially successful scripts. Lee's innovation was bringing his work online, setting up an internet bulletin which he called "Tracker," with which he shared access with twenty of his friends and professional connections. Six months later, he had established twenty five similar online groups, essentially killing the existing "spec script" market. After an unsuccessful foray into additional web content and short films, Lee took his most significant step towards the establishment of America's momentary fascination with Japanese cinematic supernatural horror with his seizure of producer Takashige Ichise's "Ringu," along with the interpersonal controversy and competition that would come with its acquisition by his peers, and American studios.

While Lee was initially intended to be credited among three executive producers for the 2002 film, as well as the man who discovered the property in the first place, a fourth executive producer whose name was added only after deliberation from Dreamworks (the film's distributor) provides a wrinkle into the story of Ringu's development into its American counterpart. In 2001, Lee was working with the talent management company Benderspink, and received word from his contemporary Mike Macari, who had been laid off from Fine Line Features, a specialty film division of New Line Cinemas. (Friend) Macari had been an executive on an American remake of Ringu, having brought the original to the attention of Neal Edelstein, a frequent producer for David Lynch. (Brodesser, Lyons) Though there is no confirmation for this, it is likely this connection that resulted in Naomi Watts starring in the eventual remake,

having just come off of Mulholland Drive, directed by Lynch. After the remake project's cancellation with his departure from the company, Macari had reached out to Benderspink with hopes of selling the film.

Lee, acting on behalf of Benderspink, showed the script to his friend Mark Sourian at Dreamworks, before the film's primary producers Walter Parks and Laurie MacDonald decided to go through with the project. (Cinema.com) In the process, Macari's involvement was all but wiped from the film's development history, and his subsequent attempts to contact Lee were met with a condescending stonewall. In the following weeks, Lee fought to keep his reputation of the man responsible for Ringu's discovery, going so far as to threaten Macari with circulating mugshots of a drunken driving charge he had been involved in. In the end, Lee relented, and Macari was given credit as executive producer for 2002's The Ring. (Friend)

The circumstances surrounding the discovery of director Hideo Nakata's Ringu, and the potential that its release revealed are demonstrative of the approach that Lee would take in future production opportunities, and thus serves as an early example of the kind of transnational production relationship that would allow for the American popularity of Japanese horror remakes. The Ring would turn out to be a box office success, and served as a proof of concept for a market based on imported horror scripts. For example, due to the early theatrical success of the film, competition between studios served as a catalyst for an unexpected profit based on the distribution rights alone. Dreamworks, as a show of faith, would outbid Disney by one million dollars to maintain exclusive rights to the film's distribution, and would continue to control the rights to the film worldwide, with Japan being the one exception. (Brodesser, Lyon) With a waning interest in developing scripts, Lee left Benderspink in the fall of 2001, and joined with

colleague Doug Davison to form their own company, Vertigo Entertainment. Their goal was to replicate the shocking success of *The Ring* by purchasing the remake rights to Asian films for cheap, and selling them to American studios. His starting pitch was simple. He would explain to Asian distributors that their films would never be profitable overseas because of a widespread reluctance to watch films with subtitles. Alternatively, remaking a film would ensure a larger shared profit based off of an immediately more attuned viewer base. (Friend) Meanwhile, due to the established success of *The Ring*, American studios had an incentive to produce films similar in narrative and in style.

Lee, as a Korean American, had no professional contacts in Asia outside of his correspondence with Takashige Ichise during the development of *The Ring*. He also had no knowledge of customs, or how the cultural gap might affect going about sealing production deals. He spoke English exclusively. To circumvent these problems, Lee doubled down on the goodwill generated by *The Ring*'s reception, and continued to collaborate on projects with director Hideo Nakata. Nakata would go on to direct the sequel to Gore Verbinski's *Ring* film, with Lee stating that he dropped the script off at Nakata's doorstep, and lent him a copy of the 1981 film *The Entity* before Nakata responded with a confirmation that he could remake it into a good film, and signed on to direct. Similarly, Lee continued a professional relationship with producer Takashige Ichise, and began to work primarily as a full time producer. These decisions transcend the traditional role of the producer in developing studio films; Lee was serving to steer the creative direction in which American studio horror cinema would follow for the better part of the next decade. As such, his involvement is just as much a creative force as the directors with which he collaborated.

As a day to day at Vertigo, Lee's career functioned as an architect of movies, communicating with the people that would allow a film to go into production. "We put together the pieces that make the movie go forward. I don't write it. I don't direct it. I just help to put the whole package together and bring the project forward for a studio or a private financier."

(Herbert) Before the process of finding writers or pitching projects to studios, the first task, that of identifying films to remake, became increasingly easy for Lee. Whereas before, Lee would have to weigh the viability of an existing Asian film to remake for American audiences, Vertigo would receive scripts, rough cuts, or final versions of unreleased Asian films with hopes of securing remake rights with an American studio. Overseas, this was becoming a viable method of offsetting production costs. If a film in the earliest stages of production could secure a remake deal, guaranteed international box office returns could be used as bargaining chip to obtain a larger budget or wider distribution for the original film. In other words, certain Asian films could use an unreleased American remake to generate a greater amount of confidence with Asian studios or investors. Other producers were coming to Lee as an avenue for success.

Takagashi Ichise would be instrumental in Lee's next steps in establishing his reputation as the "Remake Man." Whilst alternately living at a home in Japan and a home in LA, Ichise would collaborate with Lee on another, now iconic franchise remade for American audiences. This would be *The Grudge*. (Herbert)

Among its contemporaries, 2004's *The Grudge* is notable for its use of setting. Rather than adapting a Japanese story and characters and porting them over to an American setting, *The Grudge* takes place in Japan, albeit with an American principle cast. It is unique in that its national identity plays into its plot, instead of serving as a background to be erased in

international translation. This is primarily due to the transnational entanglements which defined the film's production.

At this point in his career, Lee was reaping the rewards of negotiating business between Asian and American studios, and was able to secure remake deals based on the Asian status of practically any original film by itself. One example of Lee exercising this success was a screening of Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-On* for director and producer Sam Raimi. (Friend) Prior to the film's screening, Lee made a loud announcement to the room citing Ichise's plan to remake an additional six Japanese horror films, and his ability to involve Ringu director Hideo Nakata for a shoot in Japan with American actors costing a meagre one million dollars. The screening impressed Raimi and producing partner Robert Tapert enough to secure the film's production within a few weeks. The shooting would take place in Japan, in accordance with Ichise's suggestions, but it would keep its original, relatively unknown director instead of the now internationally established Hideo Nakata. Instead of the originally pitched million dollar budget, *The Grudge* would shoot for between ten and fifteen million dollars, and go on to gross 187 million dollars worldwide. (McNary)

In an interview following the release of *The Grudge 2*, Lee explained his thoughts on the success of Japanese (and some Korean) remakes in American cinemas. In regards to the financial viability of East Asian films as opposed to remakes of European films, Lee detailed the exploitation and saturation of European filmmaking. Films like *Point of No Return* (1993), a remake of Luc Besson's 1990 film *La Femme Nikita*, and *True Lies* (1994), itself a remake of the French *La Totale!* (1991), came from a different cultural place that had had already been established in American pop culture. Europe could be seen as old culture, whereas Asia could be

seen as fresher, with less exposure. It was as if “a new door had been opened in Asia that hadn’t been considered before.” (Herbert)

The genre coding of the Japanese originals assisted in their viability as remakes in addition to their lesser US exposure. Horror was simply easier to adapt, as the themes and stories were often much less nationally specific, or could be altered to appear so. “Dramatic movies are very cultural or period pieces are very cultural, they are almost impossible to adapt to the US setting, which is what the remakes would normally try to do...If they have lots of cultural issues, like family relations or relations with the community, they're somewhat set to the region that the movies are made in, and they are harder to adapt. But horror movies seem to be easier to adapt because something that was scary to the audience, say in Asia, would potentially be scary to audiences in the United States.” (Herbert)

For a time, this truism would serve to establish a respectable collection of franchise installments following the American remakes of *Ringu* and *Ju-on*. The American iteration of the *Ring* franchise saw the release of a direct sequel in 2005 before a hiatus of twelve years until the 2017 release of Dreamworks’ *Rings*. *The Grudge* received two American sequels in 2006 and 2009, in addition to the as of yet unreleased installment tentatively scheduled for a 2019 release. Described as the second American reboot of Takashi Shimizu’s film, it retains the core production team from the 2004 film.

These numbers pale, however, in the face of the popularity these franchises commanded in their native Japan. After the 1998 release of Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu*, the next few years would see the release of a direct sequel, *Rasen* (unconventionally released in theaters at the same time), the 1999 television series *Ring: Final Chapter* (12 episodes), the 1999 *Ringu 2*, the unofficial

korean sequel *The Ring Virus* (1999), *Ring 0: Birthday* (2000), *Sadako 3D* (2012), and *Sadako 2 3D* (2013). (ComingSoon.net)

The Grudge franchise (titled Ju-on in Japan) demonstrates a similarly expansive release schedule, with nine installments, discounting the four American releases which raise the total installment count to a staggering thirteen films. The franchise found its beginnings in two short films directed by consistent franchise writer/director Takashi Shimizu, titled *Katasumi* (1998) and *4444444444* (1998). They would be expanded upon in the feature film *Ju-on: The Curse* (2000) and its sequel *Ju-on: The Curse 2* (2000). Shimizu would return to the franchise with *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002), and *Ju-on: The Grudge 2* (2003) before directing three installments of the American remake franchise. Following this were the simultaneous Japanese releases of *Ju-on: Black Ghost* and *Ju-on: White Ghost* (2009), *Ju-on: Beginning of the End* (2014), and *Ju-on: The Final Curse* (2015) The most recent installment draws the franchise into an even stronger parallel with the American slasher franchises of “Friday” and “Elm Street,” with the release of the 2016 crossover flick *Sadako vs Kayako*. (IMDB) The film concerns a group of students who, seeking to escape the curse of the Ring films, call upon the ghostly antagonist of the Grudge series to engage in a ghoulish supervillainess smackdown in a similar manner to New Line Cinema’s *Freddy vs Jason*.

Though not quite matching up in density of installments, the American and Japanese iterations of the Ring franchise in particular follow a similar pattern of release over the course of the first two decades of the 20th century, with the highest concentration of releases occurring roughly between 1998 and 2009. Following this is a hiatus of five to twelve years, prefacing a franchise return usually taking the form of a reboot. *Sadako 3D*, while commanding a larger

overseas box office impact, marks the same kind of series return and change in direction that Dreamworks' Rings did after a similar twelve year hiatus following the critically maligned Ring 2. Both films are studio products basing their viability on the success of franchises gone for more than a decade without films to add to their brand. Rings suffered a troubled production, and a release delay that pushed its opening weekend from a seasonally appropriate October slot, to a January slot traditionally associated with a studio's "vote of no confidence." The release practices on display demonstrate an awareness of how time has changed the attitude towards these products.

In regards specifically to the American releases, it's clear that the modern installments aren't meant to build off of an existing pop cultural buzz, but to provoke a response in potential consumers based on memories of a time when the films were fresh to begin with. To return to the franchise parable of Friday the 13th and A Nightmare on Elm Street, Rings has more resemblance to the slick but hollow Platinum Dunes remakes of those films, featuring similarly negative critical reception. The suggestion that production practices based on gauging public interest and box office viability of the franchises were similar between Japanese and American studios reinforces the release framework of the films as based around franchise installments, and not films as individual artistic texts. While each film has a right to be recognized by the creative merit of those involved in its production, it is just as important to identify them as products, filmed and distributed with intention of securing a profit. Within this context, it is the producers who become just as important, if not more so, than the actors, directors, or cinematographers.

Genre/Formal Analysis

To better place American J-horror remakes in transnational time and space, it is important to identify them as existing uniquely within the broad scope of generalized “horror cinema” at the beginning of the twenty first century. Genre, while identifiable by the themes commonly demonstrated within generic categories, is similarly defined by a structure within which formal filmic storytelling devices determine its reception by the public. How then, do the depictions of cultural anxiety found in J-horror films interact with film formalism to identify themselves within the scope of film genre? How do these films generically identify themselves, and what is the difference in generic representation between the original films and their remakes? What sets them apart in terms of their formal construction?

To answer this question, genre must be defined in relation to the medium of film, which is a question in and of itself. The broader understanding of genre, regardless of the medium in which it represented, remains as it was defined in regards to literature in the mid twentieth century. “Genre should be conceived... as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose). (Welleck 56) The outer form, in the case of horror film, consists of elements of framing, lighting, mise en scene, and performance. Inner form, with its reference to tone and purpose, describes the application of these formal elements to shock and involve the audience through the creation of an unsettling atmosphere. The “purpose” of horror film in the case of J-horror can also be found in its allegorical depiction of technological insecurity. This definition of genre and its function can be applied to film through a framework provided by Rick Altman’s book “Film/Genre

Altman’s text was published in 1999, just as the popularity of Japanese supernatural horror was beginning to reach a global audience, seemingly making his treatment of genre

particularly applicable. Most of his subject matter, however, deals with the understanding of film genre and its development over the course of the twentieth century. This puts his text in an interesting position in relation to J-horror and its American filmic counterparts. The films in question (with an emphasis on *Ringu* and its remake in this section), demonstrate the enduring relevance of Altman's genre theory, while also demonstrating how the uniquely transnational application of traditional genre filmmaking demonstrated by American J-horror remakes transcends traditional understandings of genre. This is revealed in the films' formal construction in relation to their national status, and nationally allegorical status of their representations of filmic horror.

Altman provides a series of guidelines with which we can define genre films, and identify the way that genre interacts with both audiences and studios. Those most relevant to the generic identification of national/transnational horror are as follows:

- Genre is defined by the film industry, and recognized by the mass audience.
- Genres have clear, stable identities and borders.
- Genre films share certain fundamental characteristics

As genre films, each and every film representing America's J-horror trend, whether of Japanese or American origin, is subject to these guidelines, and by examining them using these statements as a framework, one can come to a deeper understanding of their status as both nationally specific, and transnational commercial and cultural products.

- **Genre, Industry, and the Audience**

The relationship between audience and studio in the development of genre film is somewhat paradoxical, or at least difficult to explain in terms that do not serve to dilute the elements of audience and studio interaction into abstractions. For example, the continued existence of a particular genre is essentially a result of a film's release posing a question to the audience: do you want to validate this as a formal and stylistic structure of storytelling? The audience, in the case of an enduring, profitable genre, answers "yes." (Altman 16) The genre film reaffirms the beliefs of the audience, while also setting up the industry and audience as enablers of each others existence. In this sense, both Japan and America serve as the studio and the audience, perpetually influencing each others studio releases. Despite the fact that *Ringu* found Japanese mainstream appeal beyond its status as a relatively low budget shocker, future releases such as *Kairo* and *Chakushin Ari* took thematic influence from the American success of "Ringu-like" films. The transnational communication of American studios representatives (Roy Lee in particular) were responsible for a cycle in which Japanese films could base their financial viability on the prevalence of American filmgoing trends, as demonstrated by the practice of selling remake rights to ensure greater box office returns.

In regards to J-horror remakes' more abstract status as genre films, the relationship between studio and audience is responsible for the formation of formal trends that define both *Ringu* and *The Ring* in equal measure, such as a reliance on thematic tension in lieu of more visceral jumps, and the techniques with which the select few jumps included are implemented. As Welleck defines inner form as relating to attitude and style, *Ringu*'s approach to frightening the audience is due to the cultivation of an otherworldly and unnerving atmosphere more than it is about corpses hiding in the closet (though one iconic scare in the original film and remake rely

on this specifically). The first time the ghost of Sadako is glimpsed in *Ringu* is a deliberately underplayed moment, possessing none of the shrill bombast associated with the kind of scare signified by, for comparison, a death in an American slasher film. Within the context of the scene, the protagonist Reiko has just finished viewing the haunted VHS tape by herself in a cabin and is left staring, confused and disturbed, at the dark reflection of herself in the CRT screen. In an over the shoulder close up, we glimpse the outline of a pale figure reflected by the television, reminiscent of a classic mirror scare. Subverting popular studio horror conventions, there is no associated sound cue with the frightening image, as the shot rack focuses to Reiko's startled reaction when she whirls around. The only sound is Reiko's compulsory inhalation, and we are left with a close up on her confused face, calling into question the validity of the spectral image. It serves not so much as a confirmation of supernatural elements, but to call into question the reliability of the perceptions of the protagonist, and by extension the audience. It is an approach to horror that relies more on suggestion and the eventual escalation of inexplicable elements, even if presented within the mold of a traditional jump scare. The "jump" in this case is not forced upon the audience with a contrived and startling sound cue, but left to the discretion of the viewer. It is significant that this still relatively easy scare is omitted entirely from the remake, in favor of similarly slow building tension. *The Ring*, with a higher budget and wider release, could easily have adapted this particular scare, recontextualized by its studio horror status, and elicited an quick and easy jolt. Verbinski, however, opted to remain faithful to what made the film unique in its presentation of fright, which is in itself representative of the exchange of ideas between studios and audience, with Dreamworks, in this case, signifying the audience.

- **Stable Identities and Borders**

Throughout the history of its acknowledgment, genres have been somewhat liquid in their application, with examples including the horror-comedy, or sci-fi fantasy. In order to successfully identify a genre in its own right however, it is necessary to distinguish clear boundaries within which genres can be typified. In order for horror to be recognized among its contemporaries, it must (a) be produced according to a recognizable generic blueprint, (b) display basic structures commonly identified within the genre, (c) be regularly identified during its release by its generic label, (d) be interpreted and recognized systematically by its audience as belonging to the genre in question. (17) How then, do *Ringu* and *The Ring* demonstrate these qualifying borders of genre? Additionally, how do they demonstrate these differently based on their national origin?

Ringu's response to the first qualifier is clear in its status as a modern contribution to the tradition of the *Kaidan* film. It exhibits structural and stylistic tendencies identifying it as such, including a ghostly antagonist, a vindictive motivation for the ghost, an inescapable curse, and a tragic end in which the ghost takes its revenge upon the world of the living. *The Ring* offers the basic framework of this story, but removed of its national context, it exists within a separate generic framework. While marketed as a remake of a pre existing horror film, the film's production was inherently influenced by genre, with the popularity of *Ringu* guaranteeing the *Ring*'s recognition. Both films display basic structures commonly identified within the genre. While the details of Reiko and Rachel's investigations into the haunted tape vary in each respective version, the narrative is structured throughout in a way to facilitate an increasingly severe sense of fear amongst the characters and audience. In accordance with its more

psychological approach to horror, there are few moments of outright terror, with the most recognizable sequence appearing in both versions. This is the reveal of Sadako and Samara in corporeal form to the supporting characters Ryuji and Noah before both are dispatched offscreen at the hands of the vengeful spectre.

Both *Ringu* and *The Ring* were identified by the generic label of horror during their release, and audiences were receptive to both films in accordance with this generic label, leaving little ambiguity as to their status in the eyes of studios and audiences equally. The construction of their marketing, however, marks the films as distinct in their formal approach to horror, as it is also representative of the emotional and narrative distinctions in the context of the film's scares. The trailer for the American release of *Ringu* is hard to follow, with its disjointed series of images verging on experimental or impressionistic. While all of the shots on display are present in the full film, their arrangement in the trailer's edit obscures any narrative purpose they serve, splicing footage from the haunted tape with reaction shots and shadowy imagery to create a deliberately confusing array of dialogue free nightmare cinema. Only the presence of quotes and accolades in the latter half of the trailer signify it as a traditional piece of marketing, or identify its subject as a feature film at all. The trailer for *The Ring*, on the other hand, features a much more narrative oriented structure, with character voice over explaining the context of the film's curse, and the roles of the characters in attempting to solve it. This disparity between the film's initial presentation to a potential audience acts as another example of Japan's cultural interpretations of horror clashing with the clearly defined structures of cinematic horror present within Hollywood's studio releases. A "destruction of order" is clearly present in the

indecipherable presentation of Ringu's trailer, while the status quo of narrative horror is preserved in the marketing for its American remake.

- **Fundamental Characteristics**

Altman's claim that genre films share certain fundamental characteristics is demonstrated in a formal comparison of Ringu and The Ring. As genre is often identified in the shared topic and structure of a group of films, it is appropriate to analyze the films in relation to Welleck's claims about identifying genre: How does each film's outer and inner form identify it as existing within the horror genre? Additionally, what elements of outer and inner form can be recognized as being fundamental to generic identity? To facilitate a comparison of the formal techniques used in Ringu and The Ring, the films will be analyzed according to three scenes: the cold open in which two young girls introduce the concept of the haunted tape, the first viewing of the haunted tape by the main character, and the final emergence of the film's ghostly antagonist.

The first scene of both Ringu and The Ring play out in much the same way, with similar dialogue and pacing. Two girls are alone in one of their houses late at night, discussing a seemingly frivolous rumor of a haunted vhs tape. One of them reveals that she has viewed the tape before they are distracted by a phone call, startling them both but turning out to be harmless. One girl leaves before the other begins to experience unsettling phenomena in the form of form of electrical malfunctions and televisions inexplicably turning themselves on. This is where the two films deviate, as in Ringu, the solitary girl is displays a horrified reaction to an unseen force while the other is upstairs. In The Ring, there is additional phenomena in the form of strange

pools of water, and the unaffected girl seemingly vanishing from the scene before the victim clearly views an image from the haunted tape.

It is in this first scene that we are exposed to the formal differences that will go on to identify each iteration's approach to psychological and supernatural cinematic horror. *Ringu* is a film with a much lower budget than its remake, and this is apparent in camera movement, the coloration of its shots, and a "show less" approach to its supernatural elements. *Ringu*'s camera often holds longer on any given shot than its remake, and shots are mostly stationary, with movement only consisting of simple pans. Its color scheme is naturalistic, and its cinematography is noticeably darker than *Verbinski*'s film. The film's look is more defined by natural lighting, with household lights providing a clear separation between brightly lit areas and shadow. *The Ring* features a much more stylized look, with more substantial lighting and washed out color putting a pale, ghastly filter over the whole film. The camera is also more active, tracking the characters as they move about the house. A distinctive whip zoom is also used in this scene to focus on both a clock, and the victim's face as she succumbs to the curse. This particular movement represents a more technical approach to eliciting terror, as opposed to *Ringu*'s thematic technique of placing unsettling visuals in otherwise pedestrian shots. As *Verbinski*'s first victim looks upon the television playing the haunted tape, there is an eyeline match on a shot of well obscured by static, and the whip zoom closing in on the girl's face, which becomes digitally contorted and ghostly as the shot constricts around her. Both scenes are completely devoid of music, with the sound design emphasizing the stillness of the house, interrupted by foreboding static.

The haunted tape in *The Ring* is mostly a more robust, visually expansive version of the one found in Nakata's film. The original features many shots that would be reincorporated into the remake, such as a woman in a mirror on a blank wall combing her hair, distorted footage of humanoid figures crawling through mud, and an extreme close up of an eye. It also features a wall of Japanese characters floating unintelligibly around the frame, which would not receive an American update. American additions to the tape replace the eye close up with a horse's eye instead of a human one, a match cut on a box of maggots with a wide high angle of humans wriggling in muck, a collection of twitching severed fingers, a dutch angle of a table's corner from which a massive centipede emerges, a burning etching of a tree, and a shot of a fibrous cord being dragged out of a human's throat, from the cord's perspective. Both tapes feature an unsettling soundscape, with *Ringu's* soundtrack featuring a shrill, scraping screech. *The Ring*, on the other hand, employs a rhythmic but unsettling series of three high pitched musical notes, juxtaposed with jarring transitions to electrically distorted grinding and groaning. The nightmare logic and visual disjunction of the original tape is retained, but the inclusion of more classically disturbing imagery suggests the intention of eliciting blunt shock value from the visuals, beyond the mystery of the original's composition, and its relation to the ambiguity of Japan's supernatural storytelling.

The climax of both films plays out in similar beats, with both Reiko and Rachel's ex-husbands experiencing the reveal of the film's ghost, and fatally succumbing to fear. Similar to the films' opening, a television inexplicably powers on, playing the final shot of the well from the haunted tape. Ryuji and Noah both investigate only to recoil as Sadako/Samara emerge from the well, crawl towards the screen, crawl through the screen and into the room, and slowly

approach. The sequences both end with a shot reverse shot on a close up of the ghost and Ryuji/Noah before cutting away.

Sadako and Samara's visual design is similar between the films, with a few important distinctions. Sadako's dress and hair are preserved and clean, as opposed to Samara, who is grey and partially decomposed. Her dress and hair are soaked and dirty, and she trails water as she stalks towards Noah. Samara's depiction is also more active, both in her movement within the space, and the cinematography around her. Samara's presentation is bolstered by visual effects, and she is shown teleporting towards Noah, accompanied by a visual effect resembling video static, referencing her technological source, and a higher effects budget. She is shot with a slow dolly back as she crawls through the television, a truck right as she crawls along the floor, a pan left as she begins to approach the hapless Noah, and even a rotating truck right centering on her as she stands imposingly in the middle of the open, brightly lit room. It is a loud, celebratory shot, the same way one would frame the protagonist of a superhero film. It poses Samara as a powerful and menacing figure, with no intention of hiding any aspect about her. It is climactic and horrific in every sense, but because of the unambiguous framing, the ability to frighten is left to subjectivity. In a final reveal, there is a push in on Samara's face as her hair parts to reveal a rotting grimace and dead eyes, glaring out at her prey. Noah's death recalls the framing of the film's beginning, with a whip zoom on his terrified face intercut with a hyperactive blur of black and white imagery from the tape.

Ringu comparatively, possesses none of this bombast in its final reveal. The scene is presented mostly in stationary shots, exempting a pan following Ryuji as he backpedals about the room, and following Sadako as she sulks towards him. Sadako's iconic emergence from the

television is shot in a medium wide, and her slow crawl towards Ryuji is a wide high angle, simulating his point of view, but without any movement. The pace is slower and more deliberate, and the shots are more claustrophobic. The room in which the scene takes place is significantly smaller and darker, with light filtering through drawn curtains keeping most of the room dim and obscured. Ryuji, for all his stumbling about, never gets far before he falls onto his back and is presented with Sadako's face. Instead of presenting her full features, Ringu keeps Sadako's full appearance ambiguous, instead revealing her face in an eyeline match with Ryuji, and an extreme close up on a single bloodshot eye. Similar to *The Ring*, Ryuji's death recalls the cold open, though the depiction is comparatively understated. A close up on Ryuji's final scream freeze frames before a drum like sound cue and the color being sucked out of the frame, leaving his frightened grimace in a grisly black and white photographic still.

While budget was clearly an influence on difference between the films respective looks and depictions of their supernatural elements, the formal distinctions between the two also identify a separate, nationally informed approach to cinematic technique. *Ringu*, for example, can be distinguished as being specifically Japanese based on its formal presentation. It may seem trite to identify such an otherwise pulpy genre film as national cinema, but in a sense, the accessibility and mass market appeal of these genre films make them a more direct reflection of a nation's relationship to cinematic technique. Comparing *Ringu* and *The Ring* on the basis of their formal presentation as representative of their national cinema serves to distinguish the national context which influences the films' lasting appeal and cultural application.

Of course, it would be reductive to identify a particular set of formal distinctions in cinematography or mise en scene as being specifically and unmistakably Japanese. Film, as a

visual language, shares a universal composition, with certain approaches to elements such as framing or stylistic editing representing a national context. This is not to suggest, however, that examining *Ringu* on the terms of its cinematic composition would result in distinctions in formal filmmaking being identified that are fully and uniquely representative of Japan. “Most of these analyses, especially those by Westerners, are piecemeal studies of Japanese cinema and craft a rickety umbrella of cinematic style based on a few auteurs who may not fully typify the Japaneseness of Japanese cinema.” (Muir) To avoid these kinds of cultural assumptions, *Ringu* and *The Ring* are best analyzed in regards to a single, isolated theory representing a national (or commercial) approach to cinema. In the case of Japanese cinema, this theory is *MA*, an aspect of Japanese Buddhism dating back to the sixth century. *MA* is descriptive of the relationship between to objects in a continuity, defined by the physical or emotional space between them. *MA* has applications in spirituality as well as literature and music, but finds a particularly relevant application in regards to film. (Muir) As it describes the value in spatial, temporal, and emotional distance, *Ringu*’s formal presentation can be identified as nationally specific by its relationship to the cultural watermark of *MA*. In this case, *MA* can be identified in *Ringu*’s editing, and abstract application of negative space and ambiguous silence. *The Ring*, on the other hand, can be identified more on the terms of its commercially influenced approach to cinematic technique, as it finds its presentation largely representing *intensified continuity*, a term coined by David Bordwell in an attempt to describe the aesthetic result of Hollywood’s efforts to compete against and adapt other media. This application of film form is largely characterized by a more dense utilization of cinematographic expressions, such as increased cutting or more stylized lighting, sound, framing, or camera movement.

Ringu firstly represents MA in the pace of its editing, and its dialogue. As MA is defined by the distance between to objects in a continuity, a slower frame by frame presentation of action is demonstrative of nationally oriented cinematic technique. The opening of the film never deviates in its pace, with the mounting tension provided by the dialogue and sequence of events never representing itself in the pace of the edit. The death of Tomoko, the first victim in Ringu, is the culmination of a creeping, deliberate dramatic tempo, and the payoff of the scene does not sacrifice this tempo by altering the speed of the edit as Tomoko comes face to face with her supernatural assailant. The opening is also demonstrative of Ringu's use of ambiguous silence and negative space, with the only sounds in the scene made more significant against the backdrop of the eerily silent house. A ringing phone, television static, and a startled gasp all exist in relation to a baseline of silence, providing an intersection of cinematic tension and MA. Negative space is also instrumental to the depiction of both tension and MA, with Tomoko's house often isolating her in the frame. The dark corners and unlit rooms of the environment are a presence in and of themselves, and characterize the empty space through fear of the unknown. The Ring accomplishes similar feats in regards to the use of silence, but the pace exhibits the film's intensified continuity with the first use of a whip zoom to focus on a clock showing a date, signifying the apparent death of one of the characters. Tension, in this case, is accomplished through the heightening of cinematic technique, as the pace becomes increasingly hyperactive as more phenomena beset Katie, the first cursed victim of Verbinski's remake. The scene reaches its stylistic peak with an evil dead style push in to Katie's screaming face, with a series of rapid fire intercuts of the tape's disturbing footage. The intention, as opposed to Ringu's fear of the

unknown, is to overwhelm. The fear in this scene comes from sensory overload, as opposed to ambiguous silence or suggestively empty cinematic space.

Both film's finales reinforce this distinction between isolated and intensified continuities, as the deaths of Ryuji and Noah respectively mimic the earlier deaths of Tomoko and Katie. The Ring's camerawork is intensified in every sense compared to the mostly stationary shots of Nakata's film, creating a dichotomy between the two where The Ring is defined by movement, and Ringu is defined by stillness. In the latter film, Sadako and Ryuji are hardly shown in the same shot together, with the spatial relationship between them defined by traditional shot reverse shot. The framing demonstrates the closing of distance with an increasingly tight composition on each figure, culminating in the extreme close up on Sadako's eye, and the reverse close of of Ryuji's reaction. It is indicative of "conversation editing" along a film's 180 degree line, and reflective of MA's application to define space as an "experiential connotation, since to be among persons is to interact in some dynamic way." (Muir) The Ring, on the other hand, clearly depicts Samara and Noah in the same shot, with their spatial relationship left unambiguous, and spatial dynamism incorporated through camera movements instead of editing.

Allegorical Representation of Cultural Anxiety

America's collective fascination with J-horror remakes shuddered to its bloated conclusion with the 2008 release of Eric Valette's *One Missed Call*; a remake of Takashi Miike's *Chakushin Ari*. In spite of the films' critical reception primarily citing poor writing and tired tropes, the lessening interest in the films can also be attributed to the remakes' inherent inability to tap into the cultural fears which made the original films effective in the first place. Despite the

original films lesser critical dismissal, it still occupies a particular and significant spot in cultural time and space because of the way its subject matter interacts with the temporally specific cultural anxieties which the films' cinematic horror exploits. Alternatively, it can be stated that these particular cultural anxieties, those involving intimate integration of technology into private spaces, are responsible for the films creation in the first place. The purpose of all horror, to some degree, is to involve and shock its audience, and so it is relevant that the themes and methods with which horror films attempt to do so find relevance in topical uncertainties, whether universal, or more culturally specific. Representation of those fears, through indirect or allegorical means, (Lowenstein) is what ties a film to a time or place, and is what makes the J-horror trend significant in the period of time in which it occurred. In this case, the anxieties displayed at the intersection of the supernatural and technological branch off to touch on additional themes of family, interpersonal connection, and social isolation in modern urban environments.

The ghosts appearing in the films composing the original and reamde installments of the J-horror buzz take the form of traditional Yurei, dressed in white funeral attire and often featuring long black hair. They are modern interpretations of the type of spirits haunting the original Yotsuya Kaidan. Their implementation in the films Ringu, Kairo, and Chakushin Ari however, don't fit entirely into the molds established by traditional Japanese supernatural fiction. They take recognizable forms, but their context and presentation is specific to the technologically influenced films in which they appear. Their appearances often involve static, and their forms are blurred, featuring interference as if they were being broadcast rather than haunting in a more traditional sense. Their existence is dependant on technology, and is mediated by it. They are a

manifestation of tradition, science, and the specifically Japanese supernatural. (Wetmore) Even *Ju-on*, a film without a plot centered around a technological haunting finds ways to integrate its scares into modern apparatuses, such as chilling use of security camera footage. While *Dark Water* is unique in that it tells a more traditional story of a haunting, it is still distinguishable as existing in the same context as *Ringu* or *Kairo* by its use of its confined urban setting. Despite *Ju-On* and *Dark Water*'s lack of haunted VHS tapes or Cell phone calls, they both evoke a distinctly urban claustrophobia. Where more traditional tales of hauntings may take place in isolated mansions on hills or the furthest reaches of small towns, each film distinct to the American J-horror phenomenon takes place in a bustling urban area, with the exception of *Ringu*'s occasional forays into the countryside.

The most surface level example of the allegorical expression of cultural anxiety which defines the J-horror trend can be found in *Kairo*, with its themes of isolation and connection, both in reference to the internet. The film's characters all fear living and dying in a state of loneliness, though they also sometimes seek out the sensation. After the uncertainty of the 90's, the role of the internet had found a kind of social ubiquity in the film's release year of 2005, and the digital space was ripe for interpretation. That historical uncertainty found a fitting partner in anxieties concerning the phenomenon of the *hikikomori*, a term coined by psychologist Saito Tamaki. *Hikikomori* describes a trend of intense social isolation amongst post industrial Japanese youth, often facilitated by exposure to digital media such as video games and the internet. In the face of an overwhelmingly wide world, youths could choose to interact through a digital filter from the safety of a physically isolated existence. (Wee 77) *Kairo* was able to evoke themes of isolation and loneliness in an urban environment reminiscent of public perceptions of

the hikikomori with a story about ghosts trapped in a digital space, and their victims targeted through the internet. *One Missed Call* makes similar use of public unease about the inevitable implementation of technology into one personal life, but rather than exemplifying the ways in which the technology is inherently isolating, the film makes light of the artificiality of the connections formed through technology.

Ju-on is set apart from the other films both by its non linear presentation, and by its application of the theme of failure of the family unit, as allegorically demonstrated by a haunted house story. The formal execution of some of its scenes contain similar use of technological elements, such as the aforementioned security camera scene, and a sequence in which the ghost's presence is detected through its signature death rattle heard through a telephone. Despite this technological relevance, the social implication of *Ju-on*'s horror is found in its depiction of familial violence. The titular curse of *Ju-on* is representative of the anger and sorrow tied to a location following the murder of a woman and her son by her jealous husband, and the film opens with a jarring sequence depicting the direct aftermath of the act. Shots include torn family photographs, a man's bloody hands, and the lifeless face of the mother. Forgoing the more traditionally Western notions of good and evil, the horror present in *Ju-on* is found in the destabilization of an established order, leading to chaos and eventual ruin. (125) As another example, the social worker, Rika, who is exposed to the curse, is sent to the house to assist the aging Sachie, who would be ordinarily cared for by a younger generation of her family. Passing this duty off to a stranger acts as a perversion of the structure that typically defines the "traditional Japanese family unit." (Wetmore) Her end at the hands of Kayako's ghost is representative of the chaos wrought by this destabilization.

Ringu acts as a synthesis of anxieties concerning both the everyday integration of technology into one's personal life and the destruction of the family unit by suggesting a correlation between the two. It also expresses its national interpretation of the supernatural through the formal construction of the film, with its alienating narrative direction exemplifying Japan's attitudes towards the ambiguous morality of the Kaidan story, as opposed to the west's more binary interpretations of similar stories. Ringu, with its deliberately obscure haunted VHS tape, serves as a modern visual reinterpretation of the Kaidan's chaotic ethos. The visuals within the tape, with their haunting incoherence, reflect a national interpretation of these stories as having a basis in "emotion over reason, mood over coherence, form over narrative, and presentation over representation." (Wee 91) Just as the horror of Ju-on was rooted in the destruction of order rather than inherent malice, the supernatural qualities of Ringu's narrative as represented through its videotape are rooted in its deliberate ambiguity and alienating presentation. The character of Sadako, the ghost essential to Ringu's titular curse, is not an inherently malevolent entity, but rather one that is victimized and relegated to a more abstract spiritual role. The threat of her curse is more incidental, instead of stemming from the vengeful malice of her personality.

This formal representation of cultural fear changes with its recontextualization in the American remake. If the prevalence of supernatural and technological themes in a horror subgenre was culturally significant to a turn of the century urban Japan, what does the formal presentation and reception of these remakes tell us about how these cultural anxieties were altered for a western audience?

Takashi Shimizu's remake of *Ju-on* begins to demonstrate this translation of allegorical representation by forgoing a traditional American setting, and centering the film on American exchange students in Tokyo. Because of the similarity of its story beats as well as its formal presentation (as it was also directed by Shimizu), *The Grudge* can still function as a critique of the family unit, but its context as an American release reallocates the focus to settle on the film's two American leads, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar and Jason Behr, and their respective dislocation as foreigners living abroad in Japan. Through Gellar's character, we experience her limited Japanese vocabulary, and unfamiliarity with her surroundings. Where the destabilization present in the original film was that of an order dictated by traditional family values, the disorder brought upon Gellar is that of culture shock, and the anxiety of existing in an unfamiliar place. (Wetmore) As the film progresses, and Gellar becomes increasingly embroiled in supernatural happenings, her disorientation with the world around her increases, and she becomes more and more alienated from the urban space she inhabits. Shimizu has been vocal about attempting to replicate the experience of an American living in Japan within this the film. As opposed to *Ju-on*'s more localized terror, it's American remake seems more concerned with the fear of foreign spaces in general. This is indicative of a post 9/11 mentality and presentation that, while scarcely observable in many of the American remakes, is particularly present in Jim Sonzero's remake of *Kairo*: the 2006 film *Pulse*.

With the American J-horror boom only truly beginning in 2002, the post 9/11 context of the films release is often apparent in themes of Western technology used against Westerners (through supernatural allegory), and the linkage of personal and societal destruction. (Wetmore) *Pulse* is significant in this regard, as its takes the original film's themes of isolation and

interpersonal instability, and alters them for a renewed focus on how this technology can be used to hurt us. Other details, such as the use of tape and warning posters in Kairo become eerily prescient when recontextualized through an American lense in Pulse, as the ways in which ghosts are contained within the film become reminiscent of imagery evoking the destruction of infrastructure, and the flier plastered walls of New York following the attack.

The film ends with an apocalyptic scenario, as the city begins to burn and the characters are forced to flee. A specific sequence even includes a plane falling from the sky and crashing into the cityscape. This sequence was present in the 2001 original film, but as the Japanese release was in February, several months before the 9/11 attacks, the use of such specific imagery can only be seen as morbid coincidence. Its inclusion in the American remake, however, completely recontextualizes the imagery. In a film as paranoid as Pulse, the decision to feature a destructive plane crash in the climax as a result of the inability to contain the destructive power of technology (represented rather bluntly through the film's spectral antagonists) serves as a final statement of intent in applying a widely recognized American trauma to a narrative horror framework. The fact that this narrative framework's original intent was to showcase a different set of cultural anxieties speaks to the extent in which destabilizing the national context of a filmic text can influence its allegorical application. This is compounded by the film's ending voice over monologue. In the film's final moments, the protagonist states: "We can never go back. The cities are theirs. Our lives are different now. What was meant to connect us to one another instead connected us to forces that we never could have imagined. The world we knew is gone. But the will to live never dies. Not for us. And not for them." (Pulse 2006) The

monologue, though specifically referencing ghosts, communicates an intense disillusionment with the safety of urban environments, particularly in the wake of a great tragedy.

Ringu, in regards to its themes of familial stress in regards to “unknowable” technology retains its impact in its translation to an American setting. Gore Verbinski’s film, as the highest critically regarded film of the American J-horror explosion, also retains the most successful allegorical adaptation of cultural fear, assisted by the more universal nature of the family unit as a source of tension. The Ring depicts instruments such as television and video as an invasive force in the home that can threaten a family’s security (Tryon 45). The VHS tape is an independent item which must be brought into an individual’s home, and viewed through a separate appliance such as home television, posing the curse and its electronic methods of infection as an unassuming home invader. One must bring the curse with them in a similar manner to how one might invite a vampire into their home in a different story. The film’s iconic “seven days” line, which signals the placing of the curse on an individual is delivered inexplicably via phone call, with the mundane sound of a phone ringing rendered unsettling because of its implication of one’s inevitable demise. The link to anxieties concerning familial instability are found in the relationship between Naomi Watts’ character and her son, who ends up becoming cursed by the tape, motivating Watts to continue her investigation into the curse’s origin. This narrative turn evokes parental fears of a child’s exposure to dangerous or illicit content, as represented by the tape and its disturbing imagery, made easier by the ubiquity with which the technology can be accessed.

As the ties to familial peril are strengthened with transnational adaptation however, the thematic significance found within the presentation of the haunted video tape finds less weight in

Verbinski's version; Nakata's tape reflected his culture's historical attitude towards the presentation of genre and supernatural fiction represented within Ringu (that of Kaidan). Verbinski's tape, while containing more dynamic and provocative imagery, fails to present any specific "Americanness" in its stylish presentation. The added quick cuts and close up shocks of subjects such as eyes, insects, and dismembered body parts are reminiscent (similar to Nakata's version) to experimental art cinema, though Verbinski's reinterpretation, with the juxtaposition of disjointed shots and brevity of the images, recalls music videos, and the way their frenzied compositions can often be interpreted as "failed narratives." (Wee 93) This comparison is telling, in that many of the additions made to the videotape in *The Ring* does not serve a purpose greater than either its narrative function or unsettling aesthetics. Specific shots, such as a woman peering down from a second floor window, and a close up on a horse's eye reference plot points in the film, and may provide a sense of discovery upon repeated viewings, but they do not contribute to the film's generic identity. Ringu's iteration of the haunted tape makes no attempts at narrative coherence, with its only clear connections to the narrative of the feature film being the shots of the woman in the mirror, and a well in the woods. As horror stemming from ambiguity and the destruction of order can be identified as national approaches to horror cinema, the presentation of the tape contributes to the narrative in a meaningful way. The remake, while retaining the core imagery of the woman and the well, does not represent a national approach to horror in its inclusion of additional images. The shock value of severed fingers and unnaturally large arthropods is shock value for its own sake, and indicative of the Ring's identity as a remake: slickly produced and skillfully crafted, but lacking the context which provided the

original the relevance to begin the filmmaking trend that would result in such widespread popularity.

Chakushin Ari and One missed call act as a functional end to the original American J-horror trend, and when examining the films' narratives, it is clear how they demonstrate an exhaustion with a formula that had become overexposed to Japanese and American audiences alike. Both films recycle elements from previous releases within its supernatural subgenre, and while Miike's original Japanese film was met with mediocre reception, One Missed Call, directed by Eric Valette, was critically panned, possessing a zero percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Notable reincorporated plot elements include: A monstrous child ghost, a dysfunctional relationship between mother and child, a "virus" like curse resulting in a chain of unpreventable deaths, and the malevolent supernatural possession of technology. (185)

Because Chakushin Ari contains so many recycled plot elements, it is easier to position it less as an original film in its own right, and more as a postmodern reinterpretation of J-horror tropes. There is a possible reading of the film in which Miike demonstrates an awareness of how these tropes had become cliches within the subgenre, and while working with a screenplay that plays into them with little self awareness, is able to direct the film in a sense that at least clearly applies the tropes to contemporary fears of technological isolation. This potentiality is not reflected in the film's overall reception however, and both the American and Japanese saturation of similar tales told in similar ways makes Miike's addition to the J-horror trend a concluding suggestion, rather than a bold statement of generic intent. Miike's interpretation of such a trope ridden story may not recognize the transnational ubiquity of the J-horror narrative, and as such remains hampered by the dullness of its thematic reincorporation, but Chakushin Ari still stands

on its own as an example of the allegorical expression of anxieties concerning the artificiality of human connection through technological means. This is reinforced in particular by a sequence exemplifying the trope of the virus-like curse, as an afflicted character is broadcast before the masses on live television

On the other hand, *One Missed Call* fails to recognize the limitations of its generic trappings, and as such, serves as an unfortunate poster child of the “unnecessary remake.” It signified a lack of audience response and, in accordance with Altman’s genre theory, a studio reaction that moved production priorities away from films of its type. *One Missed Call* endlessly incorporates tropes specific to both the J-horror trend, and significantly, American studio horror films like *Final Destination*. The formal presentation, young adult cast, and the unlikely, graphic deaths of its characters are more reminiscent of exploitative and serialized shockers, resulting in a film that is representative of the end of America’s critical and cultural preoccupation with Japanese horror.

The aforementioned television broadcast scene displays a difference of cultural context in negotiating themes of technology, communication, and isolation between the original film and the remake. The characters of each film; Natsumi and Taylor respectively, both have exposed their curse to the public, and sit in front of live cameras with the now cliched ghostly clock on their lifetime ticking down to the minute. Miike’s film presents a clear social critique within the sequence, using the televised setting to reinforce the ineptitude of technology in truly connecting us with others, Vallette plays the same scene with christian overtones, perhaps making strides towards a critique of mass marketed religion, but one that is lost in the overbearing execution. As the minutes tick down on Natsumi’s life in Miike’s film, she sits in a television studio among a

large group of panelists, all of whom are discussing her and her fate, but none of whom are explicitly paying attention to her. She is terrified, but despite her impending doom, she is ignored. Miike shows images of the Natsumi broadcast on crowded streets, but none of the passers by show her any attention even still. We hear her internal monologue: “I’m completely on my own.” (Wetmore) Natsumi dies in front of millions, yet completely isolated. The social critique is clear, as the broadcast and digital exposure could bring Natsumi neither help nor company in her final moments. Vallette substitutes the studio setting for a church, modified to accommodate a television crew. Instead of emphasizing the victim’s (here played by Ana Claudia Talancon) isolation in spite of her public display, Vallette puts the focus on the televised event itself, which consists of an Evangelical christian minister bellowing an exorcism at the supposedly haunted cell phone. The direction is not concerned with isolation, or any reaction to the ghastly events being broadcast, but rather the drama of the exorcism before Claudia Talancon is helplessly suffocated. (Wetmore) With the focus placed on the failure of the minister’s exorcism, and the performative falseness of church made television set, Vallette’s film demonstrates a culturally specific navigation of themes demonstrated through cinematic allegory, but the religious themes are not cohesive within the rest of the narrative. The rest of the movie retains Miike’s narrative of haunted voice messages maternal abuse, and so the incongruous deviation into religious critique weakens the film’s connection to its temporal allegorical themes while also identifying the interpretation as more specifically Western.

In regards to the trope of the monstrous child, Chakushin Ari’s depiction is influenced by many of the Japanese releases preceding it, but also by the transnational success of those films. Whereas Ringu and Dark Water pose their youthful spectres as not being inherently malicious,

but rather representations of a curse based around malicious acts, their corresponding American releases place much of the responsibility on the children themselves, depicting their naturally occurring evil as causation for the curse, rather than the curse being representative of the chaos resulting from the destruction of order. Ringu's Sadako, as a child, can be viewed as just as much a victim of the film's circumstances as those whose lives are taken by her curse, while Samara is depicted as an evil presence from the outset, with death and unrest following her amongst her family and their horses. (Wee 83) This serves as an example of the depiction of certain narrative elements can be changed with the cultural context of a film's release. Chakushin Ari's child ghost follows much more clearly in the steps of American films, as Mimiko is attention seeking and destructive, mirroring One Missed Call's Ellie, who is in turn manipulative, selfish, and self absorbed. This marks a turn away from the depiction of supernatural forces as being ambiguous and uninterpretable, towards Western notions of undead malice and inherent evil. Instead of the unstoppable cycle of violence beginning with a wrongful act breaking tradition, the intent to do harm was present to begin with, and the destruction of order becomes secondary to the harmful characteristics of the individual. (192) This deviation makes Miike's film remarkable in the way that its narrative is influenced by the transnational exposure of the tropes found within it, and while the critical reception may have been lukewarm in reference to its lack of originality, Chakushin Ari is a film that is representative of its brand of supernatural horror's collective strengths just as much as it is reflective of the genre's shortcomings.

Conclusion

Hollywood's trend of adapting and remaking Japan's national horror cinema serves as neither an example of appropriation nor cultural homogenization. These films instead act as an installment in a transnational narrative of film as history, business, and reflection of nationally specific and globalized culture. This is due to international communication in production practices leading to the films' brief but intense popularity, and the distinct cultural coding found within a shared generic identity. Films like *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and *One Missed Call* all possess an altered iteration of the allegorical value of their original, culturally coded sources because of their status as remakes, removed of the national context which provided the shared trauma and anxieties which would crystalize into a trend of similarly themed cinematic genre installments. Their status as remakes however, displays a vertical slice of the temporal relationship between Japan and America's studio filmmaking, and the ways in which audiences both respond to and facilitate this relationship. In a globalized environment, Japan's cinematic horror can easily become America's cinematic horror, with the cultural context both informing the films' presentation, and becoming irrelevant as the immediacy of the allegory of horror becomes secondary to a recognizable series of tropes within a recognizable genre. In regards to why these films were made in the way that they were, the installments in America's momentary fascination with Japanese supernatural genre filmmaking proves that culture is mutable and reinterpretable at the intersection of national and commercial identity.

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