

“Remaking Corporeality and Spatiality: U.S. Adaptations of Japanese Horror Films”

Eimi Ozawa

University of Tokyo, Japan

Introduction

Since the golden age of the genre in the late 1960s, American horror films have always existed as indices of the status of American society and culture. For one thing, this is because the horror genre has been dominated by the U.S in terms of both production and sales; as Marilyn Manson, in an interview in *Bowling for Columbine*, assumes that what the American media are doing is a “campaign of fear and consumption, and that’s what I think it’s all based on, the whole idea of ‘keep everyone afraid, and they’ll consume.’”¹ Fear is deeply incorporated into the essential part of what makes America. Hollywood horror films also have been a product of globalization, being aligned with cultural capitalism; for instance, they had been monopolizing the market of the genre in Japan until the Asian horror boom has occurred past the decade. The other thing is that, since the birth of the genre, horror films have mirrored what American people fear, which is entangled with the pleasure of watching; and what makes them feel fear heavily depends on the complicit relationship between biological human bodies in jeopardy and the cultural surroundings in which they live. In this case, what does the recent huge Hollywood phenomenon of remaking Japanese horror films mean? This paper aims to examine this question by focusing on the U.S. and Japanese versions of *The Ring* (2002)/ *Ringu* (1998). Through comparison of the two versions, I will explore the questions of how cultural translation was made here, and what the differences between two works might mean.

Before entering the analysis, let me briefly review the “making” of the genre in order to understand the context around the remake boom of Japanese horror films. Although Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), credited by many critics as the most influential work in the genre as it is today², is deeply psychological, representative later works of the genre, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) suggest that traditional American horror films have been distinctive in their shocking and visceral violence. This can be understood in terms of the way in which once British Gothic literature had been imported, it was fully developed and amalgamated as a form of visualization and spectacle in the United States, where various shows—from vaudevilles to sideshows—had long been enjoyed by people as a key form of cultural heritage. And in the mise-en-scenes of fear, those horror films are more or less involved with major phobias or traumas of the times: misogyny, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia could almost always be found in the plots of these horror films.

However, the mass production of horror films, too quickly consumed by the enthusiastic American audience, led to a situation in which the language of horror became steeped in clichés; highly self-referential works, which parodied elements such as the genre’s frameworks, styles, and formulas appeared soon. *Scream*, probably the most representative film of this kind, was released in 1996. Gore Verbinski, the director of the remake version of *the Ring*, says in his interview that “the horror genre has just been reinvented so many times that it’s hard to set a shot, and not feel like it’s a shot that’s in someone else’s movie when you’re making a horror film.”³

Through all these transitions, since around the turn of the millennium, Hollywood producers have come to turn their eye towards remakes of Japanese horror films as well as remakes of the classic Hollywood horror films, in order to bring a deadlock to an end. The unique aesthetics of Japanese horror films have been used in an attempt to frighten audiences through ambiguities and implications, effects and silences, rather than explicit bloody violence; they are also atmospheric and deeply psychological in a different way from Western horror films. In line with the characteristics of Japanese horror films, the fear of *The Ring* is derived from psychological aspects. *The Ring* and other remakes of Japanese horror films mostly convey fear through things being unseen rather than things being seen. The film rating of The Motion Picture Association of America confirms this: while both *the Ring* and *the Grudge* are ranked as PG-13, which is low for horror films, other Hollywood horror films such as the remake version of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) and *the Land of the Dead* (2005) are both “Rated R.”⁴ In the U.S. version of the Ring, there are almost no gory scenes. Among the three films that have been remade in Hollywood in the past five years, the first and the most successful work is *the Ring*.

Table 1
Production Cost and Box Office Sales

Title (Release Year)	Production Cost (estimated)	Box Office Sales (U.S. dollar)
The Ring (2002)	45 million	129 million
The Ring2 (2004)	unknown	75 million
The Grudge (2004)	10 million	110 million
Dark Water (2005)	30 million	25 million

Source: Internet Movie Database Inc. <<http://www.imdb.com/>>

The story of *Ringu* is based on Kouji Suzuki’s best seller novel (1991), and in Japan, it was first adapted into a TV drama series. The film’s great success followed, with one sequel and two prequels, as well as related goods in various media, such as guide books, sound tracks, computer games, and comic books. Its

widespread popularity is nothing but an epidemic phenomenon, and until Hollywood remade it, *Ringu* had held a kind of cult status for American moviegoers.⁵ The U.S. remake version also resulted in great success: while the budget of the film was under 45 million dollars, which is relatively low for a Hollywood production, the movie made about 129 million at the box office. The fact that in the first 24 hours of its release alone DVD sales reached more than 2 million in the U.S. also attracted public attention. This level of success also followed the making of the sequel in the U.S, which was directed by Hideo Nakata, the Japanese director of the original *Ringu*. *The Ring 2* (2004) ended up making 75 million; but with the failure of the latest remake, *Dark Water* (2005), the boom subsided, and seems now to have come to an end⁶. Then, the question here is what makes *the Ring* so successful.

Materiality of Bodies vs. Information Technology

The story line of the remake version is basically faithful to the original. The popularity of *Ringu/The Ring* owes in great part to the way the curse is laid. There is a rule that anyone who watches the cursed video will die within seven days unless that person duplicates it and makes somebody else watch it. If the viewers watch *Ringu/the Ring* at home, the curse comes from the very media through which they watch the movie; their gazes are forcibly united with the characters'. The way the curse spreads has been called "the Ring Virus" among the publicity and fans in Japan, and its epidemic popularity is as if it replays the curse in the movie. Information technologies allow Samara, the dead little girl, to gain the power to visit the victims to kill them: she can appear wherever there is a TV monitor. Eric White examines the original *Ringu* and assumes as follows:

The film thus associates ubiquitous technological mediation—that is, the cameras, television sets, videocassette recorders, telephones and other such hardware foregrounded throughout the film—with the intrusion of 'posthuman' otherness into contemporary cultural life. As the imagery at the very beginning of the film suggests—where a nocturnal scene of watery turbulence fades into the electronic static or noise of a television screen seen in extreme close-up—the unpredictable mutability of the ocean, a traditional metaphor for threatening alterity, can also be understood to figure a cultural upheaval brought about by the simulacral proliferation of information in a media-saturated social sphere.⁷

Indeed, in the story of *Ringu/The Ring*, the sense of fear is generated from two poles: fear of information technology and fear of nature. And as White puts it, in the original Japanese version, these two kinds of fears are represented as ultimately being united and amalgamated into one. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the U.S. version emphasizes the technological aspect more than the original, and that the boundaries of the two fears are more strictly demarcated in the U.S. version.

This can be depicted most clearly in the different representations of the bodily appearance of the central figure. *Ringu's* great appeal for audiences in Japan has been widely attributed to the extraordinary appearance of the dead girl, Sadako. The remake version emphasizes the appearance of the girl Samara

much less. While Sadako is a mature girl, around 18 years old, Samara is characterized as much younger, a little child. Both girls have long black hair, which is the key feature of “avenging spirit” in many traditional Japanese Gothic tales⁸. However, while Samara’s face is always shown, Sadako’s face never appears throughout the film, with her hair hiding her face. Only her eye is shown once through her hair in the scariest scene of the film. This different approach toward her face could be easily associated with the Western thoughts regarding subjects and identities, such that indicated for example by Emmanuel Lévinas’s account of faciality—a face as a limit or presentment of one’s identity, or as a “concrete intervention of the other.”⁹ At any rate, it can be said that the original version’s faceless dead, who return from the other world to attack the living, can be regarded as something unreasonable, an inexplicable existence beyond human beings, beyond representations. On the other hand, the ghost with a face in the remake version is firmly situated within reason, that is, within the realm of human apprehension, so that both film makers and audience can still hold the grip of recognition throughout their cinematic experience of gaze.

A significant difference between the original and the remake also emerges in the climax sequence of the film. It goes as follows: Sadako/Samara climbs up from inside the TV monitor, approaching the victim on all fours. As soon as she stands up in front of the victim, the camera quickly zooms in on her face. While Sadako’s face is, as noted previously, hidden except an eye showing through her hair, Samara’s face changes dramatically: she is obviously played by a different adult actor, suddenly mature enough, not a child anymore. Her face seems to be suddenly asexual, or both feminine and masculine at the same time: her face is transformed into that of a typical Hollywood monster. Although White claims that the original depicts the fear of “posthuman” intrusion, this sequence suggests that the remake tries to represent Samara as a “posthuman,” cybernetic monstrosity much more than Japanese original.

Besides her appearance, Sadako’s (and *Ringu*’s) popularity in Japan, and the origin of the terror owes much to her bodily movement, the grotesqueness in her way of crawling into the room. This style of movement has been strongly identified with ghosts in Japanese horror films made in the past decade. It originates in the Japanese experimental avant-garde dance performance style, “Ankoku Butoh” (“Dance of Darkness”), which was founded by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno around 1960s. Jean Viala introduces this style as follows:

Its discovery has been a shock for many Westerners—and in no way comparable to what Western dance revolutionaries (such as Merce Cunningham or Pina Bausch) are offering. [...] The movement began in the spirit of revolt. [...] They did not want to speak through the body, but instead to let the body speak for itself, to disclose truth, to reveal itself in all its authenticity and depth, rejecting the superficiality of everyday life. A great deal of emphasis was placed on transformations, the only way to sublimate the body whose meaning seemed lost in the banality of ordinary existence.¹⁰

Butoh aims to delve into the worlds of grotesqueness, darkness, and decay. There, bodies transmute into other creatures or materials, such as insects, ghosts, animals, smoke, or dust. As “Revolt of Flesh” is Butoh’s

manifesto, it is in part the attempt to recuperate the animalness of human beings. Its grotesque style of movement is, therefore, Butoh's attempt to sublimate the body. Many recent Japanese horror films recover and borrow Butoh's unique style of movement; ghosts are most commonly performed in these films by Butoh dancers or by actors who were trained by them.

Thus, the differences in the characterization of the dead girl between the original and the remake reveal the film makers' different emphases on the point of producing fear. In the original version, fear is created from the way that the repressed animalness of human beings or of a culture returns to revenge (media being the vehicle) and this animalness is represented through the body of Sadako itself. On the other hand, in the remake version, the factor that bears the central role in producing fear is above all the widespread technological aspects in a society or a culture. The fear of the remake version is concentrated on the threat that human beings today could be transformed into cyborgs. Samara is, so to speak, Donna Haraway's chimera: a hybrid monster of human and technology.¹¹ The scene added in the remake version, in which Samara's father commits suicide by electrocution, suggests precisely the fear of and obsession with technologies. The animalistic nature of human beings is strictly displaced and represented by such elements as horses, beautiful landscapes, maple trees and the ocean. The remake seems to be consistent in controlling bodies, as can be seen, for instance, in the scene in which Samara is hospitalized in the white room of the hygienic psychiatric ward; at her feet, there is an electric plug at the end of a piece of electrical cord, snaking in like a devil's snare. The bodies in the remake are civilized and domesticated; they are prohibited from speaking for themselves, their materiality is negated.

Tempo-spatiality in *Ringu /the Ring*

An oscillation between animalness and technology recurs at different levels in both films. The story is tightly bound up with spatiality: it moves forward through the tension between mobility and immobility. The motifs of horror films have always been closely related to spatiality: while ghosts have the power of omnipresence, the origin of a curse can always be traced to a specific location. Ghosts or monsters, even serial killers, retain ultimate mobility, free from any spatio-temporal limitations as long as they are within their field. At the same time, as the traditional Gothic tales suggest, a curse or a spirit is closely bound to particular places, such as a haunted mansion, or a place where the dead are buried.

In the case of *Ringu/the Ring*, as we have seen, the way the curse proliferates through the information technologies is rhizomatic. The idea of the "Ring" signifies not only the figure of the well in which the girl is buried, but also the way in which the curse circulates from the center of a unique place out into the world like a virus. Round images are intentionally inserted throughout the remake version of the film in order to stress this point. In order to break the curse, the characters are forced to search for the place where the girl's body is buried and find it within seven days; this plot makes the film a kind of a road movie, in which the

mobility of the spirit and the immobility of the dead body strive against each other. Here, again, the call from the dead girl to “search for my body” can be understood as a call from the forgotten materiality of the lived bodies. When the repressed materiality of human beings recurs from the unconscious of the well, the dead body of the girl becomes the very symbol of “memento mori” for the living.

However, “Ring” also signifies a trajectory of the character’s physical movement. Although they finally find the location of the well and the dead body of the girl, this still does not allow for a happy ending, since it turns out that the curse can not be broken unless they duplicate the cursed video tape. The story thus turns out to have the form of open ending. It is as if the story tells us that it is the time for human beings to be forced to pay the price for their material bodies which they have left behind; however, we no longer have any choice other than that of borrowing the power of technologies and exploiting others’ lives to prolong our own.

Conclusion

The success of the Hollywood remake of *Ringu* comes from the way in which it succeeded in making it totally adapted to an American cultural background: it is as if it excised the notions of physicality in the original and replaced them with the implantation of cybernetic devices. The locations in the story are so perfectly translated into specific places in the United States as to leave no traces of the original. Therefore, it is no coincidence that U.S fans tend to appreciate the Hollywood remake more than the original.^{1 2} *The Ring* is exceptional to the extent that its representations and the way of creating of fear do not rely on xenophobia or “orientalism” toward Easterners, a characteristic of other remakes (particularly *The Grudge*).

“The horror film’s job is to scare you, that is the main purpose, it’s creeping you out,” the horror film director, John Carpenter says in the interview, “that becomes an enjoyable experience,” unless it scares you too much.^{1 3} The differences between *Ringu/the Ring* suggest that the Hollywood’s remake still insistently stays within the realm of reason. Anything beyond it might be too uneasy for the audience for it to be an enjoyable experience. But the popularity of *the Ring* in the United States might suggest that what people really fear is their bodies themselves rather than dominance of technologies.

In many horror films, the ghosts are represented as the violators of boundaries between the living and the dead, or fugitives from the limitations of the material body. In the case of *Ringu/the Ring*, these boundaries are also demarcated between human beings and animal, or human beings and technologies. But the crucial point is that drawing such a boundary cannot be achieved without the physical figuration of materiality of bodies and spatiality. And therefore it seems to me that it awaits someone to break a spell, to search for what is buried underneath. Oscillating between those boundaries, the ghost in *Ringu/the Ring* strongly recalls and rehabilitates the materiality of bodies, places, and time to the audience. In doing so, these horror films

remind the audience of what they have repressed, revitalizing the audience's bodies by making them sweat and scream.

*This paper is based on work in progress, and is partially supported by JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) fellowship.

¹ *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002).

² For instance, one of the most popular series of guidebook, *The Rough Guide to Horror Movie* introduces *Psycho* as "all modern horror starts here. Alfred Hitchcock's landmark psychological thriller is undoubtedly the boldest, most innovative and most influential horror film all the time" (133), and Carole J. Clover regards *Psycho* as "the immediate ancestor of the slasher film" in "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations*, No.20 (Autumn, 1987), 187-228.

³ Cindy White, "Mulholland Drive's Naomi Watts follows director Gore Verbinski into *The Ring*." *Sci Fi. com*. 28 August 2006 <<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue287/interview2.html>>.

⁴ The rating "R" suggests that "strong language, violence, nudity, drug abuse, other elements, or a combination of the above." For further information, see "What Do the Ratings Mean?" Motion Picture Association. 28 August 2006 <<http://www.mpa.org/FilmRatings.asp>>.

⁵ See Matt Hill's "Ringing the Changes: Cult Distinctions and Cultural Differences in US Fan's Readings of Japanese Horror Cinema." *Japanese Horror Cinema*. Ed. Jay McRoy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. 161-74.

⁶ Details of each title are as follows: *The Ring 2* (Hideo Nakata, 2004); *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004) is the remake of *Ju-on* (Takashi Shimizu, 2003); *The Dark Water* (Walter Salles, 2005) is the remake of *Honogurai Mizu no Soko Kara* (Hideo Nakata, 2002), which is based on the novel by Koji Suzuki, who is the author of *Ringu*.

⁷ Eric White, "Case Study: Nakata Hideo's *Ringu* and *Ringu2*." *Japanese Horror Cinema*. Ed. Jay McRoy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. 41.

⁸ The female avenging spirit who returns to revenge is the convention of the traditional Japanese ghost stories ("Kwaidan") since the Heian period (around 8th centuries). On the contrary, male figures much less appear as the ghosts as such. Such an asymmetry is of course deeply involved with the issue of gender and sexuality.

⁹ David Ross Fryer, *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan*. New York: Other P, 2004, 40.

¹⁰ Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine, *Butoh: Shades of Darkness*. Tokyo: Shufunotomo, 1998, 16-7.

¹¹ See Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, 149-81.

¹² See Hill; the audience's reaction can also be found in these websites: "The Internet Movie Database: *The Ring*" 28 August 2006 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0298130/>>; "The Ring Forum" 28 August 2006 <<http://www.ringworldforum.com/>>.

¹³ John Carpenter, Interview. *American Nightmare* (Adam Simon, 2000).