Exporting J-horror: Will its Cultural Success Abroad be its Demise?

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Imagine you are staying alone in a countryside guesthouse. In your room you find an old videotape. You decide to watch it. Many eerie images flicker on the screen, and a mysterious girl appears with long black hair covering her face. Then suddenly your phone rings and you answer it. A menacing voice on the other end says, "You have seven days to live". Would that scare you? It turns out this basic premise was hugely successful in scaring large audiences when the Japanese film, *Ringu,* was released in Asia and subsequently remade for English-speaking audiences in the West.

In light of the growing trend of remaking Japanese horror films (also known as J-horror) for Western, English-speaking audiences, this essay will explore famous examples of Hollywood reboots of Japanese horror films in order to discuss two related issues: 1. To what extent is the appeal of J-horror cross-cultural? 2. What problems can arise when J-horror is given an international audience?

To answer these questions, two well-known examples of Japanese horror films made in the late 1990s and early 2000s will be analysed: *Ringu*, titled *The Ring* for its foreign release, and *Ju-On: The Grudge.* These examples are used because, having secured Hollywood funding, they were both remade for English-speaking audiences. *Ringu* is also selected because it is one of the best known contemporary Japanese horror films internationally. Its popularity with foreign audiences, therefore, is useful for understanding to what extent this genre of horror is cross-cultural. Likewise, *Ju-On: The Grudge* is selected to explore the features of cross-cultural horror because it is a successful example of a Japanese horror movie which retained its Japanese setting when remade for a foreign audience. By comparing cultural aspects of the original Japanese versions with their remakes, this essay seeks to explain what makes J-horror popular internationally, and also consider whether the success of this genre is likely to continue in the future.

The Global Rise of J-horror

The success of the J-horror genre abroad is evident. The genre's growing popularity is demonstrated by a number of Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror movies. These remakes have attracted great commercial success. For example, *The Ring*, the American remake of *Ringu,* for which Dream Works bought the rights for $1 million USD*,* grossed nearly $130 million USD (Friend, 2003). This popularity abroad suggests that unique elements of Japanese horror appeal to Western audiences.

In the following sections, a comparison between the original and remade J-horror films will be discussed in order to ascertain whether the success of this genre relies entirely on the Japanese cultural aspects of the story, or whether other factors contribute to its success abroad.

Discussion of *Ringu* and *The Ring*

Hideo Nakata's 1998 horror film, *Ringu,* is an adaptation of a novel by Koji Suzuki. It has become a cult horror film and is one of a few Japanese horror films that is widely known among foreign audiences. McRoy (2008) claims it is the text most frequently credited with creating an international interest in Japanese and other East Asian horror films. It was remade for a Western audience as *The Ring* in 2002 by American director Gore Verbinski. The basic storyline is that a reporter investigates the mystery behind a cursed videotape. The curse is such that anyone who watches the videotape dies seven days later. *Ringu* is a classic example of a *shinrei-mono eiga*, or ghost film, which features what the Japanese call an *onryou*, or avenging spirit. The original is partially based on an 18th-century Japanese ghost story *Bancho Sarayashiki* (Heritage, 2010), the popularity of which reflects the Japanese love for *kaiki*, which Eeerolainen (2017) defines as a "suspicious and strange thing or being", an "uncanny and eerie shape and form" or "grotesque" (p. 37).

Although *Ringu* is based on the traditional Japanese understandings of ghosts, spirits and *kaiki*, this did not prevent the story being exported to an American setting and being retold with English-speaking actors. Whereas *Ringu* has actors likely to be unfamiliar to Western audiences, the American remake uses internationally well-known stars such as Naomi Watts and Brian Cox. The choice of actors may have boosted the appeal of the reboot among audiences and encouraged larger audiences to experience a horror movie that shares many elements with its original. The key similarities are in the plot line involving a cursed videotape, the threat of death within a week of watching it, and the eventual plot reveal of a young girl who has died in a well.

Comparing the two films, it is possible, however, to note some key differences. The movie producer who brought *Ringu* to the US explains that although the reboot kept the "creepiest" aspects of the original, they "stripped out a lot of the film's paranormal texture; its moody, quintessentially Japanese rainfall; and its periodic references to 'brine and goblins'" (Friend, 2003, para. 16).

It is also clear that the remake version relies more on dramatic devices common to Hollywood to satisfy audience expectations. One example is seen towards the end of the movie when the mysterious well from the video footage is discovered. The Japanese original has the main actor climbing down the well using a ladder. The scene in the reboot involves more action, with the actress falling down into it.

Whereas Western horror often focuses on blood or violence to convey horror, for example, the lift sequence in *The Shining*, or in the slasher/torture movie genre, *Ringu* is a classic example of the different ways in which Japanese horror scares its audience. Arguably one of the distinctive features of the Japanese original is its psychological element. For a large part of the movie, the motivation of the supernatural force is unknown. Although supernatural forces are present in many Western horror films, notably Tobe Hooper's 1982 classic, *Poltergeist*, the

script writers usually include characters to help guide the audience's understanding of the spirit behaviour, for example, Dr Martha Lesh and medium Tangina Barrons in *Poltergeist*. In J-horror, the audience is usually given less narrative guidance. The resulting sense of confusion may add to the terror because people tend to be less frightened by events that they can understand. Alternatively, the inability of an audience to follow the storyline may weaken the impact of the horror. In this regard, Hann (2009) makes a revealing point when comparing the two versions: "Because *Ringu* seems almost unanchored in reality, I find it harder to be scared by it" (para. 4). This reaction illustrates how the differences between Japanese horror and Western tastes for horror can be incompatible. It also helps to explain why remakes often change the way the story is told in order to make it culturally acceptable to foreign audiences.

Finally, another notable difference is the Hollywood studios' greater use of "eye-popping special effects" (Friend, 2003, para. 16). Although these different features may suggest that Western audiences are less sophisticated than Japanese viewers, requiring simpler plot lines and more special effects to maintain their attention, there are several critics (e.g. Hann, 2009) who argue that the US version is an improvement upon the original (cf Heritage, 2010). Whichever version is preferred, the fact remains: the basic storyline is faithful to the original, and its retelling, even though in a culturally adapted form, was greatly appealing to Western audiences.

Discussion of *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *The Grudge*

Ju-On: The Grudge was written and directed by Takashi Shimizu in 2002. It was preceded by two other related direct-to-video instalments of the franchise. Interestingly, in 2004 it was remade as *The Grudge* for a Western audience by the same director. While this film was followed by a sequel, a second sequel, and then a further instalment to the franchise in 2020, this essay focuses on the relationship between the 2002 Japanese original and the 2004 American reboot versions only.

Although the non-linear narrative of the Japanese original is difficult to summarise, the basic storyline is that a social worker, Rika, starts work at a house where an elderly woman, Sachie, lives. Sachie's family had experienced extreme domestic violence at the hands of the man of the household. Rika slowly discovers the dark history of the family, including the disappearance of a boy, following a confrontation with the ghost of Kayako, the housewife in the family, who was murdered by her husband. Like *Ringu*, therefore, this story is about a cursed spirit, but there are deeper messages connected to the ghost plot.

For example, by focusing on brutality in the home, the film gives attention to the problem of domestic violence in Japan. One other major theme it highlights is the decline of Japanese society, in particular, the breakdown of community and the family. This is seen most clearly in the condition of the house Rika visits. It is shockingly dirty, which is highly unusual for a famously clean country. This condition symbolises neglect and isolation, not just from family, but also from the wider community. This reflects the director's intention to show the inner worries of the Japanese people, whose traditional culture is tightly knit and focused on community.

Although a horror film, then, the Japanese original also functions as a social commentary. This raises an interesting question: with its many cultural messages specific to Japan, why was the film successful internationally? McRoy (2008) argues that its success abroad may be because of the "trans-cultural hybridity" (p. 97) of the spirits in *Ju-on: The Grudge*:

> Not quite ghosts in the strictest sense of the *onryou* or *kaidan* tradition, but not quite conventional biological monsters either, this other-worldly, mother-centered family merges a dangerous corporeality (they can physically attack and manipulate their victim's bodies), with an eerie spectral quality without adhering absolutely to one convention or the other. (p. 97)

This argument suggests that certain types of evil, both physical and spiritual, are cross-cultural. Another way of looking at the issue is to say that the surrounding themes of isolation and societal decay are not unique to Japan – people from the West experience similar societal problems and can relate to them just as easily. While both points may be valid, the American reboot is, in fact, a very different type of film to the original. It is still set in Tokyo, however, Western actors, such as Sarah Michelle Gellar, are used in the Japanese setting. By merging cultures, the directorial attempt to make social commentary specific to Japan's culture are weakened.

On this point, Xu (2004) suggests that the use of an American social worker living in Japan, as seen in *The Grudge*, offers an opportunity to give viewers an "exploration of cultural tensions for Westerners in Tokyo, similar to that revealed in *Lost in Translation*" (p. 9) (Sophia Coppola, 2003). The film's failure to attempt this exploration is evidence, Xu (2004) believes, of the way in which the commercial interests in remaking successful Japanese horror movies takes full priority.

Another way in which the remake may lose its original appeal is with the change in narrative structure. Although the remake initially follows the plot of the original, the complex non-linear narrative is abandoned to create space for a standard narrative storyline. While this may make the audience's comprehension of the film easier, it also denies them a uniquely Japanese cinematic experience. The result, arguably, is blander and less terrifying.

Financing J-Horror remakes: The bottom line

The phenomenon of Japanese cinema being given a Hollywood makeover goes back many decades. McRoy (2008) explains that *The Seven Samurai* (1951) and *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) were "famously remade" (p. 92) by Hollywood as *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) and Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). These examples of Western remakes of Japanese originals were successful because they added their own distinctive interpretations. Substantial adaptation, therefore, often appears necessary if a remake is to survive, and succeed, abroad. However, this often comes at the expense of the aspects unique to Japanese culture. Why might this be so?

A number of possible reasons present themselves. The most obvious is the financial incentives, 'the bottom line', of the global movie industry. Hollywood remakes can often feel formulaic by comparison because the financial interest in such movies, and the potential losses from box-office failure, are far greater. J-horror does not have the same commercial pressures and this may explain why the genre feels 'different' or 'unique' when compared to the Western portrayal of horror.

Despite these differences, J-horror remakes in a more commercial setting may be popular with Western audiences because, in many ways, it remains a foreign movie. The storylines still seem original because they are based on Japanese mythology, ancient beliefs or traditional ghost tales. The narrative elements are therefore exotic enough to be interesting or frightening, but retold in a way that simplifies (or removes) the more obscure cultural elements in order to help the audience connect to the movie. It may not be helpful, therefore, to compare the original version to the remake. Although the basic storyline is often the same, the intended audience is different.

In her book on American remakes of Japanese supernatural horror films, Valerie Wee (2014) makes a highly pertinent point. Wee views it as inappropriate to say that an original is better than any reboot. She maintains that it is more useful to compare the two formats in order to more clearly understand different elements of culture. She further argues that comparisons reveal more about what is important commercially and creatively to different film makers. This raises a logical question: if a reboot simply copies an original word for word, scene for scene, *why was the remake needed in the first place?*

Conclusion: The "death" of J-horror?

This essay has highlighted why the cultural adaptation of J-horror for foreign audiences is often a 'necessary evil'. It has also attempted to discuss some positive and negative outcomes when J-horror is given a reboot. In light of the success of J-horror abroad, English speaking audiences are now much more familiar with this genre, which potentially poses some risks. As McRoy (2008) puts it: "When many of these narratives recycle the same tropes that viewers have seen time and time again, they risk alienating the very segment of their audience that once found the genre a refreshing alternative to Western horror film traditions" (pp. 172-173).

Overfamiliarity may explain why some (e.g. Rucka, 2005) have argued J-horror is dead. Against this view, this essay strikes a more optimistic note about the genre's future. The greater its familiarity among foreign audiences, the better the prospects of J-horror will be. Whereas in the past there was a significant risk that, without any narrative guidance for English-speaking audiences, the essence of J-horror might be 'lost in translation', it appears more likely now that commercial risks with the J-horror format could be taken in future, as audiences seek out increasingly authentic ways to be frightened.

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