

The Intersection of Feminine Representation and Sound Design in
Contemporary Japanese Horror Films

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Contemporary Japanese horror films are some of the most influential foreign films in recent history. There have been countless remakes, rewrites, and adaptations of these films to make them more suitable for American audiences, and their commercial success means that the themes presented in them bled their way into worldwide cinema. However, in this paper I plan to explore the themes present in their original Japanese releases. The exploration of the feminine form in these films is interesting as it relates to female empowerment and objectification. Feminine monsters are common in traditional Japanese horror; not only in films but also myths and cultural figures. Many of the antagonists in the films discussed in this paper fall into the category of the *onryō*, literally translated as ‘vengeful spirit,’ but it has a cultural connotation related to vengeful female spirits that go after the men who have brutalized them. Jon Wilks writes, “Traditionally, a well-groomed onry will have lengthy black hair, unusually round eyes (wildly staring, preferably) and a snow-white gown. The ensemble is nothing short of virginal, and it’s surely no coincidence that it shares a lot with the traditional notion of Japanese beauty.” which describes how these spirits simultaneously represent the ideal feminine form and the destruction of that form. All three of the films I have selected to discuss in this paper - *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Takashi 2002), *Chakushin Ari (One Missed Call)* (Miike 2003), and *Ringu* (Nakata 1998) - have *onryō* as the antagonist, with varying degrees of dedication to the traditional interpretation of the spirits and their motivation. In this essay I plan to explore how these themes related to feminine representation are simultaneously visible in the sound design of these films.

All three of these films present their antagonists as victims, but none so blatantly as *Ju-On: The Grudge*. This film opens with a distorted montage of a battered woman, and a man with bloody hands. This launches the audience into the vignette style timeline, many stories told

over the film that all take place in the same house the initial murders take place in. These murders were carried out by the main villain Takeo Saeki. He kills his wife Kayako, the family cat, Mar, and his son, Toshio. He commits this crime in a fit of rage, because he learns that his wife has been harboring feelings for another man. After this heinous act is committed, the house is cursed as is everyone that enters it. The rest of the film depicts a family all succumbing to the curse, the main protagonist Rika attempting to move on but ultimately also losing the battle, as well as the death of multiple detectives and even a group of teenage girls. All of these crimes only compound the curse, resulting in the ghosts taking over the house and making it their own. The film ending is left ambiguous, with Rika dead but seeming to come back to life in the same way Kayako does. This ending implies the perseverance of these cycles, and the continuation of the suffering present in the film.

Ringu's antagonist, Sadako, is similarly victimized, but this is not revealed until later in the film. Rather than document the multiple horrors within one place, *Ringu* follows a cursed tape that will kill anyone who views it after seven days. Reiko Asakawa, the film's protagonist, is investigating the existence of this cursed tape after her niece's death at the hands of it. Once she finds it and watches it, she realizes the danger she is in and seeks help from her ex-husband, Ryuji Takayama, in an effort to break the curse. She creates a copy of the tape for him to view while they both study it. At one point, Reiko's son Yoichi views the tape under the instruction of her niece's ghost. Throughout their investigation - which includes researching the life of a psychic woman who died because of the tape - they come to learn of the existence of Sadako, who was the daughter of the psychic. At one time she used her abilities to kill someone writing slanderous articles about her mother, and then several years later she was bludgeoned and left to die at the bottom of a well by her father. This tragic backstory of Sadako influences Reiko and

Ryuji to attempt to put her vengeful soul to rest. After tracking down the well, they take turns trying to locate Sadako's body. Reiko finds the body, and they put her to rest. However, Ryuji is still killed by Sadako the next morning as he was originally meant to. Reiko then realizes that what broke the curse on her was copying the tape for someone else to view. This film also ends ambiguously, with Reiko creating another copy in an attempt to save Yoichi from the curse and driving to her father's house.

The most recent film of them all, *Chakushin Ari* is also the one that diverts the furthest from this common thread of a victimized villain. Mimiko's backstory is also revealed later in the film, as it is discovered over the course of the plot. However, unlike the typical *onryō* Mimiko was never the true victim. The protagonist, Yumi, and the detective helping her, Yamashita, originally think she was killed by her mother due to a case of Munchausen by proxy. She died as a young girl from an asthma attack, and it is revealed that everytime she had an attack, her sister Nanako would also be injured. Because of this, she haunts the world by killing people through a curse related to their cell phones. Each new victim receives a missed call from themselves, dated in the future, that leaves a voicemail recording of their own death. When the date from the voicemail comes, they will live out this gruesome death that was predicted, and be found with a red jawbreaker in their mouth. Eventually, Yamashita locates Nanako at an orphanage and they learn that Mimiko was the perpetrator of violence in the home. She would cut Nanako and then give her a candy if she stayed quiet. When she had an asthma attack directly after cutting Nanako, her mother realized the truth and took Nanako to the hospital whilst leaving Mimiko for dead. In this backstory, the concept of the vengeful spirit is subverted, as Mimiko was always violent even just for the sake of it. However, this film is similar to the others in its ending. It is ambiguous as well, with Yumi possessed by Mimiko and Yamashita under her care in a hospital.

The presentation of the monstrous feminine in film is not a new one, but the specific contortion of bodies in Japanese horror is unique. There is a dichotomy in how the women are presented, simultaneously being objectified and reduced to body parts, while being empowered by their actions and in the way the film is shot. Katelyn Terry, in her journal “Contorted Bodies: Women’s Representation in Japanese Horror Films,” states the following: “The contorted women in these films become re-empowered as they display their bodies as a flexible and limitless spectacle.” (2) The unique and grotesque movements attributed to these women shows their ability to bend what is thought of as capable for a human being, which gives a sense of empowerment. However, during the scenes where this contortion is seen, the shots of the camera are often meant to place her as an object, a spectacle, something for viewing. This appeal to and subsequent subversion of the male gaze shows a general fear of femininity and how it is expressed. A woman with agency over her limitless body is a threat. These antagonists are often followed by intense sound effects that work to blur the lines between human and nonhuman even further. Terry goes on to compare this form of representation to the traditional feminine figure in other horror genres by saying, “Female contortion in Japanese horror films interestingly places itself in functional opposition to other horror subgenres, such as the slasher, splatter, or exploitation horror, where the female body is subsequently destroyed by disempowering mutilation.” (9) However, this opposition does not mean that Japanese horror does not feed into patriarchal ideals, and even more specifically patriarchal fears surrounding the vengeful woman. Valerie Wee, an author well versed in Japanese culture and with many pieces dedicated to contemporary Japanese horror films, states, “Far from endorsing or celebrating the apparent advances that Japanese women were experiencing in the period, contemporary Japanese films largely offered conservative critiques of how female empowerment and independence were

dangerous and destructive to both tradition and patriarchy.” (1 Wee 7) This critique of the genre as a reflection of patriarchal ideals is not unique, as many scholars have discussed the implications that the trope of a vengeful, contorted, feminine monster has on the genre as a whole. Ryan Taylor discusses this in his article, “Demon(ized) women: Female punishment in the ‘pink film’ and J-Horror.” First he talks about how the spirits are most often created through extreme violence and states, “Here, the male frequently subjects the female to a horrific ordeal, which, when he fails to reaffirm his dominance, results in her brutal murder.” (10) Even more specifically, he talks about the main antagonists from *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *Ringu*. In this passage he discusses how matriarchal figures are made to be evil when they fail at their traditional duties, and how the patriarch's failure leads to this breakdown of the matriarch as well:

“The moribund matriarch is also evident within the character of Kayako who, much like Ringu’s Sadako, seeks retribution for her victimization and brutalization at the hands of the patriarch, the implication being that traditionalistic patriarchy has allowed authoritative masculinity to assert its dominance, which, in turn, has led to the brutalization and destruction of traditional female identity.” (13-14)

This simultaneous empowerment and destruction of the feminine form is only further pushed by the extreme contortion of the female body. There is a juxtaposition in the way these forms are shown on screen, and the way that they relate to not only the world around them, but also the spectator viewing the film. Katelyn Terry considers this dichotomy when she states, “feminist film theory reveals that the fetishized spectacle of a female contortionist draws both horror and pleasure from the contorted female body depicted as a flexible and limitless spectacle.” (3) The pleasure traditionally derived from the female form in these positions, as well as the traditional

beauty that is actively subverted by the visual representation of these characters, is exactly what elicits the horror response in viewers. These subversions of expectations are also enhanced by the use of sound in these films.

Sound is one of the most important tools used in a film to explore meaning outside the visuals presented. Japanese horror uses an important technique when creating soundscapes, and that is attributing specific sounds to the presence of the monster. This technique means that specific sounds can be used to elicit reactions from the audience, without there being any visual cues that there is danger. This technique can be seen used as early as the first canonical horror films, like *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931). Seung Min Hong talks about this technique - the utilization of contrapuntal sound - in these films specifically and states, “Nevertheless, making voices, howls, and other noises clearly audible in some of the critical moments without showing the sound sources on the screen was a deliberate method to arouse the uneasy feeling of the presence and activity of the monstrous in these films.” (3) Since sound was added to film, it has been used in this way to generate a feeling of general unease. Disembodied voices and sounds spectators know to be threatening were most often used in these scenarios, but Japanese horror takes it a step further by creating sound cues specific to the monsters. Some of them were non-human sounds, and some were typically innocuous sounds turned sinister. While each individual film has its own unique sounds, there is an element present in almost all films that feature the *onryō* as an antagonist. “In order to make her frightful but invisible presence known as much to the audience as it is, palpably, to the fictional victims, the film-makers give her an aural ‘calling card’; invariably, she is introduced with an extended sonority whose volume level rises and falls and whose basic timbre is a sibilant scraping.” James Wierzbicki describes in his paper “Lost in translation? ‘Ghost music’ in recent Japanese Kaidan films and their Hollywood

remakes.” (4). This aural cue along with the specific sounds assigned to these characters (gurgling in *Ju-On*, the phone call in *Chakushin Ari*, and the static in *Ringu*) creates an automatic feeling of unease without needing to visually reveal anything to the audience. This is building upon the already established use of contrapuntal sound, by not only using the disconnect of audio and video to create a sense of unease, but also creating a signal that the audience will remember without even realizing it. Seung Min Hong says this about early monster movies, “Rather than seeing non-synchronized sound or off-screen sound without prior visual establishment as something to be avoided, these films with monstrous entities took advantage of the discomfort and used it.” (4) Japanese horror does the same, leaning into audio cues and information that does not line up with the visuals on screen in order to unsettle the viewer. Importantly, the uncanniness and contortion of the bodies on screen only amplifies this feeling of unease.

In this paper I want to explore how these two tropes of contemporary Japanese horror - the monstrous feminine, and the inventive use of contrapuntal sound - intersect and intertwine. How does the use of off-screen sound further our disconnection from the characters on screen? How does this contribute to the further othering and objectification of the female form? Does sound design influence the way the female form is presented? The answer can be found through analysis. These three films will prove that in contemporary Japanese horror, the female form is often contorted in a way that simultaneously objectifies and empowers the monstrous feminine character, and the unique use of sound in these films aid in conveying the significant “otherness” of these women.

Ju-On: The Grudge

Female representation and simultaneous dehumanization is no stranger to *Ju-On: The Grudge*. Kayako, this film’s *onryō*, is shown in situations where she is simultaneously powerful

and objectified. Over and over her power comes from this objectification, the horrifying nature of her body deconstructing the expectations of how the female form is presented to the male gaze. The close up shots on her body are often used to objectify women in a sexual sense, whereas here it is done for the purpose of shock and horror. The first glimpses spectators get of Kayako are shots that isolate her body parts, like the flash of her feet whilst Kazumi climbs the stairs, or just her face under the covers while Rika is cowering in bed. Even in the first scene that the audience sees her full body, she is introduced from behind a door with her elbows bent unnaturally, and her face completely covering her hair. The shots used to introduce these features are quick shots from Yuji, the detective's, perspective. First we see just her arm that is out from behind the door. Cutting back to Yuji, his perspective remains the most important element of the scene. When it cuts back to Kayako, she pulls her head in front of her arm, revealing just her long black hair that obscures her face. She crawls across the floor in an unnerving and decidedly non-human manner, again shown from Yuji's point of view and in segmented parts. Katelyn Terry discusses this moment in particular, stating, "The fragmentation of Kayako's form both coincides with and subverts Mulvey's concept of fetishism of the female body via fragmentation, a cinematic technique for capturing an object, particularly the female body, in a series of close-ups edited together to build anticipation to an object of desire." (8) This subversion of the male gaze while simultaneously operating within the technical tropes of it creates a sense of unease and horror. Undermining these patriarchal systems seems like it would be empowering to the feminine figure presented, but instead it is only replaced by a different form of the male gaze; the punishing one. Rather than present the female form as a sex object, it is instead an object subjected to horrible violence.

This concept is shown in the very first seconds of the film. The film opens with a montage of close ups, depicting what the audience later learns is Kayako and her son's savage death at the hands of her husband, Takeo. Her murder is the catalyst for all of the subsequent violence in the film, this act of patriarchal violence the start of the curse on the house. This montage does include close ups of Takeo, but it also includes wider shots that allow for an understanding of him as a human being. Kayako is not given the same consideration. All the shots of her dead body are in extreme close up, barely even showing both of her eyes at the same time. Reducing her dead body to these individual parts, especially her bloodied face and dead eyes, objectifies her through this violence. Valerie Wee ponders this moment in the following: "*Ju-On's* cycle of supernatural violence begins with (what we later learn is) Kayako's brutal murder; the film's ambiguous monstrous-feminine, she is another female who is both victim and (possible) villain." (1 Wee 11) As she is shown in this opening sequence as a undeniable victim, her development into a vengeful spirit may be taken by some to be a powerful representation of female power and strength. However, even when she is invoking her supposed power, the camera reduces her into the spectacle of the female form. Her uncanny movements and contortions of her body play within the idea of a flexible and limitless female form, but her agency over that power makes her a villain and a terrifying creature. The dichotomy between victim and villain here is well juxtaposed by the technical similarities in which Kayako is presented. While as a vengeful spirit she is eventually awarded shots of her full body and face, they are distorted and nonhuman. Her dead body is as horrifying as it is pitiful, but her spirit induces terror in anyone who sees it: characters and audience members alike.

One last scene that is important to discuss when it comes to representing the feminine form in *Ju-On* is Rika's final death scene. Kayako crawls down the stairs towards her, yet again

disjointed and contorted in a distinctly nonhuman way. Rika is frozen in fear, simply watching as Kayako crawls down the stairs, covered in blood. Her body is shown in its entirety in this scene, however within the shots of her full body there is dissection. As she crawls down the stairs, her head and her body seem separate as the camera films from behind the railing, effectively cutting Kayako in half visually. Her neck creaks and twists unnaturally, moving her head below this cut off faster than it would if she wasn't contorting her body. Even when the main part of the banister is above her, the slots in the railing further carve her body into pieces, and her crawling seems to flow through these visual spaces simultaneously too fast and too slow. This confusion and distortion allows for her to be objectified and dehumanized. Wee, in her book on Japanese horror and their subsequent American remakes, brings up this analysis of the scene, "...Kayako's appearance, as a broken, deformed creature raising her hands in supplication as she crawls down the stairs toward a horrified Rika, portrays Kayako as a damaged and brutalized victim." (2 Wee 131) Kayako's ambiguity as a villain is seen no better than in this final scene, as her menacing crawl down the stairs is simply followed by a series of hallucinations from Rika. Rika views herself as Kayako, witnessing her fate to haunt others like her. When the hallucinations end, she is alone. After the horrifying slow crawl, Kayako simply vanishes, replaced quickly by the spirit of her violent husband. It is Takeo who commits the final truly violent act in the film, brutalizing Rika in the same way he killed Kayako. This cycle of violence is often doled out onto women who do not fit the patriarchal norm or expectation; Rika is a childless and single adult woman, and Kayako was emotionally involved with another man during her marriage. This film routinely punishes these women for not living up to patriarchal standards, and then reduces them to their bodies in a final act of patriarchal violence.

Sound is a tool used in this film to create unease and doubt. There many ways this can be done in a film, but one of the most effective ways is by using sounds that juxtapose the visuals on screen, or by over enhancing sounds that would normally be quiet. One scene that uses these techniques is the scene in which Rika is looking in the mirror and sees herself as Kayako. The first use of an over amplified sound is the *whoosh* sound effect that can be heard as Rika passes the mirror whilst her reflection in it appears as Kayako. This sound effect works in two important ways: to draw the audience's eye to the small detail in the mirror, and to build upon the feeling of unease that the image itself presents. When Rika approaches the mirror and begins to have visions of other victim's hands over their faces, the score accompanying it feels disjointed. The music is a slowed down lullaby, but the transitions between the montage are layered with a woman's scream and other unidentifiable sounds. Rika's visions culminate when she brings her hands to cover her own face, and sees that she has transformed into Kayako in the mirror. The cuts between these moments (from an extreme close up of Rika's eyes behind her fingers, to the reflection of her as Kayako in the mirror, to a more wide shot of Rika backing away horrified) are all connected to sounds in the score. Each jump cut has a musical cue, which enhances how the spectator reacts to what is being presented on screen. However, the ending of the sequence is accompanied by sounds that don't exactly fit the visuals on screen. As Kayako rips through Rika's shirt, and her hand comes up between Rika's own hands and face, the sound effects feel otherworldly. The tearing of the shirt is far too loud, with Rika's screams at the same volume. This use of sound, one with what feels like no favor towards realism but rather with a motivation to enhance the way an audience is disturbed by what is presented. Valerie Wee talks about how this "commitment to chaos and to destabilizing any sense of existing order or hierarchy extends beyond the narrative and stylistic to include the thematic as well." (2 Wee 134) This

“commitment to chaos” can also be seen in the sound design, and how sounds are used to increase the feeling of terror that the audience will experience when viewing this film. Another scene that is an important example of this chaotic element of the film is the opening sequence. The use of montage combined with a few moments of diegetic sound creates a sense of fading in and out of reality. Again, all of the sounds, including the score, sound effects including a cat meowing and a razor blade opening, and Takeo’s breathing, are placed on an even playing field in terms of volume. All of the actual violence happens within the soundtrack, only heard off screen whilst the shot is focused on Toshio who is playing innocently. All of these juxtapositions while simultaneously creating a non-hierarchical soundtrack influence the spectator’s interpretation of events, setting them on edge as what they see may not always line up with what’s important in the film.

Ju-On: The Grudge also uses contrapuntal sound in an interesting way, not only utilizing it to reveal the ‘monster’s presence, but also assigning a sound to that monster. Kayako’s gurgling is one of the most iconic and enduring pieces of the film, having made its way into other aspects of pop culture as something scary. Anyone making that low, gurgling sound will have anyone familiar with Kayako on edge. This is largely in part to its use when Kayako is off screen. Nearly every time Kayako is shown on screen, she is first heard off screen by the character that the camera is focused on. Sometimes, the camera is simply focused on where Kayako is hidden, behind a door or wall. These disembodied sounds set the audience into a state of unease. Robert Spadoni discusses how this use of sound can be dated back to *Frankenstein* (1931): “Other sounds in the 1931 film include those of the monster’s footsteps as he approaches Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive) and Dr. Waldman (Edward Van Sloan) from the other side of a closed door. These quiet sounds alert viewers to the approach of a figure they have seen only

under a sheet and bandages until now.” (101) What sets *Ju-On* apart in its use on contrapuntal sound is that the sound itself is unnatural, able to be formed by a human but not often used by general members of society. This sound that feels not quite human increases the audience’s discomfort in what it represents. One scene that exemplifies this disconnection between sound and body is the first scene in which Kayako is given any sort of full form, and the first time we hear the iconic gurgling sound. This comes at the beginning of the film, during the first vignette that features Rika, who is taking care of an elderly woman named Sachie. Sachie is growing weak, and is clearly terrified of something. When Rika rushes to her aid, Sachie stares up at the ceiling in horror. All of these shots are done in close up, not allowing the audience even the slightest glimpse of what there is to be afraid of. The first piece of information that the audience is given is a sound, the almost nonhuman gurgling is heard off screen, while the camera focuses on Rika’s fear and reaction to the sound. Only after a viewer is set on edge by this contrapuntal sound is Kayako revealed, and she is not yet recognizable as a human spirit. Instead she is a shadowy black figure, the only discernible thing about her is her long black hair. While at this moment the origin of the sound is technically on screen, the audience still can hardly make sense of where it is coming from as this figure does not appear human enough to make the almost human sound. Then the camera cuts back into the close up of Rika’s reaction, as she attempts to make sense of what she is seeing. Only after all of this are spectators greeted with a small piece of humanity in the monster, with an extreme close up of Kayako’s distinctly human eyes. Her skin is black and her eyes are bloodshot and bulging, but it is undeniable that at least at one time she was human.

This disconnected use of sound intersects with the contortion and objectification of female figures, as having Kayako’s sounds come from off screen or an unclear origin separates

her from our expectation of a human being. The first introduction the audience has of Kayako's actual body and form in *Ju-On: The Grudge* is through audio effects and broken pieces of her body. When Kazumi is following Kayako up the stairs, she is triggered to follow her by an off screen sound of a door closing shut. When she investigates, she finds the door with two wet handprints on it. These disembodied sounds and hands create an immediate feeling of danger, which primes the spectator to be wary of what is behind it. Next we simply see the pair of hands as Kayako grabs her cat, the only sound a swell in the score and a cat's whine. Kayako is not given a sound at this time, and her figure is only that of the hands that were cut off from the rest of her body. Not thirty seconds later, as Kazumi continues to follow the spirit, there is a shot of Kayako's feet running that is not accompanied by a sound effect. The only sound heard is actually the rustling from Kazumi's steps, again further other-ing Kayako's figure and reducing her to these body parts. Valerie Wee points out that "this sense of disorder and instability, anathema to a culture that reveres order and harmony, is reinforced by several scenes of feminine abjection that are deliberately constructed to confound and confuse," which explains how the use of a contorted feminine body could be exploited to render confusion on an audience used to female compliance. (1 Wee 12) Another example of this abjection is the aforementioned scene in which Kayako's full form is seen for the first time as she attacks Yuji. In this scene, not only is she accompanied by the gurgling, but each of her movements causes creaks and groans that do not align with the normal human body. Her figure is already distorted, as discussed earlier, through contortions and unnatural angles and movements. Pairing these contortions with confusing and nonhuman sounds only furthers this objectification and demonization of women. Katelyn Terry comments, "Each joint movement is paired with an unnerving creaking sound," as she discusses this contortion and how it subverts the male gaze. (8) Assigning Kayako not just

unnerving and dehumanizing visuals, but sounds that further blur the lines of her humanity, creates a female figure that is contorted nearly beyond recognition. Her femininity lies only in her hair, eyes, and dress.

Terry also comments on Kayako's voice and gurgling sounds, "...she makes the only sound she is capable of - a gurgling coming from her twisted throat. Even her voice appears abnormal in this depiction of the contorted female body." (8) Something in this quote that is particularly important to note is the concept that the gurgling is the only sound that Kayako can make. Not only is this sound nearly nonhuman and demonizing, it is not a sound of her own choosing. It is a symptom of the violence she faced at the hands of the patriarch. The demonization of the feminine figure that has been hurt by the patriarchy is not a new one, however the way that Kayako is simultaneously shown to have agency over her body subverts the traditional expectation of that demonization. These ideals are only reinforced by the way that the feminine figure is presented juxtaposed to the masculine one. Not only are Takeo's movements more precise and traditionally human, but the sound effects that accompany his movements are what is anticipated and expected from them. The horror of Takeo is the presence of violent masculinity, which is paralleled in Kayako's horror of feminine agency. Ryan Taylor outlines this idea as follows, "Because women have rejected the limitations and confinements imposed on them by a phallogentric society, matriarchy (or the role of the traditional matriarch as constructed by a male subjectivity) is also presented as moribund." (13) Kayako's rejection of traditional limitations go beyond her role as a matriarch, as her body and movements also reject what the audience understands as possible. This limitless appearance empowers Kayako, and she uses the horror of her mutilated body to incite fear. Empowerment through objectification is a dichotomy that this film actively plays into, as the grotesque movements and sounds that Kayako

makes for a fantastic spectacle of her own design. However, these disconnects from humanity demonize her form to the audience, and while Kayako may seem to overpower her male adversaries in the film, she is still not presented to the audience as much else than a horrific spectacle. Kayako's final appearance in the film is poignant as she reaches out a bloody hand, almost seeming to ask for help, whilst Rika cowers in fear because of the noises Kayako makes. The unnatural sounds incite just as much terror from the characters as the unnatural movements.

The final shot of the film is of Rika's body, wrapped in plastic and with the traditional *onryō* hair. She is pale, and eerily resembles Kayako. However, unlike the presentation of Kayako's body in the opening montage, Rika is shown in a wide shot immediately, followed by a slow push in until the camera is extremely close on her face. Katelyn Terry says this about the scene, "as the camera finally stops, [Rika]'s eyes open, appearing bright red followed by a surge of eerie music and her iconic throat-gurgling. These final impressions show [Rika] as limitless in both her body and transcendence of death, and in recalling the films' nonlinear timeline, we know this is just the beginning." (11) This apparent release of limitations while simultaneously continuing the cycle of violence is another dichotomy at work within the film. As this violence and curse persists, will the female figure become further and further distorted? Will her contortions actually empower her or simply aid in the continual victimization of other women? These questions are left for the audience to answer, with the ambiguous ending making it clear the curse will live on, but not as clear as to how it will continue to behave. All of these examples of the contradicting presentations of the feminine form, through visual and aural contortions, demonstrate how the female form is continuously "othered," whether it is empowered, objectified, or both.

Chakushin ari (One Missed Call)

Analyzing the presentation of the feminine figure within *Chakushin ari* is interesting, as the traditional conventions established in contemporary Japanese horror are not found in this film. In fact, *Chakushin ari* plays into far more western themes and motifs. Valerie Wee discusses this interesting evolution, stating:

“Where the earlier horror films in the contemporary cycle emphasize notions of rightful and wrongful behavior as the root cause for the actions of malevolent onryō, [...] Chakushin ari and the film’s depiction of Mimiko appear to have moved some distance toward accommodating and even adopting established Western values, offering Mimiko as a figure who, even as a child, finds satisfaction in harming her sister.” (2 Wee 193-194)

The importance that comes from the contrasting ways Mimiko’s backstory and motivations are presented compared to Sadako’s or Kayako’s is that Mimiko’s victimization stemmed from a genuine malevolence that Kayako and Sadako do not express until they take the form of *onryō*. In turn, Mimiko is shown as far more brutal than the other two ghosts. While Kayako and Sadako are never shown directly harming their victims (outside of Sadako’s death stare, but this is in and of itself a passive form of murder), Mimiko tortures and torments her victims until they reach horrific and brutal ends. Because the antagonizing feminine figure is revealed to be pure evil, there is little nuance to the way she or other female forms are portrayed in the film. There is no exploration of patriarchal violence - a feminine figure perpetuates all of the violence in the film.

Because of this portrayal of violent femininity, contortion of the female form is used in no way to empower the feminine forms within the film. Rather, it is utilized most heavily in a

brutal death scene, in which Natsuki becomes possessed and her bones twist and crack without her control. In fact, this sequence is actively disempowering - Natsuki is terrified, in pain, and knows she is going to die at her own hands, and the final result is as horrific as watching the torture itself, as Mimiko forces Natsuki to turn her head so far beyond what is possible that her head rips off of her shoulders. Her headless body actually manages to take a few disconnected steps before she falls to the ground. This shot in particular is incredibly intriguing, as Natsuki's head remains in the foreground of the shot whilst her body stumbles and falls in the background. Dismemberment at this extreme level reduces the female form into pieces, and unlike the other films addressed in this essay, those pieces are created not to increase her power, but to take it away. In the shots leading up to her death, the contortion of Natsuki's body is extreme, with her wrist turning in complete circles and her elbows bending back to try and pull her shoulder away from her head. These moments of body horror are captured in pieces within the camera as well, focusing on close ups of her unnaturally bent wrist, as well as her quivering knees as she tries to maintain autonomy over her own body. This sequence does however play into the spectacle of the grotesque. Arguably, whilst Natsuki is losing her control over herself, Mimiko is using Natsuki's body to empower herself. The visceral fear felt not only by those viewing the film but also the characters in the film who witness the death is not to be underestimated. Watching as the female form is overtaken and abused is nothing new within cinema, but the subversion of expectations is that there is a feminine figure carrying out the violence as well. Mimiko takes Natsuki's body as a vessel for her own, ultimately disfiguring her in a horrible performance of the limits to which a human body can be pushed.

Chakushin ari takes the concept of the spectacle of the grotesque one step further, as Natsuki's possession and subsequent death are all broadcast live on national television. She is

meant to be receiving a live exorcism in an attempt to stop the killings, but instead her death comes in front of millions of people. Her contorted and disfigured body is not simply a spectacle to the viewers of the film, but also to the characters within the film. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey says, “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as an erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.” (809) While Natsuki may not be a specifically erotic figure, the spectacle of her body exists for these two audiences as well. The audience members watching *Chakushin ari* will see themselves reflected in the millions of viewers that witness Natsuki’s death without blinking an eye. Being confronted by your own spectatorship can certainly unnerve viewers, and further deepens the spectacle and objectification of Natsuki’s body.

The fact that this scene revolves around an exorcism also calls on more classic horror tropes. Katelyn Terry, in the introduction of her article, states “Although this notion exists prominently throughout the horror genre, particularly within Japanese horror and the exorcism subgenre, the aspect of contortion is often neglected. Between the two, exorcism films depict contortion as a product of a male spiritual entity.” (2) The notion she is discussing here is the inclusion of body or biological horror, which is characterized by fragmented or unnaturally moving human body parts that are combined to form a monstrous figure. *Chakushin ari* does subvert these expectations in that the contortion is not a product of any male entity, but rather a young female one. However, the dehumanization and brutal way Natsuki dies is by no means empowering for women. In fact, this extreme form of spectacle plays into the traditional notion of the male gaze, framing women as objects to be overtaken and exploited. Laura Mulvey comments on the effect this framework has on the viewer, “By means of identification with him,

through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.” (811) Natsuki is being possessed by a young female figure, but she is still presented to the audience in a way that allows them to imagine themselves in that position of power.

Sound in *Chakushin ari* is one of the most important pieces of the film. The soundscape is vast, but the anxiety surrounding specific sound effects is what stands out about this film. Most notably, the ringtone assigned to the death predicting phone calls is a repeated motif throughout the film; it's innocent sounding piano notes eventually giving way to horribly sinister feelings surrounding impending doom. Valerie Wee discusses this in her chapter dedicated to *Chakushin ari* and it's American remake saying, “Notably, both *Chakushin ari* and *One Missed Call* also equate horror, threat, and destruction with a ringing cell phone, which plays a central role in the disturbing activities of the mysterious supernatural threat.” (195) Ascribing a phone call to a villain is a borrowed trope from Hollywood horror movies like *When a Stranger Calls* (1979) or *Scream* (1996). However both of these examples have one key difference from *Chakushin ari*, and that is that *Chakushin ari* features a supernatural villain. In the Hollywood films, the phone calls were the source of anxiety because of the imposing physical threat of somebody on the other line. *Chakushin ari* instead makes the character's own voices the threat, leaving voicemails that are recordings of their own death. As such, the use of the ringtone can invoke much more chilling ideas than a man with a knife. No one knows how or why the being attacks - and the film doesn't even show the audience Mimiko's full body until close to the end, everything she does happening off screen or hinted at with sound effects.

The first scene that deals with these sounds is the first scene between Yoko and Yumi, where they are in the bathroom showering and Yoko gets a phone call. This first impression of the ringtone is primed by the context surrounding it to set our nerves on edge, as the two girls are

discussing someone's recent drowning, and the camera cuts to two glimpses of a distorted drowned body. Each of these cuts is also accompanied by a sound, a low reverberating bass that hits an audience member in the heart. As Yumi washes her hands and talks, she is cut off by the first notes of the piano. The camera is focused on her, already creating a disconnected sense of reality when relating to the ringtone. Revealing the phone only slightly in the blurry foreground of a wider shot, the noise has more of an origin but is still somewhat ambiguous. Creating sonic moments that are even slightly disconnected from what is on screen conveys an uneasiness to any spectator. Finally the camera cuts to the phone itself, showing the lights going off for an incoming call. However Yoko denies it is her ringtone, so she misses the call and then looks at the voicemail. It is here the audience first learns of the nature of the curse, and witnesses it first hand. Yoko reveals her voicemail is from her own number, and then she and Yumi listen to the voicemail that is left on the phone, which is dated two days in the future. In a chilling turn of events, Yoko's own voice comes through followed by a horrific scream. This disembodiment of her own voice creates a feeling of uncanny that is hard to describe, but it may be best explained by considering the concept of a doppelganger and how it fits within the uncanny. That ringtone immediately correlates to the frightening aspect of a voicemail that predicts the future, whilst using someone's own likeness to do so.

Wee writes, "These phone calls and mediated messages are pieces of data/information that do not exist yet, in that the events have not occurred." (2 Wee 201) The concept of sound conveying information that is not given to us on screen creates a rapt audience, attempting to fill in the blanks as they try and piece together the sounds and sound effects used. In particular, the voicemails themselves serve the purpose of conveying information that is not known to anyone but the antagonist. This taunt of the future is seen first in the moments following the ringtone that

was mentioned above. As they listen to the voicemail, the camera alludes to them being watched, capturing the two girls huddled around a phone through a crack in a door. This voyeuristic camera angle places the viewer as an outsider, and makes it so observing these horrors feels like an intrusion. At the same time, there are close ups while the voicemail plays, letting the audience hear the words. Creating a visually appealing scene in which most of the important information is conveyed by a disembodied voice is difficult, but placing the viewer in the place of a voyeur allows the audience to feel as if they are overhearing this in a bathroom stall. These small moments make the supernatural in this film come to life, as the separation between viewer and threat again forces the viewer to examine why he is observing these specific kinds of spectacles.

The use of sound and this extreme exploitation of the feminine form is exemplified perfectly within the scene directly before Natsuki's death, and the scene directly after. As aforementioned, Natsuki's death takes place during a live television broadcast of what is meant to be an exorcism. As she sits and prays with a Buddhist, she ponders to herself about being lonely, her voice disembodied outside of herself. As a tear rolls down her cheek, she seems to accept her fate. Immediately the first note on the piano can be heard, and she jolts to attention. There is no visible cell phone as the ringtone plays over and over, inciting a panic so that everyone starts to try and leave, the buddhist priest staying to pray. It is then that Mimiko attacks. Natsuki is cowering in fear when ghostly hair wraps around her ankles. She screams and jumps away, catching her landing on a table and then realizing her own phone is now in her hand, and on and on the ringtone goes. This scene also utilizes non-diegetic sound to build suspense and distrust in what the audience hears. There are whispers and mumblings but it is unclear which characters, if any at all, can hear the garbled talking. Isabella van Elferen states, "Sound's relation to the unseen-uncanny can be described in terms of dorsality: that which is behind our

back: the invisible, sinister, sinister presence that just escapes our peripheral vision when we turn around.” (4) This film uses sound to keep its villain hidden and shrouded in mystery, but then uses a female victim in order to continue the concept of the spectacle of the grotesque. The final moment before Natsuki’s torture and ultimate death show her being consoled by Yumi, but then an entirely disembodied voice says “Let me take you.” As the characters in the film watch, horrified, Natsuki’s wrist snaps on its own, and begins the torturous end of her life. This disembodied voice further others Mimiko, and her brutal execution of Natsuki removes the agency this character has over how they are perceived. Elferen also comments the following in regards to disembodied voices or contrapuntal sound: “Constantly asking audiences to verify the origins of the sounds they prominently feature, and relentlessly confirming that there is no origin, the genre is pervaded by unembodied sounds.” (5) *Chakushin ari* plays with both confirming the origins of the sound and not, by showing the phone as where the ringtone is playing from, but dancing around the reveal related to who is actually making those calls. This dedication to keeping an ambiguous villain only makes Mimiko less and less human to the viewer, and unlike *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *Ringu*, by the end the audience does not sympathize with Mimiko. This extreme dismissal of a physical form for most of the film whilst still maintaining power, control, and terror coming from her allows Mimiko to be empowered in some ways, but in others she is completely dehumanized. Just as the disembodied voices on the phones are uncanny and disturbing, the amount of dialogue Mimiko speaks or whispers without being given a physical form makes her feel absolutely foreign and terrifying.

Immediately following Natsuki’s death, the focus is on Yumi reacting to the horrifying scene. As she starts to process, scared of what’s to come when a red candy rolls out of Natsuki’s mouth, the piano starts up again. By now the audience is well versed in what the ringtone means,

and the transition from Natsuki's agonizing screams, to nearly dead silence, to the piano ringtone, creates a fast pace that is essential to keeping the lines blurry between the real and the surreal. It is also particularly poignant as the piano begins playing while the camera is on Yumi's face, and the terror in her eyes at the first note reminds the audience of what is to come. When she looks down, the ringing is coming from inside of her own purse. This jump from the body horror to the uncanny phone call is drastic, but ultimately serves the same purpose: to showcase the brutality of Mimiko. Yumi's face shrouded in red after witnessing Natsuki's gruesome end is a powerful image, distorted then by the ringtone blaring through. These disembodied sounds with no true origins only further ostracize the women who can hear them, as well as disconnecting their own voice from their physical form.

Ringu

The final film that this paper examines is actually the oldest of the three, *Ringu*. *Ringu*, released in 1998, is often credited as the film that popularized contemporary Japanese horror to foreign audiences, especially with the release of *The Ring* (2002), an American remake made four years later. It's commercial success is a testament to the universality of the horrors that it explores, and the way that the contorted feminine figure can cross cultural bounds to invoke feelings of terror. Spectators don't get a glimpse of this contortion until the very end of *Ringu*, however. Sadako, the main villain and this film's *onryō*, is not shown as her full terrifying self until one of the final scenes in the film, when the audience finally witnesses her violence instead of hearing about it. This scene is when the curse of the tape is carried out on Ryuji, and Sadako crawls out of her well and then subsequently out of Ryuji's television screen. As Valerie Wee states, "Sadako's emergence from the television is coded for terror—she is visually disturbing,

possessing the long, dank hair and swollen, deformed face historically associated with the terrifying, vengeful female ghosts of Japanese mythology, folktales, and cinema.” (2 Wee 91)

The scene ends with Ryuji literally frightened to death at the sight of Sadako’s grotesque eyeball. Katelyn Terry makes this point about Sadako’s entrance sequence: “In this moment, we finally glimpse contortion in the film, where the unstable bodily display of the female form becomes a site of horror and anxiety.” (6) Sadako’s slow climb out of the well, followed by her slightly uncanny walk towards the television screen are all presented as fundamentally horrifying. The shots of her walking towards the camera with jerky and unnatural movements were actually taken with the actress walking backwards, and then played in reverse to enhance this uncanny effect. In contrast to Kayako’s presentation, Sadako is shown in her full form from the moment she is out of the well. However, her face is completely covered by her hair, which dehumanizes her body further when paired with her nonhuman-like movements and transcendence of time and space. The contorted female form is a spectacle here, but a spectacle meant to invoke a feeling of unease, horror, and conflict. To further this feeling of unease, rather than watching the entire tape the camera cuts back and forth to Ryuji’s horrified reactions to Sadako’s movements. Whilst he is immersed in the grotesque form of Sadako on his television, his shoulders start to lift in time with her movements on screen. The mirroring displayed here displays the first step in the power shift from Sadako to Ryuji. Terry also comments on this moment, discussing the way the mirroring continues throughout the scene:

“...from the moment Sada emerges from the television screen she is continually gaining power, first crawling then standing, walking, and finally attacking. Ryuji faces the reverse scenario, first walking toward the television captivated, but seemingly in control, then standing paralyzed watching Sada’s body contort. He falls and crawls away in fear,

conversely mimicking Sada's rise to power. As he becomes incapable of moving his body, Sada learns to control hers and his. The power shift from Ryuji to Sadako shows how the female contortionist is able to feed on his fear, and finally, gain dominance over his immobile and disempowered body." (8)

This plays into the dichotomy of the form of empowerment that the female figure is given in contemporary Japanese horror. As Sadako takes power from Ryuji, it is only through the way she made her body into a spectacle of the grotesque that she was able to succeed. Furthermore, her dehumanized form is only amplified when the audience is finally given a glimpse of her face. Here, *Ringu* parallels *Ju-On: The Grudge* in that it is an extreme close up, and spectators are only given a piece of her face - just one eye. It is mostly obstructed by Sadako's hair, and the skin is pulled so taut that a viewer can see into the cavern of her eye socket. This deconstruction of recognizable human features only reduces Sadako into spectacle further.

Compared to *Ju-On*, *Ringu* uses contortion sparingly, with the scene of Sadako emerging from the television the one true moment of feminine contortion within the film. However, the deconstruction of femininity is present throughout the film, even within the cursed tape itself. Shots of a woman brushing her hair and getting ready in a mirror are intercut with oddly disturbing and uncanny images, the score the final nail in the coffin to seed unrest in anyone who views the tape. It is clear why the protagonist, Reiko, is transfixed by the tape. In the same way Sadako's unnerving movements straddle the line between human and nonhuman, the content of the tape straddles a thin line between what is comfortable for us and what is not. This strange existence in the liminal space between the known and unknown, the familiar and the foreign, builds the perfect atmosphere for a fixation on the spectacle itself. And when this spectacle breaks its original confines, the audience becomes horrified along with the characters. Valerie

Wee argues that “the horror in *Ringu* is differently situated within a worldview in which supernatural manifestations of anger and vengeance can invade the natural world to wreak destruction.” (2 Wee 91) This destruction at the hand of a monstrously feminine figure reflects the concept that an empowered female form is one that cannot be trusted, breeds violence, and is ultimately horrifying. In an essay that compares Japanese and South Korean horror, James Byrne states “Embodied within this antagonist are fears around monstrous femininity and modernity, recurrent trends in Japanese horror cinema.” (7) When one considers the backstory that Sadako is given, which consists of a brutally violent murder at the hands of her father, it can be taken a step further to argue the fears extend to that of a crumbling patriarchal figure. Sadako’s power over Ryuji at the end of the film also plays into this concept, by punishing a father who is no longer with his wife and child. This terror bred by a monstrously vengeful feminine figure also implies that for a woman to be empowered she must first be victimized, and only in rage and a search for vengeance will she succeed over men. Empowerment in this form also comes at a price, in which she is actively dehumanized and othered - the source of terror to not just falling patriarchs, but everyone whom she encounters.

Ringu’s use of sound to incite fear is an important aspect of the film. Not only does it use the common trope in Japanese horror of assigning a sound to its villain - in this case, TV static - it also uses non-diegetic sound that is sometimes never assigned an origin. *Ringu* also utilizes silence, or quiet, reducing scenes to only one sound in order to pull the viewer into what is happening on screen. In her essay, “Obscene Sounds: Sex, Death, and the Body On-Screen”” Catriona Walsh discusses how sound experimentation within horror films surpass just adding to the visuals on screen, “These depictions of horror and hedonism are diverse and extreme [...] exemplifying audiovisual acuity and experimentation. They are not best served by singular

modes of sensation or reception but by conglomerate means that complement their multiplicity and complexity and appeal to sight, sound, and sensation.” (52) Her point is relevant here as it describes how much influence a soundscape can have over a viewing experience, and experimenting with what those effects are is a concept very common in horror films. *Ringu* is no exception. One scene that exemplifies this play with sound and its effect on the viewer is the one in which Reiko is searching for Sadako’s body at the bottom of the well. When Reiko gives up scooping out the water, and resorts to searching blindly in the deep water of the well for Sadako’s body, all sound cuts out except for her breathing and the splashes of the water as she moves through it. This reduction of sound forces the viewer to listen harder, to search for more meaning and information that is currently being withheld. As Reiko unknowingly approaches Sadako’s body, low rumbling begins to build quietly, starting with a low hum that is barely noticeable. As Reiko finds and strokes through Sadako’s hair, the rumbling gets louder but not more intense. The anxiety present in the sound effects is not reflected in Reiko, who appears relieved and comforted by her discovery. The disembodied hand of Sadako reaches out for her wrist with a loud splash, triggering the rumbling to transition into more sinister sounds - notably distorted human voices that only bleed through occasionally as the rumbling and slightly mechanical noises get louder. Sadako’s corpse then begins to emerge from the water, absolutely menacing with long black hair in front of her face. Reiko only approaches the form with sympathy, no fear despite what the audience is undeniably feeling, and here there is another shift in the soundscape. The odd distortions and rumbling fade out, replaced with an orchestral score that feels unnervingly peaceful as the viewer watches Reiko cradle Sadako’s skeleton. There is relief within this horrific moment - because Reiko believes she has lifted the curse, and Sadako will finally find peace. Quick shifts in the soundscape pull the viewer through these emotional

beats, and despite the genuinely grotesque visual on screen, there is a rare moment of peace in the film. Valerie Wee states that this scene is “rooted in the abject.” (1 Wee 8) The abject here represents anything that actively challenges cultural concepts, often specifically against the conventional identities held up by that culture. As the sound forces the audience to feel at peace, and to view this undeniably horrifying moment as something that brings relief to all those involved, it aids in the active abjection within the film, shifting what the spectator expects to be shown.

Sound is also used throughout the film to set the audience on edge even during the scenes that happen long before Sadako’s crawl through the television. James Wierzbicki explains how, in films that feature *onryō*, they will often “enter[s] early into each of the plots, but so that tension can build at first she is not seen but only felt.” (4) This looming presence of a threat that is not visible is inferred through creative camera work and subtly, but it's driven past vague references into the terrifying with the use of sound. There are a few moments where this can be felt most fully, one of them being a scene in which Reiko and Ryuji are studying the tape closely. There are flashes of the tape on screen, but the pictures are heavily washed out and unclear. Therefore their focus lies in the audio of the tape, which at first sounds like garbled sounds but eventually becomes clear enough to hear the phrase, “Frolic in brine, goblins be thine.” This scene uses the sound of the tape, which has already been established to be cursed and dangerous, to seed fear into the audience. Ryuji and Reiko repeatedly rewind and replay the tape, and the mechanical sounds that are attached to those actions are heard very loud and very clear. All of this is accompanied by the low static from the video itself, as well as the disembodied voice they are attempting to make out. The repetitive sound along with the confusing and convoluted visuals create a sense of unease, especially as the room they are in is dark except for the monitor

that they are watching the tape on. Deliberately eerie mise-en-scene combined with sounds that are attached to the antagonist create the perfect storm for spectators to be on edge, feeling but not seeing Sadako's presence whilst Reiko and Ryuji try and work out who is behind the cursed tape.

The contorted feminine figure intersects with these interesting choices for sound design during the aforementioned scene in which Sadako emerges from the television screen to kill Ryuji. He is only alerted to Sadako's presence and possession of his television by off screen sounds, specifically a mechanical screeching that follows the tape and Sadako through the film. Ryuji recognizes the sound and is visibly terrified, slowly turning around to see his television on and displaying the video of the well. This disembodied and nonhuman sound that alerts Ryuji to the danger he is in separates Sadako from the human world builds upon the already blurry lines between the real and unreal in *Ringu*. Valerie Wee says this about the moment when Sadako crawls through the television:

"It is essentially the moment of abjection where meaning collapses, for Sadako's appearance effectively overturns the rules of reality and dismantles established natural order as it foregrounds her uncanny ability to cross the suddenly permeable border/boundary between the natural and supernatural world, between the television image/screen and the physical world, between image and materiality, between death and the living." (1 Wee 8)

This exact moment is permeated by a shift in the soundscape, an orchestral score adding to and almost overtaking the monotonous and repetitive mechanical screech. As Sadako climbs her way through the screen, the score crescendos into a sound that sounds almost mechanical, seeming to burst in time with Sadako's breakthrough of the screen. Amplifying this moment of transcendence through a sound cue increases the impact it has on the viewer, particularly when

this is the moment the film has been building to for its entirety. Every note, breath, and non-diegetic sound effect is heard tenfold as the audience is like Ryuji - simultaneously transfixed and horrified.

This dichotomy of fascination and repulsion is seen over and over again in relation to female forms with contemporary Japanese horror, and in this scene it is reflected in the sound effect. James Wierzbicki talks about the director's intention, saying "According to the stage directions in Hiroshi Takashi's screenplay, when Ryuji first looks at the television set 'the sound from before comes louder now, more insistent, a metallic screeching that both repulses and beckons him closer'." (5) Ryuji's tumultuous feelings when he first hears the sounds are shared by the audience, knowing what's coming but seeming to be horrified by it. However, as the sound grows and he can no longer ignore it, he is forced to look at the television where he sees a still shot of the well from the end of the cursed tape. He approaches the television slowly, even kneeling down and crawling towards it slightly, observing with transfixed eyes. He watches the grotesque spectacle that Sadako has presented him with, but quickly becomes horrified. Possibly the most intriguing thing of all, the metallic screeching is never given an origin. The audience knows that it comes along with Sadako, but there is no clear element of the video that implies where that sound came from or why Sadako uses it to terrorize her victims. This complete disconnection from body and sound places Sadako again in a liminal space, both human and nonhuman, with a body that is purely for spectacle and violence. This reduction of the female form when accompanied by a sound as chilling as the metallic screeches exemplifies how feminine forms cannot exist if they are not othered in some way. For Sadako, this othering comes at the hand of her abusive father, and Ryuji and Reiko think a burial will be enough to appease her vengeful spirit. However, Ryuji's death comes after the memorial service. It is here that

Reiko realizes the key to why she stayed alive - and that was because she reproduced the tape and gave a new copy to Ryuji to study. She had passed along the curse, and if her son didn't, he would be dead. Sadako's enduring rage and violence is a testament to the power of the deconstructed feminine figure, and the necessary recreation of the tape adds to her power in the spectacle of the grotesque. As the mechanical sounds pair with her unnatural movements, she is simultaneously empowered and dehumanized - with the ability to take on her adversaries and win, despite only being a twisted version of her former self.

Conclusion

Japanese contemporary horror reflects a fear of empowered feminine figures, which is only enhanced by the expert use of sound in the genre to incite further horror into the viewer. Deconstructing feminine bodies within the framework of film is not something new, nor is it new to the genre of horror, but the monstrous feminine figure that finds power in her monstrosity is a rarity. These vengeful and violent spirits are placed as the most powerful beings within their worlds, but they have also all been victimized in one way or the other. This victimization is what grants the female forms power in the first place, which reinforces the cultural concept that female empowerment stems from the actions of men. On top of this assertion of masculine violence as the root of feminine empowerment, the way these bodies are presented only objectifies them further, as Katelyn Terry explains, "The grotesque has its own aspect of visual pleasure and because the female body is emphasized as an object to be looked at through close-ups, it allows the spectator's gaze to focus closely on her form." (9) This simultaneous enjoyment and repulsion of the female form is informed by the use of sound in these films, as the disconnected sounds that are used to fuel unrest in a viewer also serve to further ostracize the female form. Over and over these bodies are presented as unnatural, nonhuman, and horrifying, contorted

beyond recognition. *Ringu* enhances this with the use of non-diegetic voices and sound effects, *Chakunshin ari* assigns fear to a typically innocuous sound, and *Ju-On: The Grudge* uses a sound effect that in and of itself is uncanny and grotesque. These three examples of sound choices also all share one thing in common, and that is the use of contrapuntal sound. In each film, the sounds are used to contradict the visual information given to us, or to convey information that has not yet been shown on camera. These disconnected sounds add to the disconnected and contorted bodies shown within the films, further othering the feminine form to the spectator.

Sound is also typically the cue that the audience relies on to know exactly what to feel about what is happening on screen. Therefore, actively using sound techniques to instill fear and unrest in the audiences during scenes that present contorted female bodies is a deliberate effort to create fear and anxiety surrounding the female form. In particular, to create anxiety around a female form that has control over what kind of spectacle it will become, and knows that her ability to become a spectacle will ultimately give her power over her adversaries. “Their insatiable desires, their insidious haunting of their victims, and the impossibility of containing their threat and abjection all hint at contemporary Japanese society’s growing fears regarding the rise of a new generation of females increasingly outside patriarchal control and containment.” (1 Wee 11) This quote from Valerie Wee describes how the actions performed by these villains reflect these fears as well, and the sound usage whilst they carry out these acts only further emphasizes these societal fears. A soundscape designed to make the audience feel on edge reveals what exactly the horror is that is meant to be felt upon viewing these female figures, these spectacles of the grotesque. It informs the audience that these bodies are something to be feared, something sinister. Kayako’s first scene, in which her gurgling is first heard off screen by a terrified Rika, is exemplary of this concept. Her gurgling is heard before she is seen, assigning

her an uncanny sound before our eyes even see her figure. This primes the audience to be afraid of what comes after the noise, especially when paired with a frightened look from Rika. As *Ringu* plays with sound, it uses non-diegetic sound effects to disorient the viewer, and to create an atmosphere in which the audience is anticipating something terrifying. Greeted with a scene of rare tenderness instead, the audience must attempt to rectify this peace with the violence carried out by Sadako. Valerie Wee continues to say, “These versions of the unruly Japanese female appear to be finding greater representation on screen, where the female and the feminine are quite often relegated to the supernatural, the horrific and the terrifying.” (18) These increasingly common representations of violent feminine power are undermined by the implications that being thrown into one of these categories provides. The female form is repeatedly wounded, mutilated, and contorted within these films, and then they are re-objectified as they present themselves for the spectacle of their victims. Even if the film ultimately ends with them winning a power struggle, the power they have over their victims only comes from their re-objectification and dehumanization.

Fear created within a patriarchal system almost always loops back around to a male perpetrator in these films. *Chakushin ari*'s departure from this root of evil is interesting, as it only increases the dehumanization of Mimiko. Mimiko is the evolution of Kayako and Sadako, she herself the monster and perpetrator of violence in her youth. Wee writes, “Millennial J-horror reinforces a system in which dominant patriarchal concerns continue to demonise a new generation of young women who are increasingly ignoring, if not actively rejecting, the traditional and socially approved roles of wife, mother, and domestic homemaker.” (1 Wee 18) What sets *Chakushin ari* apart from other films in this genre is that this reinforcement is done by the film itself, not the violent characters within it. Kayako and Sadako both have vengeful spirits

because they were brutalized, and their brutalizations were direct punishments of perceived imperfect femininity. Mimiko, however, is violent for the sake of violence, and only dies because of her own abuse towards her sister. Where Mimiko is not as dehumanized in appearance, her incredibly violent attacks are dehumanizing in and of themselves. This is also true considering Mimiko is mostly seen being violent off screen, an unseen spirit haunting cell phones. The ringtone is what incites fear, and it is one of no true origin, most often heard off screen before the characters recognize it's their own phone ringing. Mimiko is incredibly dehumanized through this process, as her figure is rarely if ever shown, and is only alluded to through these sound effects.

Wierzbicki discusses the use of sound in these films by stating, "In any case, the key scenes in all four of the Japanese films – the *yūrei*'s emergence from the television set in *Ringu*, the exploration of the haunted attic in *Ju-on*, the discovery of the drowning site in *Honogurai mizu*, the encounter with the mother's corpse in *Chakushin ari* – hold to Japanese tradition by luxuriating in both subtly shifting noise and the purposeful absence of sound." (11) This observation of the similarities in sound technique between these films shows how deliberate the manipulation of these soundscapes is, each film having a climax that uses the same conventions to imply the same overarching fears. The fear of the monstrous feminine does not end when the credits roll, however. One of the hallmarks of contemporary Japanese horror is an open, ambiguous ending. Wierzbicki comments on this phenomenon as well, "Even the stories as told by Hollywood are thus necessarily inconclusive; the films end only with explanations of how this or that [*onryō*] came to be, not with suggestions that her wrath has been in any way assuaged." (4) While Wierzbicki is directly commenting on the respective Hollywood remakes of these Japanese films, he is speaking to how Hollywood continued on the pattern of endings that only

explain the happenings of the film, and do not actually bring a stop to them. This enduring threat of the monstrous and vengeful feminine is then recalled to viewers every time they hear tv static, or a cell phone ring with an unfamiliar song, and particularly if anyone around them attempts a throat gurgle. Through sound, the dehumanization and deconstruction of the feminine figure is amplified, allowing audiences to leave with not only an unease as it relates to the grotesque visual, but also with the sounds that remind them of it.

Works Cited

Alioff, Maurie. "Fantasia Film Festival." *Take One*, Mar. 2005, pp. 49–50.

Byrne, James. "Wigs and Rings: Cross-Cultural Exchange in the South Korean and Japanese Horror Film." *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 184–201., doi:10.1080/17564905.2014.961708.

- This article compares and contrasts Japanese and South Korean horror films that were either openly influenced by each other or remakes of the other cultures film. It delves into the different cultural aspects that affect how and why certain changes were made from film to film. This deep dive into cultural considerations that affect contemporary Japanese horror films informed my own analysis of these films and what they were attempting to say.

Elferen, Isabella van. "Sonic Horror." *Kingston University London*, eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/38741/6/Van-Elferen-I-38741-AAM.pdf.

Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, Autumn 1975, Pages 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>

- This essay is a revolutionary feminist piece dissecting the male gaze and how female forms are presented within it. It explains the way feminine forms are objectified and sexualized to appeal to a male audience, and constructs the first language surrounding the oppression of women through camera work. This essay informs how I interpret the presentation of feminine bodies as spectacle.

Oriental Nightmares: The ‘Demonic’ Other in Contemporary American Adaptations of Japanese Horror Film

Redfern, Nick. “Sound in Horror Film Trailers.” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image: Volume 14, Issue 1* *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, pp. 47–71., doi:10.3828/msmi.2020.4.

- This article analyses sound in horror film trailers through data collected from the soundtracks of fifty horror film trailers. It argues that by looking at this data one can draw conclusions based on the rises and falls in the sound trends across all fifty trailers. He concludes that sound in horror trailers is used to do three things: establish a narrative, connect with the audience emotionally, and convey marketing information. Through these three lenses he analyses what types of sound are used and how they are employed to convey those three things.

Seung Min Hong (2019) *Contrapuntal Aurality: Exceptional Sound in Hollywood Monster Horror Films during the Early Sound Era*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 47:4, 215-226, DOI: 10.1080/01956051.2019.1566201

- This article discusses the use of contrapuntal sound in Hollywood monster films during the early sound era. Contrapuntal sound is sound that does not directly relate to anything that’s on screen, or anything that has previously been established on screen. The article argues that monster horror films from the early sound era were the first to venture into using this technique, and discusses the specific usage of this technique in multiple horror films, including *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931). It also places these films in

opposition to Eisenstein's *A Statement on Sound* (1928), which argued that sound would destroy the art of film by eliminating the opportunity of montage.

Taylor, R. (2012), 'Demon(ized) women: Female punishment in the 'pink film' and J-Horror', *Asian Cinema* 23: 2, pp. 199–216, doi: 10.1386/ac.23.2.199_1

- By analyzing the history around female representation in Japanese exploitation films, this article sets out to prove that more contemporary Japanese horror films play into the same fears and anxieties surrounding women's bodies. However, the author posits that contemporary horror examines these anxieties in a more feminist mode, empowering the female antagonists. It was important for this essay in that it informed the analysis of *Ju-On: The Grudge's* representation of women and family.

Terry, Katelyn. "Contorted Bodies: Women's Representation in Japanese Horror Films." *Film Matters*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2018, pp. 57–68., doi:10.1386/fm.9.2.57_1.

- This article discusses the representation of women in contemporary Japanese horror films. It makes conclusions in regards to both horror and pleasure as represented by contorted female bodies. The female body is contorted in a way that empowers her, as shown by Kayako in *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002) and Sadako in *Ringu* (1998). These two monstrous women are able to re-empower themselves by contorting their bodies and creating a horror spectacle for the disempowered men in the films. The conclusions gathered are that Japanese horror includes a more empowered woman than the traditional American horror genres, such as slasher flicks.

Walsh, Caitríona. "Obscene Sounds: Sex, Death, and the Body On-Screen." *Music and the Moving Image*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, p. 36+. Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A545433013/AONE?u=purchase&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=8946493
3.

- This article discusses the unique role sound plays within different modes of film, specifically as it relates to showing sex and death on screen. It analyzes specifically the sounds related to the body, and how they are used to invoke *eros* and *thanatos*. In relation to this essay, it helped drive the analysis of a soundscape as a tool that is separate from the visual of the film medium, increasing meaning making and expanding the world on screen.

Wee, Valerie. *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture*. Routledge, 2016.

- This book compares many Japanese horror films to their American remakes and how they compare and contrast. The three chapters that are most important are the third one, 'Terrifying Images: Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing in *Ringu* and *The Ring*,' the fifth 'Father Knows Best: Patriarchal Anxieties and Familial Dysfunction in *Ju-On* and *The Grudge*,' and the seventh '(Post-)Modern Anxieties, Techno Horror, and Technophobia in *Chakushin ari* and *One Missed Call*.' These three chapters delve deep into each film, and discuss important aspects of each one. The chapters were incredibly helpful in creating a technical analysis of each film.

Wee, Valerie. "The Monstrous-Feminine in the Millennial Japanese Horror Film." *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine*, 2019, pp. 209–229., doi:10.4324/9780429469367-16.

- This article outlines the way the monstrous-feminine creature is shown in contemporary Japanese horror. It discusses how patriarchal anxieties influence the way feminine figures are portrayed, and goes further to discuss how female forms are deconstructed and forced into the abject. It draws conclusions that these expressions of the female form are reflections of the anxieties that were abundant in society during this time. These anxieties are around the abject woman, and the female figure deconstructed enforces that fear.

Wierzbicki, J. (2010), 'Lost in translation? 'Ghost music' in recent Japanese Kaidan films and their Hollywood remakes', *Horror Studies* 1: 2, pp. 193–205, doi: 10.1386/host.1.2.193_1

- This article compares and contrasts the scores from contemporary Japanese horror films and their American remakes. He outlines the cultural significance and history that influences these films, including the backstory of Japanese ghosts that greatly affected the portrayal of the *onryō*. The discussion of sound design and the important decisions that influence how these contemporary films reflect cultural concepts of today.

Wilks, Jon. "Ghoul Power ." *Seek Japan | Your Guide To Living, Working And Traveling In Japan*, 25 Feb. 2021, www.seekjapan.jp/ghoul-power/.

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Takashi, Shimizu, director. *Ju-On: The Grudge*. Scremfest Horror Film Festival, 2002.