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Ringu and Adaptations

One of the most popular Japanese horror film franchises is *Ringu* (or *Ring* in English). The original novel, *Ringu* by Japanese author Koji Suzuki is the first of a trilogy, along with three other novels released within the same story frame (six in total). The novel has also been adapted into many film versions, including the original Japanese adaptation and sequels/prequels, a South Korean remake, and an entire American remake with many variant film's. Additionally, it has been turned into Manga books and video games. Clearly this story took off in not only Japanese popular culture, but westernized popular culture as well. There is a lot to be said on many aspects of the original work and its adaptations, as well as the differences between all of them and the original book. This paper will explore these differences between Koji Suzuki's novel *Ringu* and the 1998 original Japanese film version by the same name, as well as touch on some dissimilarities to the American version, *The Ring*.

A basic understanding of the story within these works is useful in grasping the rest of this paper. The story is presented most generally as the following: A haunted video tape is played in which viewers die seven days after watching it. The reason for their death is because of an underlying curse caused by young adult/girl Sadako Yamamura (Samara, in the American version), who has in some way or another been through trauma and has unearthly powers. In order to save oneself from the curse once the film has been viewed, one must make a copy and

give it to someone else. Variants on this story differ greatly between the three renditions studied in this paper, yet this basic plot line stays the same.

Before diving into the differences between these three adaptations of the story it is important to understand Japanese Horror (J-Horror) from a historical perspective. As an interesting subgenre of horror, or genre unto itself according to some, J-Horror goes back to the early 19th century as well as countryside Japanese oral folktales. J-Horror varies significantly from western horror cinema as it works at a slower pace. Writer at the *Japan Times*, Eugene Thacker, describes J-Horror as the following:

“everything happens slowly, as in a dream or a trance state...characters are prey to the gradual and inevitable unfolding of strange events that will forever lay beyond the scope of their comprehension. The result is hypnotic: it’s as if the horror is stretched out and experienced in slow-motion.”¹

Differing from western horror films, J-Horror takes on a slower effect. There is less attention given to jump scares and sudden movements. J-Horror is more psychologically scary, rather than in your face terrifying.

The first major difference between Suzuiki’s novel and director Hideo Nakata’s original Japanese film version is the economic climate in which they were released. According to Reiko Aoki, writer for *The Japan Times*, Japan faced an economic downturn in the 1990’s.² Yet, the novel doesn’t point to Japan’s economic landscape as much as its film adaptation from 1998 does. This is because the “bubble burst” or beginning of Japan’s “Lost Decade” was the year

¹ Thacker, Eugene. “Defining J-Horror: The Terror of Deep Time.” *The Japan Times*, 2016. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/12/10/books/defining-j-horror-terror-deep-time/#.XmJ2G5NKg1g>.

² Aoki, Reiko. "A Demographic Perspective on Japan's "Lost Decades"." *Population and Development Review* 38 (2013): 103-12. Accessed March 6, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23655289.

1990. Suzuki wouldn't have been writing *Ringu* during the height of this economic fall because it was published in 1991, thus causing significant thematic differences between the two works.

To examine this further, it is important to look at the change in character roles between the novel and the Japanese film. Most importantly the protagonist of the story changes from male to female. In the original book, reporter Kazuyuki Asakawa is the uncle to one of the first to be deceased in the novel. He seeks the answer to his nephew's death. In addition, friend Ryūji Takayama (he) accompanies him in doing so. Importantly, Asakawa has a wife and child at home, who eventually see the cursed tape as well, causing direct familial determination to put a stop to it. This is the major difference between the original book and film adaptation. The film adaptation depicts reporter aunt, Reiko Asakawa, figuring out what is going on in this tape. Reiko is a single mom and when her son sees the tape it becomes more pressing for her to figure out the answer to the curse.

Though at face value small, the change in protagonist gender as well as family dynamic is fascinating and points directly to this time in Japanese history. According to author Murray Leeder,

“Like many J-Horror films, *Ring* involves a single mother and a broken home, and it reflects concerns about the loss of the traditional family structure as a consequence of Japan's diminishing place in the global world economy during its 'Lost Decade', as well as the influence of new media.”³

In congruence, author Reiko Aoki discusses the workforce at this time as well as fertility policies in Japan that shape this idea of a 'loss of the traditional family structure.' He suggests that workers had to “delay marriage and starting a family” because “long-term planning [had]

³ Leeder, Murray. *Horror Film: a Critical Introduction*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2018.

become very difficult for the younger generation” due to working conditions and societal values. Thus, this caused for less of a sense of the traditional home, and a loss of that Japanese cultural heritage. Additionally he states the following:

“family planning—aimed at lowering unwanted fertility—is part of a progressive ideology that is often associated with the liberation of women. It would follow that pronatal policies, in that respect the reverse of family planning, are antiprogressive: seeking to induce women to have children. (Indeed, some people, including politicians, claim that Japan's low fertility is a result of women's selfish behavior)”⁴

Further detailing some of the possible reasons that director Nakata changed the protagonist from a male to a female. This alteration is a direct parallel to the times. It is also an allegory to a change in familial structures within Japan. This not only calls out the importance of female agency, but a sign of the times.

Next, this paper will briefly examine the changes from J-horror to westernized hollywood horror within these film adaptations. Many cite that the most significant difference in the films is the sense of fright spectators experience. While *Ringu* views like a nightmare, *The Ring* has more of a Classical Hollywood Narrative and thus plot line. Author Michael Hann from *The Guardian* states that “*Ringu* seems almost like a David Lynch movie: a series of barely connected nightmares” and that it is “almost unanchored in reality.” Thus he feels it's harder to be scared by the film, whereas he argues; “there is an attempt at a plot in *The Ring*.”⁵ This is interesting, yet what's more important is the loss in the genre value. As stated above, J-Horror is known to be

⁴ Aoki, Reiko. "A Demographic Perspective on Japan's "Lost Decades"." *Population and Development Review* 38 (2013): 103-12. Accessed March 6, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23655289.

⁵ Hann, Michael. “The Ring: One Remake That Outshines Its Original | Michael Hann.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, June 25, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/jun/26/the-ring-remake-beats-original-ringu#:~:text=The%20difference%2C%20I%20think%2C%20is,coherence%20compared%20to%20its%20sequel>).

more psychologically based; it does not follow the standard narration and contain plot elements that western films do, which is the beauty of it.

One element that *The Ring* and *Ringu* take on but the original book does not is Samara herself. In the book, it is the smallpox virus and the rape of this girl that causes a curse; it is not her vengeful spirit doing the work. In these movies Samara physically comes out of the TV and it is the sight of her that kills her victims. In the first chapter of the book a man on a bike dies from her curse, “The man’s face was amazingly distorted. The only word that could describe his expression was astonishment. Both eyes were wide open and staring and his bright-red tongue was stuck in the back of his throat, blocking it, while saliva dropped from the corner of his mouth.”⁶ In changing the way death came to the story’s victims, J-Horror director and American directors were both able to make something scarier visually on screen than the book.

In conclusion, while considering the landscape of a film adaptation it is important to look at the political, social, and economical environments of the time and place in which the adaptations are being made. That being said, there is a lot to cover in the *Ringu* franchise and not nearly enough space to do so within a shorter paper. This piece touched on the different tones the book and original movie took on, and how they differed from one another based on Japan's economics and social issues in the 90's. The other important factor considered was to what extent the American version changed from the original and why that may have been. Lastly, the procuring cause of death between novel and film adaptations was examined based on visual terror.

Word count: 1437

⁶ Suzuki, Koji. *Ringu*. Translated by Robert B Rohmer and Glynne Walley. Kadokawa Shoten, Japan: Vertical, 1991.