

**SPECTERS OF MODERNITY:  
JAPANESE HORROR UNCOVERS ANXIETY  
FOR A POST-BUBBLE AMERICA**

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The fantastic, as an object and even mode of discourse, was closely affiliated with the instantiation of modernity in Japan, and that it has been mobilized to assert a mysteriousness if not exclusivity for modern Japan ever since...such a discourse might have shaped other modernities as well, which have gone unrecognized without the defamiliarization of modernity that an examination of Japan's case performs.

Gerald  
Figal<sup>1</sup>

The supernatural has indeed become a “mode of discourse” in Japan. Japanese cinema, especially the horror genre of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, is obsessed with spectral entities. In contrast, American cinema has never dealt with ghostliness in the same rigorous and self-identifying fashion. In order to understand modernity on a global scale, one might examine how the recent cultural exchange of Japanese horror films and their subsequent Hollywood re-makes represent a true “defamiliarization” of modernity for the former and yet another layer of repression by the latter. This article will look at how the containment of national identity in Japanese popular cinema often features ghostly forces that demonstrate the vacuous nature beneath the surface of this identity. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hollywood was not prepared to face these very postmodern anxieties and thus these particular films were re-imagined (I would claim re-repressed) to insert an authentic origin for the haunting. I argue that these specific alterations uncover a shared cultural anxiety: the fear that beneath all of the ostentatious nationalism there is nothing but an empty lacuna. As multiple bubbles collapse and economic hegemony fades for the U.S., these Japanese horror films could potentially shape the way Americans deal with their own

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

postmodern (ghostly) identity.

First, one must analyze the importance of phantasms in Japanese cultural history. By doing so, the reader will begin to recognize the pattern of dealing with the uncanny that is unique to Japan. I will then focus on how these ‘J-horror’ films have been re-imagined in the U.S. and why the Japanese mode of representing the uncanny (unlike, say, the Spanish modes of director Guillermo Del Toro) is translated and revised for audiences in the U.S. Finally, I will turn to the future and why, I believe, this exchange will continue to shape how Americans deal with their own repressed anxieties about national identity in the years ahead.

### **The “Ghostly” Discourse Surrounding Japanese Identity**

Ghosts are, I believe, the most prominent trope in Japanese cinema. What is “dead” in the modern era for Japan returns not as a didactic reminder or a hypocritical impulse to be purged (as in American horror cinema). Instead, the “dead” eternally return as echoes of a transient selfhood which forever elude the stasis of cinematic frames. Japanese films of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the recent wave of internationally popular horror films, cease to attempt sealing off modernist uncertainty; it is postmodern uncertainty that national identity was constructed against which thus returns from repression in order to thrive.

Japanese identity has been heavily created by both international forces (such as MacArthur and the Occupation’s “assistance” in a new post-war Japanese constitution) and national forces. This artifice has been labeled by psychoanalyst Takeo Doi as *tatema*.<sup>2</sup> During the Meiji Restoration, Japan required cohesiveness as a nation-state, something it had lacked through much of its history. Schools of thought like the Nishida philosophy of the Kyoto School supported such an ideological project. The reaction against this sort of empirical and artificial repression (one may also consider the institutionalization of the regional Shinto shrines here) was immediate.

Marilyn Ivy’s *Discourse of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*<sup>3</sup> broadens the concept of modernity and phantasm by arguing that the State project of creating a “whole” Japanese identity (a visible *kokutai*, or

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<sup>2</sup> Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Self*, trans. Mark Harbison (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Ivy, *Discourse of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

national essence) hinges on the uncanny sensation evoked by Japanese cultural works, most importantly (although she neglects adequate discussion of the form), film. She writes:

Despite [Japan's] labors to recover the past and deny the losses of 'tradition', modernist nostalgia must preserve, in many senses, the sense of absence that motivates its desire...[The Japanese] thematize loss in a variety of ways as they work inevitably to recover that loss. That work sometimes takes the guise of mourning, sometimes of recursive repetition, sometimes of remembrance or memorialization. And it also appears in the mode of forgetting, through moments of fetishistic disavowal.<sup>4</sup>

The "work" being done by the spectator, reminiscent of the Freudian *fort-da* game, is a pursuit of the phantoms on-screen; it is the pursuit of a "lost" tradition that must be absent in order for the audience to continually strive towards satisfaction. Steven Heine notes that in modern Japanese society "the center is deliberately displaced and disguised."<sup>5</sup> Ghosts are then essential (and, interestingly, desirable) to the State project because the Japanese subject is left chasing specters endlessly, working towards "reunion" with an artificial past, suspending the knowledge that what they pursue is not real nor can it ever be.

Ivy labels this process "vanishing," defining the concept as follows: "what (dis)embodies in its gerund from the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence, located at a point that both is and is not here in the repetitive process of absencing... their status is often ghostly."<sup>6</sup> H.D. Harootunian, in much the same vein as Ivy, locates this as a temporal "unevenness." He describes the State project of overcoming modernity as one that attempts to "freeze-dry the moment of cultural unevenness," seeing it as an attempt to "stave off death."<sup>7</sup> The figures being created are not just ghosts within the

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<sup>4</sup> Ivy, *Discourse of the Vanishing*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Heine, "Le-ism and the Discourse of Postmodernism," in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ivy, *Discourse of the Vanishing*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> H.D. Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and*

narrative but also (and this is essential) Derridean ghosts through their unstable representation. All of this stems from an unsettled relationship to the past, to the “origins” of modern Japan. Harootunian views Japanese discourse as:

An encounter with the realm of the uncanny: the same but yet the not-same, the past that was still present, the modern and its other... the precinct of the uncanny where modern Japan confronts its double, where the present encounters a past that in all respects is similar but is now *out of time*. In modern society this is precisely how the appeal to memory works against the claims of history.<sup>8</sup>

Japanese cinema often asks society to remember something that it cannot, which takes the form of history, a constructed and artificial narrative.

The ghostliness that pervades is thus formed on cyclical loss. Just as one believes they have grasped history, or have seen *kokutai* manifested in an image, it vaporizes into thin air; the camera shifts and the spectator is no longer certain of their position in relation to the cinematic space. The frames of ghost films such as *Ugestu*<sup>9</sup> and *Otoshiana*<sup>10</sup> are consistently violated and found to be unsatisfactory.

#### **The Shadow Self in a “Lost Decade”**

The apotheosis of the fantastic in Japanese cinema came at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the surge of horror films by directors such as Takashi Miike (*Audition*, *Chakushin Ari*) and Takashi Shimizu (*Ju-On*, *Marebito*). This climactic moment occurred amidst a variety of social anxieties, including the hyper-technologization of everyday existence and the so-called “lost decade” that followed the economic bubble burst of the late 1980s. The Self was called into question more forcefully than ever and the modern schism grew ever more pronounced. Valdine Clemens in her *The Return of the Repressed* writes:

A ‘national brand’ of Gothic fiction seems to proliferate whenever

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*Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 316.

<sup>8</sup> Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, p. 321 (emphasis mine).

<sup>9</sup> *Ugestu*, dir. Kenji Mizoguchi (1953).

<sup>10</sup> *Otoshiana*, dir. Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1962

the political and economic dominance that a given country has acquired appears to be passing its peak and about to decline... when reevaluation of the national identity seems to take on a particular urgency.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s, the economy that was impossible to sink, sank; the Japanese economic surge and apparent dominance, after a provocative decade of investment in American real estate, began to slow drastically. There was, apparently, a ceiling to Japanese growth and a number of deficiencies were revealed, including: pressure by foreign countries for Japan to pay and maintain their own military, unsatisfactory living conditions (overcrowding), and an uneven distribution of wealth, among others. This slowdown was accompanied by a self-recognition of Japan's out-of-control Westernization. The question was becoming ever more prevalent: what does it mean to be Japanese?

Films such as *Ringu* and *Chakushin ari* (which, significantly, were both remade in America) embraced this tension through the omnipresent motif of the ghost. The many frames of Japanese society (television screens, most prominently) became portals for the supernatural. Instead of being safe places where "traditional" ideology is contained (as in the early cinema of Japan, as discussed by Darrell William Davis)<sup>12</sup>, television screens became (in a self-reflexive fashion) dangerously unstable places where ghosts travel freely between reality and the imagination. The resounding image is of the eerie girl (or *onryō*, "vengeful ghost") with long black hair in *Ringu* who literally crawls out of the screen and into the world of the narrative (threatening always to go one step further and crawl into the sacred space of the spectator).

What is essential to note is the spectator's role as detective (reminiscent of Edogawa Rampo's tales) in these films. The film is clearly unstable, the images shaky and broken apart by static, but the spectator is expected to believe they are gaining clarity as the story of the traumatic past

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<sup>11</sup> Valdine Clemens, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from the Castle of Otranto to Alien* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

becomes progressively clearer. Miike's *Chakushin ari*<sup>13</sup> expects his audience, for most of the film, to blame the abusive mother for the viral phone calls; only at the denouement do we realize we have been fooled. It was the perverse daughter that was responsible all along. The past is forever eluding us, and the "origins" of the haunting are just out of reach. This echoes the Japanese tradition of seeking to create and represent the country's "origins" in vain.

American horror cinema has its fair share of MacGuffins but the difference is that in America the origin is always assumed to be real. Americans are always puritanically repressing their own "evil" or "deviance," but the monsters that return from our unconscious are not manifestations of modernist uncertainty (as in Japanese film), but rather of an authentically corrupt self that can be located at an exact moment in a Manichean split (Jason's mother became monstrous because of the inattentive children, Michael Myers became monstrous because of his own sexual frustration).

The "monstrous," as emblematic of a collective, reveals a very different paradigm in American horror film than it does in Japanese film. William Chapman observed in *Inventing Japan* that there has never been a real revolution in Japan.<sup>14</sup> The forces of collectivity permeate Japanese society from religion to politics and there (as of yet) have emerged only minor uprisings that were quickly settled. Contrastingly, America is built on the ideology of the individual versus the collective. The freedom of the subject to take on an oppressive whole is essential to the American way of life, from the Constitution to the American Dream of capitalist triumph thanks to Yankee ingenuity. An American spectator seeks enjoyment in watching an individual overcome the demons of society (look no further than Clover's archetypal Final Girl for example, *Halloween*'s Laurie survives the onslaught of raw sexuality because of her own purity).<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, discussing the detective in a postmodern society in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, argues that Western filmmakers cannot help but pit an individual against a larger system (itself a symptom of late capitalism):

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<sup>13</sup> *Chakushin ari*, dir. Takashi Miike (2003).

<sup>14</sup> William Chapman, *Inventing Japan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

The journalist-witness, whatever his professional camaraderie is alone; the collective exists on the other side, as his object, in the twin forms of the insurgents and the forces of order...(in this) sadly and evidently seem to lie in some generalized ideological incapacity of North Americans to imagine collective processes in the first place, and their tendency, in consequence, to fall back on the emotional securities of individualizing narrative paradigms wherever possible.<sup>16</sup>

The Japanese individual is much less privileged in Japanese horror films (and, I would argue, the national cinema at large). It is collectivity itself that subsumes the narrative. The haunting of society is ubiquitous.

Miike's *Chakushin ari* provides its spectator with a way to visualize this collective haunting: unsuspecting teens, embroiled in the system that Jameson discusses by relying on cell phones for communication, receive a call that alerts them to the time at which they will die. The death comes in the relatively near future at the hands of a malevolent ghost. The protagonist Yumi acts as the "journalist-witness," attempting to save herself by finding the "origin" of this universal haunting (or "technological plague," another trope one will find pervading Japanese horror). When Yumi does find the corpse of the supposedly abusive parent, the problem is assumed to be settled. Miike, however, complicates this (as he often does) by defying expectations and reversing what the audience was led to believe: it was the abusive daughter all along that was responsible.

These films about "collective hauntings" often involve a (mis)identification of the corporeal as a resolution (a metaphorical return to origins). A reunion with the body, the source (be it mother in *Chakushin ari* or child in *Ringu*), appears on the surface to release the characters and the Japanese spectator from postmodern uncertainty. Yet, it is not over. Yumi is revealed at the very end to be inhabited by the spirit of the evil girl, murdering the detective to whom she has grown emotionally attached. There is thus revealed circularity, an all-pervasive breakdown between the past and the present. One cannot locate the divide itself or the original trauma/abuse. Instead, Miike manifests modern uncertainty on the screen, asking the spectator to play the role of "journalist-witness" only to realize

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<sup>16</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 40-41.

that they themselves are a part of the collective they are trying to understand. The film ends this metaphysical design with the credits accompanied by an eerie cell phone ring, so faint as to give the effect that someone in the audience is receiving the fatal call.

The American remake *One Missed Call*<sup>17</sup> emphasizes the major differences in American audience expectations. Director Eric Valette does not jump from character to character to show, as Miike does, how this is an equal-opportunity haunting. The film instead focuses on Beth (playing the Americanized role of Yumi) and follows her alone. Her ingenuity allows her to fight the evil force successfully. The distinction from Miike's film is twofold: Beth is victimized and there is no endless chain of blame but rather a clear cause and effect to be resolved. Beth is identified as the child in an abusive mother-daughter relationship and the conclusion finds her a witness to the detective's murder (in no way is she linked to the deviant spirit of the girl). The mother returns at the close of the film, dressed in saintly white with a splendid maternal glow, to destroy the evil child and restore order. There is clearly a resolution. Beth comes to terms with her own abuse, and is free to forgive. The film ends with the same faint ring to alert the audience to their own implication, but it utterly fails to achieve the same chilling sensation. The reaction is rather one of bemusement or confusion. The individual has triumphed – there is no reason whatsoever to believe that the collective will continue. The narrative and the identity of the characters have been sealed off and framed.

#### **Takashi Shimizu and the Violation (or Re-Inscription) of Frames**

American horror film attempts to deal with a troubled present by addressing the traumatic moment of the past: the divergence from our original City on the Hill promise, issues of abandonment, issues of abuse, and so on. In essence, American horror is obsessed with the birth of evil and how we can address (and then repress) the seeds we have sown. Japanese horror film attempts to deal with a fatalistic future (the call that alerts the teens to their imminent demise) by understanding the past only to discover that the past cannot be understood (framed). The past invades senselessly upon the present and will continue to do so into the future, not for didactic reasons but because there is no solid identification to locate, only the modern schism. The “monster” cannot be purged or repressed because of its very devastating spectral nature. The present is contaminated

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<sup>17</sup> *One Missed Call*, dir. Eric Valette (2008).



with digitalized images of the past that cannot hope to move beyond their “phantasmagoric” elements. When this phantasmagoria has become divorced from a notion of authenticity within a national past (which it always-already was), it can be seen as nothing more than fantasy (the truth behind Japanese identity and, for that matter, all essentialized nationalisms). The ghosts are not of a specific moment but eternal, linked forever to the temporal restraints of being human. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on* (2000) and his subsequent hugely successful American re-make *The Grudge* (2004).

*Ju-on*<sup>18</sup> concerns a house that is cursed by a past disturbance that returns and “infects” anyone who enters. The narrative involves a female ghost with long black hair (no surprise here), Kayako, and her ghost son, Toshio, who both haunt the visitors of the house (and proceed to consume them). The assumed origin of the haunting is the murder of these two figures by a vicious husband who discovers that Kayako is in love with another man. In fact, he claims of Toshio: “That is not my son.” The boy, who keeps resurfacing, is a perfect signification of what I have been discussing: a past that is not recognized as “authentic” (he is born of another) but also strangely represents the future, although suspended indefinitely. Toshio can thus be read as floating, the specter of modernity in its visualized form. Neither dead nor alive, neither authentic nor detached, his ghost is always vacillating between the past, present, and future.

Toshio is often seen with a cat that was also brutally slaughtered and they begin, as the film progresses, to overlap (the boy gives cat-like yowls) and illuminate the repetition compulsion that *Ju-on* is grounded upon. In a scene reminiscent of Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, the protagonist Rika wakes to a large number of black cats infesting her bedroom. This uncanny event symbolizes the persistent reemergence of the traumatic moment, over and over, leaving traces of a Nietzschean eternal return. The trauma does not simply return to haunt one person (as in *The Grudge*,<sup>19</sup> where we find Karen navigating this crisis on her own). It has apparently returned an infinite number of times, moving endlessly outside of the domestic space and threatening to spill over into the real world of the spectator. This carries with it what I have labeled “feedback.” Whenever Rika gets close to the “source” of the haunting there is a ringing sound or (elsewhere in films such as Shimizu’s *Marebito*) the film itself becomes disrupted by static. The

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<sup>18</sup> *Ju-on*, dir. Takashi Shimizu (2000).

<sup>19</sup> *The Grudge*, dir. Takashi Shimizu (2004).

output (present) moves too close to the source (past) and thus time lapses on itself and, through its own technologization, can at last be visualized. The Japanese horror film is always concerned with these issues of temporality and the anxiety that is created when they are found to be merging, repeating themselves and layering back over one another. Every character we encounter, regardless of their affiliation, cannot escape the branching arms of the collective haunting. It becomes dubious that the murder itself was the catalyst for this haunting and not some essential breach in human nature. One is left with the impression that this ghost has been here for much longer than the trauma of Kayako's murder.

Frames play a key role in addressing this essential breach. In the conclusion, when Rika is fleeing from Kayako for the final time, Rika sees her reflection as the image of Kayako. This is yet another trope that we can find in the Japanese horror films of the 1990s and one which accompanies the final revelation: the Japanese subject itself is ghostly. At last, when the ghost is revealed in its full glory, it is not simply of a supernatural realm but it exists everywhere. This spectral being is symptomatic of a large number of factors and speaks directly to the conditions of Japanese society. Here we find an identity that has become "phantasmagoric" in the face of extreme technologization. Economic factors contribute greatly to this transformation. Capitalism threatens the collective with complete Westernization but the Japanese refusal to embrace capitalist lust in its entirety, preserving the (staged) presence of national dignity, is a denial of the animal urges associated with consumerism. Thus, in an interesting paradigm, the Japanese consumer becomes a commodity herself, packaging her own "Japanese-ness" and performing the ritual movements that have been manifested on-screen, actively participating in a filming of the Self that is in line with the filming of the Nation. This identity, however, is not a mere modern invention. Its ghostliness relates directly to the fundamental moment of self-identification, the fear of that fragmentary state that preceded Japan's formation of a cohesive national identity.

The television screen works in similar ways to the mirror. What has been recorded and framed as a distinct history pushes outward into the present and refuses stasis. Contrastingly, in Hollywood's *The Grudge*, American Karen looks in the mirror and sees exactly what we might expect: herself. The American subject is not ghostly but secure in its own identity, even when threatened by forces it cannot understand. Likewise, the detectives of *The Grudge* use scrapbooks to understand the murder and the house's colorful history. The frames of these photographs provide a

gateway to the past that is beneficial. *Ju-on*, however, utilizes the photograph as a fragmented piece of history that must be refigured (it is literally cut up into pieces) and reinterpreted *ad nauseum*. This trope will appear again and again in Japanese horror films, including *Tomie*, a powerful look at female identity in modern Japan. *Ju-on* as a cinematic text acts in this same fashion, its syuzhet being broken into pieces for the spectator to try and re-organize into a coherent whole. *The Grudge*, meanwhile, stays focused on the trajectory of the individual and the American spectator is allowed to view the images with confidence and never question these problems of history and representation.

Freud wrote in his essay, "The Uncanny," that "this uncanny is nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."<sup>20</sup> Lacan would later contend that this "old-established" moment was before the mirror stage, a moment before the self was understood as a coherent whole (the development of the Ego). Mladen Dolar argues that this moment of understanding the Self as whole is, in fact, the primary repression. In "I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding Night: Lacan and the Uncanny" it states "and it was only in that no-man's-land that [the uncanny] could produce anxiety and doom the subject to utter insecurity, to *floating without a point of anchor*."<sup>21</sup> What has been repressed in *Ju-on* (and thus returns in the form of specters) is this former state of "floating without a point of anchor" which the collective has desperately tried to cover-up by creating a national narrative of "Japaneseness."

American audiences are forever repressing this very modern uncertainty beneath layers of identified trauma. In *The Grudge*, director Shimizu locates this Western tendency and provides the American audience with a clear traumatic moment that Karen can deal with and then move on. The predictable return of the supernatural at the conclusion (the boyfriend grabs Karen's arm from beneath the sheet covering his corpse) is ineffective because, once again, the individual has already confronted the troublesome past and suffered for her nation's sins.

In addition, *The Grudge* gives us what *Ju-on* willfully does not

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<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 941.

<sup>21</sup> Mladen Dolar, "'I Shall be With You on Your Wedding Night': Lacan and the Uncanny," *Rendering the Real* 58 (1991): 21.

Toshio's "real" father. The object of Kayako's desire is Peter, a professor from America. The West, imposing its own physical presence and ideologies on the East, is thus the cause of the family breakdown and the effective haunting. The American spectator is asked, along with Karen, to confront their own imperialist past and feel the guilt at the sins they have committed. The past, after emerging from its frame to plague us, is safely returned to its place in history at the conclusion of *The Grudge*; Karen's boyfriend is taken as reparations and she has been forced to come to terms with American atrocities. Karen watches the murder of Kayako and Toshio (and the cat) as a horrified witness.

Jameson's argument about the unfortunate Western "journalist-witness" applies very well to Karen. She investigates the "collective" sins in an individualistic narrative as if able to achieve a position outside of the collective. It is in many ways a Christian narrative about suffering and confession. Rika, however, cannot hope to be a mere witness. *Ju-on* is not a film about Rika, but a film about all of Japan (a nightmarish Zen where everything is equally terrorized). This distinction is crucial. It is not the collective haunting the individual but rather the collective haunting the collective. The murderous husband reaches towards us in the audience at the conclusion, aiming to kill the spectator; likewise, Kayako opens her eyes at the last moment of the film to stare directly at each of us. The danger is always threatening to break the plain of cinema/reality and enter into the actual realm of Tokyo. The frame is ultimately compromised.

The distinction between these different hauntings reveals that the uncanny is not a universal concept. While it is clearly linked to modernity and questions of identity, the uncanny varies with the unique national experience of the modern (as open-ended as Freud intended when he concludes his definition of the uncanny experience with "and so on"). Americans individually dread their own deviance from the original promises of the country, while the Japanese collectively dread the stability of their State-imposed collectivity. The final question still remains: why, at the turn of the century, did American producers begin importing these films? Why do they still hold such fascination with audiences in the U.S.?

### **The Post-Bubble U.S. Horror Film**

One might surmise that it is purely a novelty item that American audiences crave (an exercise along the vein of Roland Barthes' *The Empire*

*of Signs*)<sup>22</sup>; or, perhaps, it is a way for the spectator to feel safe: it's *them*, not *us*, who has the identity crisis. We know who *we* are as a nation. While these reasons likely hold some truth, I contend that American audiences from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century recognize themselves in these ghost narratives. The original Japanese versions of these horror films are becoming ever more popular in translation. The constant repression of the unstable foundations America was built upon (seen most directly in the remakes of films such *Ju-on*) is beginning to lose its ideological control and the domestic return of hypocrisy from the 1980s slasher films is being replaced by a return of spectral national identity in the 1990s vis-à-vis the import of Japanese horror films. In a decade when violence and sex were becoming ever more prevalent in society and technology was overtaking our lives (read the anxieties of Y2K here), it was not enough to ask how to go back; we were forced to at least begin to ask: what is there to go back to? Was that tradition of "patriotism" ever anything more than an illusion? Following the presidency of George W. Bush and the smoke and mirrors of hyper-patriotism, these questions will only become more problematic (and, I believe, the Japanese horror film will only become more significant). Dale Wright, referring to the West's response for Japanese philosopher Nishitani, portends this important moment: "How will you (the Westerner) respond when you discover that your deepest thoughts – even your new postmodern ones – lack solid foundations and succumb to the dismantling effects of impermanence foretold by the Buddhas of history?"<sup>23</sup> The answer is fascination and anxiety towards the contemporary Japanese horror film by the American spectator.

At the moment, however, the American audience clings to its tendency to perpetually (re)repress what once returned. One need only look as far as the thoroughly Americanized *One Missed Call* to see that the American spectator still wants a trauma they can locate for an individual to face (a perverse little girl's murderous rage) and resolve (the glorious return of the saintly mother and family harmony). The Japanese horror film has introduced the issues into our culture of an artificial history and an artificial collective identity that terrifies the modern Ego and threatens to send the

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<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>23</sup> Dale S. Wright, "Tradition Beyond Modernity: Nishitani's Response to the Twentieth Century," in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 294-295.

modern subject to a time before the mirror stage; in short, the possibility for a truly “postmodern” horror film. Where we go from here in culturally facing our own ghosts will help define what it means to be “American” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.