
Acoustic Infidelities

Sounding the Exchanges between J-Horror and H-Horror Remakes

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*While her friends and co-workers continue to inexplicably disappear from Tokyo, Michi hurries into work and sees her boss standing against the far wall of his office. As she approaches and calls to him, she suddenly realizes that what she is seeing is only the shadowy outline of a man burned into the surface of the wall. The soundtrack falls silent as she studies the mark... then a single voice, isolated in the surround speakers, whispers: "Help Me." The disembodied voice floats in the space as Michi rushes from the room, closing the door behind her.*¹

- *Pulse* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001)

In the post-*Psycho* era, horror films began to challenge what had once been considered 'good sound.' During the classical Hollywood period, a variety of 'good sound' practices evolved, including synchronous and faithful production recording, unobtrusive mixing techniques,

1. In her article "The Voice in Cinema: Articulation of Body and Space," Mary Ann Doane argues that sound in classical Hollywood cinema "sustains a limited number of relationships between voice and image" (34). Specifically, dialogue is generally limited to the left, centre or right channels in relation to a character's position on the screen. The practice developed as a means of minimizing the possibility of breaking the cinematic illusion for filmgoers. In *Pulse*, the unprecedented placement and movement of the voice is intentionally disruptive, occurring late in the film and disconnecting the voice from the body. As the same two words of dialogue are repeated, the voice moves hauntingly from the surrounds, to left and right channels, and finally to the front channel, affirming the sense of disembodiment.

and consistent patterning of sound effects and musical scoring, among others. The current practice of horror films is to intentionally violate these expectations to plunge filmgoers into a *cinema of disorientation*, evoking states of fear, anxiety, terror, and dread. This article considers the process by which contemporary Japanese horror (or J-horror) films are remade into Hollywood horror-thrillers (or H-horror), and explores the new perceptual challenges that emerge as the soundtracks are reconceptualized in ways that are often unfaithful to past sound traditions and practices. My aim is to specifically address the differences between narrative traditions and characterizations of evil, the influence of digital technologies, and the transnational exchanges between Japanese and American filmmaking as they relate to sound design. With regard to genre, this migration of J-horror audio techniques has served to revitalize horror within Hollywood, opening the door to expanded conceptions of what is horrific. Through the formal and thematic construction of new hybrid soundtracks, H-horror remakes, like their predecessors, ponder the dark side of globalism as it has revised traditional expectations surrounding economics, gender roles, and cultural and social exchanges. In the end, these films leave us with the sense that we are all haunted by the consequences of modernity.²

2. As sound theorist James Lastra notes: "...the experience we describe as 'modernity'—an experience of profound temporal and spatial displacements, of often accelerated and diversified shocks, of new modes of sociality and of experiences—has been

Horror Exchanges

Mirroring the low-budget production and distribution models of American independent horror films of the 1970s, J-horror filmmakers over the past two decades have embraced new technologies and processes. These include using low-cost video cameras and non-linear editing systems to shoot and assemble their films, digital mixing software and recording hardware to create the soundtracks, and internet software and sites to distribute and exhibit the final results. In doing so, Japanese filmmakers fostered the rise of a cinematic movement that has redefined the horror genre through innovative narrative strategies and idiosyncratic (and highly-digitized) uses of sound and image. Historically, these films were produced quickly, shown globally (on DVD and the internet), and constructed using narrative modularity, so audiences could ‘graze’ on particularly horrific or uncanny scenes (Wada-Marciano 5).

Subsequently, the efforts of J-horror filmmakers repositioned Japanese cinema in the global marketplace, transcending previous limitations of cultural specificity, while expanding the models of media distribution to include platforms such as video games, *anime* and printed comics, or *manga*. J-horror added a bit of blood spatter to Japan’s “pink globalization,” which was defined by the resurgence of interest in Japanese cultural products, led by the popularity of *Pokémon* and *Hello Kitty* products and media (Yano 153).

Visually, J-horror films often incorporate surveillance footage, digital ‘errors’ and CGI innovations, which challenge the very nature of ‘film’ as a medium in that the image is no longer captured on celluloid. Simultaneously, J-horror soundtracks feature abstract audio designs, digital residue and artifacts, ambient music scores, and jarring editing patterns reminiscent of the French New Wave that challenge perception, offering new avenues into the uncanny. Films such as *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), *Pulse*, *Dark Water* (Hideo Nakata, 2002), and *Ju-on* (Takashi Shimizu, 2003) reconsider the traditional modes of storytelling and sound practice so filmgoers must constantly re-evaluate reading protocols and expectations as related to temporality, synchronization, causality, and sound localization. This shifting terrain provides one of the great pleasures of watching horror films. Filmgoers are never fully aware of what lurks around the next corner, partly because sound and music do not function as reliably as they might in a classical Hollywood film, which would typically use a highly-structured and ‘transparent’ musical score to provide a sense of ‘des-

shaped decisively by the technological media” (4). J-horror sound cleverly offers a critical engagement of this experience while simultaneously providing an effective example of it.

tiny’ or ‘fate’ (Bordwell 33). As music theorist Peter Hutchings notes, sound and music in horror is purposefully “intrusive” and can “manifest in shocking or discordant” ways to “amplify visual moment of shock or suspense” (224).

The local and global success of J-horror garnered the attention of major Hollywood studios, which in recent years purchased the remake rights to a number of the films, including *Ringu* and *Ju-on*. These films were remade by Hollywood studios as *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) and *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004), respectively, and both have since been serialized. During the remake process, there were expected revisions to casting and language, but surprisingly, the modular and non-linear narrative strategies and idiosyncratic audio and visual approaches remained somewhat intact. H-horror thrillers immediately habitualized these disjunctive strategies, yet reformulated their function as part of the narrative mystery that filmgoers were encouraged to solve to reach the ‘truth’ behind a supernatural occurrence.

It is important to acknowledge that the J-horror cycle is not entirely independent of H-horror, but rather, that the two are historically bound through patterns of borrowing, homage, and self-reflexivity. As Jay McRoy, editor of *Japanese Horror Cinema*, notes in his essay on *Ju-on*, J-horror directors like Takashi Shimizu (*Ju-on* and *The Grudge*) readily acknowledge the connection to Hollywood films, citing film series like *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* as models for his J-horror narratives (177). McRoy aptly argues that the resulting J-horror hybrids are connected to tensions within Japanese culture related to fears of losing “Japanese tradition” and the unforeseen complications of an “ever-emerging technological, global and postmodern Japan” (176). The description of the scene from *Pulse* that introduces this article exemplifies the new tension. In the scene, the white-collar boss of a small Tokyo company collapses into a digital shadow, losing all form. What remains is the disembodied echo of his voice, processed to sound like a recording on an answering machine. The recording and its placement is particularly telling, suggesting in its design a sense of isolation and disorientation due to technological intervention.³ This evacuation of the self through sound and image is a multifaceted commentary on modern Japan, underscoring the loss of human connection in Tokyo’s overwhelming urban landscape, the shifting of gender roles in the workplace, and Japan’s fracturing economic foundation, which currently favours the development of new technologies and media over traditional manufactur-

3. This sound usage offers a complication to Michel Chion’s *acousmètre* or voice “that is heard without its cause or source being seen” (18). The displacement is offscreen in the spiritual dimension as well as the dimension of the recording medium itself—the answering machine tape.

ing. It is ironic that J-horror films, which so vividly express the anxieties around Japan's post-war loss of cultural identity, have been the very means by which the country has enjoyed renewed recognition in the global marketplace of film, mass media, and art culture.

more focused on the nature of societal notions of right and wrong. The harbingers of revenge are typically supernatural entities such as ghosts, serial killers or monsters, but are injected into the narrative to represent a kind of ultimate consequence. The roots of the revenge formulas in Amer-

These forces become a kind of rolling dissonance, like an unresolved musical chord that leads to a new kind of horror, madness and apocalyptic dread.

The Tradition of Japanese Horror

In order to unpack the sonic exchanges between J-horror and H-horror, it is important to first examine Japanese tradition as related to the mode of storytelling within the horror genre. The “‘avenging ghost’ motif” has long been “a staple within Japanese literary and dramatic arts” (McRoy 175). These stories are often informed by various religious traditions of Shintoism, Buddhism and Christianity, and revolve around spirits (often female) seeking revenge. It is important to note that infidelity is often the trigger for the initial murder or set of circumstances that leads to a haunting by a vengeful ghost, which is the case in *The Grudge* cycle.⁴ Nonetheless, within Shintoist traditions, a central belief is that spirits (souls) and ghosts have established a constant presence in the world around us (the spirit world's version of interconnection). In J-horror films, the scope of an avenging spirit's revenge is far-reaching. At first, the spirit may seek to destroy the person responsible for his or her untimely demise, but then the revenge spreads. Soon, everyone within the narrative world is at risk (perhaps even filmgoers themselves), which functions as a kind of warning about complicity in the changes brought about by globalism. By contrast, American horror films tend to focus acts of revenge on a particular subset of victims, typically youths involved in morally questionable activities (e.g., drug use, premarital sex, and the like). The warning is

ican cinema have been shaped by a matrix of influences related to paradigms of justice, gender dynamics related to power, and cultural and religious norms. Historically, these factors heavily influenced the creation of the Production Code, which, over the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s, established the moral consequences for characters within classical Hollywood cinema. While the Production Code has been defunct for some time, it can be argued that filmgoers still establish many genre expectations based on the historical poetics that arose from these embedded standards. For instance, in recent horror films, the evil figure is subdued in the end by the “final girl,” who survives because she has maintained her virtue or discovered the “truth” behind a particular injustice (Clover 82).

The J-horror tradition subverts these expectations, offering a more frightening prospect—that evil is unbound. Supernatural forces in J-horror do not adhere to narrative containment or historical poetics; they possess their own logic based loosely on Japanese folklore, which can prove disorienting to audiences both inside and outside Japan. These forces permeate all levels of filmmaking from story structure to sound design, and become a kind of rolling dissonance, like an unresolved musical chord that leads to a new kind of horror, madness and apocalyptic dread. It is important to note that many J-horror films end with the suggestion of an annihilated world. The connections to fears of nuclear destruction are implicit, given the history of Japan since the end of World War II, and these underpinnings hint at much broader global considerations of the horrific, despite the cultural specificity of the films. In keeping with the tropes of Hollywood horror, the remakes do limit the reach of annihilation to a subset of characters, often leaving the rest of the world unaffected, but as ex-

4. In *The Grudge* cycle, an unemployed husband finds his wife's diary and discovers she has become infatuated with one of her instructors at the university. In a rage, the husband accuses her of infidelity, and brutally kills her, their son, and the family cat before committing suicide. The wife returns as the dark-haired wrath to seek revenge, while her son's spirit merges with the cat, screaming and yowling from the afterlife.

plained later in this article, this shift is not entirely optimistic or contained.

J-Horror Sound and Audio Infidelities

In J-horror, spiritual forces haunt the highest and lowest registers of the soundtrack's dynamic range, and, as a result, the spirit presence exists as a kind of deep structure, penetrating the entire story world and the lives of those within it. In general, the hierarchy of sound—dialogue, music and effects—is re-organized to create a sense of imbalance. In particular, *Ju-on* engages in a shifting pattern

view"). This strategy establishes the location of the story and links it to a quiet frustration and, more often, to brutal outbursts of rage. As many sound designers are fond of saying, sound can hold the "voodoo of the place"—its emotional soul (Haeny). In *Ju-on*, a Tokyo home sheds its domestic purpose to become the site of a haunting, retaining the supernatural imprint (or stain) of the violence and aftermath of a husband murdering his family. As many scholars have noted, Japanese cinema often engages the home as a microcosm of the social and cultural changes brought on by the shifting roles of women and men in the Japanese workplace (McRoy 176). The home is therefore



of sound design drawn from three sets of sound elements: first, ambient effects (such as bird songs, room tone, and city backgrounds) are used to emphasize domestic and urban realities; second, 'jolts' of low-frequency sounds (such as discordant musical tones and ambiences) are engaged in order to trigger anxiety, and; third, shards of high frequency sound effects (such as chimes, violin strikes and vocalizations) punctuate the soundtrack in order to intrigue and shock filmgoers. This approach to sound design forces filmgoers to constantly re-adjust their subjective positioning as they attempt to reconcile the extremes of the sound spectrum as if they were affixed to a swinging pendulum.

Overall, *Ju-on* is a surprisingly quiet film. The ambient sounds of birds, gentle wind and even street noises are understated in the overall mix. The location sound and postproduction sound effects are pristinely recorded and the emotional intentions are deliberate and contemplative. Hideo Nakata, the director of *Ringu*, identifies this approach as the "aesthetics of subtraction," noting that repressing sound can create a kind of "quiet" beauty ("Inter-

already a charged site for critiques of isolation and domestic anxiety. *Ju-on* establishes a template for sound design that emphasizes wind, bird songs, and the creaking movement of the home's wooden construction, evoking the unsettling sense of a ship on a rolling sea. Thematically, the intent is to indicate that this platform upon which the family unit is built is unstable and thus dangerous. To extend this sense of danger, low frequency rumbles are brought into the mix during the deaths in order to link the spiritual presence to the instability of the location, which could be any house or all houses in Tokyo.

Low Frequency Effects Re-Mixed

In the process of remaking *Ju-on*, *The Grudge* takes up the "quiet" pattern of sound design but re-conceptualizes it, adding more structured layers of music and sound effects to the ambient and contemplative 'silences,' in particular offering more extensive use of low-frequency effects and music (set in relief against high-frequency ef-

fects). In the past, many Hollywood sound mixers reserved the use of subwoofer effects for specific moments in a film. For instance, a low-end thud might be combined with a door slam in order to punctuate the finality of the gesture. Historically, sustained use of low frequency effects was often avoided for fear that the optical medium would be overwhelmed by the signal, leading to distortion or audio masking in exhibition venues.⁵ In H-horror remakes, however, characters live and die by the subwoofer. This remix strategy is in part an overcompensation in relation to the Japanese “aesthetics of subtraction,” which challenges the Hollywood ‘rule’ to cover all silences with sound. The re-

protective mechanism causes humans and animals alike to freeze in the presence of low-register sounds, fostering hypersensitivity as a means of assessing threats. In H-horror remakes, low-frequency sounds signify a threat not just to the life of a single character, but also to the entire collective of characters in the film (and even the audience in the theatre). The approach is viscerally effective in creating anxiety and horror. It is also thematically resonant, offering a cue to an unseen and uncontainable threat—the grudge that the anguished soul repeats over and over as it tries to break the Karmic cycle.⁶

I would further argue that in place of the apocalyptic



conceptualized soundtracks also embrace the flexibility of the new digital multichannel sound formats, which offer clear separation of low-frequency signals into a dedicated speaker, thus avoiding the previous limitations of optical sound. The resulting mash-up between J-horror sound and H-horror leads to new visceral and thematic implications that are uniquely transnational. In the first sequence of *The Grudge*, home healthcare worker Yoko (Yoko Maki) is led to her death by the sound of deep thuds—a mix of knocks, creaks and ominous low-frequency tones. Viscerally, this emphasis on low-frequency sound is used to evoke primal mechanisms of fear. One study related to psychoacoustics associates this response to the concept of “vestigial reflexes,” which come from ancestral responses to environmental dangers from animals and the weather (Lang 137). This

endings in J-horror films, which provide an effect of sickening realization of inevitable annihilation, H-horror remakes displace this sense of dread into the soundtrack design, depositing it in the lowest registers of film sound. Both *Ju-on* and *Ringu* employ open-ended conclusions. In *Ju-on*, we see shots of an empty world much like the final shots in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), implying that the stain has spread across all of Tokyo and perhaps even the world. In *Ringu*, we see the reporter’s car driving into the distance as she intends to pass along the killer videotape to her parents. The intertextual reference to the *Terminator* franchise (James Cameron, 1984 and 1991), and specifically to the notion of ‘Judgment Day,’ cannot be missed in the visual design. However, both of these endings are absent from the

5. Masking refers to a condition in which one sound may cover another and render it inaudible or unintelligible. For instance, a low frequency rumble may mask mid-range dialogue. This problem has been mitigated somewhat in the digital age as sound signals have been separated.

6. This low-frequency sound technique recently appeared in *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2009) as a cue to the supernatural ‘events’ that infected the lives of a young couple in Southern California, reinforcing its status as a new code of horror sound design. It should also come as no surprise that this film also deals with issues of fidelity and trust.

remakes; rather, the dread is transformed and integrated into these films through sustained patterns of low-frequency effects and other sound elements. The apocalyptic dread is not a sickening surprise as it is in J-horror, but rather, a sustained state of anxiety with aesthetic and thematic intents that position the threat in the present rather than the future. In part, this is due to Hollywood's reluctance to engage in apocalyptic fatalism, which dampens box office profits and often mutes the possibility of franchises and sequels. More importantly, though, this exchange is indicative of the religious and cultural differences between Eastern and Western conceptions of death and the afterlife. As previously noted, the presence of spirits (ancestral and otherwise) is accepted as a part of Japanese thinking and culture; but for the benefit of North American audiences, Hollywood films must work to explain this notion through the formal aspects of the film medium without being too specific to one particular religion or political agenda. When a film cannot show a CGI version of heaven, it relies on sound design to establish a sense of the ethereal or the 'other side.' Through sound design and multichannel sound placement, the afterlife is superimposed as a kind of sonic shroud over the diegesis as well as over the theatrical exhibition space, and in this way, the sounds become the ghosts. These sonic hauntings function to remind filmgoers of the inevitability of death, but offer no specifics that might connect it to national or global trauma.

In-Conclusion

While the vengeful ghost may be vanquished for a time in both J-horror and H-horror, the horror genre—which is inherently subversive and self-perpetuating—never provides a successful resolution. Even knowing the 'truth' is not enough. In the *Grudge* cycle, the most recognizable sound is the high frequency vocalized clicking ("AHHHHHH") that precedes the gruesome attacks by the dark haired spirit.⁷ The sound effect is a combination of the director's voice and the recording of a finger raking over the teeth of a thick comb. The design functions as both a howl of grief and the roar of attack. However, it was not until *The Grudge 2* that the origin and 'truth' of the sound was revealed. During the original murder (which is presented in flashback), the enraged husband crushes the neck and vocal cords of his wife, and the clicking be-

7. The design of the effect is significant in that it provides the archetype for the construction of the overall sound design of the film. It establishes the use of contrasting low-frequency rumbles with high-frequency sound effects. This design strategy fostered the unique pattern of disorientation for filmgoers as they try to reconcile the extremes of audio perception.

comes her dying breath.⁸ But uncovering this mystery is not enough to dispel the threat, and the protagonist from that film dies as her throat is crushed in the same manner, thus affirming the unending cycle. Horror films are about repetition, an endless cycle of birth and death. This story is eternally unresolved, and each culture and generation fills the horror genre with its own anxieties, fears, and doubts, thus solidifying the perpetuation and popularity of the genre. H-horror remakes are haunted by global changes and exchanges, and their sound designs serve to simultaneously remind us of infidelities to past filmmaking practices related to 'good sound' as they show the way forward for the future of sound design and horror in cinema.

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8. It should be noted that in the original J-Horror version of *Ju-on*, the sound could be attributed to a different origin, specifically associated with the box cutter that the husband uses to kill his wife. As the husband expands and retracts the steel blade, it clicks loudly along the notches that hold it in place.

aaahhhh...

