

***Ringu* and the Vortex of Horror: Contemporary Japanese Horror and the Technology of Chaos**

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Though much younger than Frankenstein's creature and Dracula, Sadako Yamamura¹ has already secured her position in the horror monster pantheon as an instantly recognisable icon of terror. Despite the diversity of the Asian underworld, Sadako has become its sole representative to the Western audiences, easily overshadowing her one and only contender from the past – *Godzilla*. To the unaccustomed eye every long-haired Oriental spirit seems to be created in her image, every supernatural vengeance story seems derivative and unoriginal in comparison. The illusion of Sadako's uniqueness prevails, although her origins place her in a long line of succession. Still, her singularity cannot be argued once we see her as a case in point illustrating the direction contemporary Japanese horror has taken in the last decades.

The aim of this article is to discuss the image of Sadako Yamamura, as presented in the four most significant Japanese *Ringu* movies.² The figure of Sadako – a technologically re-defined chaotic vengeful spirit – has been chosen to serve as an example allowing us to posit the understanding of contemporary Japanese horror as a culturally-fostered response to the fear of chaos in the techno-centric orderly system. The representations of chaos, whether affecting spatial and temporal reality, psyche, or social structures can be seen in virtually every contemporary Japanese horror film, while technology re-emerges as a channel for the supernatural and a site of supernatural materialisation. Sadako Yamamura, Chaos personified, may serve as an example of such a representation.

In the most memorable scene of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), Sadako Yamamura crawls out of Ryuji Takayama's TV screen appearing in the flesh, so to speak, on the floor of his apartment. Although seemingly fitting in with hoards of traditionally-rendered long black-haired Japanese vengeful female spirits, the locus of her materialisation makes us aware of the fact that

we are dealing with an upgraded version of supernatural malice, compatible with the requirements of the digital age. Neither fully organic nor material, Sadako remains but an aberration in electronic transmission, a matrix error, a flicker of light, pain and loneliness transformed into a video image flowing out of the screen in a flood of pixels and shaping itself into a solid body, as if taking substance from the terror she inspires. Spat out onto the floor in an epileptic spasm she remains nothing but a hint of monstrosity – an empty frame to be filled with our personal fears. A flicker of light, an aberration in an electronic code, she remains emotionless though born in a surge of emotions; she remains indifferent, as if programmed to repeat the curse, cursed herself, just as she was when she was still alive.

Sadako's materialisation can be seen as doubly threatening, since it contradicts both the organised "reality" of the television/video image as such (structuring herself as a message seemingly coded into, or perhaps just randomly picked out of white noise) and the "reality" of the external world (disregarding such obstacles as the physical boundary of the TV screen). Her very existence violates the rules of logic and puts into question the order of the universe, bringing disorder to our doorstep and creating a point of entrance for chaos. And although, on the face of it, her appearance is meant to reinstate the balance by ordering the chaos that ensued with her violent death, things are not as simple as they seem.

It might be tempting to read Sadako's primary motivation as an attempt to right the wrongs, but such an interpretation fails if we acknowledge that her rage is channelled indiscriminately onto all the unlucky people who just happen to be in the vicinity. A more orderly method of allocating responsibility for the evil deed committed in the past would follow the laws of genetics (responsibility for the sins of one's own kin) or *karma* (responsibility for one's past lives). True, in Japanese mythology, vengeful spirits frequently happen to be rather indiscriminate in their choice of victims, which would make Sadako conform to a pattern. But while Sadako remains essentially a Japanese vengeful spirit, paradoxically, she brings turbulence into the spiritual world she is supposed to represent.

Contrary to what one would expect of a vengeful spirit, Sadako does not seem particularly interested in avenging herself. If we examine the notions of chaos and order in the context of crime and punishment, then, typically, order is reinstated when (1) the crime is revealed, (2) the criminal is brought to justice, (3) the body of the victim is found and given proper burial, (4) the good name of the victim is restored, and (5) the spirit of the victim finds peace. And yet, the accomplishment of the above does not guarantee saving

the protagonists from painful death in the *Ringu* movies. Sadako's insistence on killing her victims regardless of their attempts at appeasing her spirit demonstrates that if her behaviour was intended to stimulate some sort of action, the action in question was not prompted by vengeance but by demand for reproduction and distribution.³

The unparalleled appeal of Sadako lies in her bringing disorder to the already disorderly world of spirits, which she does by altering the rules governing the spiritual world. On the surface of it, she may seem not that different from a plethora of other hairy vengeful female spirits, known in Japanese mythology as *onryo*. According to Gregory Barrett, such spirits always die bearing a grudge and cannot be satisfied with the usual ghost pacifiers, such as food offerings or proper burial. Barrett points out that Japanese vengeful spirits do not stop until they fully avenge themselves and their vengeance can be taken out not only on those responsible but also on innocent bystanders, even though we can observe a more recent tendency to refine the idea into punishing the guilty and leaving the innocent alone (87-117). But even such a seemingly arbitrary and chaotic organisation of the supernatural world is questioned when Sadako's nature is discovered to be, in fact, more viral than spectral.⁴

The virus metaphor proves particularly successful here, as it accounts not only for Sadako's methods of acting (randomly infecting anyone who happens to be around) but also for her motivation, which turns out to be self-preservation by means of rapid and uncontrolled multiplication. In the age of mechanical reproduction, it is only natural to see a spirit redefining itself as an electronic message, ready to be transmitted, recorded, copied and distributed. However, while enclosing herself in highly ordered structures of technology, Sadako explodes these structures from within, infecting them with her chaotic presence.

Into the Mirror

Whether regarded as a cosmological phenomenon, mythological deity, new form of science, or simply as a purely linguistic notion, chaos signifies inevitable (and frequently irreconcilable) duality. Where there is chaos, there is usually order, the two simultaneously contradicting and complementing each other. Chaos and order can remain in a relationship of mutual negation (where chaos signified *dis-order*), or they can be viewed in terms of a reciprocal cause-effect cycle (where chaos gives birth to order while order dissipates back into chaos). Chaotic turbulence may appear both deep

within ordered structures and beyond their boundaries. But whatever form, or more appropriately formlessness, of chaos we encounter, we are prone to contrasting it with what we assume to be a representation of order.

Glimpses of chaos can be caught practically everywhere. Frequently understood as "primordial matter" it was conceived of as the point of origin of more than one cosmological order. For the Egyptians chaos took the "shape" of a formless abyss that at a later stage gave birth to the sun, Ra. The Greeks saw in it a disorganised state primary to the existence of Earth. The Chinese believed it separated into the complementary forces of *yin* and *yang*. The Babylonians worshipped chaos under the name of *Tiāmat*, the angry goddess always on the lookout for ways to threaten the structures of order she involuntarily mothered (Briggs, Peat 19-20).

Today chaos is more likely to appear as a subject of scientific than theological ruminations, having embedded itself firmly within the fields of contemporary mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, ecology, meteorology, economy and medicine, to begin with. Its representations as turbulence, dynamic systems, catastrophes, strange attractors, fractals and non-linear equations remain at the same time puzzling and alluring to scientists and popular opinion alike, seducing them with a promise of predicting the onset of natural disasters, stock market behaviour, population growth, or stress-related illness. The awareness of the omnipresence of chaos, however, is by no means new and goes deeper than da Vinci's studies of turbulent behaviour. In popular imagination, the *disordered* abyss has always been within our reach, lurking right beneath the surface of a common mirror.

Mirrors and other types of image-reflecting surfaces found within an ordinary household have frequently been considered gateways into the realm of disorder. Balancing between symmetry and distortion, the mirrored image appears to us simultaneously as reversed reality and unreal mirage. The reflection reveals itself to us in three dimensions, which makes it easy to see depth within the silvered surface. Indeed, we are ready to expect that the mirror-world unfolds itself parallel to our own – for every space out of the mirror range in our reality we presuppose symmetrical space within the mirror world. Aware of the mirror's potential for distortion, gleaned from gazing at its polished surface, we believe the world hidden within its depth to be significantly more disordered. And yet, this does not deliver us from temptation to follow into little Alice's footsteps and venture deep into the chaotic abyss.

Mirrors feature heavily in (South) East Asian horror films since in popular

belief they constitute a passage into the spiritual world. Many (South) East-Asian folk rituals involving communication with the dead, as well as those invoking any other ghastly occupants of the underworld, require a mirror, sometimes broken into pieces. Apart from daring the spirits, mirrors can be used to glean some information about the future, their apparent prophetic property reflected also in Western mythologies and popular beliefs. But if we are to believe the Chinese, gazing into the mirror may cost us our soul, which is why the *feng shui* specialists warn us to cover or remove any mirrors directly facing our bed. A large mirror placed in front of the bed can prevent our bodies from recharging their positive Ch'i; it can also startle our wandering soul when we are asleep and in consequence give us nightmares. Indeed, some more extreme theories suggest that on its return from the night mirror encounter our wandering soul may not, in fact, be ours any more (Hanna).

The images stubbornly recurring in Sadako's videotape projection are those of her mother's mirror reflection. Shimizu Yamamura, the ill-fated psychic mother of Sadako, is shown to us through her mirror image as a beautiful, serene lady combing her long black hair and smiling mysteriously. We do not see Shimizu standing in front of the mirror in the recording. She materialises inside the oval surface of the glass instead, as if attempting to convince us of her spectral origin. This, however, does not necessarily need to be the case.

In one of the seemingly inexplicable fragments of the recording, the mirror containing the image of the hair-combing Shimizu appears to move to a different place on the wall. At first it is spotted close to the left edge of the screen, only to move itself to the right and then return to its original position. This, of course, can be seen as an act of magic, but it is, in fact, possible to suggest a more rational explanation. Most of the time human perception depends on data gathered by means of the simultaneous use of both eyes. If we attempt a little experiment and try to look at the world through the left eye only and then change the eye rapidly to the right one, we undergo an illusion that the whole world has shifted slightly to the right. The mirror, which once hanged on the left side of the wall, is now a little further to the right.

It is of course not very difficult to imagine ourselves standing at such an angle to the wall as to contain within the sphere of our vision the mirror itself, blocking from sight anybody standing in front of it. At the same time, we would still be able to see the person's reflection – a trick frequently used in filmmaking. If we add to this that in the analysed scene the mirror image seems to transform from a hair-combing mother into a little girl who seems

to abhor combs and any other hair-grooming devices – the explanation seems obvious. What we see on the tape is not a ghost of Shimizu trying to breach the boundary of the underworld. It is her reflection, as seen by her daughter and the image of the mother Sadako has chosen to remember.

At the same time, however, the illusion that Shimizu's soul, or spirit for that matter, calls to us from the depths of the other world is inescapable the main reason being the aforementioned expectation of the other-worldly depth beneath the mirror's surface. If the mirror shows us a reversed image, we expect it to turn physical reality into a form of non-reality, to turn the material world into immaterial substance. The same can, of course, be said of any reflective surface, such as glass, water, metal, but also, coated photographic paper, LCD computer monitors, or TV screen.

Sadako materialises out of a TV screen, having apparently transmitted her self into a band of interference between television frequency waves and then, subsequently, having been recorded onto a videotape. If we attempt to read Sadako as a "message" we find her a very complex message to decipher. Presupposing Sadako's monstrosity we would have to assume that the video message in question was created intentionally. This would mean that Sadako was capable of wilfully transmitting her psychic memories into a television frequency and then finding a way to force someone to record them and, finally, copy the recording. It is also possible to suggest that Sadako's psychic signal was randomly picked up by a TV receiver and any further recording of it happened as pure coincidence. Indeed, why would so many people be dead after they had watched the fatal recording if they knew that all they had to do to save themselves was to make a copy of a tape and pass it on? Still, as long as Sadako remains a "message," we have no problem reading her as an ordered structure – a code, a sequence of impulses, a wave. It is only at the surface of the TV screen that chaos breaks loose.

Whether made of glass or liquid crystal, the TV screen retains its reflective ability. Since flat screen TVs are a relative novelty, the slightly curved surface of most TV screens makes it easier to see distortion in the reflected image. And yet, when the TV is on, the physical properties of the screen seem to disappear and we indulge ourselves in an illusion of reality inside the box. Still, catching a momentary glimpse of the world reflected on the surface of the screen and separate from the "world" inside it, we are reminded of the physical limitations of the apparatus, which, even though it might be referred to as the "magic box," nevertheless remains first and foremost a "box." This is why, while allowing ourselves to be deceived by the "televised" reality, we have actually learnt to understand that whatever we see

on TV is not real.

Sadako's breaching the boundary of the screen brings chaos to the world of order. If she is an electronic message then her existence outside the digital framework should be impossible. If she is a living biological organism then how do we explain her previous immersion in the electronic code? If she is a ghost then why does she bother with coded messages, videotapes and TVs in the first place? Can she not simply follow the usual spirit migration patterns and materialise in water, mirrors, mist, or graveyard dust? Surely, it would have been less complicated.

True, sceptics may say that since Sadako died in a well, water binds her and she needs to look for another channel of materialisation. And since her body was never found there is no graveyard dust. But no rules are certain in the world of spirits – ghosts of people who died in water are also supposed to have special water-connected powers and frequently appear in water, just as failure to observe burial rites has rarely prevented spirits from haunting graveyards. Besides, if we are to believe the autopsy (*Ringu 2*) Sadako had actually lived for 30 years in the well before she died. And the remarks on Shimizu's unhealthy fascination with the sea, the odd-sounding nursery rhyme about "frolicking in water," as well as the suggestion of Sadako's uncertain parentage, with the supposed father not exactly being human (*Ringu 0*), all hint at Sadako's unspecified links to the world of water demons.

In the opening scene of *Ringu* and *Ringu 2* the screen is filled with a close up of the open sea. We see a succession of waves crashing against one another, as if uncertain which direction to follow. This shot of the sea just before the storm might of course be seen as ominous in the context of the story, but we may also argue that the actual image of turbulent waves serves as an introduction to chaos.

In science, turbulence remains one of the most obvious physical manifestations of chaos.

What is turbulence then? It is a mess of disorder at all scales, small eddies within large ones. It is unstable. It is highly dissipative, meaning that turbulence drains energy and creates a drag. It is motion turned random (Gleick 122).

In the world of science turbulence is today known as "the strange attractor," although the act of re-naming it has not brought us much closer to fully understanding its nature. But whatever its name, turbulence brings disorder

to orderly systems. It appears in the natural world – in freak winds, tornadoes and typhoons, in air currents, in water and lava, in tiny ripples and tidal waves, but also in man-made pumps and turbines, in oil pipelines and blood vessels (Briggs and Peat 45-52).

The vortex-like characteristics of chaotic attractors is perhaps best exemplified by what is commonly referred to as “the butterfly effect.” Edward Lorenz’s discovery of the strange attractor and the principle of sensitivity to initial conditions in dynamic systems (1963) became immortalised by a verbal illustration stating in approximation that “a butterfly flapping its wings in Argentina could result in a tidal wave in Asia” (Guastello 18). On a less metaphorical note, Lorenz’s attractor

displayed a kind of infinite complexity. It always stayed within certain bounds, never running off the page but never repeating itself, either. It traced a strange distinctive shape, a kind of double spiral in three dimensions, like a butterfly with its two wings. The shape signaled pure disorder, since no point or pattern of points ever recurred. Yet it also signaled a new kind of order (Gleick 30).

Although initially applied to testing specific meteorological conditions, Lorenz’s attractor can serve as a more general model of chaotic unpredictability. But the geometrical rendering of chaos by the shapes of irregular inward spirals translates back into its representation in culture and we are right where we started – within the vortex of turbulence.

By equating Sadako with chaos we begin to anticipate her presence in every turbulence, whether on the surface of water (in the sea waves, the whirlpool in the well, convection in a glass of water and swimming pool [*Ringu 2*]), within a TV frequency wave (through the video-tape message, or disturbances in the TV signal [*Ringu 2*]), in a polaroid image (as a spiral deformation superimposed on the picture). On a more abstract level, however, the chaotic nature of Sadako is also manifested as an aberration of the spatial and temporal reality (spending 30 years alive in the well, dissolution of the TV screen) and a disturbance to the world’s materialism.

Spectral Turbulence

The rational world does not allow for the existence of ghosts and dismisses supernatural occurrences on the ground of their obvious irrationality.

Certainly, the unpredictability of spiritual and psychic phenomena places them well beyond the range of the Newtonian compass, or in other words considers them irrational and of no consequence to the "real" science. Dealings with the dead, manifestations of the spectral presence, raising the spirits, fortune telling, sixth sense, ESP, telekinesis – all those may be of interest to an occultist, but in the world based on orderly structures the reaction they meet with oscillates between ridicule and persecution. For the rational mind, chaotic irrationality of the supernatural is perceived as threatening. In fact, the very existence of the supernatural is questioned, at best designated to the realm of creative imagination, at worst to madness.

The chaotic character of the spectral world becomes evident when we look at Western horror narratives. If we consider ghosts in terms of semiotic signs, then, using Peircean terminology, their representation would be indexical rather than iconic. While Anglo-Saxon monsters found their way into illustrated bestiaries, medieval folk tales scared their audiences with images of wild beasts and moving skeletons, and Elizabethan apparitions retained a striking resemblance to their former living selves, modern representations of ghosts owe much to the vague descriptions offered by the writers of Victorian fiction. There, the spectral world was not as much described as indicated by a sudden gust of wind, a slight movement of the sheets, by a touch of invisible hair, a flicker of light, oozing ectoplasm, or simply an "awareness" of the supernatural presence. From the 19th century onwards, Western ghosts have not quite been "seen" but "felt," which explains their semiotic indexicality.

Asian spirits, however, have traditionally been rendered in a purely anthropomorphic form. They are capable of looking and behaving exactly like humans and frequently take advantage of this skill. From time to time, their ghastriness becomes transparent to the audience, represented by a sudden transformation (a slight discoloration of the skin, growing nails, black saliva, glowing/bloodshot eyes, and one mess of a hairdo), but for most of the time they remain indistinguishable from the living crowd and their iconicity cannot be questioned. What is more, in many Asian cultures the existence of ghosts is accepted without doubt, as part of the greater natural world. The same applies to the whole spectrum of paranormal phenomena. And yet, be not mistaken, Asian supernatural worlds are also the sites of disorder. Chaos lurks behind the appearance of order.

The Japanese notion of *wa*, or harmony, represents one of the most significant values in the Japanese system. As eloquently defined by Ono Seiichiro, "harmony consists in *not making* distinctions; if a distinction

between good and bad can be made, then there *wa* does not exits" (qtd. in Smith 41). The notion of harmony reverberates in Takie Sugiyama Lebra's concept of the "boundless self" – the characteristically Japanese transcendental self, disengaged from "the shackling world of dichotomies" (114). The "boundless self" represents entropy, argues Lebra.

To transcend dichotomies involves a negation of order. [...] If order is a cultural product, the Buddhist universe is pure nature where chaos predominates (115).

And yet, as she observes,

[s]till, chaos is an overstatement in need of correction. There is a universal order running through the seeming chaos, and that is the idea of predestination [...]. Self is no free agent to determine its own course of action, but is destined to act this way and that way. The "boundless" self is thus surrendered to this fundamental universal law. In order to become free from this chain of destiny, one must "understand" and accept it (116).

The transcendental self is seen as the most accomplished one in the tripartite model of the self suggested by Lebra. This type of self goes beyond the expectations of social interaction, as well as the inner core of self-identity. Practical implications of such transcendence can be seen in Morita psychotherapy which convinces the patient to "accept things as they are" and incorporate the illness as part of self (Lebra 116). The suggestion to "accept things as they are" can also account for a more understanding attitude towards the enhanced capabilities of the mind, such as telepathy, telekinesis or ESP. Provided that those unique capabilities are understood as inherent and internal to one's self, they are easily accepted as "normative" or "natural."

As if to confirm that hypothesis, Japanese horror films do not seem to attribute as much of the "supernatural" quality to the instances of ESP, as the Western audiences would expect of them. If a character in a Western film admits to possessing certain psychic abilities s/he is generally singled out as a freak of nature and his/her ESP skills have to be scientifically verified, acknowledged as hereditary and justified as having a utilitarian value. In Japanese films people tend to have ESP in exactly the same way as some tend to be tall and other short. It just happens and nobody seems to feel the

need to explain why.

ESP forms a framework of communication in the *Ringu* movies. Sadako's mother, Shimizu, is introduced to us as a psychic who once foretold a volcano eruption. We see her demonstrating her abilities to journalists and are told of her unnerving habits involving communication with the world of sea spirits. The image of Shimizu combing her hair comes to us with a recording of her daughter's psychic memory. Her encounter with the journalists, however, is a projection of her brother's memories "read" by Ryuji Takayama and witnessed by Reiko Asakawa thanks to ESP that both of them have. Ryuji and Reiko's supernatural constitution is inherited by their son Yoichi, whose ability to transfer psychic energy into water is used as a weapon against Sadako in *Ringu 2*. ESP is also claimed by Takayama's student/girlfriend Mai Takano, who becomes a central character in *Ringu 2* and *Rasen*.

To a certain extent the abundance of characters possessing psychic abilities in the *Ringu* movies serves an instrumental function of speeding up the plot. The existence of the cursed videotape is verified not as much by Reiko's journalistic prowess, as by her sixth sense; the murderous powers of the little Sadako become exposed thanks to Ryuji's ability to read people's minds. But ESP and other psychic phenomena are also used to reinforce hard scientific research and provide additional evidence to discover the secret of Sadako-inflicted deaths. In *Ringu 2* Dr Kawajiri intends to prove that Sadako is nothing but intention that has materialised as a living thing, a form of concentrated energy that can be recorded and transferred into water, where it will eventually dissolve. In *Rasen*, Dr Ando assists the newly reborn Sadako by impregnating her with an embryo cloned from Ryuji Takayama's DNA sample and thus resurrecting him from the dead. The paranormal and the scientific merge revealing the limitations of classical science in unravelling the mysteries of the world seen as a dynamic system.

On a par with spirits and psychics, the *Ringu* movies seem to be infested with scientists. The scientists in question, introduced as lecturers, psychiatrists, anatomists or researchers, represent the disciplines that gave foundation to the study of chaos. Dr Kawajiri is a psychiatrist interested in harnessing the power of the brain. Dr Ando is involved in bio-medical research in genetics. Ryuji Takayama is a mathematician, but we are told he used to study medicine before he abandoned it for theoretical mathematics. On top of that, *Rasen* makes use of an unspecified virologist who helps to identify Sadako's psychic projection as a "mutated smallpox virus with a low chance of contagion."

Mathematics, biology, virology and medicine are all fields of science

without which the study of chaos would not have made significant progress. It is of no coincidence then that their assistance is called for to confront the complexity of Sadako. Sadako's discordant presence bringing disorder to the technocentric reality and the spiritual underworld that both contributed to her existence can only be grasped (if at all) by those not afraid to see chaotic unpredictability as an object of study. But by the same token, Sadako's cause can be helped by the chaos-oriented science and, however unwilling, her former adversaries can easily turn into her allies.

The Japanese word *rasen* translates into English as a "spiral," bringing to mind Lorenz's chaotic attractor. Although perhaps the least unnerving of the *Ringu* films, *Rasen* embraces Chaos Theory more than any other film in the series. The plot of the film deals with the patterns of Sadako's reproduction – through optical communication retrieving the genetic data encoded on the videotape, through a viral infection spread by means of Reiko Asakawa's notebook, and finally, through sexual intercourse and artificial insemination. As a result of these reproductions, Sadako's DNA enters Dr Ando's body from where it is later transferred to Mai during a sexual act. In consequence, Mai gives birth to Sadako in a human form, although in a sense it could be said that Sadako mothers herself and uses Mai as a mere surrogate.

In *Rasen* Sadako's intentions are made clear. By inducing people to leave their own records of her suffering, she makes them aid the virus in its proliferation. Infected with the virus, people will continue spreading it through sexual contact and procreation, and the world will head for a "vortex of change."⁵ At the end of the movie we see Sadako leaving with the reborn Ryuji Takayama – her son and partner – both of them looking uncannily similar. Although she smiles sweetly and her made-up face looks fresh surrounded by a neat bob of a haircut we should not be deceived by her outwardly ordered appearance. Mimicking women of the past, whose bound hair was a symbol of conformity with the expectations of the social order, the reborn Sadako remains ever ready to let her hair down and reveal her chaotic face.

Social Disorder

When talking about the *Ringu* movies with a non-Japanese audience, the element that stubbornly keeps recurring is the perception of Sadako as "that Japanese lady-ghost with long black hair." Additionally, since outside Asia most viewers tend to be ignorant of the long tradition of Japanese horror, Hideo Nakata has frequently been credited with inventing the long-haired

ghost image for the sake of his movie. Needless to say, nine years later the novelty has worn off and we can frequently hear accusations that Japanese (or indeed, Asian) horror has become repetitive. Apparently the audiences that see nothing derivative in bucketfuls of vampires that insist on having Transylvanian connections, wearing silly capes and flashing their fangs, and would never dare to criticise a werewolf for his dog's breath and glossy coat, refuse to see the visual representation of Japanese vengeful spirits as symbolic. When pressed for an explanation for their dismissal of the motif, they ask: "what's so special about the long hair anyway?"

Hair symbolism has been a subject of many anthropological studies. In his article on the subject of hair and Japanese popular religion Gary L. Ebersole points out that

hair was used in ancient Japan to signal both normality and abnormality, wildness and enculturation. Moreover, hair was associated with sexuality, female reproductive power, and ritual communication with divinities (*kami*) and the dead (77).

Ebersole stresses the association of hair with sexuality, common also beyond the Japanese culture, and the conflicting response to this association marked by the perception of hair's "naturalness" and the desire to control it, represented by a variety of hair-related ritual activities. In lieu of an explanation he remarks:

[t]o begin with, the ancient Japanese seem to have been struck by the fact that even after the rest of one's body had ceased to grow, one's hair, like fingernails and toenails, continued to grow by itself, outside one's conscious control. This may be one reason why hair was associated positively with life force and energy, but at the same time had the negative valence of wild or untamed energy (77-78).

If we add to this the popular belief, albeit not verified by science, that hair and nails continue to grow after death we begin to understand the implication behind the image appropriated by Japanese spirits.

Discussing archetypes in Japanese cinema, Gregory Barrett draws our attention to the fact that although the most famous historically recorded example of a vengeful spirit is Michizane Sugawara, believed to take revenge on his rival family of Tokihira Fujiwara (871-909) after his death in exile, and despite the fact that the majority of ghosts desiring their revenge are meant

to be those of soldiers fallen in different wars, thus men, most vengeful spirits that appear in Japanese films are wronged women. (97-117). In accordance with folk tradition they are always portrayed as *onryo* – a vengeful female spirit with long black hair.

The triangular relation between women, spirits and hair is further stressed by Ebersole when he writes that

the long hair of young women was believed to have the power to attract *kami* or divinities, who would descend into it and temporarily reside there. [...] This power was not exclusively positive, for it was believed that female hair could also attract malevolent *kami*, such as the *kami* of the plague, as well as benevolent deities (85-86).

Ebersole remarks that in Japan human hair, particularly the hair of women, was always seen as a potential source of pollution and danger and it was believed to have the power to attract the *tama* (souls) of the dead (86). Unbound and dishevelled hair, frequently associated in Western cultures with wildness, madness and grief, in Japan signifies “an uncontrollable passion, a frustrated love, or great psychic or physical distress” (95). No wonder then that the tormented ghosts of abused (and frequently murdered) Japanese women seem to be having an everlasting bad hair day.

In the first two *Ringu* movies, Sadako Yamamura is consistently presented as a girl/woman with a mess of hair practically covering her face. This image is contrasted with the one of Shimizu combing her hair, as seen in the mirror. As with hair, combs are often referred to as being of great significance in Japanese beliefs. Since they were directly associated with hair they were often believed to become repositories of their dead owners' *tama*. Associated with fertility and reproductive power they served as symbols of sexual intimacy. But first and foremost, their function was to control and order the otherwise wild and unruly hair, since “[h]air that is well groomed or coiffured suggests controlled sexuality and, more generally, a self-controlled person” (Ebersole 92-94). Societies demand of their members a degree of self-control. Where self-control is lacking social order is frequently imposed from above. Hair-control can serve this purpose as well as any other regulation.

Today we might be dazzled by the variability of hair styles and colours, but one look at the drawings from the past convinces us it was not always so. Many cultures had very specific requirements concerning hair styles and the way hair was worn often demonstrated the intricacies of interrelations

between people's sex, age, religion, social status and rank. In Asia many social restrictions had their roots in the doctrine of Confucianism maintaining the view of a society as a "structure in which relationships are inherently unequal" (Nelson 108). Confucianism represents society as a result of five hierarchical relations of king to subject, father to son, older brother to younger brother, man to woman, and friend to friend. Even the seemingly equal relationships can always be reduced to further rankings, taking into consideration such factors as social standing, occupation, or age. To ensure the well-being of society everybody is expected to know his/her place and respect the hierarchy. In order to avoid misunderstandings the outward appearance of the members of society, particularly its more powerful members, must be visibly marked – by clothes, head wear and hair style (108).

The influence of Confucian doctrine on hair styling fashions has frequently been mentioned in studies of Chinese, Korean and Japanese societies. Describing hair styles in Confucian Korea, for instance, Sarah M. Nelson remarks that although cut hair was seen as disgraceful for a person, since all of the body, including hair, was supposed to belong to one's parents (especially a son's body), uncut hair could by no means be unruly.

The long hair was never allowed to hang freely. It was controlled: knotted or braided in particular ways, each style specifying aspects of the wearer's social position. [...] the topknot for men and the knot of hair on women's necks were symbols of gender, of adulthood, of proper behavior, and of filial piety (108-109).

The rigid controlling of hair, as seen in Confucian Korea, however, was not so rigorously observed in Japan despite Confucian influences, perhaps because, as Graham Parkes suggests,

the Japanese tradition is above all *multiple*, being composed of many heterogeneous elements; and Japan is one of the most fascinating of modern cultures because of the ways its enduring indigenous tradition has continually incorporated a wide range of foreign influences (79).

The behavioural patterns of Japanese society and individuals have frequently been seen as formed by religious beliefs that shaped the philosophy of the country – Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism. While Shinto can be described as "an animistic nature religion," whose main components are a cult of nature and a cult of ancestors (Parkes 83), it is Confucian and Buddhist

thought that are often presented as responsible for formulating the accepted code of ethics. And so, Confucianism proposes "an understanding of the self as a matrix of familial and social relationships rather than as something substantial, and an emphasis on ritual activity as a means toward a harmonious 'ritual community,'" (84) as a result of which we are not surprised to discover that one's responsibility towards a group will always be seen as primary to one's individual needs and desires.

The practice of Zen Buddhism, on the other hand, requires of its follower a thorough self-transformation, in the process of which one's ordinary identity is discarded for the sake of embracing nothingness, or in other words "a return to the preconceptual level of the individual's being and to the most basic context of the person" (Parkes 85). This in turn allows for one's actions and experiences to be spontaneous and appropriate to a given situation. The practical implications of the said spontaneity and appropriateness have frequently been expressed through the associations of the Zen thought with the *bushidō* ethics of the samurai. As Parkes explains:

[b]ecause Buddhism, with its emphasis on cultivating compassion for all sentient beings, has a reputation of being one of the world's more peaceable religions, it may be thought strange that Zen should have such a close connection with swordsmanship. But from the Zen perspective everything depends on the character and integrity of the one wielding the sword: If one's will is directed toward annihilating evil and against agents that stand in the way of justice and harmony, then the sword – even though it kills – becomes what Zen calls a "sword of life" rather than of death (86-87).

Naturally then, it is one's honour and virtuous will that contribute to upholding justice and harmony – the ideal state for society.

Still, taken as a whole, Japanese society seems to be built on a premise of embracing apparently irreconcilable contradictions. On the one hand it is structured as a harmonious system based on tradition, order, hierarchy and chronology. On the other hand, the nature-oriented animism of Shinto introduces into this order a variety of potentially *disordered* deities of heaven and earth creating pockets of chaos within the structure. The attempt to reinstate Shinto as State Shinto to account for the divinity of the Emperor is but one example of the fine line dividing chaos from order and is a further illustration that the Japanese seem intent on bridging the two. Societies,

however, are vulnerable to chaos and invariably inclined to follow order, which is why the ever-present threat of dissolution into a Chaotic Society seems to be felt particularly strongly in Japan.

The *Ringu* movies do not differ much in their critique of modern Japanese society from other contemporary Japanese horror films. Society's order is threatened at the level of family and relations of obedience and responsibility as traditionally allocated by one's age, gender, or social status. Shimizu Yamamura, Sadako's mother, is presented to us not only as a tormented psychic, but also as a potential marriage wrecker. The uncertain parentage of Sadako makes us consider her at best as an illegitimate daughter of Dr Ikuma – a married man romantically involved with Sadako's mother. At worst, her father is believed not to be human at all, which makes us see Shimizu as a woman who defiled the structures of order not once but twice – not only by having an affair with a married man (since regardless of whether Dr Ikuma is in fact Sadako's real father, he is supposed to have been Shimizu's lover anyway), but also by additionally entering a relationship with a representative of the underworld. Both options bring disorder to society and, as such, are undesirable.

Family structure in *Ringu* is additionally weakened by the introduction of its main protagonists as a divorced couple. Although Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* is directly based on Koji Suzuki's novel of the same title, the main characters of the novel are two men rather than a man and a woman, not to mention an ex-wife and ex-husband. The men in Suzuki's book are just friends and no romantic or sexual connection between them is ever suggested, which, despite a greater acceptance of homosexuality in Japan, could still be seen as marginally disruptive to the rules of family-based social order. Still, chaotic instability is always present in the way the characters relate to the community around them, if only to quote the confusion arising from a simultaneous description of one of the men as a brutal rapist and a woman-shy virgin at the same time.

Confucianism expects its followers to disregard their own self for the sake of the well-being of the group, which is why it would not recognise divorce as a possibility to resolve marital conflicts. Surely, no amount of personal suffering could measure against the stark belief in the unity of marriage and since traditionally women were expected to obey men and men were given a tacit approval to seek solace in the arms of courtesans, once joined together the couple was meant to stay that way. Although today divorce rates are on the rise throughout Asia, for the traditionalists it still seems an unacceptable option and a certain sign that society is heading pell-mell into chaos.

Erupting at the level of the family, chaos inevitably affects children. No wonder then that contemporary Japanese horror movies are full of broken homes, scary children and terrifying teenagers. Whether depicted as sexually promiscuous marriage wreckers (*Tomie* [Oikawa Ataru, 1999]), armed renegades (*Batoru rowaiaru* [*Battle Royale*, Kinji Fukasaku, 2000]), or brain-eating zombies (*Stacy* [Tomomatsu Naoyuki, 2001]) Japanese teenagers, teenage schoolgirls in particular, have been recognised as a threat to organised society and a source of horror. The *Ringu* movies do not pay much attention to teenagers as such, and yet it is at school where chaos breaks loose since the story begins with a group of high school kids who, instead of studying hard for their exams engage in unproductive fun complete with pre-marital sex and incidental watching of the fatal videotape. It is of no coincidence, as well, that two of the initial four victims are found with their pants down in the car, having died while they were "getting down to it," as stated in the police report.

Whether it is a mere coincidence that Hideo Nakata separated his two *Ringu* movies with a film called *Kaosu* (*Chaos*, 1999) may remain a mystery. Still, it would be difficult to deny Sadako her chaotic properties. Born out of chaos she remains chaos incarnate, threatening and terrifying to the Japanese order. A careful analysis of contemporary Japanese horror films allows us to see representations of chaos in practically every production and see the culturally-fostered fear of chaos behind the construction of virtually every source of cinematic danger they introduce.⁶ Some films, like *Uzumaki* (Higuchinsky, 2000) and *Kairo* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001) seem to be devoted to chaos in their entirety. But even if *Kairo* and *Uzumaki* remain exquisite depictions of disorder, their treatment of chaos is meant to be realistic (if possible) rather than symbolic and Sadako Yamamura stands unchallenged. As yet another strange attractor she will continue drawing us closer to the disorderly world of Japanese horror. Guided by her turbulent presence we will spiral to our destination and loose ourselves in the vortex of fear.

Endnotes:

¹ Sadako Yamamura is a character originally created by Koji Suzuki in his *Ringu* novel (followed by two other loosely related sequels *Rasen* and *Loop*) and popularised by the film adaptations of Hideo Nakata, Norio Tsuruta and others.

² The main focus of the article will be the two original *Ringu* films by Hideo Nakata (1998, 1999), as well as Jôji Iida's *Rasen* (1998) and Norio Tsuruta's

Ringu 0: Bâsudei (2000) seen as immediately related to the first two.

³ The notion of reproduction and distribution is particularly visible in *Rasen*, where Sadako is aided simultaneously by viral epidemics and procreation.

⁴ Once again, see *Rasen* for the association between Sadako and the smallpox virus. The notion returns also in a Korean remake – *Ring Virus* (Dong-bin Kim, 1999).

⁵ The “vortex of change” is mentioned in the final scene of *Rasen*, at least in translation.

⁶ The subject of chaos in contemporary Japanese horror cinema has been given more thought in another article by the same author – “*Kaosu* means Chaos: the Japanese sense of fear and its consequences for contemporary Horror cinema,” expected to be published in 2007.

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