

Techno-Horror in Hollywood

Japanese Anxieties, American Style

The recent stream of Hollywood adaptations of Asian horror films shows no sign of drying up. *The Grudge 2* was released this October, and Tom Cruise is reportedly set to produce a remake of a fearful Hong Kong/Thai flick about a corneal transplant gone awry, *Gin Gwai* (*The Eye*). Especially interesting is the recent focus of Japanese horror films and their American remakes on the perils of ubiquitous modern technology—cell phones, computers, handheld devices.

Pulse, released in summer 2006 (and on DVD this December), is the latest in the “J-Horror” genre. Written by Wes Craven (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*) and Ray Wright, the fright-fest is an adaptation of the 2001 Japanese film *Kairo*. In the title sequence, images and sound bites remind us of just how difficult it is to get away from the invis-

ible communication networks that now weave round the planet. An announcer declares that we “can now be on the Internet anywhere in the world,” and a shot of spreading cell-phone networks is eerily reminiscent of a shot in *Outbreak*, the Dustin Hoffman film about the potential spread of an Ebola-like infection. The implication is clear: like any other contagion, the virus-like spread of information technology could prove to be an extremely dangerous threat.

The title dissolves into a modern college campus where Josh (Jonathan Tucker) is chased by some unknown, but obviously evil, figure, and must push through a throng of obliviously contented young adults—all of them using some sort of wireless device. Upon reaching the library, Josh is attacked by a ghostly demon that drains

him of what can only be described as his “life force.” We then cut to a bar where Josh’s girlfriend, and our protagonist, Mattie (Kristen Bell), shares a drink with her friends. The omnipresence of communication technology is again emphasized when a character two stools away from her sends a text-message asking if she wants to dance. (I would accuse the director of overkill if I hadn’t seen the same thing during my college years.)

As the movie progresses, we learn that ghosts have found a way to travel along our wireless networks—the Internet and cell phones, primarily; for some reason television and radio waves do not transmit them—and invade our homes. A website spreads across computer systems like a virus, asking those logged on, “Would you like to meet a ghost?” Characters are then plagued by specters who suck the life force from their victims, driving them to despair and suicide, or death from a virus that spreads throughout the bodies of the infected, leaving nothing but ashy remains.

After discovering a computer virus that might be able to wipe out the ghosts’ network, Mattie and handy computer geek Dexter (Ian Somerhalder) travel to the heart of the infestation and upload the virus. As with most of the recent wave of horror movies, however, there’s a twist: The virus doesn’t work. As the system is rebooting, the pair flees the evermore apocalyptic-looking city—trash-strewn streets, crashing passenger jets, and so forth—ditching the last vestige

of modern technology (Mattie’s cell phone) when it finally dawns on them that the device is acting as a conduit for the demons attacking them. The final shot is more colorful than every scene that came before it; driving off into a society devoid of modern apparatuses, Mattie and Dexter are welcomed by a spectacularly vibrant sunrise, symbolizing renewal and hope.

In this, and many other respects, *Pulse* is far more optimistic than its source material. *Kairo* is less preoccupied with showing people using technology; director Kiyoshi Kurosawa is content to let people infer the level of addiction themselves. Instead of a crowded college campus and a bar, *Kairo*’s narrative begins in a greenhouse, surrounded by nature. Instead of showing techno-obsession on-screen, Kurosawa chooses to delve into the psychological repercussions of living in a society more connected superficially, but lacking the real, human contact that comes with face-to-face interactions.

This psychoanalysis distinguishes *Kairo* from the average horror movie; though there are a few frightening moments, the scares come largely from tense moods instead of sudden noises or unexpected sights. To an American viewer, *Kairo* is less a horror film than an existential meditation on isolation in an amazingly interconnected world. When one character suggests he logged on to the Internet to make some friends, another notes that, “People don’t really connect, you know... We all live totally separately.”

Jasper Sharp, coauthor of *The*

Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film and coeditor of the Japanese-cinema website MidnightEye.com, explained that “major plot points are leapfrogged [in *Kairo*] to focus on their repercussions, leaving ambiguous holes in the narratives. What seem like crucial characters are killed off early on, the survivors remaining disassociated from one another—we don’t see them bonding or working together in [Kurosawa’s] films very much, and their motivations are left obscure.... The resulting disjointedness emphasizes the ideas that he is trying to express—the disconnection individuals feel with one another, with society as a whole, and ultimately with reality.”

The endings of the Japanese and American versions have starkly different subtexts. While *Pulse*’s protagonists approach the horizon on an upbeat, even hopeful note, *Kairo*’s lone survivor flees Japan on a boat buffeted by choppy waters, uncertain of the fate awaiting her.

The current J-Horror boom was anticipated by the 1998 Japanese film *Ringu*, remade in America as *The Ring* in 2002. In both versions, television sets and videocassette recorders (instead of wireless networks) serve as the conduit of evil; after viewing a cursed videotape filled with disturbing images, victims have only seven days to live. At the end of that week, an evil little girl (named Sadako in the original and Samara in the remake) crawls through the nearest television screen in order to attack her prey, literally scaring them to death.

In *The Ring*, after viewing the tape, Rachel (Naomi Watts) begins to take notice of society’s addiction to the medium: Standing on her apartment balcony she sees that every apartment near her has a television blaring; when Rachel and a friend discover the room in the barn Samara was forced to sleep in, they note that the girl’s only companion was a television; TVs are even omnipresent away from the city, as the original cursed tape comes from a VCR in the countryside that failed to record a football game.

Entire subplots are absent from the American release (including the notion that Samara is the daughter of a sea demon) that were meant, in the Japanese original, to weave apprehensions about technology with larger human stories. Eric White explores this theme in an essay in the 2005 book *Japanese Horror Cinema*. By prominently featuring modern gadgets, *Ringu* “associates ubiquitous technological mediation—that is, the cameras, television sets, videocassette recorders, telephones, and other such hardware foregrounded throughout the film—with the intrusion of ‘posthuman’ otherness into contemporary cultural life.” These modern evils are sublimated, however, into the traditional Japanese methods of storytelling. In another essay in the book, Richard J. Hand points out that J-Horror films adapt modern technologies within traditional Japanese artforms, “often juxtaposing the arcane with the contemporary or the mundane with the extraordinary in carefully developed structures. A videotape or a PC, for

example, becomes like an ancient curse in *Ringu* and [*Kairo*], respectively.”

Japan is not the only Asian nation to treat horrifically the encroachment of technology into everyday life. Consider the South Korean flick, *Phone*. While “horror hadn’t been a significant genre in Korea before the Japanese version of *Ring*,” according to Sharp, *Phone* echoes some of the technological anxieties seen in its Japanese predecessors.

Like *Ringu*, *Phone* relies on an artifact of modern technology (a cell phone) as a means of transmitting the curse of a vengeful spirit. A reporter (Ji-won Ha) hiding from a stalker is plagued by threatening phone calls. After changing her number to a new, cursed one, the daughter of Ji-Won’s friend, Ho-jeong (Yu-mi Kim), answers the phone and becomes infected by the insidious hex. The movie takes a number of twists and turns until it is discovered that the evil ghost is that of a young girl Jin-hie (Ji-yeon Choi), who has been walled up in Yu-mi’s home, entombed with her cell phone in hand. The phone, it turns out, was used by Jin-hie in the commission of an adulterous affair with Yu-mi’s husband. It is also an object of constant threat—first in the real world, as Ji-won is stalked by the

mysterious sexual predators, then Yu-mi’s husband is stalked by his jealous, pregnant, spurned lover—and then entering the realm of the fantastical, as Jin-hie haunts the journalist.

Of course, Asian cinema doesn’t hold a monopoly on the theme of “technology as threat,” but most such American releases—like *The Terminator*—are usually larger than life action flicks. Asian techno-horror movies, by contrast, are more intimate and in a sense more relatable: While we’re not all adulterers or murderers, most of us have cell phones. And personal computers. And televisions.

“Horror movies are best when they give expression to wider cultural anxieties,” Sharp points out. “The recent Japanese horror films don’t see technology in itself as a threat... [technology] merely provides a conduit for darker more threatening forces to manifest themselves through.” Unease with the modern world has created a demand for films that portray technology as a growing menace; ever increasing penetration by technology into our lives means that this anxiety will, in all likelihood, be with us—and on the screen—for quite some time.

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