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Although they differ significantly as texts, one cannot help but sense a repeated pattern in the titles of some recent Japanese horror films.[1] *Ring* (dir. Nakata Hideo, 1998), *Ring 2* (dir. Nakata Hideo, 1999), *Rasen* (The Spiral, dir. Iida Jôji, 1998), *Uzumaki* (The Whirlpool, dir. Higuchinsky, 2000), *Kairo* (literally, "The Circuit," dir. Kurosawa Kiyoshi, 2000)—they all evoke images of circularity, of a movement proceeding away and then returning, an endless repetition. This motif extends to the stories of these films themselves, their basic structure being that of repeated "attacks" brought on by the return of a monster that should be past, assaults that, it is intimated, will only continue in the future. Even a horror film such as *Tomie* (dir. Oikawa Ataru, 1999), which sports a common girl's name as its nondescript title, is fundamentally a circular tale, as the beautiful temptress Tomie repeatedly dies only to be resurrected each time to once again lure men into committing murder, including her own—thus starting the tale again. Round objects abound in such films, from cylindrical wells to revolving tapes (the *Ring* films), from *Uzumaki*'s overload of spirals to the gas tank cap literally rolling towards death in *Kairo*. Mamiya in *Cure*, an amnesiac mesmerist, in some ways becomes the epitome of the circular monster, branded on the back by roundish metal, continually repeating the question, "Who are you?" without ever accumulating that knowledge which should result in the end of such repetitions. With the more popular of these films sparking subsequent textual returns of their monsters in sequels (as in the case of *Ring* and *Tomie*), it appears the circularity and repetition of recent Japanese horror is bound to come back again and again. It is such relationships between repetition, horror, cinema, and history that I want to sketch in this paper.

Part of this overflow of repetitions is a function of the genre. If the monster is the return of the repressed, as many have argued, it returns repeatedly both because repression is never completely successful and because that which is repressed is too transgressive to be completely free. Even early Hollywood horror, which promised the triumph of order and reason in a conclusion affirming the final defeat of the monster, the attractiveness of a Dracula or the sympathy towards Frankenstein's monster—as well as the commercial success that fuels the industrial foundation of the repetitive formula that genre is—stimulated the desire for encountering the creature again. Post-*Carrie* tales foreground this desire by intimating the monster's rise again in the last shot, a device used in *Tomie*, if not more brilliantly in *Cure*. W. H. Rockett has even defined the horror genre as oscillating on an almost circuitous route between satisfying the Aristotelian desire to effect order by explaining (showing, eliminating) the monster, and allowing it to terrorize us in off-screen space; letting us be reassured it's only

a movie while also scaring the living daylights out of us.[2]

In discussing Japanese horror generically, one can argue differences between the traditional Japanese ghost story (*kaidan*) and the classic Western horror tale. The strong legacy of female monsters and the lack of an Enlightenment project to restore order and reason, coupled with animistic beliefs about death and a Buddhist cosmology, articulate the specificity of the old *kaidan*, ones which often provided the fodder for many early Japanese horror films. Yet repetition still structured much of the experience. From Oiwa in *Yotsuya Kaidan* to the ghost cats in the *bakeneko* films of Suzuki Sumiko and Irie Takako, the monsters were angry ghosts (*onryô*), women who died wronged by a brutal (and male) feudal order, but whose souls could not continue on (to paradise, to another life) because of their anger. Audiences enjoyed the return of these repressed monsters not only by viewing them time and again, but by supporting a cyclical exhibition schedule which, for a long time, played *kaidan* films in the hot summer months in order to send "chills" down viewers' spines (or so the story goes). Contemporary urban legends with a horror twist, such as the ones told by school children about "Hanako of the Toilet" (which was eventually made into Matsuoka Jôji's 1995 *Toire no Hanako*), themselves are fueled by the endless repetition of story telling that constitutes such social forms of transmission.

Recent horror films, with their share of *onryô* like the *Ring*-series' Yamamura Sadako, definitely have their referential roots in such *kaidan*, to the point that some writers praise recent work for their "return" to Japanese horror traditions after a flirtation in the 1980s with "Westernized" splatter films.[3] These are still often female ghosts, wronged in their lifetime, who return to wreck havoc, and share such common tropes as the long, straight but uncombed hair down about the face. The scale and structure of repetition has changed, however. While *kaidan* ghosts may have returned to the theater every summer, in each text, they were exorcised (*taiji sareru*) or simply disappeared, after having accomplished their revenge against a specific enemy. In many cases, they have been put to rest, allowed to proceed to the Buddhist paradise (*jôbutsu suru*), thus ending the cycle of that ghost with that film. In recent works, however, monsters like Sadako and Tomie have no specific enemy; like Mamiya, they seem to be challenging one and all. There thus seems to be no way to put them at ease; even when Sadako

is laid to rest in the first *Ring* (when her body is finally found), her videotape still retains its power. Just as the end of *Ring* implies, the cycle of watching the video will continue, perhaps out of necessity (it being assumed that one must copy the tape and have another view it to save oneself), perpetuating the ring of people that the title in part connotes.

One could argue this difference in recent Japanese horror is equivalent to that evident in Hollywood horror of the last twenty or thirty years, represented by the work of George Romero, Toby Hooper, John Carpenter, and others (who do, it must be mentioned, have their admirers among Japanese film directors, for instance Kurosawa Kiyoshi). Whereas early horror films still promised a return of order and valorized the authorities fighting the monster, in the "paranoid" horror Andrew Tudor sees in recent cinema, "both the nature and the course of the threat are out of human control," with no solution ensured.[4] Not only are authorities discredited, the monster itself increasingly becomes associated with we, the "normal" people, manifesting our own internal horrors. While Bruce Kawin argues that the horror movie monster has always been an expression of our "inner monster," such that the genre becomes a mythic means of facing up with our darker side,[5] it is clear that recent horror makes such a confrontation often impossible to resolve.

Japanese horror has often made the monster, frequently a victim herself, as or even more sympathetic than her victims. It is thus possible for audiences to identify with her, to find one's self in her, rather than with the "normal" people. This is often a process less of seeing our evil in the monster than of desiring a powerful monster to eliminate our ills for us. Kaneko Shûsuke, director of *kaijû* films like *Gamera* and such horror movies as *Crossfire* (2000), has made the misunderstood monster a central theme. Although both Gamera and Junko in *Crossfire* are fighting evil, those around them simply reject them as monsters, in part because they have powers that even they cannot fully control, and which sometimes lead to innocent deaths. The audience clearly identifies with Junko, to the point that it is normal society itself that is monstrous: it was the force that effectively created monsters like her by discriminating against and expelling those who are "other" from society (the film states that her powers of pyrokinesis are a result of the pent-up anger of her ostracized ancestors). Kaneko, however, still relies on conventional divisions of self versus other in his strategy of identification, only

perversely reversing who "we" are in a manner that only re-disguises the real problem of others in Japanese society. A film like *Cure* is more radical to the degree it renders the divisions between self and other, "us" and the monster—and thus the process of identification—fundamentally impossible.

Recent Japanese horror films repeat in part because contemporary society seems either incapable of containing such disorder, or—and this is probably why it is incapable—has utterly failed to stop perpetuating the injustices that create such monsters in the first place. But in these days of political ambiguity, when much of Japanese commercial cinema refrains from pointed critique, this concept of a politicized monster seems an insufficient interpretation. This suspicion is supported by the recognition that circularity and repetition function prominently in Japanese non-horror cinema as well. Just to name a few: there are Kitano Takeshi's films, *Boiling Point* (1990), *Kids Return* (1996), and *Kikujiro* (1999), which are framed by scenes repeated almost exactly; the two entries in Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Katte ni shiyagare* series that use the identical opening scene; Aoyama Shinji's imperative in *Eureka* (2000) to have his characters return to the origin of their trauma, take "another bus," and only stop repeated murders through deciding to continue circling about on a bicycle and not turn off to kill again. In another example, Iwai Shunji's *Love Letter* (1995) is replete with doublings and repetitions: two Fujii Itsukis are crisscrossed by two identical women (the female Itsuki and Hiroko), and the plot is partially centered on the repetition of a high fever on a snowy day. Even Hirayama Hideyuki's *Turn* (2001) seems to repeat (unintentionally) the Bill Murray vehicle *Groundhog's Day* in having the central character redo the same day over and over again, albeit in a different manner.

Repetitions are clearly a part of any narrative process, as the return of similar items and moments emphasizes story and character information, ensures narrative comprehension, establishes thematic motifs, and helps found the semiotic structure of the work. Gilles Deleuze, however, argues that repetition can, in certain forms, manifest a transgressive philosophy that questions the basis of Western Enlightenment. He identifies two forms of repetition. One, a sort of "Platonic" mode, is repetition of the same, in which the two elements in the repetition are identical according to a general concept. Identity is at the basis of this world, and it is this fundamental identity that allows one to connect two elements.

This, to Deleuze, is the model of representation, where similarity is allowed on the basis of an original concept that ensures identity of meaning. The second, more Nietzschean form of repetition, however, is repetition of difference: the two elements are fundamentally singular (different) in nature, but are united in that difference through a universality that does not eliminate difference through the concept. Difference then founds this world, to the point that repetition is not the representation of an original, but the repetition of difference without an origin. Thus, instead of representation, repetition here founds simulacra, doublings and returns without a solid "first."[6] To Deleuze, these two forms of repetition, while opposed, are always also intertwined, each involving and implying the other.

Deleuze, who claims for repetition a fundamental theatricality (a performance, with masks masking masks), associates true, Nietzschean repetition in art most closely to humor. But what is interesting for our purpose is the fact that his notion of the simulacrum as essentially a "phantasm" (the fact there is "something ghostly," in J. Hillis Miller's words, about the connections between these singular, different elements) leads us to ask whether it is not in fact horror that is the genre of true repetition. Not only does Deleuze cite *doppelgänger* as examples of true repetition, he relates that repetition to the death wish, such that the "death instinct must be understood in terms of [giving] repetition . . . an immanent meaning in which terror is closely mingled with the movement of selection and freedom."[7] If simulacra are the denial of the principle of identity (A=A), we can speculate whether it is not horror, often populated with figures who seem to be themselves yet are somehow not themselves (the "pod people" in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Yôichi in *Ring 2*, etc.), that persistently explores the opposite of identity (A=not A).

It is tempting to use these conceptions to consider the proliferation of repetition in recent Japanese film as a marker of the postmodern moment, and in fact quite a number of films make contemporary image technology, if not the floating signifier itself, a medium of terror. Kawin has argued that generically horror, because it is an occasion where we willingly see what we usually don't want to see willingly, is often self-reflexive, reminding us of the processes of seeing and submitting to illusion.[8] Some Japanese horror films focus this self-reflection on the problem of image repetition. The phenomena of "ghost photographs" (*yûrei shashin*), cited quite

commonly in contemporary popular culture and in the *Ring*-series, may indicate both a desire to restore a phantasmic aura to reproductive technology as well as a fear, with video and computer image devices, of new technology whose logic remains mysterious to many, but they also foreground that which is "ghostly" about reproduction: having two singular entities (say a person and a photograph) be the same yet different, the ghost itself marking the difference that identity cannot efface because that difference in fact founds identity.

Ring's primary "ghost photograph"—Sadako's videotape—is then, in Deleuze's terms, not an issue of representation but of simulacra. It is not impossible to argue that the tape has an origin or referent in Sadako's anger or *onnen*, and clearly there are marked moments in the series when the characters encounter the places "in reality" that appeared in the video. But these phantasmic accounts of origin are far from the common conception of representation based in identity. The video was created by means that deny the scientific basis of the medium, a point paradoxically emphasized by *Ring 2*, in which scientific test subjects "reproduce" through mental "transmission" the tape images they had not necessarily seen. They are essentially, to them, signs without any referents. The *Ring*-series then elides the "original" moment of representation for the repetitive process of reproduction, symbolized by the video itself, which promotes its own propagation. It assumes the form of a technological urban legend, spreading through town, appearing on your shelf without you being sure where you got it, and becoming common knowledge without anyone knowing where it came from. "Ring" itself can thus refer to the endless process of making copies of copies, of images repeating images—and thus to the logic of the simulacrum. In some cases, such as the scene Mai experiences in the island inn in *Ring 2*, what was the video has become "reality," leaving the line between image and reality unclear. In *Kairo*, Kurosawa performs this feat more adeptly, using image glitches (like those visible on a video skipping) to not only signify the world of the dead on the net, but also, at unexpected moments, to turn spaces we thought "real" into computer images, evoking the spread of the simulacrum.

This is a process in difference, a fact underlined by the contradictory textuality of the *Ring*-texts themselves. *Ring* is a resounding example of textual repetition: not only was there a *Ring* novel, a *Ring* TV movie (before Nakata's film), and a *Ring*

TV series (aired in time for *Ring* 2), but more importantly, all have significant plot differences even though they treat essentially the same story. These discrepancies are echoed by the two film sequels to the film *Ring*, *Rasen* and *Ring 2*, which both start off at the same point (Takayama's death) and move off in completely different directions. Yet all are, in a sense, repetitions of *Ring*—a ring for which it is less and less clear where the original is.

Whether one interprets this state as Baudrillard's all-encompassing simulacrum or Deleuze's liberatory critique of Platonic identity, it is clear that Japanese contemporary horror is imbricated in the historical moment of postmodernism. Yet as such, I would argue that many of these films, either consciously or unconsciously locating horror in the postmodern condition, render repetition itself a complex site of contestation over the potential of cinema in history. Consider the moment in *Tomie* when Tomie, confronting Tsukiko, chides her on her future of marrying "that boring boy, having stupid kids, and turning into a wrinkled granny." This she contrasts to her own existence of being perpetually young. It is, of course, an ironic comment, one not lost on Tomie herself, since her eternal youth is conditioned on her being repeatedly murdered and reborn from her body parts. In her own words, she is thus forever *kawaii* (cute, pretty) and *kawaisô* (pitiful), manifesting the present day tendencies of these related words. In some sense, she is the epitome of the *shôjo* (a young girl who is of reproductive age but through social convention remains unmarried), that figure which so represents the consumerist, unproductive trend in contemporary Japanese culture that anthropologist Ôtsuka Eiji has named *shôjo* "the 'common people' [*jômin*] of today's Japan."[9] Manifested in the "cute culture" (*kawaii bunka*) that dominated the 1980s, *shôjo*, to Sharon Kinsella, are a form of social resistance, women consuming cute things in order to construct a space of innocent cuteness that fundamentally rejects the restrictions of both adulthood in general and womanhood in particular.[10] It is much like Tomie's eternal youth, or a kind of return to the pre-Oedipal stage before difference and gender. Helping us suggest an alignment between the *shôjo* and Deleuzian repetition, John Whittier Treat even convincingly relates the concept to Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus*.[11] In several aspects, the *shôjo* is a central symbol of facets of consumerist, postmodern Japan.

Tomie could be seen as the demonization of the *shôjo*, a reactionary backlash against the transgressions of "normal" life cycles and womanhood

Tomie represents. This does remind us of the conservative roles horror as a genre can play, but in this case, we must recall the historical culture of repetition with which *Tomie* and the *shôjo* intersect. When Tomie confronts Tsukiko at the end with their similarity, declaring "I am you and you are me," this not only acknowledges the *shôjo* in all of us consumers, but also recalls Ôbayashi Nobuhiko's *Exchange Students* ("Tenkôsei," 1982), which features almost the exact same line. These words are spoken at a moment of despair by Saitô Kazumi, a middle school girl who, after rolling down some stairs with a classmate named Saitô Kazuo, ends up changing bodies with him, and are directed at Kazuo. The aim behind them, unlike in *Tomie* (where they express Tomie's assertive presence), is to reassure, not simply by proclaiming togetherness, but by denying the distinction between self and other itself. From a director who has consistently filmed *shôjo* (even turning the castrator Abe Sada into a *shôjo* in his 1998 *Sada*), it is a particularly *shôjo* moment, one that reverberates in a tale replete with repetition (their similar names, the repeated action of falling down the stairs, etc.).

We must emphasize the story's pleasure, steeped as it is in a constructed nostalgia, but one firmly related to a structuring narcissism, manifested in these two "me's" falling in love. The fact that this narcissism, in Ôbayashi, is distinctly pre-Oedipal is confirmed in the later *Miss Lonely* ("Sabishinbô," 1985), in which a teenage boy essentially falls in love with his mother (who appears out of a photograph as a girl his age), loses her, then marries another girl who looks just like her, finally to father another girl with the same visage. Here sweet circles of repetition envelop us in a comforting narcissism that recalls the union with the mother. The doublings in Iwai Shunji's *Love Letter* produce a similarly soothing narcissism from another source: as Hikoe Tomohiro argues, it is based in a melancholic refusal to let go of the lost other, as even the words Hiroko shouts to her dead lover at the mountain at the end—"Are you well?"—still assume he is alive.[12]

My point is that *Tomie*, as well as other recent Japanese horror films, do not simply demonize the *shôjo*, but bear a potential critique of a particular historical articulation of the *shôjo* (and the postmodern) that has, through repetition, created a narcissistic elision of the other. This is evident from the fact that the elided other returns with a vengeance in these films. At the end of *Tomie*, the monster most appropriately reappears in a mirror alongside the heroine. A mirror image also features prominently in Sadako's video, and even provides Mai a point in *Ring 2* to "mistake" herself for Sadako's mother (thus complicating her new motherly role towards the Sadako-ized Yôichi). Such mirrors remind us of the similarity between heroine and monster, but they also demonize narcissism itself, foregrounding the underside to that reflective celebration of the same. The potential exists for them to be read as a critique of a certain culture of repetition, one founded in consumerist narcissism, but still, I would argue, only a potential. With too many films sticking closely to the demonization of the other central to the horror genre, they allow that other space to scream out—again and again in a structure of repetition—while never fully coming to terms with the self's own perception of the other as a threat.

Kurosawa's *Cure* and *Kairo* are more radical alternatives precisely to the degree that they and their use of repetition rework the genre itself. First, it is significant that in both films, the monster never really attacks. In *Cure*, all the murders are committed by the "victims" themselves, and it is arguable that all Mamiya did was to hypnotically prompt them, as in the case of the police officer or the doctor, to act out what they had always desired. In *Kairo*, Kurosawa makes it clear that horror is a matter of desire: there again, the figure of Death that emerges on the internet does not assault people, but begins with a question, "Do you want to see a ghost?"—a question like that posed by any horror film. People in *Kairo* do not die because Death kills them (most in fact survive their encounters with the dead), but because essentially they want to die. The threat, in effect, is of their own making. This is evident in the case of Harue, who not only willfully returns alone to her room, knowing full well the dangers, but "hugs" her Reaper as if greeting an old lover. Since this "lover" is invisible to us—visually, she is just hugging the camera—the death instinct is here closely tied to narcissism, too.

Earlier comments by Harue show that this moment does not simply illustrate the emptiness of narcissism, it also elaborates the historical logic behind this compulsion with death. Her declared fear that death is just the eternal continuation (dare we say, repetition?) of the loneliness she feels now, marks her demise as both an attempt to change that through a state of self-sufficient self-love, and conversely, a recognition that she has essentially been dead all along. The latter echoes the sociologist Miyadai Shinji's argument that contemporary Japan

to many young people is nothing other than the horror of an "endless everyday" (*owarinaki nichijô*) where all is empty and nothing changes.[13] Perhaps it is the prospect of this kind of eternal return (not the Nietzschean one) that leads them towards death, either self-inflicted or directed at others (as in the Sarin gas attacks or the 1995 Sakakibara case of a teenager decapitating his 9-year-old playmate).

Kurosawa also focuses the problem in the relationship of self and other, a point that is stressed in what could be called *Kairo*'s curious double, *Barren Illusion* ("Ôinaru genei," 1999). Both are essentially apocalyptic films with heroines named Michi that make the fading out of the self a central issue. In *Barren Illusion*, this loss of self partly stems from the absence of a significant other, as Haru literally fades out at the beginning when other people reject him, but in both films, Kurosawa emphasizes that having an other is not enough (Ryôsuke in *Kairo*, after all, fades away at the end even when accompanied by Michi). Like the dots on the computer screen in Harue's lab, the point is to be near the other without getting too close (which might result in absorbing the other, thus ending the self). In *Cure*, Sakuma's warning to Takabe, the detective who wants to have an explanation for every crime, is precisely not to get too close, since some actions simply cannot be explained. The crimes Mamiya incites are essentially acts of crossing out the other (the X's cut into the victims), actions which result in virtual self-destruction. Mamiya, as the monster without a self, is then the return of the repressed other who confronts people not only with their elimination of others, but also, with his seemingly unanswerable questions of "Who are you?", with their fundamental emptiness, which is perhaps the most terrifying realization.

Kurosawa's horror uses circularity and repetition to emphasize this emptiness, foregrounding what many other horror films can only express unconsciously. The brilliant and frightening quality of his work, moreover, lies in its ability to render that emptiness both horrific and pleasurable. Mamiya, as Sakuma says, is less a monster than a missionary (*dendôshi*), a preacher offering the gospel of a new, wonderfully empty existence. It is a message that Takabe eventually accepts, at the price of killing his others (Mamiya, and probably his wife and Sakuma), yet without the loss of memory or sociability. There is something very tempting about that emptiness, a pleasure not unrelated to the pleasure of feigned plenitude for the *shôjo*,

but Kurosawa skillfully makes fear part and parcel of that enjoyment, like a critical presence lurking behind our ideologized fun.

Quite appropriately, *Cure* ends with repetition. The last scene begins with Takabe sitting in the family restaurant, seemingly reprising a shot we had viewed earlier. The mise-en-scène and lines are largely repeated, but there is something ghostly different. We feel this is not the same Takabe as before (Takabe=not Takabe), yet given the illusory quality of many of the previous scenes (the wife's body, the abandoned building where Mamiya is shot), we are not even sure of that. Even the subsequent reverse shot, which abruptly ends with the waitress picking up the knife, does not provide us with confirmation of our suspicion she will kill her boss. It is in the empty spaces between these shots, the gaps between these repetitions, that Kurosawa's horror lies. It is both fearful and pleasurable, the horror and thrills of repetition and of cinema in contemporary Japan.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this article appeared in Italian as "Il ritorno vuoto. Circolarità e ripetizione nel cinema giapponese horror degli ultimi anni" in *Il Cinema Giapponese Oggi: tradizione e innovazionei*, eds. Giovanni Spagnoletti, Dario Tomasi, Olaf Möller (Torino: Lindau, 2001).

[2] W. H. Rockett, "Perspectives," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 10.3 (Autumn 1982).

[3] Fujiwara Takashi, "Japanîzu horâ no genzai," in *The Nightmare from the Movies/Horâ eiga senritsu to kaiki no monogatari*, ed. Burakku ando Burû (Tokyo: Neko Paburishingu, 2000): 10–18.

[4] Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989): 103.

[5] Bruce F. Kawin, "Children of the Light," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 236–257.

[6] See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For two applications of these concepts in literary studies, see J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and John Johnston, *Carnival of Repetition: Gaddis's The Recognitions and Postmodern Theory* (Philadeplphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

[7] Deleuze, p. 19.

[8] Kawin, p. 251.

[9] Ôtsuka Eiji, *Shôjo minzokugaku* (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1989), 20.

[10] Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, eds. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995): 220–254.

[11] See John Whittier Treat's two essays on Yoshimoto Banana: "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The Shôjo in Japanese Popular Culture," *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, 275–308; "Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen*, or the Cultural Logic of Japanese Consumerism," *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, ed. Treat (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994): 274–298.

[12] Hikoe Tomohiro, "Merankori to hiai. Aoyama Shinji no sakuhin o megutte," *Cahiers du Cinema Japon* 22 (1997): 64–76.

[13] Miyadai Shinji, *Owarinaki nichijô o ikiro* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobô, 1995).