

**Transnational UK Reception of Contemporary
Japanese Horror Film**

Aimee Richmond

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Abstract

This thesis examines the understanding of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre in the UK, taking into account the effects that the specificities of the UK cross-cultural context have upon audiences' meaning-making. Analysis mainly revolves around six films selected based upon frequency of mention by participants: *Ring* (Nakata, 1998), *Audition* (Miike, 1999), *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004), *Dark Water* (Nakata, 2002), *Battle Royale* (Fukusaku, 2000) and *Ichi the Killer* (Miike, 2001).

Four focus groups and twenty individual interviews were conducted with individuals aged between eighteen and thirty years of age, all of whom self-identified as British. Responses were analysed in order to provide insight into three key areas: how UK audiences define the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, the frameworks and processes they use in their definitions, and the meanings that they find in culturally-specific elements within these films. Both the Japanese and UK reception landscapes of contemporary Japanese horror film are outlined in order to provide necessary context.

Ultimately, the research unearths a variety of interpretations of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre, which are reflective of a range of audience readings due in part to different levels of inter-cultural competence and personal preference. The study finds new channels of reception to be central in influencing transnational audience reception. Home viewing cultures and shifts from the original viewing context are further linked to the way in which audiences create experiences around the films, the influence of which lasts well beyond the point of reception. Alongside this, genre definition and film

placements within those genres are shown to be an important factor in film reception, particularly in terms of influencing audience value judgments. Acknowledging the fragmented nature of the audience, hypotheses as to the development of an audience-led approach to transnational genre are outlined.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction: Resurrecting contemporary Japanese horror film	1
Aims and outline.....	5
What's in a name?.....	7
A note on subjectivity.....	16
Chapter 2: Situating the study	18
Defining and locating the text in the age of transnationalism.....	18
Existing studies of contemporary Japanese horror film.....	23
Theory and wider studies.....	31
Summary.....	44
Chapter 3: Dissecting the approach	46
Research questions.....	46
Digging up graves.....	47
Assembling the monster	58
Rationale.....	64
Limitations.....	73
Chapter 4: "Welcome to a Japanese nightmare"	75
Origins and influences.....	76
Genre in Japan.....	85
The Japanese reception context.....	92
Chapter 5: Ghoul Britannia: The UK cross-cultural reception context	98
Historical reception of Japanese 'horror' film in the UK.....	98
The J-horror boom in the UK.....	113
Distribution.....	115
UK channels of reception.....	120

Reconfiguring and repositioning contemporary Japanese horror film..	128
Chapter 6: Results 1: How are the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film understood by UK audiences?	138
What's in a name? (revisited).....	139
What is contemporary Japanese horror film?.....	144
Chapter 7: Results 2: What frameworks do UK audiences use to understand and contextualise contemporary Japanese horror film?	161
Japanese + horror + film.....	162
Acknowledging individuality and antecedent factors.....	168
UK audiences and film-based frameworks.....	173
UK audiences and context-based frameworks.....	183
Meaning-making beyond the point of reception.....	191
Chapter 8: Results 3: How do UK audiences interpret culturally-specific elements within contemporary Japanese horror films?	195
UK audiences' interpretations of culturally-specific tropes.....	196
UK audiences' perceptions of Japanese society.....	208
On the absence of meaning.....	217
Chapter 9: Conclusion: You don't have to go to Texas for a chainsaw massacre	219
Implications.....	219
Made in the UK: The genre of contemporary Japanese horror film(s)....	221
Towards an audience-led model of transnational genres.....	225
Limitations.....	226
Suggestions for further study.....	228
Appendix 1: Interviewee biographies	231
References	243
Audio visual references.....	256

Chapter 1

Introduction: Resurrecting contemporary Japanese horror film

In around 2005, contemporary Japanese horror film died. Or, at least, this is what popular press opinion would have us believe. British film commentator Tony Rayns (2007) declared of the cycle of long wet haired ghost films, “Japan is sick of them. The world is sick of them”. On the popular Japanese film website *Midnight Eye*, Nicholas Rucka (2005) discusses “The death of J-horror?” almost as if it were a rhetorical question. And if Mark Schilling (2006), film correspondent for *Variety* and *The Japan Times*, is to be believed, Japanese horror is “Running out of steam” even in its own country as “Local auds tire of the same old scares”. But first, let us rewind a little.

In the late 1990s, something happened which significantly changed the transnational landscape of horror cinema: Japanese horror film boomed and came into vogue abroad. Critics lauded what Japanese audiences had long known and appreciated. Here was a national cinema that had its roots in folktales and traditional Japanese theatre, but was still able to play upon modern day anxieties and had not been immune to international influence. BBC film critic Mark Kermode (2000) praised *Ring's* (Nakata 1998) “Unique combination of old folk devils and contemporary moral panics”. Richard Falcon (2001) of the BBFC described *Audition* (Miike 1999) as “An experience which can fully satisfy only the most conscience-free of gore hounds and career masochists”. Across the Atlantic, New York film critic Dennis Lim (2004) lauded *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Shimizu 2002) as “A curious experiment in chain-yanking horror-movie

dynamics”, describing the way in which it “Performs the ratchet-release-repeat trick with such metronomic efficiency that it gathers the force of a hallucinatory incantation”. It is these three films that have come to be seen as definitive of what is commonly referred to as *J-Horror*, the film movement which brought Japanese horror film back into both cultural and economic prominence in Japan and marked the cementation of a transnational cult status for the genre.¹

Although appreciation of contemporary Japanese horror film had long been simmering beneath the surface as fans passed round copied videotapes and communed at underground screenings, it was when one of these tapes found its way into the hands of the film producer Roy Lee that the genre really boomed (Kalat 2007: 6). Lee gained notoriety through selling the remake rights of Asian films to Hollywood studios, and between 2002 and 2006 no less than six major Japanese horror films were remade by Hollywood: *Ring* (Remade as *The Ring*, Verbinski 2002), *Ju-on: The Grudge* (remade as *The Grudge*, Shimizu 2004), *Ringu 2* (Nakata 1999, remade as *The Ring 2*, Nakata 2005), *Dark Water* (Nakata 2002, remade as *Dark Water*, Salles 2005), *Ju-on: The Grudge 2* (Shimizu 2003, remade as *The Grudge 2*, Shimizu 2006), and *Kairo* (Kurosawa 2001, remade as *Pulse*, Sonzero 2006). Following their US box office release, these six films grossed a total of £237million, and in turn drew attention to their original Japanese source materials.²

So, if contemporary Japanese horror film is as dead as some critics deem it to be, then why is the genre worthy of further study? Certainly, after a decade

¹ For discussion of the 1990s as the rebirth era of Japanese cinema see Schilling (1999). McRoy (2005) and Balmain (2008) also mention the 1990s as a rebirth for Japanese horror film specifically.

² Combined figures converted from JETRO film market report (2009). Individually: *The Ring* US\$129,128,233; *The Grudge* US\$110,359,362; *The Ring 2* US\$76,231,249; *Dark Water* US\$25,473,352; *The Grudge 2* US\$39,143,839; *Pulse* US\$18.182.451.

of many textual analysis based studies, scholarship around the big three of *Ring*, *Ju-on: The Grudge* and *Audition* is starting to look tired. The answer to this question is two-fold, and it involves eschewing a narrow focus and looking outside of the texts themselves, towards the areas of audience reception studies and genre.

First, this study is more than just an obituary to the phenomenon that is, or was, contemporary Japanese horror film. Instead, the films are positioned primarily as a tool for analysing the meaning they still hold for their cross-cultural United Kingdom audience, which in turn sheds new light on the films themselves. Essentially, the process of meaning-making is never rooted solely within the film text, it has a reach which extends beyond the moment of reception and continues to be relevant today. To put these ideas into perspective, imagine that you were given and asked to describe a watermelon. What would you say? Round? Juicy? Green? If you were to define the watermelon purely by factors that were located within it, you would quickly run out of things to say, and the watermelon would eventually shrivel and lose its taste. However, if you were to look outside of the watermelon itself, the meanings are practically limitless. You might recount the experience of eating the watermelon years after the event, it might have inspired you to try other fruits, or you might have enjoyed it more because it was consumed on a sunny day. Similarly, audience reception studies is not about finding the *true* meaning perceived to exist solely within a text. It is about asking *how* a text means, and investigating the *circumstances* that influence those meanings. Indeed, so much exists around and beyond the film text which has gone largely ignored within contemporary Japanese horror film scholarship and is ripe for analysis; from audience

motivations and the influence of marketing, to the new media channels of reception through which films are viewed, to post-filmic viewer activity.

The second answer to that question of worthiness is that contemporary Japanese horror film isn't actually dead. At the very least, it still exists and is being consumed within the transnational flow of texts. More likely, the definition of what is regarded as contemporary Japanese horror film is inconsistent, always evolving, and has not yet been sufficiently addressed. To return to the watermelon analogy, if you live in the UK it is likely that you have never questioned that the watermelon is a fruit, and it may not occur to you that in some countries the watermelon is commonly classed as a vegetable. If someone had informed you it was a vegetable prior to you tasting it would this have affected your expectations? Does the recent invention of square or multi-coloured watermelons challenge and complicate your initial description? And surely those people who do not like watermelon will have a different experience to those who do? Suddenly, pinning down a universal nature of the watermelon becomes more difficult and subjective. Similarly, generic classification of films is notoriously problematic.

In conclusion to his seminal book on genre, Altman (1999: 214) highlights the need for an approach to genre that:

- addresses the fact that every text has multiple users;
- considers why different users develop different readings;
- theorizes the relationship among these users; and
- actively considers the effect of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labeling, and display of films and genre alike.

It is this multi-faceted approach towards genre which underpins this thesis. But if it is so problematic, why is investigating the genre label of contemporary Japanese horror film important? Whilst genre is ultimately fluid and subjective, it

is often the case that genre labels have already been unavoidably imposed before a film reaches its audience. The approach I take in this thesis holds the audience at its core, and serves to highlight the importance that genre labeling (and indeed mis-labeling) has in its potential to shape audience expectations. This, in turn, has the potential to impact upon the reception experiences of the contemporary Japanese horror films which are explored in this thesis.

Aims and outline

The aim of this study is to embark on a journey which culminates in a deeper understanding of how audience reception and genre functions transnationally. There are three key uncharted areas to be explored: What UK audiences understand to be contemporary Japanese horror film as a genre, how UK audiences understand culturally-specific elements within the individual films, and the processes involved in this meaning-making. However, the journey itself is an exercise in mapping the different contexts within which the films are produced and received, and observing that genre definitions and film placements within those genres are an important factor in film reception.

The thesis which follows examines UK audience reception of contemporary Japanese horror film, which I define as being from 1998 (or the release of *Ring*) onwards. By utilising contemporary Japanese horror film as a tool for the exploration of that which surrounds the text rather than as the sole site of meaning, it is these surrounding meanings and the nature of the audience which forms the crux of this study. The originality of the thesis lies in addressing the meanings which contemporary Japanese horror film holds for a UK audience in combination with an analysis of the antecedent factors which acknowledge the

cross-cultural nature of the exchange. Hence the study is a starting point for shedding light on the process of genre film reception across borders, and the interpretive communities which consume them.

Like a good horror film, this thesis has a clear structure. First, the scene is set with chapters one, two and three. The remainder of chapter one dissects the genre terms within which contemporary Japanese horror film is often discussed. Chapter two hunts down the key literature surrounding the cross-disciplinary approach which underpins this research. It documents that which exists around the direction taken by this thesis towards the analysis of UK audiences of contemporary Japanese horror film, and highlights the need for such a study. Chapter three pries open the methodology behind the thesis and gives background to the New Audience Research approach. It explains the research questions; the research design; and the rationale, including sampling, selection of films, and the author's positionality in relation to her research.

Chapters four and five represent what might be regarded as building characterisation and investment within the story. Together these chapters provide a contextual basis for the results of the audience interviews. Chapter four hunts down the history of Japanese horror film, and outlines the Japanese reception context. Chapter five dismembers the specificities of the UK context of contemporary Japanese horror film, including the history of how Japanese horror film was discussed in the UK, the J-horror boom, distribution, channels of reception, and the way in which the films are reconfigured for a transnational UK audience.

Chapters six, seven and eight must therefore depict the climactic ending of the film where we slice apart each research question. These chapters present

the results from focus group and individual interviews. Chapter five addresses *what* is contemporary Japanese horror film deemed to be in the UK context, and chapter six addresses *how* audiences interpret contemporary Japanese horror film and the process and frameworks they apply. Chapter seven ties these together with short cases studies of UK audiences' interpretations of culturally-specific elements common to contemporary Japanese horror film.

In chapter eight we are presented with what would akin to the closing credits and the end-of-credits scene that points towards an inevitable sequel. This final chapter provides a summary of the results, offers up hypotheses in relation to audience definition of transnational genres, and points towards the wider implications alongside potential avenues for future research.

What's in a name?

Locating the contemporary Japanese horror film text within a body of genre is a highly subjective matter. To demonstrate the extent of this, consider the lists that users can create on the film website IMDB. *Ring* alone features on over 1000 individual lists, each of which have a theme chosen by their creator. This is, essentially, film grouping at the most micro level. Of course, the themes of these lists go beyond simply genre. They might be based on ratings, year released, or simply a list of films that the user has seen. However, for the purposes of genre, *Ring* features on lists including "horror movies", "world cinema", "Asian movies", "ghost stories" and "J-horror", and many more beyond this. Some of these are particularly specific such as "television horror".

When a smaller number of genre gatekeepers begin classifying films for a wider audience, essentially the amount of genre terms becomes further

restricted. At a more macro level than the IMDB user lists, if you were to pick up a range of academic books about Japanese horror film, read a variety of reviews, or browse the categories of online retailers, an uneasy bridging across the various genres into which Japanese horror films tend to be placed would become apparent. At this level the most common terms such as *Japanese horror*, *J-horror*, *Asian horror* and *Asia Extreme* appear to be used almost interchangeably. Notably, all of these pseudo-genres are transnational constructs which sit in contrast to the domestic shelving practices used in Japan, something which is discussed further in chapter four.

While the fact that contemporary Japanese horror films are viewed as belonging under an umbrella of genres may at first appear innocuous, these different genre terms call into question the spatial, temporal and geographical nature of the films and filter through into the meaning-making of their potential audiences. Fitting into three distinct categories, differing connotations exist between globalist-localist genre terms referring purely to Japan, globalist-regionalist terms referring to Asia as a perceived whole, and pan-Asian terms referring to the West and Japan simultaneously. Further distinctions exist within these groups themselves. In light of the perceived crossover of genre terms, in order to provide an exploration of what contemporary Japanese horror film is to a UK audience, it is first necessary to establish what it is *not*. This section will explore the origins and connotations of these various pseudo-genres, and the rationale behind the selection of the default term *contemporary Japanese horror film*.

Globalist-regionalist: Asia extreme and the Asian horror film

While there is a rich history of horror films in Japan and also more widely throughout Asia, it was following the J-horror boom that regionalist terms such as Asian Horror began to emerge and find favour with press and retailers. Japanese films like *Ring* came to public attention in the UK almost simultaneously with the horror output of other Asian countries such as Thailand (*The Eye*, Pang Chung & Pang 2002; *Shutter*, Pisanthankun & Wongpoom 2004), and South Korea (*The Isle*, Kim 2000; *A Tale of Two Sisters*, Jee-woon 2003; *Oldboy*, Park 2003). This led to a lack of genre consistency as films from different national origins were often grouped together.

As will be explored in chapter five, UK distribution companies were a key agent in this grouping of films. Of all the umbrella terms within which contemporary Japanese horror films are discussed, it is perhaps the term Asia Extreme which has received the most academic attention (Dew 2007, Shin 2009). Although the most prominent distribution label of these films was *Tartan Asia Extreme*, the use of the term Asia Extreme extends beyond just Tartan's label and indeed outlived the label itself as a pseudo-genre following Tartan's demise. The emergence of Asia Extreme was a result of grouping together "shocking" films coming out of Asia at the time, which themselves were spread across various genres and national origins.

The original reasoning behind the *Tartan Asia Extreme* banner lay in shoehorning films into one all-encompassing (and problematic) category for ease of sale. However, the less exclusive term Asia Extreme has become a pseudo-genre in its own right which has extended beyond the original practical usage for distribution. For example, the term was often used as a reference point by press critics, something which Altman (1999) sees as a key factor in

perpetuating ideas of genre. It was also used by TV channels to code these films to audiences, such as Film4's Asia Extreme season. More recently, and as the *Tartan Asia Extreme* label fades from public memory, the term Asia Extreme appears to have fallen out of favour compared to the softer, and slightly more specific, Asian Horror. Although this pseudo-genre also places films from different countries together, it could be argued that in regard to the geographical origin of these films, the term is primarily associated with Japan. This is something which was evident amongst interview participants in this study. However, it should be observed that the regional labeling of Asia is overall far less inclusive than it might appear, as it tends to be primarily represented by films from Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand and South Korea (Shin 2008).

Although used at times interchangeably, the globalist-regionalist terms Asian Horror and Asia Extreme have slightly differing implications. The *Extreme* of Asia Extreme, is most comparable to Williams' (1986) notion of body genres, films which she identifies as typically associated with the excitement of physical response. For Williams these films are most visibly horror and pornography alongside melodrama. However, in Asia Extreme the genre extends to cover a plethora of different films. While these films might not necessarily be horror or pornographic, they feature particular elements of these genres, or elements which a viewer could regard as otherwise shocking or an assault on the senses.

Perhaps evidenced by the ease of transition into Asian Horror, despite the wider overtones of Asia Extreme, it is visibly most conflated with what both viewers and academia have come to regard as Asia's horror film output. Notably, many of the films which are perceived transnationally as being part of Japan's horror output, originate in other domestic genres for which there is no exact UK

equivalent. This misalignment is specifically addressed in chapter four. It could then be viewed as a combination of the conflation of Asia Extreme with horror, alongside the homelessness of genre films with no previously existing UK context, as to how these films seem to have found a place of belonging in transnationally constructed genres.

Globalist-localist: Japanese horror and J-horror

The term Japanese horror film is in itself a loaded construct, and one which is questioned throughout this thesis as a whole. It is a term which proved to be immediately problematic as the UK genre of Japanese horror is not an automatic equivalent of what is considered a horror film in Japan. In Japan, the horror genre is governed by a strict set of rules and conventions, revolving around aesthetics and the portrayal of ghosts, which is discussed further in chapter three. The genre includes only those films with a supernatural element. Films where the horror element is borne from violence, such as *Ichi the Killer* (Miike 2001) and *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku 2000), belong to other genres which do not have exact UK equivalents but are somewhat similar to subgenres which exist within the Western concept of horror.

The term Japanese horror film was the default term used within this research because, of the options available, it is the most objective as well as indicative of belonging to the UK context. In addition to being more specific than referring to Asia as a whole, it lacks the connotations associated with the other popular globalist-localist term, J-horror. Yet it has the disadvantage of giving the false impression that the films in question represent the Japanese idea of a horror film. This is perhaps the main marker or difference between the

connotations of Japanese horror and J-horror: While Japanese horror perpetuates the impression of the films as being authentically domestic, the J of the term *J-horror* has connotations of being intended for international consumption.

As a naming tool, J-horror may at first appear to be simply a contraction of the term Japanese horror, or to signal a cemented evolution of the genre to the extent that has become a noun, much in the same way that Altman (1999: 51) charts the evolution of the Western Romance sub-genre into simply the Western. However, it comes with connotations. While the J does indeed refer to Japanese both domestically and internationally, it also signals a departure from products intended purely for domestic consumption, and instead towards a self-consciously mass international market. As Iwabuchi (2002: 197) acknowledges, when exports of Japanese cultural commodities rose in the 1990s, they trended towards no longer being entirely “culturally odorless”, but instead visibly and artistically representing Japan. Simultaneously, the late 1990s saw what Asada (2000) referred to as *J kaiki*, or “The return to J”, with J-horror coming into prominence alongside a plethora of other J-cultural artifacts such as J-drama, J-pop and J-league. This use of J, as viewed by Asada, denotes a superficial reaction to globalisation, one in which the concentration is on a popular culture divorced from Japan’s rich pre-modern history. However, as viewed today, J can be understood as a shortcut for the subcultural within the national of Japan, and furthermore is intrinsically tied to both the local and the transnational, and in turn, to cross-cultural spectatorship.

Whereas the term Japanese horror can at least on a surface level attempt to appear a domestically aimed product, the implication of the term J-horror is

one of a local product that has been subsumed by the global. It is perhaps for this reason that the films most frequently paired with the term J-horror are those which are closest to the true Japanese idea of a horror film: low-budget ghost films made towards the end of the 20th century, associated with specific directors and screenwriters such as Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Hideo Nakata, Takeshi Shimizu, Horishi Takahashi and Chiaki Konaki. However, the term is contested within academia. In her analysis of *Loft* (Kurosawa 2006) Kinoshita (2009: 104) feels a need to specify that she is taking “J-horror in its narrowest and most precise meaning... rather than in the broad meaning that covers all the horrific films made in Japanese language and by the Japanese film industry”. In Kalat’s (2007) book *J-horror* he takes the view that while the term still refers to seemingly “low budget” ghost films, the net it casts is much wider in terms of the films themselves and the people involved. For Kalat, J-horror is a genre to which any Japanese supernatural film can belong. This is a marked difference from Kinoshita’s depiction of J-horror as a movement, which she notes is located by some as ending with *Ju-on: The Grudge*, a film which Kalat lauds as emblematic of the genre.

Pan-Asian, or simultaneously globalist and regionalist: Hollywood remakes of Japanese horror films

Verevis (2006) makes the case that remakes constitute as much a critical category as any other film, and that the discourses surrounding remade texts are equally influential in securing their success. This is particularly evident in relation to contemporary Japanese horror film, in which Hollywood remakes are prolific, and were regarded by many participants of this study as being part of

the genre itself. As Lim (2009: 193) remarks in her approach to the analysis of Asian horror film: “Genre refers not only to horror but also to a generic practice: the remake”.

The Hollywood remake of the Japanese horror film could be described as closest to what Leitch (2002) refers to as the “true remake”, in which there is a combined focus on the cinematic original with an accommodating stance which seeks to make the original relevant by updating it. In the case of contemporary Japanese horror film this would be in order to appeal to a different cultural audience whilst not displacing the original film. Although remakes of Japanese horror films were not the focus of this study, they did bear relevance on participants’ understanding of the genre as a whole, and a modal approach to genre must also acknowledge these cross-influences between industry and audience reception on national, regional, and global scales.

Notably, the nature of the promotion of Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films differs greatly from Hollywood remakes of other Western films, where Leitch (2002: 50) observes that:

The producers of the remake wish not only to accommodate the original story to a new discourse and a new audience but to annihilate the model they are honoring – to eliminate any need or desire to see the film they seek to replace.

In the case of Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films, it is their “Japaneseness” that sells. Hence the paratext of the original, rather than being something to compete against, becomes valued for its Japanese nature, both in communicating the film’s status as a remake and in invoking an “Intertextual framework within which to comprehend and evaluate the new film” (Verevis 2006: 131).

By and large, remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films are marketed as pan-Asian, simultaneously global and local. Often, the original sees a UK re-release around the same time as the remake. Japanese “authenticity” is frequently invoked through the use of Japanese locales, and the attachment of Japanese directors, writers and crew. Further elements of Japanese cultural specificity are played up in terms of tropes, motifs and storylines. For example, the character of Samara in *The Ring* maintains many elements of the portrayal of Oiwa,³ and many storylines based in Japanese tradition or the nature of Japanese ghosts remain largely unchanged. The Japanese horror film remake is caught between the cultural specificity of “authentic” Japanese elements, whilst also projecting cultural neutrality (Lim 2009: 223) in order to appeal to a wider audience. This simultaneous discourse opens remakes up to a wide range of value judgments and interpretations.

Alongside the use of Japanese elements, Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films have kept the same titles, the direct English translations that the originals tend to be known by in the UK. This can obviously lead to some confusion, as was demonstrated by interview participants, about what happened in which version, and as to which one is the original. If a film is labeled a remake, then by common sense there must be an original for it to have been based on. The question of whether the Japanese films can indeed be seen as the originals is complicated by the existence of multiple cross-cultural and inter-media texts, something that Stringer (2007) has explored with *Ring* as a case

³ Oiwa is the protagonist of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* (Ghost Story of Yotsuya). After being poisoned by her husband she returns to seek vengeance. The visual appearance of her spirit in pictures and Kabuki theatre has many of the traditional traits of a Japanese ghost such as the white burial kimono, pale skin and long black hair. However, her appearance also reflects the effects of the poison, with her left eye drooping and her hair falling out.

study. Indeed, given their popularity and the rapid succession in which they were produced, the Hollywood remake is not entirely separate from contemporary Japanese horror film, but is in itself a hallmark of the genre. This is something which Lim (2009: 197) sees as being tied up with the idea of *new* in what she terms New Asian Horror, due to the convergence of regional cinema with Hollywood from around 2001. Lim's theory is that the potential of Asian horror film to be remade, and the quick succession of these remakes, is tied up with a new era for the genre which differentiates it and the approach towards it from what came before.

Alongside questioning the nature of the "original", the labeling of these films as remakes also calls into question the nature of national cinema. As Lim (2009: 231) observes, the popularity of Asian horror film as a source text in Hollywood is indicative of Higson's (1989) notion that the national-popular is to be popular internationally. Remakes of Japanese horror are a challenge to the concept of national cinema as they represent something which is not entirely divorced from the international, in this case Hollywood. Hence, perhaps the most important point in the case of Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films, both in the naming process and the process of the remaking itself, is that they challenge a discourse of exceptionalism which is often present in academic discourse positioning Japanese film on a binary against Hollywood.

A note on subjectivity

As well as genre terms being subjective, it should be noted that the classification of individual film texts is also highly subjective. As will be explored in chapter six, there were a range of participant interpretations regarding which

films were horror films. In particular this highlights the problem of different frameworks of understanding genre across national borders. The discrepancy between the UK term Japanese horror film and what is actually considered horror film in Japan represented a significant personal discovery, and one which was also received as a revelation when mentioned to interview participants both in the UK and Japan. In short, the UK term Japanese horror film is in itself a globalist-localist construct, informed not just by industry practices, but also through audience expectations as to what the constructed genre entails. Perhaps most importantly, any film - no matter how contested - which is *perceived to be a contemporary Japanese horror film by its audience* has the potential to contribute to their understanding of the genre.

Chapter 2

Situating the study

Given that it is a relatively recent development in film, a substantial body of writing exists on contemporary Japanese horror film. However, the vast majority of this work relies on text-centered approaches. This chapter provides an overview of the few existing studies of contemporary Japanese horror film which focus on *context and contextual meanings* rather than meanings perceived as being located solely within the text itself. In this chapter I will assess some of the key theoretical issues surrounding genre, transnationalism and cross-cultural reception, contextualising the contribution that this study makes and justifying the need for such an approach.

Defining and locating the text in the age of transnationalism

Visualise browsing the aisles of a large DVD store, with the aim of finding out whether they have any intriguing-looking Japanese horror films. Where would you look? Perhaps you would head to the “World Cinema” section, or the “Art House” section. Given its popularity, the store may even have an “Asian Horror” section, or a specific “Japanese Horror” section. Maybe they offer box sets of films grouped together under the banner of “Asia Extreme”. The question you are probably asking yourself is *where is it located?* Locating the contemporary Japanese horror film text within a body of genre is a highly subjective matter. However, locating the text itself goes beyond these questions of genre classification. Are you looking for the film on DVD or Blu-ray? If you are looking for a Hollywood remake of a Japanese horror film with a Japanese director at the

helm, would you still be looking in the same sections as before? These complications are tied up with the notion of transnationalism.

The problem of defining genre

If we were to look for a clear definition as to what horror *is*, or for the exact boundaries which define the horror film text, we would find, as Tambourini and Weaver (1996: 1) observe in their piece on the historical perspective of fictional horror, “A deeply entangled and controversial concept”. An individual’s definition of horror may be different depending on the angle of interest which they take in the genre. This could be, for example, with the functions of horror, the form and characteristics of the genre, or with the distinct differences between subgenres. To reiterate the closing of the previous chapter, *genre is a subjective concept*. This is something which is discussed later in this chapter, with regards to the individuality of audiences and meaning-making, and explored yet further in the results presented in chapter 6. Indeed, in reference to those films grouped under the *Tartan Asia Extreme* label, Shin (2009: 87) refers to horror broadly as: “Films that evoke fright, terror, and abjection from viewers”, a definition which is suggestive of an audience-led nature that has the potential to vary amongst individuals. In turn, I advocate and take an audience-led approach to the definition of contemporary Japanese horror film both in this thesis and beyond.

If the *horror* part of contemporary Japanese horror film is complicated by the definition of the horror genre, then the *Japanese* part is further complicated by the notion of transnationalism. The inconsistency within academia in defining the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film is

understandable, given that it is not a genre in the classical sense of the term, for example, in the way that one would recognise a genre such as the Western, or horror film as a wider grouping. It is, as Altman (1999: 53) terms it, an *unsubstantive genre*. Further adding to this dilemma is the previously mentioned fact that there is of course no genre called Japanese horror film in Japan. Contemporary Japanese horror film is a UK construct which toes the line between being a generic modifier upon the more established genre of horror film, and an ambiguous and unsubstantive genre in its own right. That is to say, the defining features of its films are not recognisable enough to qualify as a distinct genre. This is perhaps best evidenced by the emergence of terms such as J-horror and the more encompassing Asia Extreme.

Altman's (1999: 51) theory of genre evolution would suggest that contemporary Japanese horror film is becoming a transnational genre in its own right, as he indicates the importance of noun progression in creating genres. This evolution also serves to illuminate a central point of this thesis, that genre is fluid and never a fixed construct. As Jancovich (2002b: 135-136) observes:

Not only can the generic status of an individual film change over time, it can also be the object of intense struggle at a particular moment. A film which, for some, may seem to obviously belong to one genre may, for others, clearly belong to another genre altogether.

Definitions of genre can vary both from individual to individual and across time.

However, in the case of cross-cultural reception, it must also be considered in terms of the potential for variation across global space and national borders.

The problem of transnational reception contexts

In *Hollywood and the World*, Toby Miller (1998) notes that the nature of world horror film in particular is more fluid and transnational than ever before. Indeed,

as far as audiences are concerned, in the past seeing a particular film may have depended upon having access to a specific showing at a scheduled time on television or a limited run at the cinema. Now textual migration towards DVD and video-on-demand allows present-day audiences to consume film texts in an increased variety of places and at a time convenient to their needs. In turn, geographical boundaries are much less of an obstruction to accessing a film. This increased geographical mobility of cultural commodities is something which is emblematic of transnationalism and characteristic of the contemporary film viewing landscape.

In his study of the flow of Japanese popular culture texts and transnationalism, Iwabuchi (2002) offers a specifically Japanese case study which prioritises a hybrid and decentred approach to the study of film. Such an approach foregrounds the increasing difficulty and problematic nature associated with attempting to read any film exclusively against its national context. This difficulty is primarily in light of such factors as bi-lateral influence, flow of production crew and co-financing, and the flow of the film texts themselves. Specifically in terms of the Western cross-cultural reception context, a call for further attention has been raised by Stringer (2011: 63). Stringer identifies “A need to consider how, as a result of its overseas circulation, Japanese cinema has been subject to different cultural fantasies and meanings within different national contexts”.

This is not to suggest that transnationalism is an entirely new movement, although it is a relatively recent academic approach. Japanese cinema has long found an audience outside of Japan, particularly in terms of Western critical attention focused on the “Golden Age” of Japanese cinema in the 1950s (Ritchie

1971, 1990, 1992, 1996, 2005). Further to this, Japanese directors have not been immune to outside influence, with many having grown up watching Western films or having trained internationally. However, the increased transnational consumption of film in particular opens up two major areas of concern which have been largely ignored within academia: the function and construction of genre in the transnational context, and cross-cultural audience reception.

The problem of cross-cultural context

In relation to cult cinema (a framework within which contemporary Japanese horror cinema is often discussed), Mathijs (2005: 453) notes that such films are generally a challenge to reception studies as they are “Almost never simultaneous across territories”. Indeed, the context within which any film is received has significant bearing upon its reception. Kleinhans (2009) has highlighted some of the problems as to what is to be considered horror amidst the increase of cross-cultural viewing of contemporary cinema. In particular, Kleinhans notes the rise of a distinct market in the West for Asian horror cinema, and how this foregrounds the complications of (mis)understanding in cross-cultural viewing and deserves further analysis. Likewise, Hantke (2005) has also noted the importance of recent shifts in audience demographics of contemporary Japanese horror film in light of their transnational nature.

Given these calls for focus, it is understandable that the reception dynamics of contemporary Japanese horror film addressed in this thesis make for a timely study. However, a single thesis is too limited to be able to explore the dynamics of contemporary Japanese horror film reception, or cross-cultural reception as a whole, especially given the fragmented and individual nature of

audiences. Yet the very nature of audiences as fragmented and individual accentuates the importance of a study such as this one, which aims to provide insight into a specific reception context. Since no study has yet been conducted which probes UK audiences of contemporary Japanese horror film and their understanding of the genre and culturally-specific elements therein, this thesis actively invites new lines of enquiry.

Existing studies of contemporary Japanese horror film

In order to identify the new lines of enquiry into contemporary Japanese horror film that I open in this thesis, it is necessary to establish what has already been addressed in the area. Analyses of contemporary Japanese horror films thus far have tended to focus on their potential meanings as determined by the text or its producers, relating the films to perceived issues in Japanese society, such as the role of women, new technology, modernity or oppression.

Within studies of contemporary Japanese horror film, *Ring* and *Audition* have overwhelmingly commanded focus, being read from a variety of angles by film scholars. To demonstrate the diversity amongst these studies: Stringer (2007) looks at *Ring* in terms of its inter-text nature and adaptability, questioning the notion of how to define what is the original, and beginning to encroach upon the reasoning behind its cross-cultural success; White (2005) approaches *Ring* and *Ring 2* in terms of technology and the manifestations of gender difference, and positions the avenging spirit trope as foregrounding a shift towards a post-human economy; and Culbert (2009) presents *Ring* as offering a means to engage with postmodern spectatorship in relation to media coverage of the community in crisis, which typically invokes the figure of the girl

who fell into the well. A similar diffusion of approaches have been applied to *Audition*. Mes (2003) positions the film within the larger body of Takashi Miike's work in order to deduce that the violent and horrific elements of the film (and of Miike's work in general) are surface and resultant of narrative action rather than belonging to the horror genre; Hyland (2009) also addresses the aesthetic extremity of *Audition*, but in terms of how it functions to question gender roles within Japanese society and the roots of the monstrous feminine trope; and LeDrew (2006) approaches the film through the framework of Freud's notions of the uncanny and jokes in relation to the unconscious, positioning it as being simultaneously horrific and comical. These multiplicities of readings present a number of points for consideration. First, textual analysis does not have to be boring or predictable. Second, there are numerous angles from which any film text can be analysed, and in the case of textual analysis this is usually in line with what the researcher deems to be important and present within the text. This results in the third point which illustrates the contribution that audience studies can make in opening up the potential of a film: the presenting of a multiplicity of interpretations rather than a singular authoritative viewpoint on any particular element.

Reception studies of contemporary Japanese horror film

Audience reception studies of contemporary Japanese horror film have similarly concentrated on *Ring* and *Audition*, perhaps due to their position as the two most prominent examples of the genre in terms of their cross-cultural appeal. Hills' (2005) study of Internet message board discussions surrounding *Ring* in relation to its Hollywood remake *The Ring* highlights that discussion around the two

versions of the film initiates dialogues regarding cultural difference. Hills' analysis is based around a thread entitled "Remake vs. Original debate", which provides a focus point for the way in which fans compare the two films, often in order to construct mature identities for themselves. Within this particular online community, Hills concludes that a certain amount of cultural capital is attributed to those who possess an understanding of Japanese cultural specificity. These discussions of cultural difference (which allow fans to demonstrate knowledge, cultural capital and maturity) become linked to the cult distinctions of contemporary Japanese horror fandom and identity.

Hills' approach is emblematic of the way in which reception studies have historically had a tendency towards analyzing the fan audience. One complication presented by the fan audience is that communities such as these often work together to negotiate texts and coherent meanings (Jenkins 1992). Hence, the way in which fans create meaning has the potential to differ greatly from more mainstream viewers who do not engage in fan behaviours, underscoring the lack of wider applicability of fan-based studies. An additional drawback of fan-based reception studies is that basing analysis on those individuals who actively make themselves visible through their public engagement with the texts presents a narrow focus. Such a concentration does not account for the multi-faceted nature of reception, and makes the results highly unsuitable for generalisation. In terms of influence upon this thesis, Hills' study illuminates the additional knowledge and cultural capital that fans actively consume, indicating the possibility of a large difference in inter-cultural competence from more mainstream viewers.

Martin's (2009) analysis of the UK critical reception of *Ring* draws attention to a prominent problem within film studies: the tendency to read in terms of East/West binaries, and in particular towards organising world cinema in terms of a binary division between Hollywood and the rest of the world (Nagib 2006). Martin presents the way in which film critics simultaneously located *Ring* within the realms of both similarity to and difference from Western horror films. These critical opinions are organized around hierarchies of maturity and immaturity. Within the realm of "similarity" the film is compared to "intelligent" and "restrained" Western horror films which were released around the same time period, namely *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan 1999) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sánchez 1999). Both of these films also function as examples of texts which found similar cross-cultural success, both commercial and critical, in the UK, and are in turn discussed by the critics in terms of their being positioned for a mature, adult audience. Concurrently to these frameworks of similarity, Martin finds that *Ring* was also differentiated from Western teen horror films, such as *Scream* (Craven 1996), which were pulled into critics' comparisons as examples of melodrama and associated with an infantilised female audience. Martin concludes with the observation that since the success of *Ring*, British critical context has changed so that *Ring* itself has become a reductive reference point for discussing subsequent contemporary Japanese horror films. This is of particular relevance to chapter six of this thesis, which highlights the way in which audiences' frameworks of interpretation have the potential to change and develop over time.

In contrast to these studies of *Ring*, Hantke's (2005) analysis of the cross-cultural reception of *Audition* attributes the popularity of the film largely to its

perceived lack of cultural specificity. These deductions are based on both textual analysis of the film and analysis of the critical discourse surrounding it. Hantke approaches *Audition* in light of its cross-cultural success, and the way in which it deviates from the traditional avenging spirit motif and engages with issues regarding society and gender. In this case, the cross-cultural success of the film is attributed to Miike's use of widely-recognised generic elements, and to the text as being potentially evocative of globalised themes and concerns. Hantke further notes that this success could be suggestive of a Western audience who may be missing the cultural indicators necessary to view the film within its intended cultural context. These observations lead Hantke to a conclusion which reflects that of Martin's study of *Ring*, that the film is being read through recognisably Western frameworks. This points towards the centrality of reading through frameworks which are related to the reception context in which the film is received. However, given the temporality of this study, with over a decade having passed since the films were released in the UK, in chapter seven I will also present the argument that cross-cultural readings of contemporary Japanese horror film presently utilise a wider and more complicated combination of frameworks.

A key element within these reception-based studies is a movement away from the conflation of Japanese cinema with Japanese nation, and towards recognition of transnational influences and an aware audience. The intercultural competence demonstrated within these analyses is not just on the part of the academics themselves, but is evidenced within the viewers and film critics also. The viewers presented within these studies are not simply reading for difference, but are instead recognising and interpreting culturally-specific elements, and

displaying a varying amount of knowledge regarding what can be seen as specifically Japanese tropes and traditions.

Contextual studies of contemporary Japanese horror film

While Hills' and Hantke's studies are essentially geographically anonymous, Martin's study begins to hint at the specifics of the cross-cultural UK context. This is present in the frameworks into which critics place *Ring* in the process of meaning-making and definition, such as British gothic horror. As Shin (2009) acknowledges, disparities also exist in marketing and promotional materials, particularly between the UK and American branches of *Tartan Asia Extreme*. With context having such a large bearing, the benefit of a cross-cultural reception study being grounded geographically becomes apparent, and provides justification for the narrow geographical focus of this thesis.

The reception of contemporary Japanese horror film in the West is inevitably tied into not just its ability to cross cultural boundaries, but also market boundaries. The boom of the genre domestically in the 1990s was fuelled by the evolution of digital media both thematically and in terms of form, as well as economically. As Wada-Marciano (2009) observes, changes within the Japanese studio system towards the cost-effective DVD format as a result of the decline of the Japanese economy led to changes in promotion, production and distribution. Wada-Marciano frames contemporary Japanese horror film as a form of trans-media commodity, moving away from cinema and towards digital distribution. Further to this, she notes that those who consume Japanese cinema in the West are often highly technological and adept in film sharing, use of multi-region DVD players, and further engagement with the films online. Wada-

Marciano's analysis highlights the way in which digital media has prompted a move towards decentralisation within global cultural flows, and just how much exists and is consumed by audiences outside of the cinema release of a film.

Dew's 2007 analysis of *Tartan Asia Extreme's* promotional materials surrounding the UK release of *Audition* begins to shed some light on the problem of the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of the genre film text. In *Tartan Asia Extreme's* case this is performed through cross-cultural marketing practices which aim to appeal to three particular segments: the cult "fan boy" audience, the world cinema or art film audience, and the genre audience. This targeting is performed through the suggestion of multiple potential readings of the film through its extra-textual materials. Dew demonstrates these multiple potential readings through analysis which suggests that *Tartan Asia Extreme* chose to market *Audition* in the UK with a variety of press quotes in order to present it as both marginal and appealing to a cult audience ("*See it if you dare*"), but to also portray its extreme nature as textually deterministic and the film as worthy of artistic merit in order to appeal to the world cinema or art film audience ("*Outstanding, unforgettable picture*"). A further differentiation is evoked by *Tartan Asia Extreme's* marketing which targets the cult audience through the notion of a "dare sell", which distances the fan demographic group from the mainstream viewers. These mainstream viewers are infantilised in the marketing materials surrounding the film, much in the same way that the critics in Martin's study differentiated *Ring* from what they deemed to be immature horror films. In particular, Dew recognises the way in which different demographics of the aggregate audience are targeted differently in certain publications. This complicates the theory of marketing funneling audience

expectations towards a homogenous experience of genre, as it is suggestive of the circulation of multiple frameworks of expectation.

Shin (2009) also takes *Audition* as one of her case studies. Her analysis of *Tartan Asia Extreme's* UK and US marketing demonstrates the way in which the *Tartan Asia Extreme* label groups together different Asian national cultures and different genres to form the self proclaimed genre of Asia Extreme. Essentially, this pseudo-genre repackages the films it releases in a reductive manner. Shin cites this as being mainly due to the forceful encompassing of other genres besides the horror genre, which in turn create perceptions and preconceptions about the nature of Asian film as a whole. However, Shin is careful to acknowledge that alongside the proliferation of region-code free and multi-region DVD players and international mail-order websites since the end of the 1990s, these reductive practices played a central role in getting the films to an international audience.

To return to Wada-Marciano's (2007) study, the next step in marketing contemporary Japanese horror is new media channels, which are crucial for targeting the niche and cult audiences. For these individuals, the Internet and DVD platforms allow them to see the film earlier and position themselves as pre-mainstream, creating an identity for themselves as early adopters of a text.⁴ Like Shin, Wada-Marciano recognises the way in which extra-filmic products helped to fuel the boom of contemporary Japanese horror film both domestically and overseas, and similarly subscribes to the centrality of the Asia Extreme labeling. One of the arguments she presents is that because a Western audience is largely

⁴ "Early adopter" is a term often used by media industries in describing the cult audience who seek sub-cultural capital in seeing films before their peers. For more in-depth discussion of this in relation to contemporary Japanese horror film see Dew (2007: 61-65).

unfamiliar with Japanese genres, there has been a tendency to conflate foreign language films with genre. Because of these factors, the Asia Extreme label (and therefore reconstructed genre) becomes the main selling point of contemporary Japanese horror film.

Theory and wider studies

As previously mentioned, no study of this kind yet exists which considers the interpretations of UK viewers of contemporary Japanese horror film, and the specificity of the transnational UK context upon these processes of interpretation. Indeed, wider studies beyond contemporary Japanese horror film do not take this particular mixed approach either. As I propose an audience-led approach to the definition of genre and cross-cultural understanding, the focus of this thesis is reliant upon two interrelated areas which must be addressed. First, it requires an examination of how contemporary Japanese horror film exists as a transnational concept or genre as held by individuals in the UK. Second, it requires an understanding of how UK audiences interpret both the notion of contemporary Japanese horror film as a whole, and specific cross-cultural elements within, in conjunction with the frameworks of reference available to them.

Such an undertaking may seem complicated, so let us break it down into its simplest form. Boiled down, the areas to be addressed look like this: *genre/transnational context, cross-cultural reception/individuality*. In order to address these areas in combination it is necessary to take influence from a number of wider publications and theories beyond the area of contemporary Japanese horror film research. In addressing genre/transnational context I draw

on genre theory and theories about transnationalism and popular culture. Considering cross-cultural reception/frameworks of understanding/individuality I take influence from theories from reception studies and wider cross-cultural studies. To account for individuality attention is paid to the antecedent conditions which lead to individual differences amongst film audiences.

Defining genre

Altman's (1984, 1999) work on genre, and in particular his addressing of the way in which genre is constructed both discursively and institutionally, has significant bearing upon this study. Genre, as defined by Altman, can fit into four specific definitions:

- Genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production;
- Genre as *structure*, as a formal framework on which individual films are founded;
- Genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- Genre as *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience (1999: 14).

In addition to these definitions, Altman also identifies the existence of film cycles as being separate to fully formed genres. Film cycles, according to Neale (2000: 7) are "Groups of films made within a specific and limited time span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes".

Film cycles allow studios to add new material or approaches to existing genres, something which contemporary Japanese horror film could be viewed as doing. However, this is complicated by the rich history and influences that the

genre has in its original Japanese context. Unlike in the UK, in Japan these films simply represent an evolution, rather than a cycle or sub-genre, of the horror genre. Although the UK construct of contemporary Japanese horror film could be viewed as a film cycle which began with the release of *Ring*, in my opinion it goes beyond the characteristic film cycle focus of transient topicality. Transient topicality, as coined by Alloway (1958), in this case refers to the horror genre's preoccupation with the new, as the genre quickly evolves based on trends, social preoccupations and the search for novelty and new scares. Further complications arise from transnational context, and from there being no exact UK/Japanese equivalent in terms of the genre definition, labeling or boundaries of the films. The approach taken in this thesis is that, in fulfilling of a number of the definitions of genre provided by Altman, contemporary Japanese horror film can be classified and approached as a genre in its transnational UK context, albeit as an unsubstantive genre which has unstable and subjective boundaries of definition.

Of course, all historical genres began life as theoretical genres, and contemporary Japanese horror film is discussed under the assumption of it being an established genre in book-length studies by a number of academics under a number of genre terms. Wada-Maricano (2007, 2009, 2010) discusses J-horror as an assumed genre, Lim (2009) discusses temporality and the fantastic using a case study of what she refers to as New Asian horror, and McRoy (2005, 2008) editing a book with a title that specifically contains the term Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema. The plethora of genre terms in use, which are usually umbrella terms referring to the same films, further complicates the definition of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film.

Also of note is that, as Altman (1999: 24) recognises, “Nearly every genre critic offers a long list of films but only treats a few of them”. As Altman explains, while this can be done openly, recognition is needed as to the difference between the full list of films and the more limited list that critics address in order to fit their version of the boundaries or ideal of the genre. While this is evident within publications on contemporary Japanese horror film (which with the exception of *Ring* tend to vary as to which films they deem suitable to include), it is of relevance to this study for a different reason. Given the focus on reception of these films by audiences in a transnational context, it opens up the possibility of how audiences, like critics and academics, pick and choose films which fit into their personal construct of a given genre.

Whilst mention has been made of the lack of consensus as to the boundaries of contemporary Japanese horror film within academic writing, it should be reiterated that genre definition in general is problematic, and that this is particularly evident in the horror genre as a whole. Jancovich (2007) notes the way in which scholarship surrounding contemporary horror film continues to use a limited theoretical model of genre which pinpoints and focuses upon particular texts which have come to be seen as canonical. Hutchings (2004: 7) remarks that critical attempts to define horror film “Operate on an abstract level, constructing what in effect is an ideal of horror that is seen to lurk behind a whole range of horror films”. However, the instability of genre is evident beyond academic and critical writing on film, with Hutchings further noting that the critical approach to defining horror film accounts for the distance between such definitions and those formed by industry and audiences. In short, “Different accounts of the horror genre therefore offer competing accounts of what the

horror ideal might be”(Hutchings 2004: 7-8). In addition to variations in the critical context, Hutchings observes that neither industrial nor fan-based definitions of the horror genre are consistent. He draws attention to the way in which audience understanding of the genre is “Fragmented, pragmatic and short-term” (2004: 7). In combination with Altman’s previously mentioned definitions of genre, this accentuates the way in which different agents (such as the audience, film critics, and the film industry) can **sometimes** be at cross-purposes with each other. Hence it would seem logical that audience perception of genre can differ from that which is imposed during production, marketing or distribution, and that which is referred to in academic or critical context. Whereas early genre critics such as Tudor (1973: 139) said that “Genre is what we collectively believe it to be”, it is now apparent that there is no collective consensus in relation to genre.

Locating genre

In addition to genre not being fixed amongst industry or audiences, neither is it fixed temporally or geographically. Neale (1990, 1993) stresses the fact that many films have come to be regarded as belonging to different genres over time, and highlights what he sees as the assumption made by recent critics as to the permanence of genre once it has been imposed by the industry. Hutchings (2004) provides the example of *Dracula* (both the 1931 film and beyond), which he states has only reached a consensual definition of belonging to the horror genre through the suppression of locating it within other possible genres, and that the possibility exists for it to be relocated to another genre in the future. As he explains:

Saying that *Dracula* films are horror is not the same, therefore, as saying that they are essentially and irrevocably horror films. Rather it is an indication that these films are widely perceived as horror within particular contexts (2004: 8).

Similarly, in reference to Japan specifically, Wada-Marciano (2009, 2012) notes how films which were not originally viewed as being horror, came to be defined so retrospectively following the J-horror boom. As well as varying temporally through these retrospective definitions alongside multiple temporalities of reception and non-contemporaneous audiences (Lim 2009), genre also varies geographically in light of transnationalism. In their analysis of rethinking genre through distribution practices, Lobato and Ryan (2011) observe that the horror genre is particularly susceptible to mutation at both the point of distribution and at the point of reconstruction by audiences. Further to this, they place particular emphasis on how a transnational perspective has been largely neglected within genre studies. Whilst not audience-focused, at the centre of Lobato and Ryan's work is the idea that taking a transnational perspective on film distribution practices can help open up the area of genre studies, which has historically tended to focus on national reception contexts. In particular relevance to this study, they recognise that networks of distribution influence audience expectations, and that genres are both opened up and limited by transnational distribution, through the emergence of new genres and limitations imposed upon existing ones.

Genres and the way in which films are grouped into them is a product of the market and market change. Ciecko (2006: 13) acknowledges that with Asian cinema in general, those films released abroad and remade by Hollywood tend to feature spectacle and "excessive" body-focused genres. Similarly, Hawkins

(2009) has written about the way in which international films with a marketing hook such as strong sex or extreme violence are often those picked up for distribution in Anglophone territories. Together these observations plays directly into the way contemporary Japanese horror films selected for distribution under the *Tartan Asia Extreme* label were often shoehorned into genre categories, with their extreme elements played up during marketing. Cieko (2006: 13-14) notes that “In the business of contemporary world cinemas, genres are used as marketing tools, as short-hand to address audience expectations and preconceptions” Further to this, she acknowledges that by their very nature as foreign films, Asian genre films are being defined against other cultural texts, setting themselves up for being understood in terms of comparison, or how they are similar or different.

The idea of genre as not fixed within a text, and as being open to interpretation dependent upon context and within a range of frameworks, is central to this study. Indeed, one of the key things that Hutchings (2004: 7) recognises is that, rather than taking genre at a theoretical or historical perspective as academia most often does, audiences “Operate on a much smaller scale, interested only in what is relevant to them in the context within which their engagement with horror is situated”. If, as posited, the film industry is not particularly consistent in the way it defines and promotes horror film, and fans are not consistent in their definitions, there are great implications for a study built around audience research. Principally, there is a need for the context-based chapters which precede the audience-centred results presented in this thesis.

A transnational approach to genre

As Schneider (2002) observes, all forms of American horror are engaged in cross-cultural exchange with other national cinemas. These same exchanges can be recognised within contemporary Japanese horror film, with directors openly citing such influences as the *Evil Dead* trilogy (Raimi 1981, 1987, 1992), *The Haunting* (Wise 1963), *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper 1974) and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973) (Kalat 2007: 44, 78). In combination with factors such as international co-production and the importation of Japanese directors into Hollywood, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define an exclusive “Japanese” national cinema. As Gerow (2005) summarises, the very idea of nation with which film scholars had once tended to equate Japanese cinema is threatened by transnational flows and cross-cultural dynamics.

In Hantke’s (2005) aforementioned analysis of *Audition*, he rejects binary ideas of self/other relating to reading for difference and exoticism of the film, in favour of evoking similarities within Miike’s body of work. He cites this as being emblematic of Tatsumi’s (2002) notion of the Japanoid. Through evoking such a comparison, Hantke is saying of *Audition* that, in terms of cultural competence, the film transcends the idea that there is a boundary between that which is Japanese and that which is non-Japanese. Hence, in theory, no meanings exist which need to be domesticated or neutralized. There is, in effect, a theoretical post-hegemonic invisible culture which goes beyond ideologies of cultural boundaries, particularly the outdated Western positions of Japan as ‘other’, one within which Tatsumi acknowledges Japan as being adept at adapting, and projecting visions of other foreign cultures while making its own culture generally invisible to the outside world. There is, Tatsumi posits, a threat to “...the canonical distinctions between western identity and Japanese identity,

Orientalism and Occidentalism, and Anglo-American narcissism and Japanese masochism". (2002)

The invisible culture to which Tatsumi refers can be extended to a perceived invisibility of Japanese culture within transnational flows. Iwabuchi (2002) gives prominence to the location of invisible culture within Japanese popular culture texts through the notion of *mukokuseki* (lit. statelessness). *Mukokuseki*, Iwabuchi posits, is used: "To suggest the mixing of elements of multiple cultural origins, and to imply the erasure of visible ethnic and cultural characteristic" (2002: 71). This is noticeable, for example, in anime, where the ethnicity of characters is often unclear from their appearance. Although there is research to suggest that Japanese audiences do not question the ethnicity of anime characters as Japanese (Thorn 2004, Stockins 2009), and other forms of *cultural odor* such as references to Japanese culture are present, there is enough lack of cultural odor for these to be marketed abroad without necessary reference to their Japanese origins. This cultural odor, Iwabuchi acknowledges, coexists with *mukokuseki*. Iwabuchi defines cultural odor as "Cultural features of a country of origin and images or idea of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" (2002: 27). The notion of cultural odor can be positioned as akin to the exoticism which Hantke rejects, but texts can also exist as culturally odorless and hence perceivably neutral.

As well as that which is located within the text, central to transnationalism is the notion of texts being read outside of their original context and national framework. Hawkins (2009) provides the example of the cross-cultural reception of Spanish horror films to demonstrate the

transmutability of genre across borders. Hawkins notes that the visual styles of many Spanish horror filmmakers were influenced by the sexually and violently explicit art of national artists such as Goya and Velazquez. In turn, American audiences generally received these films out of context and read them, rather than the art films they were received as in Spain, as exploitation films. The increased transnational nature and reception which is emblematic of contemporary Japanese horror film does not necessarily mean that culturally-specific elements are being diluted, but it would seem apparent that this thesis is timely, as more attention needs to be paid to how these elements are interpreted cross-culturally.

Reception contexts

As Staiger (2000: 1) has observed, in relation to audiences:

The contextual factors, more than the textual ones, account for experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives.

The contextual factors to which Staiger refers are social formations and constructed identities. However, of equal importance are those external factors which influence an audiences' meaning-making, most notably marketing and channels of reception, which are liable to change across cultural territories. In his analysis of the mediation of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme 1991), Jancovich (2002b) discusses the way promotional materials function to frame films for reviewers, who in turn frame those films for audiences. Jancovich's analysis highlights the relevant complications which occur when a film is presented in a certain way to an audience who adjust their expectations accordingly. As Jancovich elaborates, cult and art-house films in particular are

defined by the interplay between textual and extra-textual marketing materials. Similarly, Berenstein's (2002) study of the marketing and reception of classic horror cinema draws attention to the pivotal role that extratextual materials play in defining a film, and the need for the film text and the extratextual to be studied as parallel in order to fully understand how audience readings are shaped. Although consideration of promotional strategies does not show exactly how an audience understood a certain film, it can serve to demonstrate the wider range of meanings which an individual viewer could deduce from the text.

Equally important within reception contexts are the channels of reception through which films are received. Media is distinctly central to the process of globalisation, and the Internet and DVD platforms have expanded the potential of Japanese film beyond the cinema, to be "reused" in the form of television broadcasts, DVD sales and Internet distribution (JETRO 2006). That is to say that each new format gives new life to the original text, increasing industry profit, but also accessibility for new and repeat audiences, both domestically and transnationally. In turn, the lifespan of these films is increased.

As films were produced for the straight-to-DVD market contemporary Japanese horror film was initially a "Low budget B genre intrinsically linked to regional popular culture", which later became a transnational film franchise (Wada-Marciano 2012: 29). As Martin (2009) highlights with the example of *Ring*, contemporary Japanese horror films came to have a certain cultural value attached to them cross-culturally. The way in which DVD releases play upon this overlap of high and low culture, and indeed the centrality of reception in determining the cultural worth of a film text, is noted by Hawkins (2000). The mainstreaming of perceivably low culture or exploitation films, Hawkins

observes, is happening not at the level of prestigious film festivals, but at the level of widely-available DVDs and the Internet as a medium for sourcing them. The subsequent increase of what Klinger (2006) terms “home viewing cultures” allows audiences to repeatedly consume films across a variety of platforms. The centrality of the home in Klinger’s theory reconfigures the relation of an individual’s film viewing experience to public and private space, and is indicative of a need for a reevaluation of modes of reception through engaging with the home viewing cultures within which films are increasingly received.

The cross-cultural context

Regarding art horror, Hawkins (2002) notes that the filmic area of body genres has remained largely neglected within academia because of the concentration of these genres on affect rather than intellect. Of particular relevance to cross-cultural analysis is Hawkin’s recognition of the way in which the categorisation of a film as high or low art is largely dependent upon its audience reception. In addition to this, the same reception rhetorics cannot be applied to different kinds of films. An audience lacking the cultural understanding to interpret a film in an educated manner may also misinterpret it from the original context.

Because of the importance of class to cultural studies based analysis, studies from this approach have inevitably addressed the way in which national identities inform viewers’ expectations of text. However, such an approach also reveals the way in which audiences can use national contexts, and in turn texts, creatively. One prominent example of this is Ang’s (1985) analysis of cross-cultural audience reception of the long-running American soap opera *Dallas*. As a result of appealing to Dutch viewers to write to her about their likes and dislikes

of the programme, Ang observed how they were able to use national context in order to negotiate or resist meanings. The audience in question formed meanings through appealing to their knowledge of American culture, and at times choosing to position themselves outside of that viewing context, as ironic viewers.

In terms of the cross-cultural demographic, it becomes apparent that there is a clear need to distinguish between national audiences, rather than grouping the West as one unspecified demographic whole. With changes in spatiality and temporality accelerated by global cross-cultural flows, the positionality of both the film texts and the audience is pulled into question.

Antecedent factors

Theories about individuals and horror film from an audience research perspective have thus far tended to focus on the production of fear, or on the way in which horror film is used. Nonetheless, studies carried out by Tambourini (1996) and Tudor (2003) into the negotiation of fear are extendable and adaptable to this study in terms of their acknowledgement of the varied antecedent conditions which account for individual difference in audience reactions.

Tudor's (2003) parameters of fear model attempts to account for the variable nature of fear reactions amongst individuals through eschewing broad generalisations about fear states and instead allowing for varying and conflicting degrees of fear. The way in which these factors are broken down into microscopic and macroscopic levels make them applicable to this thesis in terms of the antecedent conditions that may affect an audiences' understanding of film

in a transnational context. By extension of this, Tambourini's (1996) model of empathetic and emotional reactions to horror is also relevant for two distinct reasons. First, the identification of the extent to which antecedent factors play in varying reactions. Second the acknowledgment of relational meaning, or the way in which the text is interpreted through the prior learned knowledge which the viewer has available to them.

At the macroscopic, or structure, level, the antecedent factors are closely related to society and culture. This covers understandings that are formed from prior film viewings such as learned associations, ambiguity and imminence of harm, and culturally learned signs of core relational themes. At the microscopic, or agency, level, the antecedent factors are more specific to the individual. These are the factors related to personality and individuality. Although these microscopic level antecedent factors may not appear to have much influence in terms of understanding film viewing on a cross-cultural level, they are nonetheless evident as a factor within the cross-cultural interpretations of films. Most evidently, a varying level of cross-cultural competency was identified as contributing to degrees of variance within participants' interpretation of specific Japanese elements, as is presented in the results of this thesis.

Summary

This chapter has surveyed literature on contemporary Japanese horror film and beyond in order to demonstrate the need for a study of this kind. All research previously done on transnational audiences of contemporary Japanese horror film has either been on a very small scale, or a case of the author aligning the audiences' perceived readings with their own readings or assumptions. In

addition to this, a study providing insight into the subjective nature of defining the contemporary Japanese horror film genre is overdue, particularly as the films continue to receive attention within academia. In my opinion, contemporary Japanese horror film is best defined in the eye of its beholders, for all the messy and varying answers this may bring. Such definitions that do not fit neatly into boxes are indicative of a relativistic and constructivist approach, rather than one based on outdated binaries. A relative approach, in which there is no absolute truth or validity to a point of view, posits that there is only a *relative* subject value to an individual's answers based in differences in perception and consideration. Complimentary to this is a constructivist approach which assumes that knowledge and meaning is generated from the interaction between experiences and ideas. The methodology employed by this study shall be explored further in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Dissecting the approach

As a researcher concerned with audience reception of films in relation to both understanding and perceptions of genre, it was necessary to design a methodology which utilised a number of approaches. It is, of course, difficult to sustain a methodology of researching an audience simultaneously in terms of texts and contexts, but I seek in part to demonstrate that reception analysis and textual and contextual analysis are complimentary endeavors. This chapter will address how the study was carried out, untangling how participants were selected and unraveling how data was collected and analysed. The rationale behind the research design, and its limitations will be discussed.

Research questions

Central to the thesis are three primary research questions:

1. How are the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film understood by UK audiences?
2. What frameworks do UK audiences use to understand and contextualize contemporary Japanese horror film?
3. How do UK audiences interpret culturally specific elements within contemporary Japanese horror films?

There are also two secondary research questions:

1. How is the idea of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK shaped, influenced and defined by marketers, distributors, and other external factors?
2. How is contemporary Japanese horror film understood in its native Japanese context?

Each of these five questions is the focus of a single chapter, with the three primary research questions relating directly to the three results chapters of the

thesis. The secondary research questions are addressed in the two context chapters, and provide the information necessary to contextualize the analysis of audience interview data presented in the results.

Digging up graves

In developing an audience research methodology which is concerned with how viewers construct knowledge and interpretations, it is necessary to look to both previously utilised methods in audience research studies and wider sociological and cultural studies theories. In this sense, I imagine myself as Dr. Frankenstein, digging up graves in search of the best parts to create the perfect monster. This section will outline the major influences and their relevance and contribution to the approach of this thesis, acting as a prelude to the research design which follows.

Audience reception studies

The interplay between text and context that this thesis explores has grounding in the historic materialistic approach defined by Staiger (1992, 2000) and applied and expanded upon by Klinger (1994, 1997). A historical materialist approach

Assumes an interaction amongst context, text and individual in which a perceiver's socially and historically developed mental concepts and language may only be partially available to self-reflection and are most certainly heterogeneous' (Staiger 1992: 72)

In *Interpreting Films* (1992) and *Perverse Spectators* (2000), Staiger examines the interpretative strategies that have been available to historical audiences by utilising extra-textual materials such as film reviews, academic scholarship and fanzines. The reception studies that Staiger seeks to address is not about

interpreting texts, but rather about explaining the event of interpreting a text in a historical context. As Staiger advocates, it is the contextual factors as much as the textual factors which contribute to viewers' meaning-making. The heterogeneity of experience she recognises promotes a sensitivity to the multiplicity of interpretation which my research foregrounds. In this thesis I ground the ideas of a historical materialistic approach in the small and well-defined context of the UK in the contemporary moment.

Although this thesis is less concerned with historical reception, the approach is particularly relevant due to its aim of examining the contextual meanings of texts, and also in explaining how a text is interpreted. As Klinger (1997) recognizes, there is a difference between film historians who aim for a totalized view, and reception studies scholars who aim to pinpoint meanings at a particular time. In her study of how different contexts have created different meanings for the melodrama works of Douglas Sirk, Klinger (1994) pays attention to academia, the film industry, reviews, star power and the mass media. Klinger uses what she terms a "contextual perspective" (160) observing that

The contextual factors that accompany the presentation of a film, including such materials as film reviews and industry promotions as well as specific historical conditions, serve as signs of the vital semiotic and cultural space that superintend the viewing experience." (1994: 160)

Part of what Klinger's work highlights is that meaning is in constant flux due to context, and that the meaning of a text is redefinable and ultimately out of the control of the filmmaker. While the focus of this study is on audience reception, the importance of context is addressed through two chapters addressing the UK and Japan specifically. Contextual details about the interviewees are also included throughout the results chapters and in the appendix.

Klinger's 1997 work on recovering the past in reception studies is informed by Staiger's historical materialistic approach and traces the development of literary approaches and historical reception studies in film. Klinger divides contextual factors into the synchronic and the diachronic, under the subdivisions of cinematic practices, intertextual zones and social and historical contexts. Of particular relevance to this study is that cross-cultural reception is listed under both synchronic and diachronic, along with Klinger's observation that studying the cross-national reception of films (she refers to US films in particular) forces a reevaluation of all the other contextual factors in line with the specificities of the context of the receiving country.

As Klinger acknowledges, a total history of film is a seemingly impossible task, so it is logical to narrow the focus in terms of context. Bearing in mind that one of the key research questions of this thesis is "How are the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film understood by UK audiences?" how might we address how context affects an audiences' understanding and definition of the horror genre in particular?

Jancovich (2007) suggests that one way in which to further horror genre studies in particular is to look at how genre is assembled and constructed, rather than viewing it as coherent and generic. This represents a key approach within this thesis, which takes a constructivist approach to genre. One particular influence is Morrison's (1998) work on focus groups in mass communication research, and his application of this in determining how audiences define and understand violence in the British media (1999). Although violence is not a UK genre, Morrison's work centres around the search for an audience definition of the term in a way which allows for subjectivity, much in the same way as this

thesis does with contemporary Japanese horror film. Notably, Morrison allowed audiences to set their own boundaries of definition rather than presenting them with predefined elements or binaries. By asking audiences to define in their own words, a picture can not only start to be formed of how they understand a concept, but insights into the process of understanding are revealed.

In Morley's (1986, 1992) research on domestic television in the UK, he stresses that viewer responses to media cannot be deduced solely through studying the media itself. As much as he deems meaning-making as being attributed to context, he also argues that there is a strong need within cultural studies to work towards an understanding of how viewers actively produce "Meanings from the restricted range of cultural resources which his or her structural position has allowed them access to" (1986: 43). Further to this, Morley has also called for the need for audience researchers to consider negotiations over use which arise as part of the viewing context. For the purposes of this study, this plays a large part in the justification of dedicating two chapters to addressing both the Japanese and the UK reception context.

Traditionally, studies into horror film audiences have largely taken a Uses and Gratifications based approach, subscribing to the idea that audiences seek out a particular media text in order to gratify a need, for example catharsis, hidden anxieties, violent urges or identification.⁵ In contrast to this, cultural studies based approaches take interest in addressing individual difference, and paved the way for Audience Reception theory as it is understood today. Audience Reception theory owes much to Structuralism and Post-Structuralism.

⁵ See, most prominently, the seminal works Robin Wood 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film: Part 1: Repression, The Other, The Monster; Part II: Return of the Repressed; Part III: The Reactionary Wing,' In *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (eds) (1979). Pp 7-28; Carol J. Clover (1992) *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*.

Structuralism posits that it is easier for experienced readers to interpret a text because within each text there invariably exists a structure. In terms of literary criticism, this is determined by locating the text within a larger discourse such as genre, intertextuality, models of narrative structure and recognizable motifs. Post-structuralism developed through a number of responses to structuralism, which commonly include interrogating the sustainability of the structures within which structuralism locates texts, and debunking the binary oppositions which constitute such structures.

The advent of Audience Reception theory was popularised by Hall's (1973) Encoding and Decoding model, which prioritises the relationship between the artist (and by extension the text) and the audience, who encode and decode the text respectively. The model sits in opposition to long-held assumptions about the way in which media messages are produced, circulated and ultimately consumed, through highlighting the centrality of active viewer interpretations. Hall rejects textual determinism, citing three hypothetical methods of decoding which result in three different readings: The dominant reading which is aligned with the original intended meaning, often through favourable social situations; the negotiated meaning in which the social variances of individual viewers inflect the intended meaning; and the oppositional meaning in which the viewer's social position situates their interpretation in direct opposition to the intended meaning of the text. The Encoding and Decoding model recognises that there are frameworks of knowledge at both the encoding and decoding level which may not sit comfortably with each other. A central criticism of the model was voiced by Stam (2000: 233), in that it essentialises the possible positions of readers when in

reality these positions are “Multiform, fissured, schizophrenic, unevenly developed, culturally, discursively and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting realm of ramifying differences and contradictions”. Essentially, an audience-led study such as this one can only provide insight rather than firm conclusions. As a result of this, the results chapters present individual responses to elements in the participants’ own words, taking influence from the area of phenomenology by concentrating on what contemporary Japanese horror film *means* and *represents* to the them rather treating it as an object with firm definition. Further to this, a phenomenological approach tries to allow for the objective study of subjective topics, something which I have aspired to in this study and is addressed throughout this chapter.

One aspect of text circulation addressed by the Encoding and Decoding model is that certain groups in society have the ability to generalise meanings as “common sense”. From a cross-cultural analysis point of view, this can be expanded to consider the implications of the model, in that certain codes are so widely distributed within a particular culture that they appear to be natural rather than social constructions. However, these codes may be read differently within the frameworks of another culture.

New Audience Research

New Audience Research is the name given to the relatively recent turn in cultural studies based audience research that places greater focus on ethnographic research methods, whilst distinguishing itself from anthropology through attributing a larger importance to theory. De Certeau’s (1988) theory that meaning does not lie solely within a text, but is decoded uniquely by a

viewer dependent upon their individual social and cultural circumstances and experiences, plays a large part in New Audience Research. The notion of interpretive communities, as addressed by literary theorist Fish (1980), is also significant in New Audience Research, referring to the groupings of audience members which influence their reading of media texts. A key idea which Fish argues against is the existence of the two extremes proposed by other schools of research. According to Fish there is neither only one true meaning which lies within the text, nor are there as many meanings as there are readers. As knowledge is socially conditioned and we often find people both in agreement and disagreement with one another, it should be expected that there will be groupings of readings. This focus on interpretive communities means that researchers in this vein examine issues far beyond the media text itself.

New Audience Research is characterised by a preference for utilising qualitative methods on a smaller scale as opposed to large-scale questionnaire research. This approach allows researchers to address the social contexts within which audiences interpret a text, and for participants to describe their experiences within their own frames of reference. Interactive research methods such as interviews and participant observation are prioritised over textual analysis methods. New Audience Research is also overwhelmingly concerned with the everyday. While acknowledging the fragmentary nature of everyday identities and taking into account the routine of everyday life, this has also come to be regarded by some critics as a “loss of ‘critical energy’” (Corner 1991: 269). This is antagonised by the frequent focus of such studies on popular or low culture (and hence often perceived as low value) genres. This context of the everyday can also work against the New Audience researcher, as audiences may

express difficulty in finding any meaning in routine media use, and uncovering these taken-for-granted meanings can require extra effort. A further criticism which I find with some New Audience Research studies lies in their methodologies, in terms of inadequate explanations as to how the researcher made choices and arrived at conclusions, and generally too little explanation of the methodology overall. Although this is likely due to limited space with smaller published studies, it is something which I am keen to avoid through the methodological transparency of this chapter.

The three studies which are often considered to be the founding texts of New Audience research are Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980), Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985) and Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1987). *The Nationwide Audience* (1980) is recognised as the first empirical ethnographic study dealing with audiences, and demonstrates that meaning within the television text is more complex than is suggested by Hall's Encoding and Decoding model. Morley takes a semiological approach involving the notion of preferred readings of media texts, and the way in which the number of potential meanings within the text are ultimately limited. In combination with this Morley examines how the sociological factors of social class, race, age, gender and sex that can affect the potential readings open to an individual. *Nationwide* was primarily based on focus group interviews, with Morley using the Encoding and Decoding model to reject the notion of textual determinism whilst acknowledging a wider range of affecting factors than social class, as in the original model. Interaction between the text and audience was prioritised.

Ang's study of how different audiences find different pleasures in watching *Dallas* was based on forty-two letters that she received from mostly

females, both fans and non-fans, in response to an advert she posted in the Dutch women's magazine *Viva*. Ang used the cover of asking about why people like or dislike a text in order to facilitate a response which allowed her to uncover the meanings that the program holds for individuals, a key idea which will also be applied within this thesis. The advert which Ang posted read:

I like watching the TV serial Dallas but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to... (1985: 10)

Ang indicates that she read these letters 'symptomatically' in order to uncover what meanings the writers got from watching Dallas, although this poses ethical questions as to whether the respondents knew the way in which their letters would be used. Placing an advertisement like this also allowed viewers to respond in their own words, and Ang's self-positioning places her authority as more dialogical in nature. Ang's simultaneous positioning of herself as an insider through her involvement as a viewer may sit against traditional ethnography as the researcher could be regarded as occupying a potentially biased position. However, in interpretive ethnography, this sense of involvement can be highlighted as a means of accessing similarly involved individuals. Both Morley and Ang's studies are central to the approach I take in this thesis, as the data is interpreted both in terms of how far removed interpretations are from the original intended meanings in the Japanese context, and also in light of the influence of UK and individual contextual factors.

Unlike Ang's positioning of herself as an insider, during Radway's ethnographic study of a group of female readers of romantic fiction in a small Mid-Western American town she does not self-identify as a member of the group,

although during the research she did stay in the town she was researching. Radway facilitated access to individuals via Dot, a bookseller of romantic novels who compiled a popular newsletter. Early in her research, Radway had realized that textual analysis would not be enough to explain the pleasure and meaning which audiences found in romantic fiction, although it was useful in identifying common factors and indeed in explaining some of the attraction. Radway's research methodology was hence an initial short and factual questionnaire in order to establish which romance novels were the most popular amongst the group, followed by interviews and textual analysis in order to discover the discursive frameworks within which the women found meaning in romance novels. Radway was also careful to maintain an awareness of the novels as a capitalist commodity, hence she also details the market imperatives behind romantic fiction, and pulp fiction more generally.

Rather than search for individual meanings, Radway found there to be a limited number of interpretations and thus focused on the concept of interpretive communities and the frameworks interviewees used to approach the romance novel, which means that her research can be more widely applied. The concept of interpretive communities makes it possible to envision how interpretive frameworks are shared by groups of readers who have never nor will ever meet one another in the flesh (see Lindlof and Shatzer, 1988).

Two other studies related to New Audience Research that have informed the methodology of this thesis primarily through their focus on cross-cultural audiences are Liebes and Katz's research of *Dallas* (1984) and Yanish's study of *Seinfeld* (1995). Liebes and Katz precluded their study as an example of the influence that American television has on audiences by stating that they could

not accept content analysis as explanation for the effects of a television text, but neither could they accept questionnaires about television content and 'real life' as a primary method of analysis. Hence qualitative analysis was used, taking the form of fifty small cross-cultural focus groups with whom Liebes and Katz watched an episode of *Dallas*, after which they asked a series of open questions, including asking them to retell the events of that episode. Each focus group was made up of at least three couples who knew each other, and in total five ethnic communities were represented. Analysis was made of how the different ethnic groups approached, interpreted, and became involved in the program. These statements consisted of both those that were 'critical' i.e. about the value of the program, and those that were 'referential' i.e. referring to characters and events as if they were real. These in part formed an analysis of the 'distancing' mechanisms which Liebes and Katz suggested were used by those who did not possess the same rhetorical tools with which domestic viewers would be familiar. Perhaps the shortcoming of Liebes and Katz's study is that rather than giving a voice to audiences, particularly those who part of marginalized communities as in previously discussed studies, ethnography is used as method, with the participants being positioned as 'victims' of American cultural imperialism. This is something which I am keen to avoid in this study. In addition to this, the focus on juxtaposing a total of five ethnic communities leads to research findings which are much more abstract than is usual in New Audience Research ethnographies. This is a contributing reason towards the focus of this thesis being purely on UK audiences.

Yanish's study of audiences of *Seinfeld* in Canada and the Netherlands is also inspired by concern as to cultural imperialism, with the goal being to

uncover whether these cross-cultural audiences are negotiating meanings (in accordance with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model), and to what extent these negotiated meanings are unique to a particular national culture. Yanish used focus groups which, in comparison with other New Audience Research ethnographies, were made up of quite homogenous demographics. Participants were all between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five and educated beyond high school level. The participants chosen were not fans of *Seinfeld*, and Yanish selected episodes for screening which could theoretically be understood without requiring an in-depth knowledge of American culture.

Yanish's research establishes that there is a marked difference between the way in which the two national groups interpreted the program. However, a possible explanation for this lies in the difference in popularity of *Seinfeld* between the two countries, with many Dutch interviewees watching the program for the first time as opposed to Canadians who were already familiar with it. Yanish acknowledges that a possible flaw in her methodology is that she herself is Canadian. However, within New Audience Research epistemology, as long as the position of the researcher is fully acknowledged, being a part of the group that is being studied should not necessarily be considered a flaw.

Assembling the monster

As the focus of this study is on audience interpretations and audience-led definitions, the research for this study primarily consisted of qualitative data gathering and analysis. First, focus groups were conducted to establish which films and themes were most common within the UK cultural context. Following

this, individual interviews in the form of guided conversations were conducted to probe interpretations of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre and common themes within, as well as to provide data which could be analysed in term of the frameworks of reference employed by interviewees. For the purposes of context, interviews were also conducted in Japan with Japanese film viewers. Data collected was transcribed and analysed using Nvivo.⁶

Stage 1: Focus groups

The initial data gathering for the study took place across four focus groups with between five and eight participants each. The sampling of this is discussed in more depth later in this chapter. A pre-screening questionnaire was emailed to respondents to establish whether they met the required demographic, as well as to quiz them as to which contemporary Japanese horror films they had seen, their experience of Japan, and the extent to which they were invested in the contemporary Japanese horror film genre. Focus groups were then organised in order to group participants who would be able to discuss the same films.

The pilot focus group took place in December 2011 at the University of Sheffield and consisted of five participants, four males and one female. The session lasted around forty-five minutes and was a general discussion of contemporary Japanese horror film where participants were encouraged to discuss the films freely amongst themselves. In Ang's (1985) study of the cross-cultural reception of *Dallas* she used the cover of asking people why they like or dislike the programme in order to facilitate a response which allowed her to

⁶ Nvivo is a software package designed for qualitative data analysis. Amongst other things it allows for the organisation and cross-examination of large amounts of data, which can be grouped together and classified under nodes, which was its primary use in this study.

uncover the meanings it held for the individual, and in Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance* she discovered that the women she interviewed talked a lot about what constituted a "bad" romance novel. With these in mind, where necessary I initiated conversation by enquiring as to likes and dislikes and "good" and "bad" films. This proved to be a tactic which worked well.

With no significant problems emerging during the pilot stage, three further focus groups took place in January 2012, again at the University of Sheffield. These meetings were once again discussions of contemporary Japanese horror film lasting around forty-five minutes, with participants allowed to freely raise any issues, topics, themes or commonalities they thought important, with gaps in conversation prompted with questions as to likes and dislikes. Although the discussion was useful superficially in building an awareness of the UK reception context, the primary aim of the focus groups was to allow participants to identify films, themes and culturally-specific elements worthy of further study without being prompted. The plan was to explore these in further detail during the individual interviews, hence avoiding self-imposing my own ideas and readings of the genre or of what was "important" or "worthy of study" onto the research as far as possible. In natural conversation, a number of elements and films were consistently identified, and ideas began to be built regarding frameworks of interpretation. These were taken forward to form the focus of individual interviews.

Stage 2: Individual interviews, UK

For the UK-based individual interviews there were twenty participants, the sampling of which is addressed later in this chapter. Participants completed the

same pre-screening questionnaire as focus group participants, and a number of individuals from the focus groups were invited back to take part.

The pilot interview took place in February 2012, at the University of Sheffield. Once again the technique of referring to “likes and dislikes” was employed. Originally, an anecdotal approach to individual interviews had been intended, with the aim of allowing interviewees to talk about their viewing experiences at length, which I planned to later transcribe and examine for meaning. In the pilot interview the following open-ended request was made:

“I am interested in what UK audiences like and dislike about contemporary Japanese horror films, and how they are different from other horror films. Please tell me about your experiences of watching them and what you think”

However, one of the previously mentioned problems which New Audience researchers face is that the context of the everyday can be difficult to express. The pilot interviewee seemed uncomfortable and unsure of talking at such length, as well as confused about what was “required” of her. The interview proved to be difficult and unfruitful.

The approach was reconsidered and a second pilot interview took place a week later, placing more consideration on my own positionality as addressed later in this chapter. This time I adopted a guided conversation approach in order to make the interviewee feel under less pressure and scrutiny as to their answers. In addition, I positioned myself on the same level as the interviewee, making no attempt to conceal my own position as a fellow viewer of contemporary Japanese horror film. This approach was successful and was carried forward for the rest of the individual interviews.

Between February and April 2012, twenty individual interviews were carried out. Twelve of these were held at the University of Sheffield, and eight at

a large company in Windsor. Each interview lasted around between twenty and fifty minutes. Interviewees were encouraged and enabled to express themselves freely, and were invited to bring up any film, theme or trope that they felt relevant. However, in order to produce data which could be grouped, when appropriate the conversation was steered towards those films, themes and tropes which had been identified as common during the focus group stage. However, rather than being imposed upon the interviewees, in the majority of cases these films, themes and tropes were raised by the them in the natural flow of conversation. As all interviewees had completed a pre-screening questionnaire, I was already aware of the films which they had seen and that could be raised for conversation.

Each interview opened with a short conversation about film watching and the interviewee in order to gain background context and set them at ease. There were then two areas around which the majority of the guided conversation took place:

1. Establishing the interviewee's perception of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film. For example:
 - *What do you like/dislike about contemporary Japanese horror?*
 - *Why do you like it (as a whole or a particular film)*
 - *Are there any moments which have stayed with you? Why?*
 - *Do you consider [film title] to be a horror film?*

2. Interpretations of common themes/tropes within contemporary Japanese horror film. For example:
 - *What themes do you think are common within contemporary Japanese horror films/[film title]?*
 - *Can you provide any other examples?*
 - *Do you think there is any meaning behind this?*

Stage 3: Individual interviews, Japan

For the purposes of triangulation of data and gaining insight into the domestic context, eight interviews were carried out with Japanese viewers. These took the form of guided conversations and lasted around thirty minutes each. During these interviews the case study films and the interviewee's perception of their genre was discussed, as well as the perceived meaning of the tropes and themes which were raised during the focus group stage. Participants were asked to define how they perceived the contemporary horror genre in Japan.

Stage 4: Qualitative data analysis

Data from the individual interviews were transcribed and managed using Nvivo. An inductive approach was employed in order to assist in the understanding and organisation of data into themes and categories, so that conclusions and theories could then be drawn from these emergent themes and categories. Transcripts were analysed using interpretive thematic analysis in order to identify meanings as recurring themes, alongside those themes that had been identified during the focus group stage. As a result, data was coded at multiple nodes.

As discussed in the rationale section of this chapter, as this is a new area of analysis, my focus was on generating theory rather than testing existing theory. Hence I had decided that the data analysis would take place in stages which mirrored those advocated by Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). First, nodes were established from the focus group results relating to the individual films, themes and tropes within the genre. These nodes included titles such as "vengeful spirits", "myths and folklore" and "water". Excerpts from the individual interviews were coded first at these nodes. Transcripts were then re-

read and coded again to identify emergent themes. This time interpretive thematic analysis was used in order to identify meanings held by individuals, and also to identify frameworks within which participants talked about contemporary Japanese horror film. These were grouped under general nodes such as “fragmented viewing”, “linking to real-life experiences” and “referencing of other texts”.

Rationale

In line with New Audience Research, this study favours qualitative methods due to their suitability for gathering information on experiences and opinions, and for their ability to allow the emergence of themes and categories rather than those imposed by the researcher. Qualitative methods allow for follow-up questions, as well as the opportunity to explore loaded meanings which may be present in the way in which an individual words or presents their answer (Fontana & Frey 1994: 370-372). This was particularly relevant in terms of the analysis of the frameworks which interviewees used to make sense of and interpret their experiences of contemporary Japanese horror film.

My decision to use both focus groups and individual interviews stems from there being no previous research into the area of UK audiences of contemporary Japanese horror film, as well as a desire to limit the imposition of themes. Focus groups were used to establish which contemporary Japanese horror films were most present in the cultural imaginary, and to identify common themes and tropes in the eyes of the audience, rather than from an academic point of view.

The research design was intended so that participants could speak at length in response to open ended questions, and structure their responses in a way which gave a true picture of their interpretation process. No impositions were placed on the films which could be discussed by participants as being part of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre, and any tropes they identified were accepted as being valid to the individual and were not dismissed. Similarly, only those themes and films which were identified and received attention from participants are discussed in this thesis, which aims to give definitions based on insight into audiences rather than academic textual analysis.

Emic and etic data and coding

As the core of the study relies upon audience interpretations, importance was placed on generating emic data, and with less emphasis on etic data (Krippendorff 1980). Etic data is the data generated in response to specific questions and emic data is that which arises naturally with minimal influence from the researcher. Emic data is more appropriate for areas of relatively new research, hence the focus of this study was on generating emic data which was then used to formulate theories during Nvivo analysis, and to make suggestions for further research.

Both emic and etic codes were used during the qualitative analysis for ease of sorting the data, and in order to address the research questions through grouping into similarities suggestive of interpretive communities. In line with the nodes mentioned in the previous section, emic codes were those primarily based on the films and themes identified during the focus group stage, and etic codes were those based upon the author's analysis of the data in relation to

frameworks and theories. Although each individual's interpretation would be unique to them, in order that some general groupings could be made, these were coded under larger more general nodes. For example, although a number of different real-life experiences were cited by individuals, these were grouped together under one node of "real-life experiences".

Grounded theory

Grounded theory was created out of the concern that social science was too focused on testing theory and neglecting theory generation. In line with this, I did not set out with a hypothesis, as I did not feel that there was anything to test without imposing my own frameworks of reference upon the study. Overall, an exploratory approach was preferred which concentrated on generating ideas rather than testing them. This is evident also in the way in which no choice of film or theme was imposed upon interviewees, and these were allowed to arise naturally as far as possible.

In line with the four stages of analysis in Grounded Theory, the focus groups generated the first level of abstraction, which was subject to open coding in order to find the core variables (in this case films and themes). The individual interviews then represented the second stage, where new data was gathered and then selectively coded. As a result of the third stage of re-reading and constantly comparing the data, theoretical codes emerged, which in this case were based around the identification of frameworks used by interviewees in their interpretations of contemporary Japanese horror film. For the final stage, the results were grouped and are presented throughout this thesis.

Sampling

The study is deliberately local, historically, and culturally specific. Although a study of other reception contexts of contemporary Japanese horror film would be valuable due to the comparable elements they would provide, such a study is beyond the scope of this thesis. The decision to focus on the UK was due to a combination of factors including those discussed in chapter two, but also due to my own positionality and the potential impact of this upon the results. Further to this, focusing on too many differing groups can lead to results which could be overly abstract for the purposes of this study. Although concentrating on a smaller group limits generalisability (or external validity), for the purposes of this research this is secondary to the importance of internal validity. This is because the focus is not on creating results that can be generalised, due to the positioning of genre as a subjective concept. The focus is on providing insight or a snapshot, and this internal validity can be increased by explicitly controlling some of the factors around selection.

For the requirements of the study UK participants had to self identify as British, have seen at least one film which they considered to be a contemporary Japanese horror film, and be between the ages of eighteen and thirty. The age range was constructed in line with the general audience for *Tartan Asia Extreme* films confirmed by *Tartan's* Matt Hamilton (Dew 2007: 61). Participants came from a wide range of demographics and were targeted in two ways, either through the University of Sheffield volunteers mailing list, or through an email request within a large company in Windsor. Those who responded to the company email held a range of job titles and levels, and it should be noted that not all respondents to the university email were students. The study attracted

recent graduates (both undergraduate and postgraduate), as well as relatives and friends of people who had received the email. In line with the New Audience Research notion that those who freely volunteer information are valuable for analysis, participants were actively encouraged to pass on the study to anyone who they thought might like to participate.

As previously mentioned, a pre-screening questionnaire was used. Aside from ensuring that potential participants met the required demographic, this also helped to establish that there was a fair range of both contemporary Japanese horror film experiences, and of cultural-competencies with regard to Japan. There were vast variations in the amount of films which participants had seen, as well as discrepancies as to those which they considered to be horror films. A number of participants had first-hand experience of Japan, and two were students on Japan-related courses at the University of Sheffield. Some held an interest in Japan or in particular areas of Japanese popular culture, and others indicated that they had very little knowledge or interest in Japan. In terms of ethical considerations, all participants were made aware of the purpose of the study, and remained anonymous. Names have been changed and participants were compensated five pounds for their time.

Participants in Japan were all students at Waseda University, also between the ages of eighteen and thirty. They were selected through a combination of volunteers from the International Community Centre and students recruited via the author's host professor.

Although there are no firm guidelines as to sample sizes in qualitative research, recommendations tend to be between thirty and fifty (Morse 1994, Bernard 2000, Creswell 1998). For this study there were twenty-four focus

group participants and twenty UK individual interviewees. Of the twenty individual interviewees, five had also taken part in the focus group stage. Although not contributing directly to these results, there were eight Japanese interviewees.

Selection of films

Since this study is audience-led, and based on interpretations of contemporary Japanese horror films, it is logical that the films considered should be those which have been seen by a UK audience. For the purposes of this thesis, that UK audience is represented by the research participants. Theoretically, those films raised for analysis are most present in the cultural imaginary and therefore most likely to have made an impact upon perceived definitions of the genre as a whole. The identification of key films during the focus group stage was done not through prompting participants to give titles, but in observing which contemporary Japanese horror films they used as a point of reference during their discussion. The most prominent of these by far were as follows:

- *Ring* (Nakata 1998)
- *Audition* (Miike 1999)
- *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Shimizu 2004)
- *Dark Water* (Nakata 2002)
- *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku 2000)
- *Ichi the Killer* (Miike 2001)

All of the above films have at some point been discussed within academia as contemporary Japanese horror films, although they are not all considered horror films in Japan. These were the films around which tropes and thematic discussion during the individual interviews tended to focus, and around which the majority of the analysis presented in this thesis revolves. An additional small

number of films received only a few mentions but still generated some discussion, namely:

- *Grotesque* (Shiraishi 2009)
- *Confessions* (Nakashima 2010)
- *Death Note* (Kaneko 2006)

The above films are referenced occasionally in the results where relevant.

Additional films were only mentioned by one or two participants and non-Japanese films were also discussed. However, all films mentioned contributed to discussion within this thesis of what the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film consists of in the UK reception context. Judgments were not imposed as to whether a film was contemporary Japanese horror or not, as any film which is perceived by interviewees as belonging to the genre has the potential to contribute to their understanding of it.

Textual analysis

The disparity between the amount of empirical studies and text-activated studies within the area of contemporary Japanese horror film is evident. However, whether or not audience ethnographies should include an element of textual analysis is a question on which New Audience researchers have struggled to reach a consensus.

Textual analysis is not a necessary part of understanding the meanings that a text can hold for its audience, and carries with it the risk of suggesting that the opinion of the researcher is superior to the everyday readings of the audience being studied. However, audience reception studies which venture into textual analysis should not to be neglected. On the contrary, textual analysis of

film texts and reception studies of audiences in relation to those film texts can be considered complementary endeavors.

The main problem with textual analysis methods is that they are never entirely objective. Not just the films, but everything including interview material or questionnaire responses by participants must be textually analysed and re-presented by the researcher. This poses the problem that interpretations of data will always have the researcher's opinion, however subjectively, imposed upon them. Even materials gathered from the Internet or the press are subject to re-presentation, as they have been written by an individual for one purpose and are being analysed by the researcher under a different purpose. Hence, the problem presented here is that the opinion of the scholar interpreting these texts will always be present. No textual method can be entirely objective or present a true picture of audience or critical reception.

The focus on meaning-making in this thesis is two fold: First, in the spirit of audience research, the meaning that contemporary Japanese horror film holds for its UK viewers; and second, UK audiences' interpretation of the meaning of culturally specific elements, which requires a knowledge of their original context. In order to achieve the latter, textual analysis of contemporary Japanese horror films was conducted to identify common tropes and traditions and their meanings. Alongside some analysis of UK marketing materials relevant to chapter five, this textual analysis was necessary in order to give an accurate background to the study, although not all of it was ultimately featured.

Positionality

Positionality is key within ethnographic and New Audience Research, and should be motivated by solidarity and equality with those being researched. At the same time, the researcher should be reflexive in awareness of their own positionality and the effect it has on the study. Such a form of ethnography ideally allows for a dialogical rather than authoritative position between the researcher and the participants, although the unavoidable problem of the researcher retaining a position of power is always present. This may be in the choice of the research topic, the picking of participants or in the selection and interpretation of interview material.

In the context of this study, I acknowledge my own position as familiar with the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film and Japanese culture, and in being a part of the demographic group with which the study is concerned. In line with this, a feminist perspective of the interview as a shared experience was taken, with a guided conversation approach, during which I openly offered up my own experiences on the same level as the interviewees. Further to this, all efforts were made during textual analysis, interviews, and interpreting of data, to be reflexive and aware of this position.

Importantly, it is acknowledged, along the lines of research such as Liebes and Katz (1989), that viewers are much more knowledgeable and critical than many media commentators assume. Accordingly, my own interpretation of contemporary Japanese horror film texts was by no means prioritised over the interpretations of the audience members who feature in this study.

Limitations

Within any research design there will always be questions as to its limitations and the validity of results. However, it is the role of the researcher to identify and challenge these limitations wherever possible, and to fully acknowledge their existence. Both focus groups and individual interviews have their limitations, and the results as a whole of this thesis are limited, particularly in terms of generalisation and reliability.

There are a number of commonly acknowledged problems associated with interview methodologies. In particular, the limitation of the researcher unavoidably bearing influence upon responses, which I have attempted to minimise as far as possible. There is a further common problem as to whether interviewees are reporting their own thoughts or not, and the possibility of misremembering, especially in terms of films which were watched some time ago. However, New Audience Research subscribes to the idea that even if interviewees provide a false impression of themselves, they do so using frames of reference that are familiar to them and hence their responses are still useful, particularly in the context of this study. There are also problems relating to focus groups specifically in terms of group dynamic and possibility of generating consensus-based rather than true answers. To negate this as far as possible, the final results of this thesis in terms of interpretation and frameworks rely primarily on data gathered during the individual interviews.

Reliability is limited within the scope of this project due to the extensive quantitative and qualitative work which would be involved to produce results which could be generalised. However, generalisability is not a key aim of this thesis. It relies more upon a phenomenological perspective in terms of

addressing an individual's understanding rather than pinning down a firm idea of what contemporary Japanese horror film is, and I seek to analyse experiences and meaning-making through a smaller amount of results. Indeed, many of these are related in the interviewee's own words throughout the results chapters. Unlike phenomenology however, this study is aimed at drawing wide conclusions as to areas of importance. The lack of ability to generalise findings does not necessarily mean that this study is of limited significance. Rather, in its utilisation of grounded theory it is an exploratory exercise aimed at gaining insight and uncovering interpretations, as well as offering preliminary conclusions which may steer further research.

There are a few key factors which remain unaddressed due to the limited scope of this project, and are deserving of further research. The first of these is the long-term trajectory of viewing experiences, particularly as meaning is something which I subscribe to as being constantly re-defined with new experiences and being often formed retrospectively. Gathering data over a longer period of time would also lead to greater reliability. The second limitation lies in the necessity of the study being UK-based. Other countries, particularly in comparative terms would be worthy of future study. The third of these is a limit imposed by the interviewees themselves: that the selection of films, themes and tropes was restricted by what was popular or had received recognition from participants. Hence, the definition of the meanings and genre of contemporary Japanese horror film is limited to that which fits the definitions and experiences of the sample group. A wider sample group would theoretically reveal a wider (although unlikely exponentially so) range of definitions and interpretations.

Chapter 4

“Welcome to a Japanese nightmare”

In order to fully discern how UK audiences understand the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, it is necessary to take into account the reception contexts of these films both in Japan and the UK. The way the genre has developed in Japan in terms of influences and industrial factors, in combination with transnational UK-specific factors such as marketing and distribution practices, has the potential to influence UK audiences' interpretations. This chapter and the one that follows provide an overview of the Japanese and UK contexts of contemporary Japanese horror film respectively.

At this point, you may perhaps be seeking justification as to why an understanding of the domestic context of contemporary Japanese horror film in Japan is necessary within a study on UK audience reception. In order to demonstrate, let me provide the comparative example of a strange creature taken from its natural habitat and placed into a zoo. Upon his arrival at the zoo, you notice that the creature is acting, well, *strange*. How might you approach the problem without knowledge of how it behaves in the wild? Surely information about the creature's natural habitat would help? Would knowing about his ingrained behaviours or biology be of use? If you had access to such information you would be able to pinpoint both the behaviours which were specific to his new environment, and the extent to which this new environment is compatible with his ingrained behaviours. Similarly, having knowledge of the Japanese context of contemporary Japanese horror film can only serve to highlight the unique aspects of the UK reception context and how it interacts with these films.

Ultimately, the specificities of both the Japanese and UK contexts have significant bearing upon the results presented in this thesis.

This chapter interrogates the domestic context of contemporary Japanese horror film, paying particular attention to its origins, influences, development, reception context and ideas about genre in Japan. The first section will address how contemporary Japanese horror film came to prominence in its current form, from its origins in theatre and folklore and beyond, as well as the industrial factors that led to a climate that was ripe for its emergence. The second section will provide an overview of the way genre functions in Japan. Particular focus is placed on the highly specific nature of the domestic horror genre and the plethora of genres to which films commonly regarded as Japanese horror in the UK belong to. The final section will provide some insight into Japanese audiences and the Japanese reception context. Data gleaned from interviews with Japanese participants will be occasionally referred to throughout in order to demonstrate points, and to provide a domestic audiences' perspective upon the arguments presented.

Origins and influences

Prior to the emergence of contemporary Japanese horror film in the 1990s, Japan had already established a rich history of horror, both in terms of film and other media and performative traditions. The influences of these predecessors upon the current genre manifest themselves in multiple ways which have had a significant impact upon the development of the genre into its current form. As detailed in the later results chapters, the deeper meanings of historically and culturally-embedded aspects of the genre were largely lost on UK audiences.

However, these influences subconsciously had great bearing upon what UK audiences considered to be contemporary Japanese horror film. This section will outline these cultural influences, alongside the industrial factors which allowed contemporary Japanese horror film to evolve into its current manifestation.

Influences on contemporary Japanese horror film

Within the history of Japan, cinema is a relatively new art form amongst a long cultural tradition of horror. Many of the images, themes and narrative trajectories that are recurrent within contemporary Japanese horror film can be traced back to and located within the performative traditions of Noh and Kabuki theatre, Butoh,⁷ and the folklore and storytelling traditions which predate them. However, that is not to say that such elements remain static, these have evolved along with society and the form itself.

Noh and Kabuki are reflective of a Japanese aesthetic which Wee (2011: 44) observes: “Privileges a nonrational, emotion-centered perspective, and consistently emphasizes artistry, and hence artificiality, while disregarding most aspects of realism”. Wee demonstrates that this is particularly evident in *Ring*. However, the privileging of style over rationality or narrative coherence is a trend that is evident in much of Japan’s media output, be it the prioritizing of relationships between characters rather than narrative in J-dramas (Lukacs 2010), or anime producers having no clear focus as to how the show will develop or end upon starting production (Condry 2013). It is something which is particularly evident in Japanese horror films. The importance of stylistic elements in Kabuki, such as the presentation of blood and gore, can be seen as an

⁷ Butoh is a performative art which lies somewhere between theatre and dance, depending on the performer’s sensibilities.

influencer of similar stylisations in contemporary horror films such as *Ichi the Killer* and *Grotesque*. Further to this, the origin of striking images such as Sadako emerging from the television in *Ring* can be located in the Kabuki practice of *keren*, stage tricks designed to make the unreal look real and to “Startle the audience with an irrational display” (Hand 2005: 23). A number of additional visual cues have also been retained, such as the long black straggling hair which permeates contemporary Japanese horror film, the obscuring of faces (through masks in Noh), and the white skin of the ghostly figures (evident in the painted faces of Kabuki and the whiteness that is typical of female Noh masks). Particularly in relation to the vengeful female spirits that haunt contemporary Japanese horror film, it could be argued that Butoh has also played an influence. Butoh is typically performed in full white body makeup, and with a jarring style of movement which is a rebellion against traditional styles of both Western and Japanese dance, and hence appears deliberately unnatural.

A number of stock characters from Kabuki and Noh have carried over into contemporary Japanese horror film. The most frequently observed of these being the *kyōjo-mono* or *shunen-mono* (the demonic women), and the *akuba* or *ajuko* (the evil woman). Often appearing in Noh’s *shunen* (revenge) and *shura-mono* (ghost) plays, as well as the supernatural tales of Kabuki, these characters are usually supernatural figures who enter the world of the living to seek revenge. How revenge motivates these characters to undergo a transformation is a narrative often played out in contemporary Japanese films, with the most famous examples being *Audition* and *Ring*. Whereas aesthetic elements of contemporary Japanese horror film are often indebted to Kabuki and Noh theatre, narrative trajectories and stock characters found within these forms are usually predated

by both oral and written literature, especially folktales. In particular, stories of the vengeful female are rooted in folktales such as *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* (Ghost Story of Yotsuya) in which the spirit of Oiwa returns to seek vengeance on her husband for her murder by poison, which has come to be an archetypal image of Japanese horror cinema.

Despite rich links to historical art forms, it should not be assumed that contemporary Japanese horror film has remained uninfluenced by other areas of Japanese culture, or indeed by other cultures. Alongside traditional influences, these films also appeal to their audiences on the grounds of contemporary horrors. This is evident, for example, in the recurring themes of broken families and fear of technology which can be seen in many films, from the single-mothers struggling in *Dark Water* and *Ring*, to a suicide pact spreading via new media in *Suicide Club* (Sono 2001) and ghosts logging onto the Internet in order to lure victims in *Kairo*. Further to this, they are influenced by other contemporary art forms. For example, Hand (2005: 18-19) notes that elements of *Ichi the Killer* appear to be inspired by the video game “beat ‘em up” genre. In addition, it must be acknowledged that the majority of contemporary Japanese horror films are adaptations of, and therefore preceded by, Japanese novels and manga. Stringer (2007) calls this into question when he poses the problem of locating the “original” in relation to adaptations and a plethora of inter-textual and inter-media forms within Japanese cinema.

As well as this cross-fertilisation across textual and media boundaries, there are also influences across cultural boundaries. Hand (2005) observes how the opening sequence of *Ring* is reminiscent of American teen slasher films, and Wee (2011: 44) notes the influence that psychological anxieties associated with

German Expressionism and disorientating images of the French avant-garde have had on films such as *Ring* in their form. It is of note that, as mentioned in chapter two, a number of prominent Japanese horror directors spent time studying filmmaking abroad and openly cite Western influences (Totaro 2000, Kalat 2007: 44, 78).

The Japanese industrial context

The Japanese film industry landscape has traditionally been rooted in a studio system, characterized by the “big three” of Shochiku, Nikkatsu and Toho, which were established in the 1930s. Toei and Daiei arrived slightly afterwards, with Daiei later becoming incorporated into Kadokawa, founded in the 1950s. Originally, the major studios tended to own or lease film studio facilities and, much in the same way as Hollywood, had binding contracts with stars, writers and directors, although allowing for more freedom of expression (Chaudhuri 2005: 102).

After hitting a peak during the early 1930s, from the late 1930s until the early 1950s the Japanese film industry was controlled first by the Japanese military authorities, and then the Allied Occupation forces from 1945-52. Both placed restrictions upon content and attempted to control the industry by trying to force mergers (Anderson & Ritchie 1983). Despite this environment, the 1950s is still commonly regarded as the “golden age” of Japanese cinema, characterised by the surprise awarding of a Grand Prix at Venice Film Festival to Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), which generated critical and commercial attention (Yoshimoto 2000:9). The 1950s also saw the release of other highly critically-acclaimed films such as *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa 1954) and *Tokyo*

Story (Ozu 1953). Audience numbers reached their peak between 1957 and 1960 at consistently over 1 billion, and the number of cinemas exceeded 7,000, indicating that the average Japanese person went to the cinema 10 times a year and that even a small town had two or three cinemas (Takeo 2006: 10).

The spread of television from the mid 1960s instigated another decline for the Japanese film industry. Audience numbers had fallen to 254.8 million in 1970, and Japan was swept by widespread cinema closures, dropping to 3,246 facilities in 1970 (Takeo 2006:10). Simultaneously, studio franchise cinemas and the system of having actors and directors under contract began to collapse. The Japanese film industry responded to this by producing controversial content, such as the work of Masamune Yasuzo, and later Nagisa Oshima and Shohei Imamura. This pushing of boundaries led to an increase in experimental and underground cinema and towards the producing of content that was deemed too sexually explicit or violent to be shown on television. Alongside the fruition of the *pinku eiga* (softcore or “pink film”) genre, this style paved the way for some of the more gory films which are associated with contemporary Japanese horror in the UK. With both *pinku eiga* and horror film being prolific genres within the straight-to-video market, *pinku eiga* provided a foot in the door for many young directors who would go on to become key players within the Japanese horror industry, including Hideo Nakata and Kiyoshi Kurosawa.

By the 1980s the studio system had almost completely disappeared, and the Japanese film industry faced more competition in the form of video. By the mid-1980s there were thought to be 10,000 video rental stores in Japan (Takeo 2006: 12). In response to this, studios began to create *V-Cinema* (straight-to-video films), which came to be characteristic of contemporary Japanese horror

and was where Takashi Miike began to make a name for himself. By the end of the 1980s, the major studios were largely acting as distributors for the films of smaller production companies. As in-house production declined, the cinematic productions made by the studios were largely serialisations reliant upon audience loyalty such as Shochiku's *Tora-san* series (Yamada 1969-1995) (Schilling 1999: 30). The serialisation format was carried forward into contemporary Japanese horror film, which trends towards producing numerous sequels, texts which take place in the same filmic world, or anthologies. To name just a few: the *Honto ni atta kowai hanashi (Scary True Stories)* series (Tsurata 1991, 1992), the descriptively titled *Inagawa Junji no Shinjitsu no Horror (J horror Anthology)* series (Various 2003, 2005), and *Nihon no Kowaiya (Dark Tales of Japan, various 2004)*.

As well as paving the way for the straight-to-video format that is emblematic of contemporary Japanese horror film, the 1980s saw the rise of independent non-studio productions with breakout directors such as Shinya Tsukamoto (*Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, 1989). By the 1990s Japanese film (including horror) had begun to once again receive attention at international film festivals, and had a footing in international film and television markets (Domenig 2004). However, the "independent" nature of those Japanese films which received critical attention can be misleading. Ritchie (2005: 217) draws attention to the way in which "independent film" in Japan has in fact become mainstream. Wada-Marciano (2012: 30-32) notes the complex nature of "independent" directors of contemporary Japanese horror film, observing that the idea of independent is more tied to an "independent spirit" as they often work closely in conjunction with studios.

Japanese cinema in the 1990s and 2000s was characterized dually by growth within the film industry in Japan and by the success of Japanese films abroad. 1993 saw the arrival of multiplex cinemas, and by 2008 there were 2,659 of these, making up 79.2% of all cinema screens in Japan (Takeo 2006: 14). Up from 27% in 2002, Japanese film had recovered a market share of 53.2% in 2006 (Kaneko 2006:15). Concurrently, Japanese film was finding success abroad, something which is particularly relevant to contemporary Japanese horror film. This success was intertwined with the move of Japanese media products towards having the cultural odor that Iwabuchi (2002) acknowledges as beginning in the 1990s.

Indeed, it is in the early 1990s that Kiyoshi Kurosawa pegs the beginning of the J-horror boom (Wada-Marciano 2012:35). This boom, Kurosawa acknowledges, was tied up with the aesthetic of video produced for home viewing. Whereas historically, Japanese directors would have trained extensively under a master, the new breed of independent directors were moving away from the trend of being studio-trained. Many were inexperienced with 35mm film and worked purely in video. This allowed for the rapid creation and release of movies, which is indicative of the contemporary Japanese horror film movement. As contemporary Japanese horror film has its roots in the straight-to-video market, directors worked within its limitations, creating aesthetics developed out of the necessity of producing films designed to be viewed on a small screen. These often heavily featured themes and iconography of technology and technological horror. Formats that fit with the home-viewing experience were reflected in J-horror anthologies, and in the chapter format of films like *Ju-on: The Grudge*, designed to appeal to fragmented viewing. The boundaries between film and

television have become increasingly permeable, and many Japanese film directors tend to work concurrently in producing work for television. Examples include contemporary Japanese horror film directors Hideo Nakata and Takashi Miike, both of whom work across a number of television genres. In addition to this, films such as *Ring* also have TV series tie-ins, including *Ringu: Kanzenban* (*Ring: Complete edition*, Takigawa 1996) which predates the film itself. Further shaping of the nature of contemporary Japanese horror film was the studio-less nature of low-budget productions, which spurred directors to shoot on location. This in turn evoked an association of contemporary Japanese horror film as being rooted in the everyday, including real locations and a distinctly urban feel. This everyday nature is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

Films that are popular often have influence on subsequent film productions. For example Mes (2003: 200) notes that *Audition* “Was intended to be both a cash-in on and a departure from the horror boom that had swept Japanese cinemas after the success of Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu*”. However, Gerow (2006) posits that, in terms of current trends in the Japanese film industry, it is in particular those films which find success *internationally* that influence the subsequent films which are produced in Japan. Being international by nature, contemporary Japanese horror film boomed and a large volume of titles were released in quick succession. This included films designed specifically with an international audience in mind, such as titles belonging to Nikkatsu’s *Sushi Typhoon* label which was formed in 2010.

Genre in Japan

Perhaps due to genre being particularly important as a marketing tool for independent films (Altman 1999), the Japanese films that make it to the UK tend to be placed into a small number of established genres during the distribution process. Typically this involves being shoehorned into those genres which are the most marketable (Shin, 2008). Additionally, only a small percentage of Japan's film output is distributed in the UK. As a result of this, Japanese cinema abroad has been conflated with genre films, obscuring the true picture of the genre landscape. This section will first give an overview of the genre landscape in Japan, before honing in on the horror genre specifically. Data from interviews with Japanese audiences will be used for context.

Genre

There are two overarching categories into which Japanese films fall, *jidaigeki* and *gendaigeki*. *Jidaigeki* are essentially period dramas or historical films, often based on theatre or Kabuki plays from the Edo (or Tokugawa) period and generally set in the same period (1603 – 1867). These films are frequently samurai movies, or follow the lives of other people who lived during the time such as craftsmen, merchants or government. They tend to follow set plot points and dramatic conventions such as sword fights, appearance of characters and conventional dialogue. *Gendaigeki*, on the other hand, is used to refer to any film or television text that is contemporary, set in the modern day and grown from the modernization of Japan during the Meiji period.

As mentioned, the Western view of Japan's film output is one largely conflated with genre films. This is not only due to international distribution

choices, but also due to what Schilling (1999) observes is the demographic of domestic Japanese audiences at which Japanese studios aim their cinematic releases. According to Schilling (1999: 15) the target audience for major films in Japan:

Has long resembled an hourglass, with filmgoers under twenty and over forty occupying the ends. Thus the strange skewing, to western eyes at least, of the “big three”’s lineups, which seem to consist largely of animation for kiddies, idol movies for young teens, and period dramas and other cinematic strolls down memory lane for the old folks...

Of course, independent films are still created and distributed outside of these restricted genres, but have far less power behind them. The domestic films distributed for cinematic release in Japan are generally fitting with the genres that, alongside horror, are largely seen as representative of Japanese film in the West: historical dramas (inclusive of the highly visible samurai genre), and anime (inclusive of *Studio Ghibli*). Alongside these is the odd quirky and independent Japanese film which receives cult attention, and occasionally critical acclaim. For example, the Oscar-winning *Departures* (Takita 2008). However, in the case of the idol movie genre, its prominence in Japan fails to translate to an international appeal. This is perhaps due to idol-based media being largely dependent upon intertextual knowledge of other Japanese media, thus limiting its broader appeal (Galbraith & Karlin 2012: 12).

The variety of genre amongst Japanese cinematic releases was not always so restricted. At the peak of the studio system in the 1950s, the “big three” studios aligned themselves with a range of genre films in order to attract and retain audiences. This began to change when audience share dwindled as viewers migrated from cinema-going to television and video. In the 1950s, films categorisable as *jidaigeki* accounted for one half of the industry’s output

(Schilling, 1999, 16). However, by the 1960s these had largely moved to television, and in the 1980s the *yakuza* genre also migrated to the small screen in the form of video. The studios established subsidiaries such as Toei Video to cater to these markets. By the time the move towards working with independent directors and companies began to be established, studios had trended towards aligning themselves with particular brands, much in the same way as they had done with serialisations. However, these were now predominantly brands or series that had been created by independents, emblematic of the increased affiliation between the two. Wada-Marciano (2012: 31-32) cites the example of the *Ring* series, which was originally produced by the independent film company Ace Pictures, who distributed *Ring* and *Ring 2: Spiral* (Iida 1998) together to great success. However, subsequent installments in the series were released under the “Kadogawa Horror Series” banner of the major Kadogawa studio.

As previously mentioned, subsidiaries were set up by studios for creating straight to video products, and the low cost of digital production opened up the market for independents. In contrast to the restricted number of genres amongst domestic cinema releases, Japan’s surprisingly extensive range of genres is evident within the booming DVD market. DVD rental remains a strong in Japan, as do DVD sales. Whereas Blockbuster met its demise in the UK, Japan’s primary DVD rental chain Tsutaya was still continuing plans for growth after reaching 1400 stores in 2011 (Culture Convenience Club Co. 2011). Taking a stroll through Tsutaya or browsing Japanese online DVD retailers guarantees encountering a dizzying range of established genres. For example, the genre under which Tsutaya lists *Battle Royale* is termed *baioresu* (violence), a genre which does not exist in the UK. Other prominent Japanese genres such as *haha-*

mono (films about mothers and their children) or *tsuma-mono* (films about wives) reflect subject matter dealt with in the film output of the West, but with no equivalent fully formed genre. Other genres such as *matabi-mono* (films about gamblers or yakuza) are distinctly Japanese genres that understandably have no direct UK equivalent. Further still, other genres in common use in Japan such as the *shakai-mono* (social problem film) have either dropped out of fashion in the UK, or are rarely used outside of critical context.

Breaking down the contemporary Japanese horror genre

As previously mentioned, the horror genre in Japan predates film, and is a genre which has developed both with influence from, and independently from, the West. As McRoy (2008) notes, although horror film had existed previously in Japan, the 1950s and 1960s saw an explosion of films concerned with terror and disaster, namely the *kaidan* (ghost story) and the *daikaijū eiga* (giant monster film). These films drew influence from previous performative traditions as well as the social preoccupations of the time. It was during this period that many of what are regarded to be the most famous traditional Japanese horror films were produced, including *Onibaba* (Kaneto 1964), *Kwaidan* (Kobayashi 1964) and *Ugetsu monogatari* (Mizoguchi 1953). Films concerned with body horror such as *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* and *Evil Dead Trap* (Ikeda 1988) followed and led the way for the violence and gore which dominated the Japanese horror films of the 1980s. The *kaidan* (ghost story) was notably reinvigorated in the 1990s with the video work of Norio Tsurata (*Scary True Stories, Honto ni atta kowai hanashi*, 1991; *Honto ni atta kowai hanashi: Dai-ni-ya*, 1992). Tsurata is often regarded as being instrumental in the lead up to the J-horror boom, through a move back

towards creating atmosphere and tension rather than blood and gore (Zahiten & Kimata, 2005, McRoy 2008: 8-9). This was characteristic of the films belonging to the J-horror boom, which made household names of directors including Shimizu Takashi, Miike Takashi and Hideo Nakata both in Japan and abroad.

As established, genres are divided differently in Japan from the UK. So it is perhaps unsurprising that a number of the films which UK audiences deemed to be contemporary Japanese horror films are not regarded as such in Japan. This was particularly evident in terms of marketing, shelving practices and amongst Japanese interviewees. For example, *Battle Royale* and *Ichi the Killer* were often discussed as horror by UK interviewees, but are listed on the Tsutaya website under the genres of *akushon/bairensu* (action/violence). Likewise, Japanese interviewees expressed surprise that a UK audience might consider these films horror, although many were unsure as to exactly how they themselves would categorise them. On the Tsutaya website *Audition* is listed as horror. However, Japanese participants expressed confusion as to its genre much in the same way as UK participants did. During the Japanese interviews, when addressing anything outside of the rigidly-defined horror genre, deducing a film's "true" genre was difficult. Various perceptions existed amongst Japanese participants and they displayed a higher degree of uncertainty in their answers, perhaps due to the sheer volume of genres in the Japanese film market. Opinions on the genre of *Battle Royale*, *Ichi the Killer* and *Audition* ranged from *shakai-mono* (social problem film) to *sasupensu* (suspense) and *baiorensu* (violence), to categorisation by rating in the form of *R-shite*, a term used to refer to films with restricted audiences.

To Japanese interviewees, contemporary horror film was a very specific genre. It was one which they associated with the atmosphere and tension reintroduced by Norio Tsurata, and as being evocative of supernatural-focused films such as *Ring* and *Ju-on: The Grudge* as well as titles less well-known in the UK. For many of the Japanese interview participants, their perception of contemporary horror film in Japan was tied into folklore and urban legends, but not always explicitly. For example, Masato (26, male, student) acknowledged that “Japanese horror films seem to follow an old story, but not in the way of a direct translation, just references”. He highlighted some discrepancies, such as Sadako’s constant presentation as an *onryō*, or vengeful spirit, in the film *Ring* in compared to the focus on her when alive in the book.

Perhaps indicative of the looser inclusion of films by UK audiences, it is not unusual for Japanese films categorised outside of the horror genre to contain elements of horror. It is also common for horror films to contain elements from other genres. However, as McRoy (2005: 2) notes, these are “Usually to a degree that renders them subordinate to the development of terror”. Within the Japanese film industry contemporary horror is a strictly defined genre with no room for the ambiguity associated with those films outside of the genre which might feature the horrific elements of gore and violence associated with horror in the 1980s. What Japanese interviewees aligned with horror was the idea of J-horror, in the domestic nature of the term rather than the more inclusive view with which it is often associated internationally.

In terms of defining J-horror, Kinoshita (2009) draws attention to the *Konaka riron* (Konaka theory). *Konaka riron* is a formula for horror film aesthetics so termed by Hiroshi Takahashi (a prominent script writer and

supervisor of a number of J-horror films) and Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and was originally detailed in Chiaki Konaka's book *Hono eiga no miryoku: fundamentaru hora sengen* (The fascination of horror films: A manifestation of fundamental horror, 2003). The J-horror that Kinoshita (2009: 104) postulates is located as beginning in the late 1990s, and she views it as being paralleled with what Kurosawa himself describes as "Japanese horror". Kinoshita posits that Takahashi's (2004) criticism in conjunction with the Konaka theory can be used to analyse the ghost, which both Japanese and UK interviewees deemed to be central in their definitions of contemporary Japanese horror film. Whilst Konaka deems the figure of the ghost as central to J-horror, Takahashi outlines strategies for activating the uncanny feeling which interviewees associated with contemporary Japanese horror. Takahashi (2004: 27-28, in Kinoshita 2009: 115) gives a list of the six techniques for the representation of the ghost within J-horror:

- 1) Don't show the face.
Show only a fragment of the body or the clothes. Or, put it in a long-shot so that the details of its face are blurred.
- 2) Make the standing position or behavior unnatural.
Human beings have a specifically human sense of space and distance between themselves. Position someone in such a way to defy this sense subtly. If it glares at us from that position, it would be scary.
- 3) Make its movement non-human.
Make its movement unrelated to the natural mortality of human muscles. It could look like a zombie if handled poorly, though.
- 4) Put it [a body part] in an impossible position.
A well-known spirit photograph shows a hand put on a classmate's shoulder. Also, things like a face looking up from the bottom of a doorway would be creepy.
- 5) Use an awesome face.
There is nothing to add, if the actor's face terrifies. It is an ultimate tour-de-force, an ideal of the ghost film.
- 6) Show nothing.
Your weapon is premonition and atmosphere in space and the use of sound. Robert Wise; *The Haunting* [1963] is an exemplary case.

These rules regarding the representation of the ghost correspond with many aspects which interviewees both in the UK and Japan described as influencing their categorisation of a film as contemporary Japanese horror, such as atmosphere, tension and suggestion. However, as Kinoshita (2009: 115) rightly observes, if these rules were to be applied indiscriminately, *Ju-on: The Grudge*, which all interview participants deemed to be J-horror, would not be part of J-horror canon. As Kinoshita elaborates, some locate the end of J-horror at the release of *Ju-on: The Grudge* due to its showing of the ghost. This would suggest that in Japan there is also contestation within the genre and that audiences play a central part in definition.

The Japanese reception context

In order to understand the importance of the nature of contemporary Japanese horror film being removed from its original context when viewed in the UK, it is necessary to point out some of the key elements of the Japanese reception context. Although not the focus of this study, in this section I utilise data collected from interviews with Japanese audiences in order to provide examples, and to emphasise that similar varieties within viewing experiences and meaning-making exist in Japan.

Whereas the West has long seen an association of cinematic horror film releases around Halloween, in Japan horror films have traditionally been a summer trend. This is both to coincide with *O-bon* (festival of the dead) in July and August, and a continuation of the perception that horror stories and Kabuki plays bring chills on hot summer days and nights (Drazen 2001: 3, 38). However, video has brought with it the ability to choose the time and place of viewing at

one's convenience. Indeed, a defining characteristic of contemporary Japanese horror film is the speed and frequency of its releases. These tend towards operating without constraint on release dates and screening times, although "big" horror films in Japan are still usually slated for a summer release. Further indicative of the Japanese context is that cinema attendance is remarkably low. Ticket prices are expensive (around ¥1800/£10.45 for a standard ticket in Tokyo in 2014). A slow period of growth in attendance was stunted by 2011 tsunami, which saw box office revenue drop from £1.29billion in 2010 to £1.06billion (Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan). Box office revenue is still slowly recovering, standing at £1.14billion in 2013 (MPPAJ). The number of individual admissions in 2013 was 155million (MPPAJ), which given a population of approximately 127million, would equate to an average of only 1.22 cinema visits per person.

To give a true contextual picture it should be acknowledged that during the J-horror boom when contemporary Japanese horror film was most active, admissions were also low. In 1998, the year that *Ring* was released, there were 153million individual admissions (MPPAJ). The target market of these films is also important, as younger generations in Japan have a tendency towards not going to the cinema (Kakeo 2009: 15). The ability to view these films at home can therefore be seen as central to their success. The small screen format associated with contemporary Japanese horror film also parallels new paradigms of distribution and consumption in Japan. As Wada-Marciano (2012: 46) notes:

J-horror is well suited for the circumstances of industrial transition and the new economies of small-screen viewing, the genre targets younger audiences, who would rather rent or purchase DVDs than pay exorbitant ticket prices at movie theatres in Japan.

Just as it is in the UK, in Japan contemporary Japanese horror film is largely tied up with video, not least in its origins and how the form has evolved and targeted an audience.

Contrary to their perceivably “high-art” status in the UK and their appearance of being independent productions (Martin 2009), horror film in Japan is a highly visible genre with high-profile cinema releases, which sits in contrast to the “hidden gem” idea that is so frequently circulated in UK discourse. For example, to promote the release of *Sadako 3D* (Hanabusa 2012), a publicity stunt was staged at the famous scramble crossing in Shibuya, which was flooded with “Sadakos”, and “Sadako” threw the first pitch at a baseball game at Tokyo Dome. A similar stunt was repeated in 2013 to promote the release of *Sadako 2 3D* (Hanabusa 2013), this time at Nagoya Dome. This is by no means a recent development, as in 2002 a symbolic funeral was held for Sadako at Harajuku’s popular department store La Foret as part of an art installation.

Different too are the target audiences for contemporary horror films in Japan. As previously mentioned, those aged under twenty are a key demographic for cinematic releases. While *Ring* was positioned in opposition to “immature” films such as *Scream* by British critics (Martin 2009), in Japan it was marketed as a date film but actually found its key popularity with female high school students who spread positive recommendations to friends via their mobile phones (Wada-Marciano 2012: 44). In light of this, the choice to stage the aforementioned publicity stunt in the trendy and youthful district of Shibuya can be read as a business and targeting decision, evocative of their key audience. I do not wish to imply that other audience demographics do not engage with Japanese horror (as they evidently do), but instead to stress that in Japan horror

is a commercial genre that is comparatively mainstream when placed against the niche aggregate audience which UK distributors target.

One of the key features of contemporary Japanese horror film is its nature of being rooted in the everyday. As discussed earlier, this is partly due to the necessity of filming on location and urban topography, but it was also something on which Japanese interviewees invariably placed strong emphasis. According to the interviewees, contemporary Japanese horror film was a very specific kind of horror, one which was tied up with the idea that “it could happen to you”. Hiromi (25, female, student/office worker) observed that “The difference between daily and not daily life is very vague in Japanese horror... Japanese horror is so daily life, you drop a pencil and look under the desk and someone is there. It’s something that might happen”. Many interviewees related particular films to experiences within their everyday life as a way of meaning-making. While some of these observations of everyday life were universal and could apply also within the UK context, other experiences were tied explicitly to a Japanese context which was unlikely to be accessible to UK viewers. For example, Keiko (30, female, student) related that Koji Suzuki (author of the *Ring* novel) had been her cram school teacher, and a number of interviewees recounted tales about visiting locations where particular films were set, often citing being scared or being reminded of specific elements of contemporary Japanese horror films in their everyday life.

Japanese interviewees universally agreed that contemporary Japanese horror film was reflective of Japanese society. One interviewee, Kentaro (22, male, student), reasoned that “American horror is not like daily life, it’s like zombies, because of the different culture it’s not realistic to Japanese people”. As

previously stated, many of the films which UK interviewees did not unanimously perceive as horror were declared as definitively not horror by all Japanese participants. This is highly suggestive of a difference in the frameworks of understanding, and a shift in interpretations when the films are being consumed by UK viewers in a transnational context.

Japanese interviewees frequently referred to urban legends in their responses, such as *Toire no Hanako-san* (Hanako of the toilet).⁸ Interestingly, they largely did not mention the folklore roots of contemporary Japanese horror, and when questioned specifically often admitted to being unaware of these origins. Indeed, Kinoshita (2009: 110) observes that within Hills (2005) analysis of the transnational appeal of *Ring* there is a suggestion of “The Japanese film’s indebtedness to a contemporary media environment, rather than to indigenous folk traditions”. It is important to acknowledge that just because a film is embedded in a certain culture, this does not necessarily mean that members of that culture will find the same meanings in it, or that they will understand culturally-specific elements in line with how we may expect them to. Variances of cultural competence exist in Japan in the same way that variances of cross-cultural competence are evident amongst UK audiences. Indeed, as Denison (2007: 313-14) observes, part of the marketing for the *Studio Ghibli* animation *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki 2001) involved an article explaining the traditional Japanese roots of some of the imagery. This was partially in order to lend authenticity, but was also targeted at those viewers who might have been unaware of the culturally specific origins. As Denison notes, the audience

⁸ *Toire no Hanako-san* is a widespread urban legend similar to the Western folklore legend of “Bloody Mary”, in which the ghost of Bloody Mary is said to appear in the mirror if you say her name three times. The protagonist in the *Toire no Hanako-san* legend is a young girl who supposedly haunts school bathrooms. According to the legend, if you knock three times on the third toilet stall on the third floor and ask “Are you there, Hanako-san?” she will appear in the stall.

targeted had a range of cultural competencies, much in the same way as the UK audience presented in this study does.

Perhaps at this point you are wondering about the title of this chapter. Maybe it seems a little... *reductive*? “Welcome to a Japanese Nightmare” was the intended tagline for the UK release of *Grotesque* before the film was banned. This provides an extreme example of playing upon ideas of nation in a reductive way, which forms part of the analysis for the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Ghoul Britannia: The UK cross-cultural reception context

The transnational journey of any film has implications for reception, through the effects of a number of factors such as marketing, distribution, shelving practices and the format in which it is viewed. Continuing on from the previous chapter which established the domestic context of contemporary Japanese horror film, in this chapter I will address the specificities of the UK reception context. This chapter will provide the background information necessary for a full understanding of the three results chapters, and will begin to present a snapshot of the audience data which they interrogate.

The first section of this chapter will give an overview of historical reception of Japanese film in the UK. Following this I will give a brief introduction to the UK experience of the J-horror boom before focusing on UK distribution and its implications. Building on this, platforms upon which contemporary Japanese horror film is available for viewing and how these affect reception are discussed in the third section. The final section of the chapter outlines the major ways in which contemporary Japanese horror films are reconfigured and repositioned in the uniqueness of the UK context.

Historical reception of Japanese 'horror' film in the UK

Before addressing the current reception of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK, it is useful to gain an understanding of the history of Japanese film in the UK context. Klinger (1997) notes the way in which historical reception studies are undoubtedly heavily influenced by interpretation, as the search for meaning

has been displaced from the text and becomes reliant upon context instead. She goes on to note how Staiger (1992) acknowledges that materialist approaches are not based around purely finding new contextual meanings, but are more concerned with looking at the interpretational strategies that are available within particular historical contexts. A historical analysis of Japanese horror film in the UK is tied into issues of availability, genre frameworks, changing attitudes which group Japan against the West as a whole, and the international nature of scholarship on the topic.

The results of this thesis address UK audiences' meaning-making and interpretations of contemporary Japanese horror film, and how they construct the genre. However, in attempting a historical analysis of Japanese horror film reception in the UK three initial problems arise. First, without access to actual audiences a history of audience reception cannot be provided in the same way as audiences were interviewed for this thesis. Second, when looking at historical writings on Japanese film it is difficult to distinguish that which is purely a UK viewpoint from the West as a whole. Third, Japanese film in the UK was arguably not strongly equated with horror until the J-horror boom, or at the very least until the 1980s with body-horror films such as *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. With these problems in mind, I will give an overview of the UK historical context of Japanese horror film through academic writings and critical reviews. The first section gives an overview of how academic discourse on Japanese film in the West has changed, before the second section focuses specifically on the UK, using analysis of reviews from UK publications in order to explore the changing way in which Japanese 'horror' film has been categorized.

Western scholarship on Japanese film

The case of how Japanese film has been discussed in academia is particularly interesting due to the progress that has been made in how we discuss Japan and its film output, having moved from essentialised views and binary oppositions towards a more transnational perspective and an inclusive idea of what constitutes 'World cinema' (Nagib 2006, Scohat and Stam 1994). Japanese cinema was reborn in the early 1990s after more than a decade of hiatus, with formal recognition from international film festivals and the development of a strong cult following and an international audience, as well as the boom in Japanese horror abroad (Schilling 1999). Yet understanding this contemporary Japanese cinema ironically requires a break what used to be called Japanese cinema and a discussion of it as something other than a traditional national cinema. Japanese cinema is now in a post-national state, consisting of complex and contradictory trends and developments which do not necessarily form a coherent image of Japan, traditional or otherwise, as has been constructed in previous Western scholarship of Japanese film. As Klinger (1997: 124) observes "Like revivals and retrospectives, academia constructs assessments that differ dramatically from any the film may have earned in its original context".

Yoshimoto (1993) identifies two types of Japanese film scholarship in Western academia; historical and theoretical. Within these definitions, area studies specialists tend to take up the historical study of Japanese cinema since they are familiar with the culture and often have an understanding of Japanese language, but are rarely aware of the theoretical advancements made in film studies. In opposition to this, film critics well versed in theory but less competent in the Japanese language and culture write on Japanese cinema from what

Yoshimoto refers to as 'theoretical perspectives'. Given the nature of the availability of Japanese film historically and the academics who wrote about it, it is difficult to pinpoint an entirely UK view. Studies at the time tended to focus on textual analysis and be removed from attention to context, and academics such as Ritchie, Burch and Bordwell tended towards positioning Japan against the West as an imagined whole. To the present day it continues to be difficult to pinpoint in academia what is a specifically UK view on Japanese horror film through textual analysis based studies alone, although contextual studies such as this one, and those of Martin (2009), Dew (2007) and Shin (2009) which make specific references to the UK context are increasing. This section outlines some of the pre-1990s approaches to Japanese film in the West.

Conflation of Japanese film with Japanese national character

As Gerow (2005) notes, there has in the past been a tendency amongst Western scholars of Japanese film to connect Japanese cinema with the concept of Japanese nation. This is, in part tied up with the concept of *nihonjinron*, or essentialised discourse about the uniqueness of Japan and Japanese national character, which became popular after World War II. Through defining itself as Oriental through the discourse of *nihonjinron*, Iwabuchi (1994) argues that Japan has ultimately led itself and the West into a system of 'complicit exoticism', which encourages Oriental criticism of Japan, and that this Western Orientalist discourse on Japan has in turn supported the construction and maintenance of "Japaneseness". It is argued by Yoshimoto (2000) that the same essentialised and stereotypical view of Japanese culture constructed by Benedict in the key *nihonjinron* work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) later continued to

be used to explain the thematic motifs, formal features and contextual backgrounds of Japanese films.

This portrayal of Japanese national character has most prolifically been represented by Ritchie who in 1971 wrote of the way in which national character had been influential in shaping the work of directors such as Ozu, and applied this idea to his readings of Japanese films. Writing in 1987, Lehman refers to this image of 'Japanese character' as being typical of much Western film scholarship, and warns of the need to "...be aware of how far we still are from a reading of Japanese films which neither reduces and trivializes the role of the culture in understanding the films, nor obscures through Orientalising the role of the culture until everything is turned into stereotyped "essences" of Japanese character and religion" (1987: 14). Acknowledging the shift in attitudes, in the online version of *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* made available in 2008, Ritchie added an introduction in which, reflecting on advances in the scholarship of Japanese film, he stated that his ideas of film style have since broadened and he is no longer so confident that national character can be said to exist.

Japan as an imagined whole

There is a school of thought within the theory of *nihonjinron* which places it as a reaction against Western ideological hegemony, and argues that "a nation's identity is usually formed in reaction to the culture or identity of another nation" (Revell 1997: 59). This idea of creating an alternative signifying practice was particularly prevalent during the second wave of Western scholarship of Japanese film in the 1970s. Under the influence of post-structuralism, the global

hegemony of Hollywood came under scrutiny, and critics such as Bordwell and Thompson (1976) and Burch (1979) defined Japanese cinema in terms of its binary opposition to Hollywood. Japanese cinema was, in effect, treated as what Bordwell (1979) himself later referred to as a cinema of 'Otherness' onto which dreams, or in this case, poststructuralist ideals, were projected.

The superpositioning of Japan and the West implied that all Japanese films actively questioned the classical Hollywood paradigm, and, although Hollywood cinema was itself popular in Japan at the time, assumes an audience with a unanimity of taste based upon pre-modern traditions (Kiriwara 1987: 19). This is indicative of the way in which Western scholars of Japanese film positioned themselves as able to make assumptions about the Japanese film audience through an analysis of Japanese films. This can be seen, for example, in Ritchie's (1971) theory that Japanese audiences view films different to the West due to the right-to-left nature of the Japanese writing system, or in Burch's "tendency to construct an idealized Japanese culture" (Kiriwara 1987: 19). Lehman (1987) addresses the idea of Western film scholars' assumptions that Japanese culture can be grasped as a coherent unity through his identification of Western scholarship of Japanese film as fitting into one of three constructs of Japan; the 'mysterious Orient', the 'crystal clear Orient' or the 'non-existent Orient'.

Otherness

Underlying historical Western criticism of Japanese film has been the idea that the West and Japan exist both as opposites and as unchanging. Japan's self-Orientalism and the West's Orientalism at the time strengthened and required each other, and it was arguably this interaction between Japan and its Other that

made it possible for Japan to differentiate itself from other nations and define a unified cultural identity. The model of complicit Orientalism which had dominated Western scholarship on Japanese film was, as Yoshimoto points out “constructed on the opposition between the self and the Other or between Western theory and Japanese culture” (1993: 339). Critical shifts in film studies during the 1980s led to a third phase of Western scholarship on Japanese cinema which turned towards historical audiences and argued for a multiplicity of readings within a given text, and the preceding approaches were critically reexamined through the introduction of the discourse of Otherness and cross-cultural analysis. However, it can be argued that these discourses of cross-cultural analysis only serve to support the Othering of Japanese culture through the reinforcement of *nihonjinron* ideologies, as Iwabuchi (1994) points out in relation to these complicit discourses of orientalism and self orientalism: “Japan talks about the Self, while the West talks about the Other.” As Willeman (2005) further observes, what is wrong with the application of Western theory is not that it is Western, but that so much of it fails to recognize that it is Western.

Returning then to Yoshimoto’s (1993) observation about there being two types of Japanese film scholarship in Western academia, it can be observed that, historically, area studies specialists such as Ritchie related strongly to a Japanese culture which is itself infused with *nihonjinron* ideologies which are in turn reflected in their criticism of Japanese film. Film specialists, on the other hand, tended to either remove any cultural, political or historical context from Japanese cinema, or resort to the use of *nihonjinron* discourses in a different way to the area studies specialists – referring to these popular misconceptions about Japan as a way of explaining that which they do not fully understand. As a new

generation of Western film scholars emerge and boundaries between academic disciplines merge, the previous division in Western scholarship of Japanese film between film theory and area studies looks to become a thing of the past.⁹ The notion of writing about a national cinema in terms of its linear historical development has further come under threat as the idea of history has become far from self evident, and the notion of national cinema and the idea of nation itself has become ambiguous.

UK reviews of Japanese 'horror' film

Whilst acknowledging that studying a single external field such as reviews is not enough to fully address the context of a film's circulation in any given context, Klinger (1997:10) does state that this kind of approach can "tell us how that field produced meaning for the film and give us a partial view of its discursive surround". With this in mind, this section will utilise reviews from UK publications across a period of time in order to provide insight into how the way in which Japanese 'horror' film has been discussed has changed, as well as the way the genre itself has come into formation in critical discourse. The reviews analysed are primarily from the UK publication *Sight and Sound* and the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin*, which merged with *Sight and Sound* in 1991.

As Wada-Marciano (2012: 41) acknowledges, prior to the success of J-horror, Japanese cinema was never considered a global cinema. The exceptions to this were, she notes, anime and a small number of auteur films which played

⁹ For discussion of the benefits of a movement with Japanese studies away from area studies and toward cultural studies see Harold Harootunian and Naoki Sakai (1999) 'Japan Studies and Cultural Studies.' *Positions* 7(2): 593-647.

at international film festivals. In the 1950s, it was Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1951) and Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatori* (1953) which brought Japanese cinema to the attention of the West, with *Ugetsu Monogatori* winning the Silver Lion at the 1953 Venice Film Festival. As Wada-Marciano continues "outside of the occasional art-house film, there have been few attempts to export Japanese cinema in a commercially viable way, much less to create a global cinema" (2012: 41). As a result, the general UK public would have had very little opportunity to view Japanese films. *Ugetsu Monogatori*, along with *Kwaidan* (1964) and *Onibaba* (1964), have come to be regarded as classic Japanese horror films and precursors to the contemporary Japanese horror film genre. But, given the evolution of the genre and retrospective repositioning, was this always the case in the UK? This section will explore the way in which Japanese horror films, or more accurately, those which came to be viewed as horror have been reconfigured in critical discourse.

As previously mentioned, one problem presented here in trying to provide a history of the way in which Japanese horror is discussed in the UK is that the genre does not have a historical presence in the UK which dates back to the time of the release of the films in question. This section takes particular influence from *Sight and Sound's* "Fistful of Five", a regular feature where five definitive entries into a particular genre are listed. The entry entitled "Japanese horror" (2006) reads as follows:

Ugetsu Monogatari - Mizoguchi Kenji's creepily atmospheric 1953 ghost story about a lowly potter who is fatefully seduced by two ghosts in war-torn 16th-century Japan is released on DVD this month by Criterion.

Kwaidan - Shot in sumptuous painterly colour, Kobayashi Masaki's stylised adaptation of four ghost stories by Lafcadio Hearn is a beguiling, dreamlike spectacle, enhanced by Takemitsu Toru's score .

Audition - Miike Takashi's breakthrough film about a widower bewitched by a mysterious young woman slowly builds in uneasy tension before its unforgettably gruesome finale.

The Ring Trilogy - Nakata Hideo's trilogy about a ghostly curse passed on through a video tape was remade by Hollywood, but his eerie originals remain superior.

Onibaba - Kaneto Shindo's visually atmospheric film follows two women who prey on unfortunate samurai, but who are fatefully driven against one another by sexual jealousy.

Hence the older of these films, *Ugetsu Monogatori*, *Kwaidan*, and *Onibaba* shall be discussed due to their apparent repositioning, along with primary examples of them being used as frameworks in the discussion of the definitive entry into the genre, *Ring*.

Of course, the purpose of reviews is generally considered to be guiding audiences, and this combined with a lack of accessibility to Japanese film for a historical audience, inevitably means there is a lack of reviews compared to what one might expect to see today. This lack of accessibility also results in reviewers themselves often not reporting upon films until many years after their original release. Writing in 1962, Rhode reviews *Ugetsu Monogatori*. As he notes, previously only one of Mizoguchi's films, *Streets of Shame* (1956) had been distributed in the UK. In 1962, *Ugetsu Monogatori* was finally being shown commercially in London. Reflective of writing for a readership with lack of accessibility to the film both geographically and in its very limited run, the majority of the review comprises description of the film's events. It is, for the large part, objective, and perhaps more importantly, the film is never once referred to as *horror*. This does not mean that the presence of horrific elements is denied, there are mentions of things relating to horror such as the uncanny: "This *Ugetsu* is an essay in the uncanny: an unearthly fable, uncanny because it

revives in us those childhood fears aroused by a wind whistling in the chimney-piece or doors creaking in the night”, a description of the “nightmareish world” in which it is set, and references to the film as “supranatural” both in relation to specific elements and to “supranatural” as a standalone genre.

Likewise, in reviewing *Kwaidan* in 1967, Price gives more description of the storyline than we would expect to see in a review these days. Again, language is used that might relate to what we now regard as horror film, such as the use of sound as “hauntingly and chillingly effective”, or the reference to the “horrific climax” of the second segment. However, of most interest is the line in relation to the first segment: “The echo of *Ugetsu Monogatori* consorts uneasily with the elements of Hammer horror”. With this remark Price both discusses the film within a framework of understanding which references another Japanese film, but also actively differentiates it from what is arguably the most visible form of horror in the UK at the time, Hammer horror.

Fitting with the previously mentioned notion that a small number of auteur films were amongst the exceptions to Japanese cinema not having a global status, historical reviews of both *Ugetsu Monogatori* and *Kwaidan* were tied up with the idea of the auteur. Rhode’s review opens with the line “Kenji Mizoguchi is generally recognised as one of the masters of the cinema”. Price’s review similarly lays praise to the director, stating that “the better parts of the film are a striking demonstration of what academic direction is about”. Between the two films they are likened to Greek tragedies, Shakespeare plays, and at one point *Kwaidan* is likened to *Ugetsu Monogatori*. At no point is either of the films referred to as horror. So how have these films come to be regarded as horror? What has changed?

The association of contemporary Japanese horror film with DVD is something which has had a dual affect on defining the genre, both in retrospectively redefining older films and in being central to the nature of contemporary films. DVD has increased accessibility to older texts, but this accessibility largely increased after the rise of contemporary Japanese horror to amongst the most representative of Japan's outputs. This can be seen, for example, with the relatively recent rediscovery of *House* (Obayashi 1977). Although originally released in Japan in 1977, *House* was not released in the UK until 2010, on the *Masters of Cinema* label. Reviewing the film in 2010, Sharp refers to it as a "spook movie", and hints at its inclusion in the horror genre through the review title "House of horror". Despite never directly calling it horror, Sharp interestingly notes the film as "...a further move from the traditional Edo-period kaidan ghost stories that had dominated Japanese horror throughout the 1960s towards a more contemporary western-inspired model". Two processes of (re)situating Japanese 'horror' films are at work in this particular example. First, as Wada-Marciano notes "the dominance of DVD in the marketplace has produced a new genre system in postfilmic distributions, it is a system with more generic terms, but at the same time it resembles the genre categories of Hollywood cinema, amidst this process, local generic terms such as *jidaigeki-eiga* have been erased" (2012: 48). That is to say, the move towards more Western terms of genre is becoming apparent. Second, this begins to hint at the retrospective recategorisation of older Japanese films with elements of the horrific as having always been considered part of the horror genre.

The J-horror boom, as discussed later in this chapter, brought horror to light as one of the most marketable and recognisable Japanese film genres. As the

purpose of a review is to shape expectations of a particular film for potential audiences using recognisable examples and frameworks, it is perhaps unsurprisingly that a false continuity of the Japanese horror genre has been created with retrospective rereleases of films such as *Onibaba*, *Ugetsu Monogatori* and *Kwaidan*. As Klinger notes “Reviewers comment directly on revived films, evaluating them against whatever aesthetic canons dominate journalism at the time to renovate the films' appeal for new audiences within existing systems of professional taste and social and aesthetic ideologies” (1997:124). This can be seen for example in Newman’s review of the 2006 Eureka DVD release of *Kwaidan*. The title of the review is “Fathership of “The Ring””, leading by explicitly situating the film as a precursor of contemporary Japanese horror film. Newman works to justify this positioning, writing that “Now, Japanese ghosts are everywhere in the movies, but notably they still look like the creatures in *Kwaidan*”, and also acknowledging that *Kwaidan* was preceded by *Ugetsu Monogatori* with the phrase “...*Kwaidan* was not the first of its genre: another variant of the man who-sleeps-with a seductress-but-wakes-with a corpse can be found in Misoguchi Kenji’s *Ugestu Monogatori* (1953)...”. Finally, she deems it “...a fine starting point for those unfamiliar with the major director and the whole Japanese ghost tradition”. The way in which Newman positions *Kwaidan* suggests a building of the genre, at least in terms of Western review criticism.

How then, might we account for the role that contemporary Japanese horror film has played in this reconfiguration of genre within UK review criticism? The answer lies in looking towards the DVD format that is, as previously mentioned, tied up with the notion of contemporary Japanese horror

and the false history that it has created for the genre. Perhaps owing to their status as both auteur films and as 'classic' Japanese films in the UK, films such as *Kwaidan*, *Onibaba* and *Ugetsu Mongatori* have had multiple retrospective releases in the UK under different DVD label collections. In this sense, these films are uniquely positioned to assess their critical review reception over a period of time. It should be noted however, that reference to the films in terms of contemporary Japanese horror is not always their defining element. *Ugetsu Monogatori* was reviewed by the same person (Brooke) and in the same publication (*Sight and Sound*), both in 1998 preceding the J-horror boom, and in 2012, after Japanese horror was, as the introduction to this thesis states, considered to be over. In neither review does Brooke make reference to the film as horror. Likewise, writing about *Onibaba* in 2013 he again makes no reference to horror. Reviewing the same film in 2005, again in *Sight and Sound*, Bell also makes no reference to *Onibaba* as a horror film. Macnab reviews *Ugetsu Monogatori* in 1998 on the cusp of the J-horror boom again making no reference to horror. That is not to say that *Sight and Sound* as a publication does not regard these films as horror films, indeed it was their inclusion in the list of five Japanese horror films that prompted their selection for analysis.

What we may hypothesise then, is that these films become more important in terms of being referred to as horror when reviewers are talking about contemporary Japanese horror films, as they create context for a falsified history of the genre. While Wada-Marciano (2012 : 46) points to the power of digitization to erase historical context, she also notes that it has allowed J-horror (as she refers to it) to expand its parameters. References to older Japanese films which were not originally equated with the horror genre in either Japan or the

UK abound in reviews of contemporary Japanese horror films. Reviewing *Ring* on the cusp of the J-horror boom in 2000, Kermode notes the way in which “...*Ring* remains compelling viewing, a stark treat which looks back to the austere black and white rituals of Kaneto Shindo’s unsettling samurai film *Onibaba*...” whilst not acknowledging *Onibaba* as horror, it is nonetheless the beginning of a repositioning of the film as a precursor. Reviewing *Ring* as a festival highlight in the same year, Newman notes the way in which Sadako is “...pitched here somewhere between the classical Japanese vengeful ghosts of *Ugetsu* or *Kwaidan* and such Hollywood franchise stars as Freddy Krueger or the *Candyman*”. Reviewing *Ju-on: The Grudge 2* six years later after the J-horror boom has become a cemented and perceivably tired genre, Kermode recommends that those who are tired of the recycling of J-horror “check out Masaki Kobayashi’s uncut *Kwaidan* (1964), available in a spanking new DVD, which gets right back to the source of these increasingly world weary horror”.

Martin’s work on the British critical reception of *Ring* picks up the case of reviews in far more detail, concluding that it “reveals a clear case of familiarisation; critics were faced with a totally alien text, one of the first Japanese horror films to be released in Britain. The timing of the film’s release meant that it immediately found a place in current debates on horror.” (2009: 49). However, I would argue that what is revealed here sits in contrast, or rather offers a more multi-faceted view on the point of critical reception than that adopted by Martin. Martin states that “...the Japaneseness of the text was virtually ignored, the film was defined by its relation to a cycle of American horror films popular at the time” (35). I would argue that British critics did not only read *Ring* in terms of similarity or difference from Western films, but they also did so in terms of

creating an imagined history of the genre which resituated older Japanese films as precursors of the genre, particularly in light of DVD format and their increased availability.

The J-horror boom in the UK

The Japanese release of *Ring* in 1998 awoke a domestic resurgence in the horror genre. As the film took a year or two to make an impact abroad, the J-horror boom in the UK can be said to have first picked up somewhere around the year 1999 or 2000. This period was characterised by a growing level of press hype surrounding festival screenings of *Audition*, and the official UK release of *Ring*.¹⁰ The boom was subsequently fuelled by the release of several more prolific contemporary Japanese horror films, which began to be collectively referred to as East Asia Extreme, after the label *Tartan Asia Extreme*, which was the most visible distributor at the time. Release dates of the most prominent films of the J-horror boom are detailed below.

Fig.1. UK release dates

Film (Director & Japanese release date)	UK home release date	UK distribution label	UK Festival Screenings
<i>Ring</i> (Hideo Nakata 1998)	18/08/00	<i>Tartan Asia Extreme</i>	
<i>Audition</i> (Takashi Miike 1999)	16/03/01	<i>Tartan Asia Extreme</i>	Raindance Film Fest. 17/10/2000
<i>Battle Royale</i> (Kinji Fukusaku 2000)	14/09/01	<i>Tartan Asia Extreme</i>	Edinburgh Film Fest. 18/08/2001
<i>Ichi the Killer</i> (Takashi Miike)	30/05/03	<i>Premier Asia</i>	London Film Fest.

¹⁰ Although *Audition* received a festival release in the UK, it had already been hyped by the British press before that time. Writing about the premier at the Rotterdam Film Festival, specialist Japanese cinema website *Midnight Eye* made mention of “The highest audience walkout count I was ever lucky enough to witness” and *The Guardian* reported that several audience members had said to director Miike “You’re sick” following the screening. This was however, something that was deliberately played up, with sick bags being handed out for a subsequent screening of the film at Toronto Film Festival.

2001)			13/11/2001
<i>Dark Water</i> (Hideo Nakata 2002)	06/06/03	<i>Tartan Asia Extreme</i>	Edinburgh Film Fest. 17/08/2002 Raindance Film Fest. 27/10/2002
<i>Ju-on: The Grudge</i> (Takashi Shimizu 2002)	04/10/04	<i>Premier Asia</i>	Leeds Film Fest. 03/10/2003

The importance of these particular films is noted by Pilkington (2004) in *The Tartan Guide to Asia Extreme: An introduction to an Astonishing World Cinema*, a booklet that was released by Tartan when the films were largely unfamiliar to a UK audience. These films were also the most frequently mentioned by interviewees, and thus became the case study films around which the results chapter of this thesis primarily revolve.

Amongst these instrumental titles, *Ring* is over-arching, and was central in fuelling the boom, with Japanese filmmakers quickly turning out similar films following its success (Wada-Marciano 2007). *Ring* was also the first to receive an official UK release on 18th August 2000, concurrently on video and DVD. However, the boom ignited by *Ring* had been simmering for a couple of years. The film had already achieved a cult status before its official UK release through underground screenings and the circulation of copied videos and VCDs (Kalat 2007: 5-6). It was the widespread availability which came with the official UK releases of a number of East Asian horror films, including *Ring*, *Audition* and *Battle Royale*, within the space of just over a year which fanned the flames.

The spark of interest in contemporary Japanese horror film was symptomatic of a general malaise with Western horror, with academia acknowledging a slump around the early 2000s (Humphries 2002: 19, Jancovich 2002a: 7, Hantke 2007). Critics in the UK and beyond applauded the uniqueness

of contemporary Japanese horror films, often in comparison to their Western counterparts, and with little acknowledgment of the influence that Western horror had played upon the genre.¹¹ Hollywood remakes *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and to a lesser extent *Dark Water*, *Pulse* and *One Missed Call* (Valette 2008), helped to sustain the boom. They also directed new audiences to the originals, which were often reissued to coincide with the releases of their respective counterparts.

Distribution

Lobato and Ryan (2011) draw attention to the role that distribution plays in shaping genre and suggest that it provides a new approach to addressing concerns, including those around categorisation and canonisation. Distribution is, as Lobato and Ryan (2011: 189) propose: “central to contemporary relations between audiences and industry in international context”. Historically, which films find release in any particular territory has been determined by distribution. Illegal file sharing and importation aside, distribution companies have the power to largely determine what the audience of a particular territory has access to view.

While the distribution of Japanese film in general has improved, writing in 1999 when the boom was just beginning, Schilling (1999: 7) notes the way in which:

Overseas distribution of new Japanese films has improved in the past decade, with more film festival screenings and theatrical releases, but few foreign film-goers, even those who travel the festival circuit or live in major cities, see more than a fraction of the total output.

¹¹ For example, Steve Rose writes for *The Guardian* on 20th September 2002 that “Hollywood horror is creatively dead, but Asian films are reviving the genre”, and in 2002 BBC film critic Mark Kermode praised *Ring*'s “Unique combination of old folk devils and contemporary moral panics”.

Although avenues of digital piracy and video-on-demand have opened up barriers since then, without distribution labels and their marketing and physical presence, it is easy for films to go unnoticed. In the UK distribution sector Hollywood is dominant, and has the potential to operate most effectively through a vertical integration of the production, distribution and exhibition processes. Producers tend to have long-term economic links with distributors, who in turn have formal connections with exhibitors (Petley 1992). In contrast to this, UK distributors of contemporary Japanese horror film are lacking in these links, and often survive on a film-to-film basis, putting out one release at a time (Crisp 2010).

The role of UK distribution in forming the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film

Given the differences in exhibition circumstances between Japan and the UK, the actions taken by UK distributors can be seen as having had a significant impact upon the way in which the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film was formed. Typical of how UK distributors approached contemporary Japanese horror film, Altman (1999: 107) notes that distributors without easy access to venues “Need to communicate the nature of their product as clearly as possible”. The difficult nature of independent distribution means that in order to compete, the use of a recognisable genre (or indeed the forming of a self-proclaimed genre such as *Tartan Asia Extreme*) becomes almost a necessity.

Further to the way in which distribution shapes genre through the presentation of a text, it also shapes genre through choosing which texts or groups of texts are distributed or withheld (Lobato & Ryan 2011: 192). The

ability to act as a definer of a body of texts through restricting access is cited by Cubritt (2005) as something which should bear equal focus to those which they chose to provide access to. What we do see in the UK is just a fraction of the total film output of Japan, and is (unless side-stepped by Internet piracy) determined by distributors' tastes, for whom small horror films now present a gamble (Crisp 2010). The contemporary Japanese horror films distributed in the UK tend to feature marketable elements, in particular hooks such as sex or violence which sell to an international audience (Hawkins 2009). This in turn influences perceptions of the genre, and of Japan's filmic output as a whole.

Although contemporary Japanese horror films had not originally been created with an international audience in mind, both their departure from the "slump" that was present in Western horror at the time, and marketable shock elements, led to them being distributed in the UK in quick succession during the J-horror boom. Following this, it would appear that distributor preferences became internalised as Japan officially recognised the potential of these films, particularly as Hollywood remakes (JETRO report, 2004). Gerow (2006) similarly notes the way in which the Japanese Committee for Film Promotion formulated the "Plan for Promoting Japanese Film and Image Media". This plan included an £8.4million investment in producing appealing Japanese films. As studios saw the success that contemporary Japanese horror had both domestically and internationally, the market quickly became flooded and studios began to produce horror films specifically with international distribution in mind.

The dominance of *Tartan Asia Extreme*

Undoubtedly, the most high profile of the contemporary Japanese horror film distributors in the UK was *Tartan Asia Extreme*. In addition to distributing the forerunners of the J-horror boom, the label also credits itself with the creation of the definition of the Asia Extreme sub-genre itself (McAlpine 2004). *Tartan Asia Extreme* focused beyond just Japan, with a combined concentration on the genre film output of Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand. Originally known simply as Tartan, the label was founded in 1984 by film producer Don Boyd, Scottish distributor Alan Kean and entrepreneur Hamish McAlpine, who received much credit for making these films accessible to UK audiences.¹² It was following a back-to-back viewing of *Ring* and *Audition* in 1999, followed soon after by other East Asian titles, that McAlpine realized there was a steady flow of marketable films coming out of the region (McAlpine, 2004). Tartan was operating under the title of Metro-Tartan Distribution at the time of the release of *Ring* and *Audition*, but rebranded such releases under the *Tartan Asia Extreme* banner in 2002, a label established specifically to distribute the kind of East Asian films which McAlpine liked to refer to as “cultural hand grenades” (Hahn 2005). In 2004 Tartan expanded into America with the launch of Tartan Films US, which went into administration in May 2008, with Tartan Films UK following suit the month after. The majority of Tartan’s library of 400-plus film assets, over 40 of which were under the *Tartan Asia Extreme* banner, were acquired by Palisades, which now operates as Palisades Tartan and has a company aim of continuing to build upon their library of films (Palisades Tartan 2014).

¹² Acknowledgement came more thickly after the demise of *Tartan*, for example in *The Guardian*, where Geoffrey MacNab (2008) hails *Tartan* as having been “The UK’s most influential indie film distributor” and “One of the few with a recognizable brand name”. Academically, the contribution made by *Tartan* is acknowledged explicitly by Dew (2007), Shin (2009) and Crisp (2012).

Although the most prolific, *Tartan Asia Extreme* was not the only distributor of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK. *Ichi the Killer* and *Ju-on: The Grudge* were both distributed under Medusa's *Premier Asia* label, which was active until 2008. More recently a new wave of labels has been established, including 4Digital Asia which distributes films which tend to be linked into popular serialisations such as the *Death Note* series (Kaneko 2006, Nakata 2008), and the most recent films in the *Ju-On* series, *Ju-on: White Ghost* (Miyake 2009) and *Ju-on: Black Ghost* (Asato 2009). Alongside this, 4Digital Asia also distributes films orientated more towards gore, including *Tokyo Gore Police* (Nishimura 2008), and *Vampire Girl vs. Frankenstein Girl* (Nishimura 2009). Although claiming not to be a horror film distributor, Third Window handles films such as *Confessions* and *Cold Fish* (Sono 2010), both of which feature horror elements and have been pulled into horror film frameworks by the press and viewers. Relative newcomer Terracotta Distribution houses some of the recent "mondo" Japanese "horror" films such as *Big Tits Zombie 3D* (Nakano 2010) and *Gyo: Tokyo Fish Attack* (Hirao 2012).

Despite the emergence of these new labels, times are hard in the UK distribution of contemporary Japanese horror film, and it accounts only for a small portion of the above companies' catalogues. Crisp (2010) observes that for Tartan, and also Third Window, acquisitions were in the form of negative pick-ups, which is "when a distributor (or international sales agent) acquires rights once a film is completed without previously having had any involvement in production finance" (Jackel 2003: 92). These can be considered less risky due to their outsider position in not directly financing the film, but equally, neither company has the ability to spread risk across multiple potential profit-makers in

the same way that Hollywood does. Third Window, at least, is literally a one-man operation that operates on a film-by-film basis, only able to buy up their next title should the previous prove successful (Crisp 2010).

UK Channels of Reception

The above points about the hardships faced by distributors have much bearing upon the current UK landscape for contemporary Japanese horror film. However, there are also secondary variables from distribution which impact upon audience meaning-meaning, most notably channels of reception and marketing which I will address in this section and the final section respectively. In June 2012, Third Window announced that it was withdrawing from the theatrical distribution of its releases due to cost (Torel, in Vijn 2012). Because many Japanese rights-holders include a clause stating that in order to acquire a film for DVD release it must also have a theatrical run, the subsequent effect of decisions like this is that some films in which UK distributors show an interest will likely not see an official UK release.

UK theatrical screenings of contemporary Japanese horror film

At the beginning of the J-horror boom, the forerunners initially found their way to the UK not just through the passing round of copies, but through screenings at film festivals. In some cases this was instrumental to their acquisition for UK distribution. Festival screenings of some of the case study films were noted towards the beginning of this chapter in fig.1. Notably, film festival screenings neither provide any kind of long-term or widespread access to a film, and are thus often unattainable for mainstream audiences (Acland 2003).

However, theatrical access to those films acquired by Tartan was opened up in the UK when, from 2003 to 2005, they ran an annual “Asia Extreme Roadshow” in conjunction with UGC cinemas, a major cinema chain now known as Cineworld Cinemas. Screening films from their own catalogue which were also available to buy on DVD, they consequently positioned these films in a much more mainstream environment, hence creating easier access for a younger and more mainstream potential audience. Each year that the roadshow ran, Tartan screened a programme of examples of its output, films from a range of East Asian countries linked by its self-proclaimed *Tartan Extreme Asia* genre. However, as a horror fan myself I was in attendance at a number of these screenings and personally have doubts as to how successful they were. Cinemas were often practically empty. Additionally, none of the UK interviewees in this study recalled having watched a contemporary Japanese horror film at the cinema.

Although the Tartan “Asia Extreme Roadshow” is no more, the fact that the case study films continue to retain popularity and cult status is testified to (and perhaps partially fuelled) by their continued showing at film festivals. Often the films are called upon as a staple of Japanese film or horror film programming. For example, Leeds Film Festival programmes an annual horror marathon which shows more recent Japanese horror films alongside the key *Tartan Asia Extreme* players. Even in 2012 *Ring* could still be found screening at Brighton Japan Festival.

The Proliferation of DVD format

As I addressed in chapter four, the move towards digital media was a catalyst for the emergence of contemporary Japanese horror film. Alongside influencing its

format and style, digital media allowed contemporary Japanese horror film to challenge the idea of Hollywood as being central within cultural flows. With the exception of anime, Japanese film had never really achieved the status of a global cinema (Tsutsui 2010, Iwabuchi 2002). However, digital technology allowed contemporary Japanese horror film to cross transnational borders and enter new markets, despite its culturally specific nature and images.

Prior to the J-horror boom, Japanese films had been difficult, but not impossible, to source. In addition to the illegal copies and rare screenings, websites that shipped DVDs internationally and the mainstreaming of region-free and multi-region DVD players proved instrumental in allowing fans of the genre to obtain copies of the films from abroad (Shin 2009: 86, Hawkins 2000). Crisp (2010) notes that Internet piracy was also rife, and continues to provide avid fans with access to Asia Extreme films before the official DVDs are released. Fans who access material in this way are indicative of the notion of early adopters, who prize the acquisition of cultural capital before the (either real or imagined) mainstream (Hills 2005: 164, 165).

It was recognition of this demand by early adopters which led to the setting up of specific distribution labels, which in turn led to the widening of the market. Although the films central to the J-horror boom were also released on video, the format of DVD was pivotal due to its surge in popularity at the end of the 1990s (Wada-Marciano 2009: 31). These digital technologies afforded changes in the spatiotemporal dynamics, which changed the nature of distribution, reception and consumption (Wang 2003). Perhaps most importantly for distributors, the surge in home viewing media brought with it the opportunity to avoid the expense of theatrical release, which has become

difficult for specialist distributors to meet. This altering of the flows and format of cultural texts towards the availability of watching at home has provided multiplied venues and reduced reliance upon theatrical release (Wada-Marciano 2009: 27-28). The proliferation of the DVD format was particularly central to *Tartan Asia Extreme*, who experienced their titles as being stronger on DVD than theatrical release (Smith, in Shin 2007: 92). The DVD format has also allowed independent distribution labels to compete with the likes of Hollywood through the marketing and distributing of Asia Extreme films as dispersible texts (Dew 2007). The effects of home viewing and the marketing of the DVD format to UK viewers will be addressed later in this chapter and throughout the results chapters.

As the bottom has largely fallen out of the DVD rental market in the UK, new media has stepped in to fill the availability gap with online video-on-demand film rental growing in popularity. Officially acknowledged by the UK Film Council Statistical Yearbook for the first time in 2008 as a small but expanding market, video-on-demand was worth £62.6million in 2002 (BFI 2013: 143). This figure remained fairly consistent until 2008, when it became worth an estimated £120million and accounted for roughly 3% of the total UK filmed entertainment market (UK Film Council 2009: 105). Growth has continued and the worth of video-on-demand in 2012 was £243 million, representing 6% of the total UK filmed entertainment market (BFI 2013: 143).

Alongside legal avenues of access, and beyond the scope of this study, is Internet piracy and file sharing, something which is addressed specifically in relation to Asia Extreme by Crisp (2010). According to OFCOM figures, from August to October 2012, 56% of people accessing video online did not pay for it,

and a further 15% accessed a mixture of paid for and not paid for content (OFCOM, in BFI 2013: 145). These avenues have opened up access for UK audiences beyond just those film texts that have been selected for distribution. Indeed, many participants in the interviews cited that, while they preferred the DVD format, it was increasingly necessary for them to resort to Internet piracy in order to watch films which they could not otherwise access in the UK. In addition, Internet piracy allows viewers to access films earlier than their intended release date, and versions not intended for release such as those which have been fan-subbed. This raises issues of temporality and multiple versions, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Between the two major video-on-demand services in the UK (Lovefilm and Netflix), all of the films listed in fig.1 are available for subscribers to legally watch online. This has coincided with a fall in the price of DVDs. Whereas *Tartan Asia Extreme* DVDs had a price-point of around £20 at the beginning of the 2000s, the price-drop of older films to around the £5 mark has seen the market embrace opportunistic buyers beyond the realm of their original niche aggregate audience. Although television screenings of contemporary Japanese horror films were not unknown before 2006, these increased when Film4 (who often champion world cinema programming) switched from being subscription-based to a free channel. It would seem that contemporary Japanese horror film entered an increasingly mainstream realm, with some interview participants stating that Film4 was their main platform of access to the films. However, watching on television and watching on DVD bring with them different reception contexts, as I shall now address.

Home viewing cultures

With the lack of cinematic screenings and the proliferation of DVD, Internet piracy and television screenings, comes the notion of home-viewing cultures (Klinger 2006). This is emblematic of the way in which contemporary Japanese horror film is received in the UK, both during the J-horror boom and increasingly so today. Indeed, a definition of contemporary Japanese horror film as a genre, as discussed in chapters six and seven, is inevitably tied up with small screen viewing. This migration to the small screen means that films meet audiences in a wide-range of places outside of the confines of a cinema. As Klinger (2006: 7) addresses, media industries repackage their output in order to “Weave movies firmly into the audience’s routines, rituals, and experiences”, to which the ability to view repeatedly at home is central. Fittingly, the idea of ritual is actively enforced by independent distributors such as *Tartan Asia Extreme*, who, as Dew (2007) suggests, aim towards creating a “habit” of watching the kind of films that tie in with their brand. As the results chapter will address, contemporary Japanese horror film was tied into elements of ritual and viewer experiences formed outside of the films themselves.

There is no prior research into the reception context afforded by the consumption of contemporary Japanese horror films in the UK home environment, and in this thesis I seek to shed some of light on the subject as a side to bigger questions about genre and meaning-making. This is not least because reception context undoubtedly has an effect on the impression a film creates on a viewer. The majority of the UK participants interviewed for this study expressed a preference for watching contemporary Japanese horror films on DVD, with many of these also watching them through online piracy and on

television. Home viewing in a digital media context is instrumental in providing long viewing trajectories for a film text. This was evident in the way that interviewees most often spoke about their viewings of contemporary Japanese horror films in the present tense, as something that was ongoing, and exemplary of the textual afterlife these films have achieved. These long-term trajectories are further fuelled by the aforementioned sharp drop in price of DVDs which lends itself to impulse buying, and also to notions of collector mentality often seen amongst fans of cult genres such as anime (Cubbison 2005). In line with this, a number of interviewees tended to speak about contemporary Japanese horror film in terms of the films that they had “got” rather than simply “seen”.

The extended viewing trajectory is also prolonged by the tendency towards repeat viewings, which were again mentioned by many interview participants. These often tied into ideas of the genre as cult and the notion of cultural capital. A number of these tended towards the demonstration of early adoption to others, with those particular participants stating that they liked to watch a contemporary Japanese horror film alone first, and then if it was good they would recommend it and watch it again with a friend. In some cases, this was the pattern through which participants they were introduced to particular films. These multiple viewings are afforded not just by DVDs, but also by the advent of programs such as *Sky+* and *TIVO* which allow viewers to record films during showings on channels like Film4 and re-watch repeatedly at their leisure.

While Klinger (2006: 9) describes the idea of home-viewing cultures as akin to Superman’s Fortress of Solitude, with the viewer exerting power over a text in a closed private space, in light of the conclusions drawn from audience interviews I respectfully disagree. The landscape of home-viewing cultures

painted by interviewees was one in which many participants, although not necessarily upon first viewing, largely enjoyed talking with friends throughout a film. A social, rather than solitary, experience. Further to this, the lack of power over television screenings was commented upon by five separate interviewees, who all cited that advertisement breaks ruined the atmosphere for them.

The proliferation of small screen viewing of contemporary Japanese horror film is not unique to a transnational context. The DVD market and particularly the rental market in comparison, is very strong in Japan. Despite cinematic releases of contemporary Japanese horror films, cinema attendance figures are reasonably low. However, perhaps more universally applicable is that the design of such films for the straight-to-video market is reflected in their format and makes them particularly suitable for small screen viewing. To recall from the previous chapter, *Ju-On: The Grudge's* chapter format lends itself to the DVD medium, as do horror anthologies, and other less well-known horror films that operate around a chapter structure such as *X-Cross* (Fukasaku 2007). This would seem a more explicit reflection of the idea put forward in Klinger's (2006) study of repeat viewings of films by college students, in which she observed that one pleasure expressed by participants was jumping to moments that were most enjoyed, particularly in the case of genre films. Such strategies of textual appropriation, Klinger observes, allow viewers to effectively restructure the film to their demands.

The final link between digital media and contemporary Japanese horror film lies in that it is often entwined with the subject matter itself. This has been frequently observed in academia, with the most relatable example being *Ring*. *Ring* appropriates viewing a VHS that inevitably leads to the death of the subject,

and positions the television as a portal between the real world and that inhabited by Sadako, the two of which merge on a number of occasions. Alongside this are other examples such as *Pulse*, which portrays the Internet as a medium for ghosts; *Suicide Club*, through which suicide pacts are spread via new media; and *Ju-on: The Grudge*, which uses surveillance cameras during some scenes. *Marebito* (Shimizu 2004) tells its entire story through the form of handheld video footage.

Reconfiguring and repositioning contemporary Japanese horror film

Factors such as temporality, multiple versions and marketing are concerns in the transnational distribution of any film, but with contemporary Japanese horror film in particular the effects of these appear amplified. During the J-horror boom films were released rapidly, riding on waves of popularity. However, these films were also being repackaged for the UK in a way which differs to how they were originally released in Japan. The way these films are presented, and the version of the film which is seen, inevitably differs from the original domestic presentation. Older films such as *Onibaba* (Shindo 1964) and *Kwaidan* (Kobayashi 1964) were also recategorised and retrospectively positioned as “precursors to J-horror” through the separating of these films from their history (Wada-Marciano 2007: 33). In this section I will address how these factors affect the formation of viewing cultures in the UK, and how they reconfigure or affect perceptions of genre.

Temporality and Serialisation

Sequels are common within the realm of contemporary Japanese horror film, perhaps owing somewhat to the tradition of straight-to-video production values, the ability to adhere to low budgets, and the proliferation of extra-filmic and extra-textual material which surrounds the films in their domestic context. As Wada-Marciano (2009: 25) notes, J-horror, coming out of the recently growing independent film production system in Japan, often follows patterns of serialisation. Prolific serialisations include the *Ring* series, the *Ju-on* series, and the *Tomie* series. All of these revolve around stories which lend themselves to a string of sequels, primarily through their story format of a threat which cannot die or be killed. However, one-off sequels are also not uncommon, for example in the cases of *Death Note* and *Battle Royale*. Both of these are also serialised in a manga format, which expands upon the story and is available both in Japan and the UK. Additional extra-textual materials such as these help to build viewing habits and fandom, as well as being liable to influence a viewer's interpretation, understanding and definition of the original film.

Obviously sequels are not unique to Japan. In terms of contemporary Western horror film, the *Saw* franchise had similarly low-budget independent beginnings and has spawned seven films in total, along with extra-textual products such as video games and a theme park ride. The difference with this now-Hollywood film series, is that (alongside having wide UK cinematic releases) it found immediate popularity in the UK. Subsequently the *Saw* series followed a release schedule which coincided with a steady time delay due to production between films equivalent to its domestic release. In the case of popular contemporary Japanese horror film serialisations, due to the delay in the DVD release of the first installments in the UK, and because of audiences often

coming to these films long after their original release, there is often a bank of material built up for UK audiences to consume. This was evident amongst the experiences related by interview participants.

The time delay between the start of the J-horror boom in Japan and the point at which the boom started to really catch on in the UK can be seen as an instrumental factor in the nature of its impact. The influx of immediately available films played directly into creating a habit for audiences invested in viewing these films.¹³ Rapid releasing, not just within franchises but across individual film texts, allowed for avid fandoms to build due to readily accessible material and minimum loss of interest and hype over potential time delays. In addition to the films themselves, original source material and other extra-textual materials could be sought out by fans, and the films could be discussed online at a time when the Internet was becoming more central to fan activity (Hills 2002, 2005).

Although linear time delays between the original domestic release and the official UK DVD release is the most straightforward example, it should be noted that there are a variety of temporal differences that exist outside of this. This is particularly evident in relation to theatrical screenings. A minority of contemporary Japanese horror films received a UK theatrical screening which occurred prior to the DVD release, for example festival screenings. Although as stated earlier, these are largely inaccessible to a mainstream audience due to specific location and extreme temporariness. Popular *Tartan Asia Extreme* films received a theatrical release that ran concurrent to or shortly after their DVD

¹³ It is interesting to note that the immediate availability of a number of films was also instrumental in the creation of the *Tartan Asia Extreme*, as founder Hamish McAlpine (2004) cited watching films back to back, and realizing there was a lot of unreleased material as inspiration.

release, as part of Tartan's "Asia Extreme Roadshow". The cult status of such films has also led to theatrical screenings long after their DVD release, during special programmes such as horror marathons or Japan orientated events, helping to ensure their continued cult nature. Finally, there is the piggybacking which took place between the Japanese originals of films including *Ring*, *Ju-On: The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, *One Missed Call* and *Pulse*, and their Hollywood remakes. This led to retrospective theatrical screenings of the originals prior, parallel to and following the remakes, as well as repackaged DVD releases. Such strategies served to generate hype and enabled the two versions to add authenticity to one another through their intertextuality.

The temporal shifts described above have become less noticeable in recent times. In the early 2000s, UK distribution companies capitalised on the wealth of available contemporary Japanese horror films, feeding the J-horror boom whilst effectively killing it through over-saturation. This was partially rooted at the point of production in Japan, as due to demand and quick turnaround, the domestic market was flooded with similar films. The reception context of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK now resides at two differing temporalities. On one hand, as production has now slowed, official distribution in the UK follows a more traditional pattern of delay between releases. On the other hand, Internet piracy reduces this delay to its very minimum, by foregoing formal channels of distribution.

The contemporary Japanese horror films recently released in the UK seem to have less of a fan following, evidenced both in the lack of recent hype, and in the frequent mentioning of older films during the UK interviews. UK releases that fall into the classic J-horror mold tend to rely upon being part of established

franchises, such as the recent *Ju-on: White Ghost*, *Ju-on: Black Ghost*, *Sadako 3D* and *Sadako 2 3D*. With the success of films such as *Departures*, *Tokyo Sonata* (Kurosawa 2008) and *Confessions*, it would seem that Japanese film is once again finding success in the UK beyond the realms of anime and horror. However, particularly in the case of *Confessions*, which fits within the drama/thriller genre in Japan and was marketed as such, it has been pulled into the horror genre through reviews, discussion, and viewer reception frameworks.¹⁴ Opinions amongst interview participants were split as to whether *Confessions* was a horror film, but there were a number who strongly insisted that it was.

Is Everyone Seeing the Same Film?

As explored in the previous chapter, at the level of production of contemporary Japanese horror film, multiple versions exist of what is essentially referred to under the same title. Multiplication is emblematic of contemporary Japanese horror film, and this in itself caused some confusion during the interviews and thus subsequently presents a problem in terms of defining the genre. For example, both *Ichi The Killer* and *Deathnote* also exist in anime versions bearing the same name. Takashi Shimizu remade his own *Ju-on* (2000) and released it as the more popular *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002). *Ring* was remade as a television series, as well as a remake in Korea titled *The Ring Virus* (Kim 1999) which was released in Korea before the Japanese version. There are two legitimate sequels to the first *Ring* movie: *Spiral* and *Ring 2*. There are also Hollywood remakes of *Ring*, *Ju-on: The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, *Pulse* and *One Missed Call* amongst others.

¹⁴ For example, In writing for *The Guardian* Peter Bradshaw (2011) referred to *Confessions* as “An overcooked, overwrought and unconvincing revenge horror film set in a Japanese school” and *Empire* magazine’s Kim Newman summarized the film as “A typically edgy Japanese schoolyard horror”.

There exists Hollywood films entitled *Ring 2*, *The Grudge 2* (Shimizu 2006) and *The Grudge 3* (Wilkins, 2009), all of which bear resemblance to the series of films but none of which are direct remakes.

However, perhaps of more underlying importance to this study is that a single contemporary Japanese horror film as seen in the UK is not necessarily the same film that is seen in Japan. Obvious alterations such as subtitling and dubbing aside, the British Board of Film Classification rules regarding what makes a film acceptable for release in the UK are more stringent than that of Japan. The most prominent victim of the BBFC's rules was *Ichi the Killer*, which received 3 minutes and 15 seconds of cuts for what the BBFC termed "sexualized violence".¹⁵ The film was cut for a UK release in a way which made the violence seem more suggestive, and subsequently led to different interpretations of Miike's use of violence as a trope. During the audience interviews, two participants commented on the "suggested" violence of the film, which is a direct result of the cuts rather than the original intention of the director. Mes (2006), in his book about Miike also talks about the suggested violence, using a series of screen grabs from the cut version to demonstrate this, which do not correspond with the original film text. Notably, this is not unique to the UK context. *Ichi the Killer* received varying amounts of cuts in other regions, such as Hong Kong, which lost around 13 minutes, and the US around 11 minutes. Analysis of Internet message boards reveal further confusion as to different versions of the film, as well as to continuity and storyline which was affected by the heavier

¹⁵ Full details of the cuts made for the UK release of *Ichi the Killer* can be viewed on the BBFC's website at: <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/website/Classified.nsf/c2fb077ba3f9b33980256b4f002da32c/6fc8fd8b8499fe0180256c70003d7565?OpenDocument>

cuts.¹⁶ Given the proliferation of region-free pirated DVDs and Internet piracy, it is likely that viewers in the UK could be seeing any of the varying versions of the same film.

Further complicating the idea of multiple versions is the existence of unofficial versions, often involving films that are not yet available in a particular region and are subtitled by fans, commonly known as fan-subbed versions. As well as variation in the quality of the film copy, unofficial subtitling can lead to eschewed interpretations. In particular *Grotesque*, which was banned in both the UK and the US and hence has no official English language version, exists in multiple fan-subbed versions. These versions impose differing qualities and meanings upon the film, within which I have observed a number of mistranslations and lost meanings. Issues such as these seemingly impact on potential UK viewers, who in most cases indicated that they prefer to wait for an official DVD version if they knew one to be available or coming soon, or for a pirate version of the official release. By and large, interviewees only resorted to Internet piracy of fan-subbed films that had no foreseeable official UK release. In addition to allowing for the co-existence of multiple versions, Internet piracy also allow viewers to potentially bypass the marketing and packaging images which may have given them preconceptions or expectations about a particular film.

Marketing

¹⁶ See for example: <http://www.horror DVDs.com/vb3forum/showthread.php?t=6572>
<http://www.mandiapple.com/forum/index.php?threads/ichi-the-killer-spoiler-warning.152/>

The success of the case study films, which were extremely small scale in terms of advertising budgets compared to that of Hollywood blockbusters, are a sign that there is (or at least was during the J-horror boom) an existing audience who respond well to niche marketing. The aggregate audience to which Asia Extreme films are marketed is defined by Dew (2007) as being comprised of the cult “fan-boy” audience, the art-house/world cinema audience and the mainstream viewer, all of whom are targeted during marketing through the multiplication process known as hype. Within marketing, hype is intentionally employed by marketers who play a central role in shaping a film for audiences (Austin 2001). In building hype, the potential audience is broken down into demographic segments which are targeted through different marketing strategies based upon taste formations. When brought together, these segmented demographics make up the aggregate audience to which the film text is sold.

Publicity for any film prepares viewers for what to anticipate. For example, *Premier Asia's* marketing of *Ichi the Killer* prepped viewers for a film that appeared as if it was to be “endured”, a kind of dare sell that was popular within the genre at the time. Promotional print material and the DVD cover for *Audition* takes a similar approach, playing up the image of Asami with a syringe. This sits in contrast to the Japanese promotional material where the main focus is the male character, Aoyama. Piggybacking off the success of other films was also common within the marketing of contemporary Japanese horror films. The UK trailer for *Audition* presents the lead female character as similar to *Ring's* Sadako in the guise of the Oiwa, through the out-of-context image of her dressed in white with hair over her face. Further similarities are evoked by prominently

featuring a phone ringing in a context that is implied to kickstart a chain of horrific events (Richmond 2009).

The playing up of extreme moments within a film, even when it is largely very slow paced, is a practice which is common within the marketing of genre film as a whole. As previous noted, it is these extreme moments that sell a film (Hawkins 2009, Shin 2009). Focusing on the extreme is endemic of the shoehorning of films into the Asia Extreme genre as discussed by Shin in her piece on *Tartan Asia Extreme's* branding strategy. The reductive nature of the *Tartan Asia Extreme* label is mainly due to the forceful encompassing of other genres besides the horror genre, which in turn create perceptions and preconceptions about the nature of Asian film as a whole. However, this is not unique to horror. Japanese film on a larger scale is no stranger to repositioning by Western distributors. For example, as Sharp (2008) has written, this pushing into extreme genres is also evident in overseas distribution of Japanese *pinku eiga*, which are often forced into the porn genre through the playing down of story and deliberate mistranslations to more sexual language during the subtitling and dubbing process.

As Dew (2007: 52) recognises, supply alone cannot explain Asia Extreme, as it is “In part constructed by traditions of marketing and watching foreign language film in Anglophonic territories”. Although it may be reductive, these methods of marketing and distribution choices allowed for the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film to emerge through the determining of certain characteristics. Simultaneously it also imposes limits on generic change, leading to repetition and the “death” of the genre addressed in chapter one. It should be noted that there are yet other factors at play in the process of the

construction of the contemporary Japanese horror genre. Wada-Marciano (2009: 35) notes that in America, as soon as a Japanese film is written about as horror in an academic context it becomes absorbed as such, and the same is seemingly true in the UK.

There is an identifiable need for clarification as to what constitutes the contemporary Japanese horror genre. And while it is undeniable that extra-textual materials surrounding the films influence viewer perception, genre is ultimately perceived by the viewer themselves. The dissemination of audience perceptions will be presented in the three results chapters which follow.

Chapter 6

Results 1: How are the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film understood by UK audiences?

Chapters six, seven and eight of this thesis will explore UK participants' ideas about contemporary Japanese horror film based upon focus group and individual interviews. Together these chapters explore the way in which UK audiences apply the frameworks of understanding available to them in transnational interpretations of both the genre as a whole and culturally-specific elements within. As a result, they provide insight into how UK audiences define and understand the boundaries and common features of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre.

The definition of genre and why it differs transnationally is an important area for study as it has implications as to the importance of context (and in particular cross-cultural context) within film viewing. As addressed in the previous chapter, films belonging to genres for which there is no easy transnational equivalent are subject to shoehorning into genre categories and other reductive practices. Additionally, these practices have the potential to influence audience expectations and perceptions of a film or genre. In this chapter I present findings in relation to the first research question: "How are the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film understood by UK audiences?" Within the research design of such an audience-led study, participants were freely allowed to define both distinguishing elements and film texts which they regarded as belonging to the genre of contemporary Japanese horror, and to use alternate genre terms without discouragement.

The chapter will begin by briefly revisiting the plethora of genre titles within which contemporary Japanese horror films are often grouped, which were examined in depth in chapter one. Thereafter I address how participants define the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, and how reaching a definition is a complicated process due to a number of influencing factors. These factors include both the genre and the audience themselves being multi-faceted in nature.

What's in a name (revisited)

Chapter one set the background for this study by explaining in depth why I chose the term contemporary Japanese horror film. In doing so, I addressed how the subtle implications of the term differed from those of other genre terms under which contemporary Japanese horror films are often collectively referred. As this information is necessary for contextualisation of the results that follow, these will briefly be summarised again here.

The genre terms under which contemporary Japanese horror film is commonly discussed can be grouped into three categories: Globalist-localist, globalist-regionalist, and pan-Asian. Globalist-regionalist encompasses Tartan's self-proclaimed genre of Asia Extreme and the genre term Asian horror film, both of which group together films of different Asian nations. Japanese horror film and J-horror are globalist-localist terms where it is specified that the films are Japanese, but these still have international implications. Further to this, the category of Pan-Asian (or simultaneous globalist and regionalist) covers Hollywood remakes of Japanese horror films, which is what was implied when participants simply referred to "remakes".

Given the nature of the study, a globalist-regionalist term was chosen as the default way to refer to the films collectively. Contemporary Japanese horror film was chosen over J-horror, as the J holds implications of being intended for an international market. However, all terms have international implications. The following section will elaborate on this through surveying how these terms were used by participants when discussing contemporary Japanese horror film.

Participants' use of terms

Throughout both the focus group and individual interviews I was careful to pose questions using the discursive term contemporary Japanese horror film.

However, no impositions were made upon participants as to how they referred to the genre of the films that were being discussed, or which films they could refer to and include in their discussions concerning the genre.

Participants demonstrated a leaning towards favouring globalist-regionalist terms, and a much wider variety of these than had initially been expected. The terms *Asian film*, *Asian horror film* and *East Asian horror film* were frequently employed by participants when explaining their answers. *Eastern horror* was used less frequently. Notably, these terms often emerged when participants were asked why they liked Japanese horror films or what they thought constituted contemporary Japanese horror film. On the whole, East Asian horror film was largely discussed as homogenous. No specific differences were pointed out, and at no point did any participant state enjoying one East Asian country's horror output but not that of another country.

In particular, the idea of Asia as a projected whole was used to emphasise similarities between the region's horror films. One way this was done was

through promoting the idea of an Asian aesthetic. For example, Dawn (21, female, student) asked: “Do you know Kim Ki-Duk? ...He’s creepy, but like Asian-type creepy”. A second factor was the indiscriminate mentioning of other regions as if there was an assumed similarity: “*The Grudge* and *Ring* really seem to center around a restless spirit kind of thing, which I think you see a lot in Chinese ghost stories” (Abbie:30, female, unemployed). Participants also used regionalist terms in order to set contemporary Japanese horror film against their perceptions of Western horror. For example, John (22, male, student) asserted: “There’s a lot of Western horror that’s based on gore rather than anything else, which I was never really interested in. The Eastern horror primarily builds on the atmosphere and the tension”.

Interestingly, the term *Asia Extreme* was used much less frequently, and only by the older participants. This suggests that it is more of an outdated vogue term than one which is useful in defining a perceived genre. One likely explanation for this differing between age groups could be that younger participants were not directly acquainted with *Tartan Asia Extreme’s* marketing in the past. In turn, this alludes to marketing and distribution naming practices playing a noticeable part in the process through which people define genre and the genre terms they use. Given this use of naming it can be assumed that, amongst the participants, contemporary Japanese horror films are largely subject to globalist-regionalist groupings which emphasise the similarities amongst Asian nations in terms of their style and filmic output. In light of this, it is unsurprising that the national originals of several East Asian horror films were often confused during the interviews. However, it is important to note that this is not necessarily indicative of participants actively conflating Japan with the rest

of Asia in terms of genre recognition, but could perhaps be due to ignorance, discursive slippage, or a convenient form of shorthand.

A discourse of exceptionalism was present during some discussion of contemporary Japanese horror films, with Japan's horror film output being positioned as 'unique' and outside of the realm of general 'horror film' in a way which was implied to be inherently due to its national originals. However, this was offset by the similarities which were enforced when Hollywood remakes were often discussed interchangeably with their Japanese counterparts. In many cases participants did not even question the status of these films as remakes, and mentioned them during their discussion in a way which lent authenticity to their value as part of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre. At times participants explicitly demonstrated perceived interchangeability:

Darren: It's like the girl in the Ring
Rachel: Which one, the original or the remake?
Darren: Either really... both

This is not to discount the differences which participants identified between the originals and the Hollywood remakes. These differences generally did not affect their reasoning in classing such remakes as contemporary Japanese horror films and is discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

Perhaps mirroring my own use of terms while interviewing, participants used the term Japanese horror film far more frequently than the term J-horror. Although the term J-horror was used less frequently by individual interviewees, during the focus group stage a number of participants used it interchangeably with the term Japanese horror, although this could represent focus groups creating consensus. During the individual interviews when participants attempted to explain their understanding of contemporary Japanese horror film,

a number used the term J-horror to refer specifically to the ghost stories that are seen as emblematic of the J-horror boom. Despite the term's international implications, these films are closer to the idea of what is considered horror in Japan, Those films which were commonly discussed as J-horror were *Ring*, *Ju-on* and *Dark Water*. As addressed later in this chapter, for a number of participants any Japanese film outside of these particular ghost films did not fit with their perception of contemporary Japanese horror film.

Elliot (20, male, student) expressed differentiation from other participants in being the only one who associated J-horror with the boom period rather than a particular predefined list of films. Elliot implied a link to the idea of J-horror as a movement as proposed by Kinoshita (2009):

Film4 used to do a strand called "Saturday Night Shocks", and that was the only time you could really see Japanese films, they were always part of that... during the boom, during the J-horror thing" (Elliot).

Despite Elliot's recognition of J-horror as a movement, none of the participants acknowledged the implications of the noun modifier J as being linked to notions of the international. However, when using the term participants were always focused solely on Japan, which would suggest that they are aware of the J symbolizing Japan at least semantically.

The transnational circulation of films which are categorised in terms which are simultaneously globalist and regionalist challenges ideas about genre, and begs for a reconsideration of the nature of the films themselves. Given the variety of genre names used, and the emphasis on similarity amongst different national bodies of Asian horror films, it would seemingly be implied that contemporary Japanese horror film is a very ill-defined and contested genre within the UK. Notably, it was usual for participants to refer to films by their

individual titles, and for these individual titles to be used as a point of comparison or similarity. This was frequently done through the use of the word “like”, for example: “I think in films *like Ichi the Killer*, that’s [the violence] really, really over the top” (Peter: 28, male, contracts engineer).

Despite how marketers and distributors attempt to frame it by implying that Asia is one homogenous whole (Shin 2009), the constructed genre of contemporary Japanese genre is far from homogenous. This has implications for the way in which films are received and understood when placed into suggested frameworks which do not correspond with their domestic origins. It is therefore crucial to analyse exactly what the genre of contemporary Japanese film constitutes when it is removed from the regionalist Asian whole, and what the term means to the UK audience of these films.

What is contemporary Japanese horror film?

The horror genre, as noted by Lobato and Ryan (2011), is particularly susceptible to mutation by audiences at both the point of distribution and the point of reconstruction. Both Hawkins (2002) and Guins (2005) have remarked that the genre is vulnerable to textual reconfiguration at the point of cross-border distribution through textual modifications such as dubbing, re-titling, subtitling and editing. This begs the question: how do transnational UK audiences understand the de-contextualising and subsequent re-contextualising of this group of films from Japan that have come to be labeled as contemporary Japanese horror film? As the films in question were essentially made for a different audience, it is my opinion that the definition of contemporary Japanese horror film can be assumed to be audience-centric. Although what constitutes a

Japanese horror film is a flexible construct amid a plurality of reception, this section provides insight into the ways in which the genre is understood by a UK audience. While the previous section placed emphasis on similar constructs in order to determine what contemporary Japanese horror is *not*, this section sets out to explore what it *is*.

Key texts and uneasy canon

There is no direct domestic equivalent for the range of films that are often incorporated into the UK genre of contemporary Japanese horror film. There is no predefined list of films within the Japanese horror genre that can be simply translated to a UK context. Similarly, there is no list available in the UK context, as is evidenced from the lack of consensus in academic writing on the subject. It is predictable then, that although a body of films emerged during the interviews with some degree of agreement, there was no unanimous definition amongst participants.

As outlined in chapter three, focus group interviews were carried out to identify key film texts and themes that commonly emerged from participants' perceptions of contemporary Japanese horror film. The most frequently mentioned of these were further investigated during the individual interviews. Overwhelmingly, the film mentioned most frequently was *Ring*, and following this *Audition* and *Ju-on: The Grudge*. *Dark Water*, *Battle Royale* and *Ichi the Killer* also received frequent mentions. A few films received fewer mentions but still generated discussion, namely *Grotesque*, *Confessions* and *Death Note*. *Grotesque* was banned in the UK so had only been seen by two participants who were fans

of the genre and had actively sought it out.¹⁷ *Confessions* and *Death Note* were both highly polarising amongst participants as to whether they belonged to the horror genre. However, these were popular titles for discussion due to the recent release of *Confessions* in the UK, and the continued popularity of the *Death Note* franchise in general, with some participants being self-proclaimed fans. Some of the films mentioned and taken up for discussion by participants as “Japanese horror film” were not Japanese, the significance of which is addressed in the final section of this chapter. A few other Japanese films received only one or two mentions, such as *One Missed Call* and *The Locker* (Horie 2004) and did not generate useful discussion. This highlights a key weakness of this study in that the inclusion of films is limited by their popularity and presence in the cultural imaginary. However, it is my intention to provide insight into popularly held notions of the genre rather than exhaustive lists of films.

Not all participants had seen all of the films mentioned, or agreed that all of these films belonged to the horror genre. Altman (1999: 125) provides an interesting analogy for such a situation, in which he posits the idea of someone working alone in a library categorising films by genre. The system works smoothly until the introduction of a second worker which causes the system to go awry. They would, as Altman applies, agree on some of the more straightforward categorisations, but problems would likely occur over issues such as imposing differing restrictions on a genre. This would ultimately lead to

¹⁷ BBFC director David Cook justified the banning of the film: "Unlike other recent 'torture' themed horror works, such as the *Saw* and *Hostel* series, *Grotesque* features minimal narrative or character development and presents the audience with little more than an unrelenting and escalating scenario of humiliation, brutality and sadism. In spite of a vestigial attempt to 'explain' the killer's motivations at the very end of the film, the chief pleasure on offer is not related to understanding the motivations of any of the central characters. Rather, the chief pleasure on offer seems to be wallowing in the spectacle of sadism (including sexual sadism) for its own sake" (Press release, British Board of Film Classification, August 19, 2009).

the imposing of a small amount of restrictive genres, in the same way that contemporary Japanese horror film is burdened with encompassing films which, as previously stated, do not really fit into specific UK genres. Plurality of reception was evident amongst participants and how they defined the boundaries of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre. Notably, all participants who had seen them agreed that *Ring*, *Ju-on: The Grudge* and *Dark Water* constituted contemporary Japanese horror films. These were also the films most often discussed in the context of J-horror, particularly when participants were referring to their supernatural basis as validation for their inclusion into the contemporary Japanese horror genre.

Ring, *Ju-on: The Grudge* and *Dark Water* tended to be tied up with participants' perceptions about what they also considered to constitute horror more widely. This sits in contrast to those films that belong to sub-genres which exist within the horror genre, or simply feature horrific elements, as was often applied to other films. At the extreme end, for a number of interviewees anything outside of these emblematic ghost films did not constitute Japanese horror film at all. Participants clearly varied as to their personal understanding of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre, with many tending to draw a line between whether singular aspects of the films (such as gore or psychological elements) were enough to justify their inclusion in the genre. Hence there emerged two distinct perceptions of contemporary Japanese horror film, varying in the clearness of their generic attribution, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Semantic and syntactic elements

In 1984, Altman proposed a semantic/syntactic approach to the study of genre in an attempt to account for contradictions which he perceived to exist within the field of genre studies. Although he later expanded upon and revised the theory within his book *Film/Genre* (1999), the method still provides an inclusive approach by taking influence from both of the two distinct approaches towards the definition of genres. These two approaches are semantic and syntactic, and are often used exclusively rather than dualistically as Altman proposes. Semantic elements are essentially the building blocks of the text, or what might be seen as the iconography or tropes of a genre. Altman (1999: 89) gives examples of: “Common topics, shared plots, key scenes, character types, familiar objects or recognizable generic affiliation because a group of texts organizes those building blocks in a similar manner”. These blocks can then be arranged according to shared syntactic features such as: “Plot structure, character relationships or image and sound montage” (Altman 1999: 89), the more abstract meanings of tropes and elements of the narrative or ideology. Through a series of examples, Altman demonstrates that his semantic/syntactic approach can be used to successfully define genres, and also that it is at its most optimal when the two approaches are combined. However, the genres to which Altman applies this approach are well established and are considered in their domestic context, for example, the Western.

The collective noun of contemporary Japanese horror film evokes an idea that is abstract, intangible and in constant flux. It is assumedly a less established genre than those Altman addresses, a factor which might be attributed to a less well-defined set of semantic and syntactic properties. Thus, understandably, participants struggled with the direct question of “What is contemporary

Japanese horror film?” Answers given demonstrated a large plurality in some aspects, yet a degree of consensus in others. Although I will go into more depth regarding the definition and comprehension process in chapter seven, this section will begin to provide some analysis of definitions in order to highlight the semantic and syntactic elements that participants recognized within the genre.

One way in which participants approached the definition of contemporary Japanese horror film was by identifying what they deemed to be common features of the genre. In some cases this was prompted with the question “What themes do you think are common to Japanese horror film?” Other times it arose naturally during conversation. A number of semantic elements were identified by participants as defining or being common to contemporary Japanese horror film. For example:

- Adam: Just thinking about it that does seem to be quite a common thing... like water and drowning.
(27, male, Line manager)
- David: Like in *The Ring*, that long wet black hair. And I actually think that’s something that’s ingrained in those films that I’ve seen as well, that black wet hair and like it stringing out and spreading out and the thought of it like choking you or just wrapping around someone’s like white dead face.
- Abbie: Water, I think, just thinking of *Dark Water*, obviously, and in *The Ring* there’s quite a lot of water involved in the well and things like that, it seems to be a bit of a theme.
- Dawn: Always a child who was abused, the main characters are always schoolgirls, high school students, or a child who was abused.
- Graham: There always seems to be a kind of theme of a child, where something happens to them, usually bad. Like in this case it was the daughter being killed, in *The Ring* it was the daughter being killed, yeah and also in *Audition* as well, it

was the daughter being abused when she was younger. It seems to be a running theme of children who are female.

John: There is often an emphasis on either a younger female villain or protagonist against an older or male goodie.

Anna: (28, female, administrator) There certainly seems to be that sort of vengeful ghost thing going on, but I guess that's reasonably common across all horror films, but it seems to be vengeful ghosts and quite often women, sort of female ghosts being particularly nasty.

Jodie: (25, female, clerk) Retribution, definitely there's some kind of revenge or retribution. The ones that I've seen there's often children involved.

Kevin: (28, male, co-ordinator) One thing they do really well is like bangs and footsteps, like footsteps that you can't see. You know, the sound of footsteps. That's one thing they seem to do quite a lot of.

Jamie: (20, male, student) No one is safe, it's like they're picking random people. And about locations, whereas Western films seem to have a specific location, you know like trapped in a mall with zombies, or trapped in a building, Japanese horror films like *Ju-On [The Grudge]*, it just picks people. There's that woman in her flat, isn't there. And in *The Ring* it doesn't matter where you are, it's going to get you.

The examples above, while useful in defining the elements of the genre, are just a representative selection of participants' opinions on the subject of common themes taken from individual interviews. However, they demonstrate that there was generally a separately achieved consensus amongst participants about a number of tropes common to contemporary Japanese horror film. Further to this, these tropes often tended to intersect with one another. The main identified semantic tropes will be discussed in depth in chapter eight in terms of their perceived meanings.

Notably, even when prompted, participants tended to only identify one or two semantic elements that they deemed common to the genre, and at times, acknowledged these as also being extendable to the wider horror genre. Hence,

to take a semantic approach to definition alone would be typical of the shortfall that Altman describes, in that they are applicable to a large number of films and do little to explain context. Thus, these semantic elements must be considered alongside answers given by participants that were syntactic in nature.

According to Altman (1999: 89): "Where attention to semantic concerns produces little more than a label...syntactic analysis offers understanding of textual workings and thus of the deeper structures underlying generic affiliation". Of the common themes that participants identified, far fewer were syntactic than semantic. Given varying levels of Japanese cultural-competency amongst participants, it is perhaps unsurprising that upon identification of syntactic elements which they believed to be common to the genre, these were often attributed in some way to the perceived uniqueness of the Japanese context. At times, wider influences such as Japanese myth and folklore were identified themselves as a common theme. Both of these tendencies can be seen amongst the following examples of syntactic identifications:

Abbie: There seems to be a sort of indiscrimination about who gets killed in some of Japanese horror film I've seen, things like that. My sister loves the *Final Destination* films so I've gone to see a couple of those with her and there's some reason for all those people getting killed, you know they missed out on some destined event, but in some of the Japanese horror it just seems to be total random selection of victims and that might be something that is cultural, fits in with the scene I don't know.

Adam: Um...yeah, definitely theme of ghosts and dead people. And like myths and legends.

Sarah: There's something about them that everyone can understand, situations that they can relate to which makes it scarier, and you think "what if I was in that situation?" Then you've got more similar things that happen that are mixed in, perhaps they believe these things might happen, like superstitions. Whereas we don't have many

superstitions, they have beliefs like Buddhism so maybe they have more belief in ghosts and stuff.

A syntactic approach which goes beyond attention to just objects or images has a further benefit in that it can serve to contextualise the films within extra-textual syntactic patterns. This was evident in the way that participants discussed the films, tying them into ideas about Japanese religion, folklore, superstition and history. However, I suspect that this is more visible than it would be in the case of domestic horror, as the naming of the genre in the UK as '*Japanese horror film*' means that is undeniably tied up with Japan as a signifier. Ties to both nation and ideas of the nation in general exist in the way in which the films are grouped in the UK. This opens up the potential for audiences to create preconceptions before viewing, and for elements within the films to be deemed '*Japanese*' and for conclusions to be drawn from them about the nature of Japanese society.

While it is not my intention to suggest that participants identified features that were purely either semantic or syntactic, further examples demonstrate that when these approaches are taken singularly they can prove problematic. This was particularly noticeable because, as mentioned, interviewees often tended towards naming just one or two defining features of contemporary Japanese horror film. In these following examples, participants realised during their answer that a feature was either applicable beyond the genre, or that it confused the generic nature of a different film that they had previously passed judgment on:

Peter: A lot of Japanese film, not necessarily horror films, always seem to be very stormy and maybe Japan is a place that gets lots of storms, I don't really know but they always seem to

do that, but then I suppose they do in Western horror films as well.

Mike: I think that's [*Audition*] more of a thriller I would say. I mean a horror film to me is something that has a supernatural element to it and *Audition* as far as I can remember is more of that revenge and stuff like that. But saying that, it did fuck me up in a psychological way, do you know what I mean. I guess I might say it was a psychological horror.

This is representative of the way in which the two approaches benefit from being combined in order to give a clearer definition of genre boundaries. However, to pin down a clear set of features is difficult with such a highly contested genre.

This lack of consistency within the genre was acknowledged by a number of participants, including the following two examples:

Craig: I wouldn't say that they had particular themes running through all of them that were the same. But, you know, I (30, male, shop worker) don't understand a lot about the culture so it's hard for me to say.

Abbie: *The Grudge* and *Ring* really seem to center around that restless spirit kind of thing, which I think you see a lot in Chinese ghost stories and in some of the Japanese films. But I suppose it is a lot more broad than that, because, thinking about that, *Audition* is very much not like that, it's a very personal thing, nothing's safe, it's not just supernatural it's more sort of physical. And I guess there is also the out and out wild ones, like *Battle Royale* was just a wild idea, I loved that haha. I suppose it's not just kind of one central thing that holds them together for me, I think they're all very different films

These responses were at the most aware end of the spectrum, where some participants acknowledged that there was not a set of common features that run through all, or even the majority, of the films that might be considered to be contemporary Japanese horror. Why then, might participants demonstrate trying to find common features amongst the films even when they struggled to

do so and acknowledged this fact? To paraphrase and update Altman's (1999: 93) idea about arbiters of generic taste: if academia, reviews, distribution labels, and the shelves of a DVD store or categories of an online retailer are all telling us that these films are to be grouped together, who are we to disagree? The problem here is that the contemporary Japanese horror genre is deliberately constructed to be inclusive of films which do not strictly conform to the idea of horror. Critics, as both Altman (1999) and Neale (1993) observe, often misapprehend the genre of films and perpetuate the same genre ideas as industry. Likewise, academically, it is much easier to analyse a film without questioning its genre. Many books are published which are based upon the included films being organised by, or included because they fit with, widely accepted ideas of specific genres.

The problem in particular with defining contemporary Japanese horror film is that it has more than one face. Participants tended to lean towards naming common features that were relevant to the supernatural films which they most often considered canon (*Ring, Ju-on, Dark Water*). The identification of gore and violence as a defining feature was avoided, although it was acknowledged as a feature that existed and was common amongst the more contested films (*Battle Royale, Audition, Ichi the Killer, Grotosque*). There are seemingly two distinct "kinds" of contemporary Japanese horror film, an exploration of which deserves further attention.

Contemporary Japanese horror film is two-faced

The processes of definition evident in participant interviews provides insight into the idea that there is a dual image of contemporary Japanese horror film

when placed in the transnational UK context. This is often reflected in the way in which it is marketed and written about in the UK. The films which are usually contained under the umbrella of contemporary Japanese horror can be grouped into two broad categories: *supernatural* films which are largely ghost stories and close to the idea of J-horror canon, and *body horror* films which usually have no supernatural element but have shock value related to gore. Participants tended to equate either the supernatural films or both categories with contemporary Japanese horror film, although individual films such as *Audition* were contested. No one regarded only those films which rely on the body horror aspect to represent the genre. The broad range of interviewee definitions as to the nature of contemporary Japanese horror film were all fitting with the idea of horror in general, and can be simplified as follows: gore/violence, supernatural, psychological, scare and shock.

As stated in chapter four, in Japan, films in which the horror element is closer to the idea of body horror, or is borne of violence, are not equated with the classical idea of horror. These films are instead aligned with genres which are somewhat similar to subgenres which exist within the Western concept of horror, but are commonly accepted stand-alone genres in Japan. Distancing from horror during both the domestic production and distribution processes extends to a number of the films included in this study, namely those which were most frequently contested: *Battle Royale*, *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*. Although none of the participants cited gore as a primary defining feature of contemporary Japanese horror film, some did deem it to be a feature when placed within their perceived duality of the genre:

Jodie: They're quite melancholy horror films aren't they,

Japanese horror films I always kind of find, it's not like a sort of a frenetic stabbing and then away, apart from *Battle Royale*, that's a bit gunho.

Elliot: Well there are one or two gory elements, but it is kind of about the shock and the suspense... It's easy to just show people being killed, but it's a lot more difficult to create suspense and tension and I think [Japanese horror] does that pretty well.

Sarah: If you're talking about things like *The Ring* or *The Grudge*, they're more psychologically scary. Like if you are watching them in bed and you think that kid is going to crawl out of the duvet... yeah, they don't have huge gore factor in them. Well, most of them.

Likewise, at times participants explicitly addressed a distinction between what they perceived be different kinds of contemporary Japanese horror film, such as Abbie's observation that *Battle Royale* was "Not a supernatural horror film. I think that's the distinction I've made, that it's more of a, I dunno, it's almost sci-fi, it's like a sci-fi horror".

The lack of emphasis on, and reluctance to classify, all contemporary Japanese horror films as being gory may reflect ambivalence as to whether these films truly belong in the genre. However, it is more likely a reflection of their status as an ambiguous part of the genre secondary to supernatural-based films. This is not to imply that gory films were not considered to be horror film by UK participants, indeed when asked directly whether they considered *Audition*, *Battle Royale* or *Ichi the Killer* horror films, around half of all participants said that they did. Although contradictory, when talking about those particular films, some participants described the way in which they thought their non-supernatural nature was a contributing factor to their status as horror. For example, when speaking about how she considered *Audition* to be horror, Anna stated: "It's like revulsion. Yeah, just like eugh, that's horrible. I think because

it's not particularly supernatural, so you think, you know, something like that could happen to somebody”.

Perhaps due to the prominence of supernatural films, which all participants agreed constituted horror, it was more common for participants to cite that particular element as a defining feature:

Mike: To me horror is about supernatural elements. If it's got the scare factor but there's no sort of ghost or monster at the end of it then I... you know what I mean... if it's just about murder and things. But it doesn't have that... I would class that one [*Audition*] as a thriller. Not even a psychological horror, it has to have that supernatural element for me.

David: The whole sort of idea I guess of ghosts strikes me, I dunno if that's different culture, what's scary, what's supernatural and the things that connect to Japanese and the Western society might be different... But I dunno, like in *The Ring* and *The Grudge* and stuff like this, it kind of just, there's that sort of like supernatural theme where it's more sort of story, I guess there's not so much some geezer running round in a hockey mask with a chainsaw trying to cut people up.

Elliot: I think they rely more on the supernatural, but in a more kind of Buddhist way, like Shinto way, you know, the idea of spirits and kind of ghosts.

At times the idea of contemporary Japanese horror film as supernatural was entwined with participants' ideas about the horror genre in general, which some also perceived as being defined by supernatural elements. These were often differentiated from American horror which some generalised as reliant on gore. However, a common thread linking both the nature of contemporary Japanese horror film as supernatural and as violent/gory, was the idea of the genre as psychological. This feature was cited by a large number of participants across all of the films mentioned:

Sarah: It [*Battle Royale*] was based a lot more on gore, I think that's definitely why it was so popular with Western

audiences because it has got the gore in it. It doesn't abandon the psychological state because of the horror bit, because you're thinking "If I was there, would I be able to kill myself?"

Mike: More the psychological things I think, that's the difference between Japanese films and American, you know like sort of *Ichi the Killer*, and stuff like *Confessions* or *The Grudge*, they're more sort of subtle horror, not giving you enough, or like giving you enough and then taking it away to let you think about it.

Dawn: Definitely more psychologically orientated. Like, they don't rely that much on visual effects. Well, they do, but not like in the American movies though, in the American movies you can just be like "oh, there's a bucket of blood".

While the definition of contemporary Japanese horror film as psychological tended to be a common thread which linked the two kinds for many participants, there was also a second dichotomy present. This largely consisted of splitting the genre, or qualifying a film, by whether it is shocking or whether it is scary, or relating to the ability of a film to create suspense or tension:

Kevin: I mean *Battle Royale* never scared me it just made me... if it scared me I'd consider it a horror. That's why *Suicide Club* in my opinion isn't a horror, it's more of a thriller, because it didn't scare me but I was like 'wow that was shocking'. But shocking stuff I don't consider as horror, so like *Battle Royale* for the same reason shocked me, I mean I thought about it quite a lot, but it didn't scare me.

Adam: Shocking was just like "wow", it just makes you think, whereas horror is different, it actually scared me. If there's something on the screen that I look at and it scares me or it sometimes comes down to the sound, stuff like that, that sort of thing. Rather than a theme, because in *Battle Royale* it's more of a theme, about a subject, there's no monsters in it, there's no ghosts.

Graham: Like in Japanese films the tension builds more slower, (26, male, student) whereas Western films show quite a lot, it's more graphic and in your face and jumpy. Whereas in Japanese films, I think the tension slowly builds and people don't know

what's happening to them, and then there's a point of climax.

Elliot: So, yeah, Japanese horror like *The Grudge* is more about suspense and shock. And yeah, I think it shows more talent from the director. It's easy to just show people being killed, but it's a lot more difficult to create suspense and tension and I think he does that pretty well.

For many participants, qualifying a film as shocking or scary was akin to aligning shock with gore and scare with supernatural elements. However, this was not exclusively so. "Shocking" was also used to describe moments in *Ring* and *Ju-on: The Grudge*, and the violent moments in *Audition* were at times described as "scary". Further to these readings based upon reactions, the building of tension and suspense was also deemed by many participants to play a central role in their consideration of whether a film belonged to the contemporary Japanese horror genre, particularly when compared against their ideas of Western horror. For many interviewees this tension or suspense was related as something that led up to the shock or the scare.

While I have outlined a basic picture of the semantic and syntactic elements at play within the definition of contemporary Japanese horror film, it has been demonstrated that these only work when considered concurrently. Further to this, inconsistency within participant responses is reflective of the fact that the genre is not clearly defined. It would seem that a key element in defining contemporary Japanese horror film is not something that is found within the text itself, but rather the feeling evoked by the films. This is present in the structure of building tension and suspense and how this is experienced by the viewer, resulting in being shocked or scared. The actual experience of watching a film, and the associated feelings it activates, would appear to be internalised and

remain with participants much more definably than tropes within the films. These experiences then play into audience definitions of the genre. This would suggest that the key to unraveling and understanding the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK really does lie in its audience reception rather than within the film texts themselves. Accordingly, this chapter has provided insight into the nature of audiences as both complex and competent in their definitions of genre, and that they do not passively accept the genre definitions imposed by marketers and distributors. Leading on from this, the next chapter will address the processes through which UK audiences define the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, and how they apply contextual frameworks of understanding in their meaning-making.

Chapter 7

Results 2: What frameworks do UK audiences use to understand and contextualise contemporary Japanese horror film?

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, contemporary Japanese horror film is a largely undefined genre. Participants cited a variety of semantic and syntactic elements which did not universally account for the variety of films which have been purported to be part of the genre by distributors, critics, marketers and shelving practices. From this it is apparent that the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film is not fully formed enough to rely purely on what can be deduced from the film texts alone, and that the role audiences play in definition is more important than has been previously acknowledged. Secondary to this, the differing definitions of contemporary Japanese horror film would suggest either differing viewing experiences, or differing cultural and viewing competencies. In short, contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK is a complicated genre to define, and one which brings with it a high degree of subjectivity.

In this chapter I will address the frameworks of reference and understanding through which UK audiences make sense of contemporary Japanese horror film. To achieve this requires tackling two key questions: “How did participants describe their understanding of contemporary Japanese horror film?” and “What influences and frameworks of reference are apparent in these processes of definition?” In doing so, this chapter highlights the benefit of analysing genre and film in relation to transnational audiences, because of the central role that context plays in the process of definition. However, the role of

context is contradictory. UK audiences' context-based interpretations are not necessarily aligned with what is being presented and adapted by marketers and distributors for the UK context. This further serves to highlight audience members as highly individualised, and far more complicated than the aggregate audience targeted by *Tartan Asia Extreme*, as described by Dew (2007) and outlined in chapter five.

The first section of this chapter deconstructs the term Japanese horror film. The connotations of the title are addressed in order to highlight how definitions of the genre have transcended the limitations of the term within the eyes of UK viewers. The second section draws attention to the crucial factor of individuality in terms of viewer experiences and prior knowledge, something which is central both in informing ideas about genre and in making sense of and defining it. The third and fourth sections address the frameworks of interpretation through which participants defined contemporary Japanese horror film.

Japanese + horror + film

Having established in the previous chapter that contemporary Japanese horror film is a vaguely defined concept, it would seem an oversight to assume that the associations of the individual words of which the term is comprised are not disputable in themselves. Indeed, this warrants further explanation in order to understand the way in which frameworks of reference are used. Each word of the term *Japanese horror film* carries with it connotations and implications, and this will be discussed through insight given by the ways in which participants

applied the term. This information provided in the section is necessary for clarification, as it acknowledges the wider range of what participants may be referring to when they discuss contemporary Japanese horror film.

Japanese horror film

In Japan there is no genre called Japanese horror film. The term Japanese is a signifier added in the UK to denote national origin and inform viewer expectations. During the interviews, participants often used the term horror film to refer to American or British horror film, but Japanese horror film was always excluded from this substantive genre. *Japanese* horror film was set apart, to be consistently defined through its modification upon the horror film genre, and hence its assumed difference from the horror genre as a whole. For example, a number of participants cited either actively avoiding or seeking out Japanese horror films in particular due to preconceived notions such as them being “too scary” or “original”.

The marketing of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK has relied heavily on the construction of nation, and places stress on geographical origin. As Iwabuchi (2010: 93) points out, particularly for Japan since the late 1990s, nation has emerged as the most marketable and significant local unit. Perhaps it could then be argued that Japanese horror film is tied up with ideas of the national film. However, it would be useful in this case to acknowledge the multitude of scholarship specifically on Japanese horror film which does not take a national film approach. Likewise Yoshimoto (2003) has acknowledged that what is regarded as “Japanese” (as well as “Western”) could be a matter of personal difference. In his analysis of the extent to which elements in the work of

Tanizaki Jun'ichiro are Japanese, Yoshimoto deduces that it is better to employ a self-reflexive analysis, as well as acknowledge group differences that go beyond nation. However, for many participants, the idea of contemporary Japanese horror film was inherently tied up with their perceived ideas of the nation. Unexplainable aspects were frequently passed off as being something which was inherent or unknowable within Japanese culture. It is unclear whether the films influenced or reinforced participants' ideas about Japan, or whether they applied pre-existing preconceptions to their film viewing (most likely both). But what is clear is that reading through such a framework has dangerous implications, particularly when participants used the films to draw conclusions about the country that produced them, or the perceived tastes of Japanese audiences.

During UK marketing and distribution practices, contemporary Japanese horror film has become complicated, largely due to two factors. First, Japan has emerged as the overwhelming marker of Asian horror film. Second, marketing practices have shoehorned the varying outputs of different Asian nations together under one banner or pseudo-genre. Perhaps as a result of this, participants often discussed other Asian films under the assumption that they were Japanese. By and large, these were films that had been marketed and distributed by *Tartan Asia Extreme*, such as *Oldboy*, *Phone* (Ahn 2002) and *The Eye*. Also discussed as Japanese was the Thai horror film *Shutter* (Pisanthankun & Wongpoom 2004), which received a Hollywood remake in which it was resituated to Japan.

Notably, it would seem from the way participants often discussed Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films interchangeably (and knowingly) with the originals, that these are somewhat classed as

contemporary Japanese horror films. Further to this, other clearly non-Japanese films such as *Saw* (Wan 2004) and *The Human Centipede* (Six 2009) were also raised by a few participants as being Japanese horror films. What can be assumed here is participants were referring to the style, and the equation of the extreme with Japanese horror film.

This identification of a particular Japanese 'style' was something which a number of participants mentioned, particularly in relation to those films which were based on anime and featured similar stylistic elements such as the stylized presentation of violence, and in relation to films which portrayed graphic violence. Amongst participants there were both positive and negative connotations of the films with the subgenre of 'torture porn', and they were often compared to films such as *Hostel* and *Saw*. This, in combination with the strongly pushed idea of Japanese horror films as original and innovative, could go some way towards explaining why non-Japanese films with these particular aesthetic elements were sometimes referred to as being Japanese horror films. In this sense, the notion of Japanese then, could be assumed to function as an aesthetic or thematic marker that goes beyond nation.

Japanese Horror Film

In light of participant responses, the element *horror* tended to be the least well defined and the one that caused the most contention. While participants often questioned whether films were indeed horror films, the notion of film was never questioned and used interchangeably with DVD and other formats. The notion of Japanese was only questioned on a few occasions when participants asked for clarification as to whether a particular Asian horror film was indeed Japanese.

As Altman (1999: 54) posits, new genre cycles are usually produced when a fresh type of material or approach becomes associated with a genre which is already established. Paying reference to Leutrat and Liandrat-Guiges (1990: 95, 105-7), Altman notes that genre categorisation sometimes involves adjectives such as the Western romance, and sometimes only nouns, such as the Western. Altman identifies these two ways of titling as being reflective of whether the genre is substantive or unsubstantive, the difference being whether the traits of a film are recognisable enough to qualify as a distinct genre. While the term contemporary Japanese horror film immediately identifies the contained texts as pertaining to a nation, it also suggests that the genre is largely unsubstantive. However, the term J-horror, which in its domestic context, and in the view of many of the participants, includes a very specific collection of films, could be seen as being far more substantive, supported by a large consensus and commonality of semantic and syntactic elements. Essentially, when speaking about the horror genre in general, participants were confident about their definition of horror. However, when defining the unsubstantive genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, modifications upon the original term *horror film* make the horror element seem less concrete.

Japanese Horror *Film*

Although it might at first seem like a given, one shortfall that exists within film studies is that the medium of films are often considered to be *film*.¹⁸

Contemporary Japanese horror film, as a genre, is something which both domestically and internationally is caught up with the small screen. As Wada-

¹⁸ Some authors such as Ackland (2003) have begun to discuss this, and Wada-Marciano both draws attention to the problem (2009), and addresses specifically the problem of Japanese cinema in the digital age (2012).

Marciano (2009: 42) observes, what is considered Japanese horror film is more commonly actually DVD, something which forces a reconfiguration of the genre. The origin of contemporary horror film in Japan, and some might say a major attribute to its success, was its design specifically for the small screen and the straight-to-video market. Although a few of the more prominent films received limited cinematic runs in the UK, none of the participants interviewed had seen the films in a cinema. All had watched them either on DVD, on the Internet, or on television, with DVD comprising the overwhelming majority.

As Klinger (2006) argues in *Beyond the Multiplex*, cinema for a long time was not associated with the home. Her study of home viewing cultures notes that they are related to the individual's relationship to the home, friends and family, and identities formed. These are just as tied up with the technologies through which one views a film as they are with the choice of film itself. Non-theatrical exhibition thus does not merely intervene in the individual's relationship to the home and family. Conversely, identities both public and private are staked in equal measures on the films an individual watches *and* the technologies they use to watch them. For the participants of this study, the DVD and television formats lent themselves to multiple viewings, social viewings and defining fan identity through DVD collections.

Acland (2003: 23-24) observes that:

The contemporary moment demands a series of afterlives for cultural texts... a process of metamorphosis moves culture through a life cycle of commodity forms, from film to video, pay-TV, television, DVD, and so on, and at each stage the form migrates cross geographical territories.

This life cycle of commodity forms is part of what is referred to in the film industry as a film "having legs", helping it to travel into other national contexts

and contributing further to multiple temporalities of reception. This long textual-afterlife through non-contemporaneous reception is indicative of the long-tail marketing which is common to cult films such as contemporary Japanese horror, and has subsequent effects for its transnational audiences. Whereas it is common for Hollywood productions to spend most of their marketing budget on the opening week of a film in cinemas, long-tail marketing follows the idea that there is more, or at least as much, money to be made in the long term as there is in the short term. As a result, new audiences are coming to contemporary Japanese horror films continuously. Amongst the interview participants, it was rare that anyone came to the films at the time of their original release, viewings had taken place across a wide time period, with a number of participants having only recently watched some of the films for the first time.

Acknowledging individuality and antecedent factors

As Barker *et al.* (2001: 158) observe in their film “viewing strategies”, audiences come to a film equipped with prior experiences, knowledge and expectations, all of which impact on their interpretations. In much of academia relating to film studies, and specifically film audiences, the point of focus has been on the theoretical spectator, or on the “ideal” audience rather than the “real audience” (Mayne, 1993). A further problem, and one which is particularly evident in horror, is the focus on those who are the most prominent demographic – the fan audience. For example, Hills’ (2001, 2005) acknowledging of the “enthusiast”, and his analysis of message board text relating to *Ring* which inevitably focused on those who cared enough about the film to actively take part in an online

discussion. How then might we account for a range of viewers, who are not enthusiasts and are perhaps ambivalent? And surely there are variances amongst the fan audience themselves? Studies such as Barker *et al.*'s (2001) of *Crash* (Cronenberg 1996), and Radway's (1984) of women's reading of romance novels, exemplify the diverse emotional reactions and motivations involved when engaging with a text. Audiences by their very nature as individuals, are equipped with different experiences, knowledge and expectations towards a film, making homogenous definitions of audience interpretations highly problematic. It is necessary for this chapter to acknowledge and provide insight into some of these differences which exist between individuals, in order to provide context to the subjective interpretations presented later.

What's your motivation?

This section shall provide insight into how participants demonstrated the influence of their own individual traits and preferences in relation to the meanings they attached to contemporary Japanese horror film. Putting aside the influence of viewing contexts, which is addressed later in this chapter, the elements discussed in this section are largely related to value judgments and personal meaning.

As demonstrated in chapter six, the perception of contemporary Japanese horror films as building tension and suspense was frequently cited as a defining factor of the genre, and was often a motivating reason in why participants watched the films. However, there were other motivational factors which some participants placed importance on that were evidently due to their individual traits and preferences. For example:

- Abbie: I can't remember if it was a director that I'd seen before, because there's a couple of directors that I never remember their names but my husband does, and he always says "oh there's a new so-and-so film, let's see it!" It might well have been one of these directors that we both like so we watched it.
- Elliot: I wasn't so much interested in horror, but it was the idea that the filmmaker was...it was made by the same filmmaker, Miike Takashi.
- Jodie: The music in Japanese horror films as well, it just builds the tension so well. You couldn't just listen to the soundtrack of *Ring* on its own and not be like "ohhh something horrible is gonna happen!" I think yeah the noises, because in *Ring* I love that little "frolicking brine, goblins be thine", that little rhyme that goes through them all, and it's sung in that sort of distorted voice, it's really supernatural. Yeah, I like those bits.
- Craig: I just thought the production value was absolutely amazing. One of the things that's really striking about this film [*Ring*] overall I think, you know the little clip that they've all seen.

Influences reflecting personal interests tended to be extended towards defining traits of the genre, and largely revolved around directors and technical aspects of the films. Aside from evidencing the impact that elements such as these have on audiences and the way in which they connect to the films, this also begins to hint at audiences bringing their own prior knowledge to a film viewing.

Contemporary Japanese horror film can be contextualised with the same value judgments that participants would likely apply to any film. Indeed, participants often extended their points of interest to an appreciation of similar elements in other media, particularly Japanese, unprompted:

- Craig: Oh yeah, that creaking sound... it's a very strong horror element isn't it. I think the Japanese are very imaginative like that, I remember the music... the sound director from the *Silent Hill* series, he was in an interview and said that he

used the sound of a rhino and distorted it. It seems that a lot of thought goes into using sounds that are unusual.

Elliot: I think the character is called Shinji but he's played by an actor called Tsukamoto Shinya who was a film director who has made some very good films like *Tetsuo, Iron Man*.

The influence of value judgments takes on particular meaning in relation to contemporary Japanese horror film as it points to the importance of context in influencing individuals, and how far these films are removed from their original context. For example *Ring*, which had low production values and was aligned with the straight-to-video B-movie market in Japan, was talked about in terms of its maturity and restraint by critics (Martin 2009), and admired by interview participants. This transition of framing from low-art to high-art across cultures likely bears influences on the value which individuals assigned to particular films.

The factors that participants deemed worthy of discussion in relation to contemporary Japanese horror film were varied and non-uniform, dependent upon individual value judgments. These elements were not extendable in the same way as the syntactic and semantic elements discussed in the previous chapter, as there was a low degree of repetition across a far smaller number of participants. However, these participants tended towards strongly emphasising the area in which they showed personal interest as a defining feature of contemporary Japanese horror film, even when none to few of the other participants did. From the small amount of personal information that was learnt about the participants during the course of the interviews, these areas correlated with a wider interest held by them that extended beyond contemporary Japanese horror film. The two most prominent examples were Craig and Elliot, who frequently returned to discussing contemporary Japanese horror film in terms of

sound production and directors respectively. Craig also had a wider interest in sound and music and talked about these more generally in conversation. Elliot was studying a module on film, and wished to become a filmmaker himself. Overall, those who felt strongly about certain areas tended to easily volunteer this kind of information unprompted.

Evidently, the elements which participants chose to focus on indicate the areas onto which they place importance more generally. However, this can be taken further by accounting for the fact that some individuals formed personal relationships with particular films as a whole. A prominent example was Adam, a self-proclaimed *Battle Royale* fan, who enthusiastically related: "It's one of the only films that I can watch over and over again. I hate re-watching movies, it's not my thing [...] Yeah, Battle Royale, I'd say that it's my favourite movie. Of all time. Definitely". Other participants cited seeking out extra-textual materials such as the original novels or manga tie-ins of particular films. In these cases where particular films were highly valued, interviewees also tended to tie these up with social aspects and elements of ritual, a framework which is discussed later in this chapter.

One of the most common individual factors, which was often cited as a reason for watching the films, was varied levels of interest in Japanese culture. Two participants were studying areas related to Japan, and others had a strong interest both generally, and in specific areas such as manga and anime. For the purposes of this study I choose to treat that interest as a framework through which individuals approach contemporary Japanese horror film. This is acknowledged in chapter eight, and tied in with an analysis of audience understanding of culturally-specific elements.

UK audiences and film-based frameworks

In order to understand the frameworks through which UK audiences make sense of contemporary Japanese horror film, it is necessary to consider ideas of intertextuality and intercontextuality. In positioning his model of empathy and emotional reactions to horror, Tambourini (1996: 121) concludes that, in terms of the antecedent conditions of the film viewer, these are constantly being shaped by the films we see. In other words, the films that any person has previously seen will provide frameworks of interpretation for further film viewings. The process of definition of the unfamiliar text should therefore demonstrate the employment of intercontextuality. That is, using knowledge from one context to assist in making meanings in another.

As previously mentioned, since the release of *Ring*, the film has become a reference point for audiences within a much larger body of film. In terms of temporality, whereas *Ring* and other contemporary Japanese horror films may have at first seemed unfamiliar to their cross-cultural audiences, they now have the potential to be used as a guiding framework for subsequent film viewings within the genre. To demonstrate the way in audiences make sense of genres and how viewing frameworks develop, consider the following analogy: Imagine that you are perusing a menu in an Indian curry house for the first time. With no prior experience, you choose something from the menu and are perhaps surprised at the new taste. Later describing the experience to a friend, you might struggle for points of comparison. Of course, you could pick out general features of the meal such as it having been spicy or the kind of meat used, but your friend wants to know what it was *like*. With no direct points of comparison you perhaps

compare the dish to another national cuisine, maybe Thai food. The next week you return to the same curry house and order a different dish. This time you are able to describe the meal to your friend in terms of its similarity or difference from the last dish, and you are beginning to build up a knowledge of Indian food that might inform your subsequent visits. Similarly, once an audience begins to build viewing experience within a certain genre or subgenre, anything which comes after it is not entirely alien or unique. Frameworks begin to develop that rely less upon intercontextual readings.

As Staiger (2000) has frequently acknowledged, reception is liable to change over time, and Japanese horror film is now no longer wholly unfamiliar on UK shores. Indeed, *Ring* itself has become a defining reference point for UK viewers of contemporary Japanese horror films, and a proliferation of intertextual readings have emerged across the genre. Over a decade after the release of *Ring* in the UK, the availability and viewing experience of a number of contemporary Japanese horror films has allowed UK audiences to build a discursive framework within which to interpret further film viewing experiences. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, audiences now recognise a bank of distinguishing features within contemporary Japanese horror film. Whereas participants still used Hollywood films as a marker of difference, they also engaged with Japanese and other Asian films when talking about similarities, particularly as points of comparison in describing what they considered to be horror. Importantly, during the interviews I made no mention of other genres, national bodies of film or film texts against which contemporary Japanese horror film could be compared. Neither were interviewees directly asked to provide any as points of reference.

Participants' frameworks of reference: Non-Japanese films

Referencing non-Japanese horror films as a way of defining and discussing contemporary Japanese horror film served a number of purposes amongst the participants. Hollywood films were held up as a marker of difference in order to demonstrate a perceived “superior” Japanese equivalent. They were also presented as similar to either provide an example of a stylistic point, or under the assumption that Hollywood was borrowing from an “original” Japanese idea. This was separate to the referencing of Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror film, which has been addressed in its own section. Other East Asian films were also occasionally held up as similar, as part of an imagined canon, likely influenced by distribution labels like *Tartan Asian Extreme*. The lack of other East Asian films being held up as a point of difference suggests a leaning towards a perceived homogeneity of East Asian horror films amongst participants. This is further suggested by the misconception of some of these films as Japanese, as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Undoubtedly, the most common films against which participants defined contemporary Japanese horror film were Hollywood horror films, which is unsurprising given their dominance of the UK market. Alongside mentions of *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) and *The Sixth Sense* (which were also evident in Martins' 2009 analysis of critics), the Hollywood films most frequently mentioned by participants were the *Saw* series and *Hostel* (Roth 2005). Perhaps due to the prominence of “torture porn”, films like *Saw* may have been amongst the most present in the interviewees cultural imaginary, and these films were indeed a

post-cursor of Asia extreme.¹⁹ Torture porn films often self-identify contemporary Japanese horror film as a direct influence, with Japanese director Takashi Miike even making a cameo in the *Hostel* film itself. Interestingly, these films were held up both as markers of similarity and of difference by different participants. This was dependent upon their view of the contemporary Japanese horror film genre as a whole, and whether they were only discussing one particular film within the genre. These comparisons were never in terms of narrative, but purely in terms of the depiction of violence and gore as shown in two examples from John and Anna:

John: The best part of Western horror for me is the atmosphere and the tension. I really like *The Exorcist*, for example. But there's also a lot of Western horror that's based on gore rather than anything else, which I was never really interested in. The Eastern horror primarily builds on the atmosphere and the tension, so things like the direction.

Anna: I think it's obviously of a particular style and there were some where I thought they'd gone over the edge of being a bit gratuitous, but I think only in the same way that I think things like *Hostel* and things like that are, you know *Saw*.

When participants held up either individual films or Hollywood films as a whole in terms of their perceived difference from contemporary Japanese horror film, it was consistently in order to illustrate the way in which Japanese horror film was a departure from the Hollywood "norm". On occasion, what was stressed was the difference of foreign films as a whole. This, surprisingly, contained a range of specific comparisons which included films from outside the horror genre, such as comedies. Alongside valuing aspects of tension and suspense that were mentioned in the previous chapter, in these cases, contemporary Japanese horror was situated as opposed to the "latest

¹⁹ "Torture porn" is a subgenre of horror, which could also be viewed as a film cycle. Although the term originated in 2006, it was once again in fashion at time of the interviews.

blockbuster". It was positioned as something unpredictable and outside of the mainstream:

Jodie: If you think about sort of formulaic Hollywood horror films you can... there's not really anything surprising happens in it, it's stuff you've seen in different horror films but it's all pulled together in a different order and a different structure.

Abbie: I think if you got and watch the latest blockbuster, I dunno *Bridesmaids* or *The Hangover*, you kind of know what's gonna happen, you could almost write the script as you're watching it.

Peter: In films like *The Sixth Sense* where the kid sees dead people, compared to Japanese films like *The Grudge* or *The Eye*, well, it's a lot darker and more scary in the Japanese versions.

When Hollywood films were referenced by participants in terms of their similar nature to contemporary Japanese horror film, it was often in a sense that the Hollywood film had taken cues from Japan, or directly copied something which the interviewee deemed to be an original Japanese idea. *Paranormal Activity* (Peli 2007), despite its indie beginnings and also being a film that had an unofficial Japanese sequel (*Paranormal Activity 2: Tokyo Night*, Nagae 2010), was mentioned on more than one occasion as taking cues from contemporary Japanese horror film. The perception that elements such as these, particularly in terms of style and pacing, "belong" to the Japanese film industry was reinforced. For example, Mike, who placed high importance on the original Japanese films and walked out of the cinema during the remake of *Ring*, asserted: "Paranormal Activity is an American film but I would say that was more towards... they've taken ideas from the Japanese side of things, because it is a lot slower, it's a lot kind of suggesting you see".

Given that the interviews took place around the time that buzz was beginning to build about the upcoming Hollywood film *The Hunger Games* (Ross

2012), the film was held up as a point of narrative comparison on four separate occasions. In each case participants, despite having not seen the movie, assumed it to be an inferior “rip-off” of *Battle Royale*. *The Hunger Games* was consistently used as a reference point to reinforce the nature of how *Battle Royale* was the superior original and to demonstrate the “uniqueness” of the narrative. Notably, all participants subscribed to the idea that the narrative would not work if it was Americanised. Andrew (18, male, unemployed) felt particularly strongly about this, stating that:

[*Battle Royale*] basically got Americanised, they made, what’s it called... *The Hunger Games*. It always happens though, 9 times out of 10, something you see will have had a Japanese origin or some kind of idea from a manga or something like that.

A major function of participants directly comparing two films was to emphasise that the Japanese context is the original, and that the idea was cannibalized by Hollywood. Although directors such as Kinji Fukasaku and Hideo Nakata openly cite their American influences, any indebtedness to Hollywood went unacknowledged by participants. Despite this, Hollywood films were sometimes used by participants in order to provide reference points and explain the way they felt about a particular film, or to explain certain elements which they perceived as distinctly “Japanese” in a more relatable context. For example:

Abbie: I think it’s one of those films a bit like, you know the film *Candyman*? You almost don’t wanna watch the film within the film because you’re thinking “oh is that like part of it”, and then...yeah, I wouldn’t ever go and stand in front of a mirror and say ‘Candyman’ five times, just in case. There is that... it’s a really clever device I think in films, to have something that the characters have to do and you have to

do it while you're watching the film so that you're frightened with the characters instead of what's happening.

The context of other East Asian films being mentioned as points of reference was problematised by the mixing up of geographical origins, and by participants' tendency towards using the term *Asian* horror rather than specifically *Japanese* horror. This is perhaps understandable, given that on the occasions when participants did mention other East Asian horror films they tended to reinforce aspects of similarity, or discuss them interchangeably:

- John: Asian horror tends to focus on a place, either tangible or non-tangible as being possessed or haunted.
- Jamie: Chinese and Korean horror has the same traits, and I have seen some Thai horror with the same aspects.
- Craig: I suppose I kind of got into it through the route of looking at Hong Kong cinema and seeing a lot of the Chinese ghost films, and some of the Japanese films seem to be like that, or some of the first ones I saw. So it's more sort of about hauntings and that sort of thing.

These points of comparison would suggest that the filmic output of other East Asian nations may also be blurred in terms of their definition as horror transnationally. Particularly as films such as *Oldboy*, which were referenced by some participants as a horror film, is not considered a horror film in its domestic South Korean context.

Participants' frameworks of reference: Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films

Hollywood remakes were generally discussed by participants interchangeably with the original films. It would seem from the way in which participants framed their responses, that these pan-Asian titles were also included by many in their

definition of contemporary Japanese horror film. This is partially due, perhaps, to their source material, or the way they incorporate tropes that were deemed emblematic of the genre. In a reversal of the intercontextual readings that critics displayed around the time of the emergence of contemporary Japanese horror film, it would now seem that UK audiences are often reading the remakes through the framework of the original, or drawing comparisons with the genre as whole.

Lim (2009: 224) notes the way in which the Asian horror remake is “Caught between two moves, emphasizing the *cultural specificity* of the Asian horror film while imputing a *cultural neutrality* that guarantees its appeal to global audiences”. This dual focus is evident in the split of audience approaches towards the films, much in the same way that Altman (1999: 151) describes audiences as having access to a “generic crossroads” where they can choose to either ignore or go along with cultural and generic values and cues. Some participants emphasised the similarity of the remakes through their perceived closeness to the Japanese originals or to their idea of contemporary Japanese horror film in general. This was done either outright or through confusion between the original and the remake:

Graham: Well, I remember the first time I'd ever seen a Japanese horror, it was the American remake of *The Ring*, but I suppose the themes and the way it was done were still Japanese. I thought it was so different from the way Western films were, because, I dunno, they're kind of stagnant doing the same things over and over again, and then these Japanese films came out, the monsters were different, they're more creepy.

Craig: That's the one I remembered the least... partly because I've seen the American remake of it, and again I'm a little bit confused between the two.

Other participants focused more on the differences, perhaps suggestive of the imposed cultural neutrality which is often a result of the re-situation of the original by Hollywood. Participants sometimes tied these ideas of difference into value judgments, a process which was not present when they read through a framework of similarity. For example, Mike, Caroline (29, female, administrator) and Sarah gave their opinions of Hollywood remakes in relation to their Japanese originals:

Mike: I saw the Japanese version of *The Ring* originally and I really enjoyed it, and I watched the American remake at the cinema and I walked about half way through it, because I didn't like it.

Caroline: I think they're completely different films, I prefer that [the remake of *Ring*] to the original version. The great thing about *The Ring* is that it's completely alien.

Sarah: I don't know, but I think Japanese films often base themselves on plot rather than the action. Particularly, *The Ring* – I'd read the books as well – and when you compare that to the American remake, the Japanese ones are a lot more investigative, like they're trying to work out why this is happening. It's like, its suspense because you're finding out why this happened. In the American version it's a lot more about trying to make you jump, but there's practically nothing like that in the Japanese version. There's a lot more suspense.

As Horton and McDougal (1998: 6) assert: "By announcing by title and/or narrative its indebtedness to a previous film, the remake invites the viewer to enjoy the *differences* that have been worked, consciously and sometimes unconsciously, between the texts". In Hills' (2005) study of US audience readings of the differences between the original and the remake of *Ring*, he finds a similar split in preference, and hypothesises that people tend to enjoy the version that they saw first the most. With this in mind, Hills argues that the subcultural distinction which takes place amongst fans is primarily temporal in

nature, with fans of the original representing themselves as early adopters with pre-mainstream rather than anti-mainstream tastes. Lim (2009: 221) also notes the importance of temporality in viewing Asian horror. She draws attention to how, for some viewers, in cases where this it was watched first, the remake becomes the contextual factor through which the original is interpreted.

Subsequently this calls into question what is truly the “original”. Indeed these factors were present amongst participants. Those who mentioned having seen the remake first, or who had a larger experience with remakes than originals, tended to be positive about them. These individuals were also more likely to discuss the remakes as if they were a part of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, rather than drawing distinctions between the two and focusing on difference.

Participants’ frameworks of reference: Other Japanese films

Temporality was the major reason why participants used references to other Japanese films in order to underpin larger ideas about the genre. By and large, films outside of the horror genre were not mentioned. Other contemporary Japanese horror films were not only used to draw assumptions as to common tropes within the genre, but were also used as a point of reference during larger explanations, primarily in order to situate viewings in time. *Ring* was by far the most commonly mentioned temporal marker, and participants tended towards using phrases such as “After I saw *Ring*” (David) or “It was round about the time that *Audition* was released on DVD” (Elliot). Particularly for those who attributed personal meaning to one of the films, these temporal markers also took on special significance as a catalyst:

Adam: I mean, when I first saw *Battle Royale*, that was one of the first films that kind of got me into Japanese culture actually.

Jamie: For me, I remember starting to get interested in Japan, seeing how different it was, because *The Ring* itself showed a lot about Japanese society and it wasn't just, you know, creepy because it was quiet... it's really, no, actually, that's not just because of the horror film, that's like, Japan.

The only time non-horror Japanese films were mentioned was in reference to citing other works of a particular director or actor associated with contemporary Japanese horror film. This was mainly demonstrated by Elliot, who had a strong interest in film and filmmaking.

UK audiences and context-based frameworks

As new conditions and contexts of spectatorship arise from distribution and home-exhibition practices, the nature of film viewing is constantly evolving. This evolution, particularly in relation to transnational mutations, makes it as important to address the viewing condition of *where* and *when* a film was watched as it is to consider *what* was watched. The way in which film viewing has evolved may be considered, as Acland (2003: 47) observes, through:

The manifold and imaginative ways in which film becomes part of a lived and ordinary culture, as informal background to gatherings, as excuses for close-knit groups to congregate, as objects of intense personal rapture.

This section shall provide insight into some of these contexts, and the bearing which they have upon the way in which contemporary Japanese horror film is consumed and understood in the UK.

The influence of marketing and distribution practices

Interestingly, in what is perhaps a testament to the longevity of contemporary Japanese horror film, the vast majority of participants who came to the films said that they had bypassed any sort of official marketing. However, this does not mean that their experiences were not shaped by marketing and distribution practices, as this is more likely to be happening on a subconscious level.

Participants were much more likely to recognise that they were influenced by recommendations they had received from other people, and this was frequently commented upon in the interviews.

On the occasions where participants did remember their expectations of a particular film being shaped by marketing or distribution, these fell into two categories. The first of these was the “I’ve got to see that!” response. In these cases, participants had seen a DVD cover or an advert for a TV screening, or had read about a film and subsequently expressed a strong desire to see it. For example:

Craig: I remember the first time I saw it [*Audition*], we got it out of the video shop because there was just this... this picture on the front and the tagline was something like “lulls you into a false sense of security and then starts pulling the floorboards up from underneath you” and I grabbed it after that.

Mike: I think I’d read a review that said it [*Audition*] was deeply disturbing, so that made me kind of wanna see it because, you know, I’ve got a pretty warped mind like that.

Andrew: When I read about how it [*Grotesque*] had been banned I called my brother up and I was like “We have to watch this!”

Notably, in the above cases, participants were not keen to see these films based upon any imposed sense or preconceptions of genre, but from reputation and the way in which they were presented.

The second category of influence by marketing and distribution practices was more harmful. In these cases participants remembered being mis-sold as to the nature or the genre of the film. For example, Mike declared that *Confessions* "...was just stupid. I was expecting something like *Battle Royale*". As Altman (1999: 151) observes: "What genres are adept at... is funneling towards a homogenous experience those viewers who invest in a similar type of pleasure". Audiences were more likely to remember when they were expecting a homogenous genre experience and in turn received something which did not fit with their expectations. In the majority of these cases participants expressed negativity towards the film in question. Also, in contrast to the importance of positive recommendations in bringing viewers to these films, some also expressed having passed on negative word-of-mouth about their experience.

So how important is it that audiences are given an accurate expectation of what to expect and whether they would enjoy a recommended film? What if we could put a monetary figure on it, and that figure was \$1million? \$1million dollars was the prize money offered by Netflix to any programmer that could improve its "recommendation engine" by 10%. The competition was launched in 2006 and eventually solved in 2009, but it was not without its challenges. The Netflix prize saw the emergence of the "*Napoleon Dynamite* problem", where a few films (including *Napoleon Dynamite*, Hess 2004) proved impossible to predict whether a viewer would enjoy them or not. The "*Napoleon Dynamite* problem" is perhaps best referred to as an Internet sensation, which was picked up and reported upon by publications such as the New York Times ('If You Liked This, You're Sure to Love That, Thompson 2008). Writing for *What Culture* online magazine, Wakefield (2013) posed the question of whether *Napoleon*

Dynamite was the most divisive film ever made, citing that Netflix users tended towards giving the film either one or five stars out of five, making for divergent results. This can be attributed to a number of reasons such as storytelling, characterisation, difficulty in defining the genre, and liberties with the timeline. However, perhaps the most important reason is that no one knew quite what to compare it to.

These are, in fact, several factors which intersect with the way in which contemporary Japanese horror is most commonly understood in the UK. What is highlighted here is that it is difficult to predict whether someone will enjoy particular films, especially if they are polarising to audiences, outside of the mainstream, or have no/few counterparts. Contemporary Japanese horror film, in theory, falls into these categories (for example often lacking narrative coherence), so pushing recommendations to audiences based on enjoyment of previous films or perceived similarities could be said to be likely to lead to them having false expectations or preconceptions of a film.

Small screen formats

Alongside increased accessibility, small screen formats for contemporary Japanese horror film (DVD, television, Internet, video-on-demand and illegal downloading sites) are intertwined with the way in which the films are consumed and understood in the UK. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of participants expressed that they watched these films on DVD, with some stating that they also used video-on-demand services, illegal download sites or watched them on television (either recorded or real-time broadcast). The greater control exerted over these methods than with cinema viewing has predictably

impacted upon the structure of how they are consumed. For example:

Dawn: I thought there was someone who died in the beginning [of *Ring*] and then the main character started an investigation and there's this tape that you die after 7 days of watching it. Then I didn't watch the whole movie, I just clicked until the end so I saw how it ends, which wasn't really satisfying because then you have to copy the videotape and pass it and really you have like 15 sequels after that.

Peter: I've started *Grudge*, the Japanese one, a couple of times but I've never watched it to the end because I can't!

These responses are fitting with the rhetoric that digital media offers viewers in general, as Wada-Marciano (2009: 21) acknowledges "The majority of home theatre viewers tend toward an interrupted pattern of spectatorship rather than watching a film straight through as in a movie theatre".

Contemporary Japanese horror film in particular often lends itself to this kind of fragmented viewing, at times explicitly promoting a chapter viewing structure.

For example with *Ju-on: The Grudge* and *X-Cross* which are broken up into separate chapter-like segments, or various horror anthologies as previously mentioned. However, despite this tendency towards interrupted viewing, this was only acceptable to participants when it was something over which they had control. This was evident in a number of participant responses which stressed annoyance at adverts whilst watching screenings of the films on television, or at being interrupted by others:

Elliot: The advert breaks didn't really help with the whole tension, that was particularly... I had to try and put that aside. I think of all the films you wanna watch, I think that horror films are probably worst to watch with advert breaks because the tension building is so important. And it does undermine that when you see an advert for Direct Line or something.

John: It depends how it's handled. If it's on Channel 4 and there's adverts in there then that's a problem, because it breaks the

illusion really. You're in this film where the atmosphere and the tension and the context are so important and then it shatters it.

Graham: Especially with Japanese horror as well, I think people ask me a lot of questions, like he was asking me stuff and I'd rather watch the movie and just shut up.

Cult cinema has, as Joan Hawkins has asserted (2000, 2009) traditionally lent itself to a collector mentality. Indeed, a number of participants, notably all male, talked about contemporary Japanese horror film in terms of films that they had "got", rather than simply "watched". With the decreasing price of DVDs, and the recent development of being able to record and store films broadcast on television, contemporary Japanese horror film has become something that can be experienced not just at a time or in a format that is convenient to viewers, but also as many times as they desire. In addition to Adam's aforementioned multiple and regular viewings of *Battle Royale*, Abbie and Craig were amongst the other interviewees who provided observations about multiple viewings:

Abbie: Yeah, definitely. I've seen it twice and I think the first time I thought that nothing really happened in the first half of the film, and then watching it again knowing what happens at the end you can see it all building. So I think it stuck in my mind as a better film than some of the others. You know, just better... narrative I guess.

Craig: It's a difficult question because I've seen it more than once as well, and I kind of think in a way it's a better film, if you do see it the second time it's different, because you don't have the element of surprise.

As Lim (2009: 239) observes in relation to multiple viewings, although a first viewing of a film cannot be replicated, especially in the case of puzzle films, these repeat viewings allow viewers to appreciate the way in which the film is crafted. This was demonstrated by participants in relation to contemporary Japanese horror film, particularly in terms of *Audition*, which sets itself up as

somewhat of a slow puzzle film, and one that lends itself to a reevaluation upon second viewing. For many participants, ideas about contemporary Japanese horror film were tied up with the desire or the necessity for multiple viewings and re-watching, often with other people. Caroline recounted that she had watched *Confessions* (which she categorised as horror) three times in one week, once on her own and twice with other people who she was keen to share the experience with.

The social context

Altman (1999: 162) theorises that alongside sufficient shared syntactic and semantic elements, a genre needs to also have a *reception-driven definition* in order to be recognized. Altman positions genre as coming into being only once it serves a constellated community. That is, when a viewer becomes aware that other people are viewing the same films in a similar way and genre hence becomes a way of communicating about those films. These constellated communities typically tend to be fan communities. However, meaning-making and the contestation and definition of film and genre can take place at any social level. Although this study was unconcerned with fan communities, a number of observations about community and contemporary Japanese horror film emerged during the interviews, particularly as a large proportion of participants asserting that they often watched contemporary Japanese horror films with other people:

Abbie: I think I've seen *Ju-on* twice, I've definitely seen *Ring* more than once because I've watched it with other people. I used to live in a flat and we used to have horror film evenings with the people who lived upstairs, so I've watched it with a few people yeah.

David: The day after we talked about it [*Grotesque*] in the last interview, I watched it. I had a look online and then I rang up my brother and he was like “I think I’ve got that”, so he went through his stuff and he was like “yeah, yeah, I’ve got that do you wanna watch it” and I was like “yeah, I’ll come round now”.

Caroline: Definitely [prefer watching with other people]. Because when I watch them by myself, not that I don’t understand them, but when I watch them with another person then you sort of like share theories and stuff.

Although this social element is not unique to contemporary Japanese horror film, it does begin to suggest a high level of constellated and immediate communities that would perhaps lead to a stronger definition of genre than that defined by semantic and syntactic elements in the previous chapter. Although some participants stated that they preferred to watch the films alone, they said this in light of having experienced watching them with other people, confirming that communal viewing is still something which they have engaged in. Those participants who liked watching contemporary Japanese horror film socially also spoke of actively encouraging other people to watch a specific film that they had enjoyed, or being encouraged to watch one with someone else:

Jamie: *The Ring* was one of the first films I saw - Japanese ones - and my brother showed that to me.

Sarah: Usually I watch them alone first, then if I like them I’ll suggest them to friends.

Andrew: My sister was round and she was like “Have you got any really bizarre films?” and I was looking through my DVDs and saw *Ichi the Killer* and said “What about *Ichi the Killer*” and she was like “What is it?” So we watched it and she was completely shocked because she’d never watched a Japanese film in her life.

Although fan studies has pushed the idea of viewers being keen to demonstrate their pre-mainstream discovery of a film in order to position

themselves as early adopters, I would suggest that is not always the reasoning behind the dynamic at work in the case of contemporary Japanese horror film. Instead, the way in which participants discussed being introduced to the films by other people or introducing them to others was suggestive of the creation of a community that actively strengthens the genre. Interestingly, following one of the focus group sessions I was able to witness this building of community first-hand, as a number of participants who had met during the session held back to talk with each other, make film suggestions, and in some cases exchange contact details. Overall, interview responses and focus group interaction was supportive of the way in which Altman (1999) suggests that fans have a vested interest in building, defining and redefining their nature of a particular genre.

Meaning-making beyond the point of reception

How contemporary Japanese horror film affects participants beyond the moment of reception is an area which has been sorely neglected within academia. Indeed, studies of the long-term trajectory of film in general is a key area which Staiger (2000) highlights as needing further analysis. Acknowledging that any film viewing experience informs subsequent film viewings, it is evident that these experiences can inform meaning-making beyond the point of reception itself. For example, in her analysis of a group of approximately forty female readers of romance novels, Radway (1984: 50) demonstrated the way in which ideas, habits and preferences around the genre were tied to readers' daily routines. As well as encouraging others to watch films which they themselves enjoyed, interviewees also demonstrated a number of other activities such as thinking or

talking about the films, and actively seeking out knowledge either about the films themselves or about related Japanese culture:

Andrew: I read up on that actually. I don't know if it's more about the social kinds of situations, now I've really got into in, it's like Japanese life. How you get up early on a Japanese day, and worry about all the events like school and stuff. In case it ever came up in a book or a film I'd be ready.

John: there was this one horror film I had to look things up for afterwards called *Shibuya Kaidan*, which is called *The Locker* in English. The *jizo* statues, which I think in Buddhism, the child is supposed to show respect to their parents in order to be able to be protected and move on.

Elliot: the vast majority of people I know aren't really particularly interested in the films... I'll talk to them about it afterwards obviously, but they won't actually watch the film.

For John and Elliot, Japanese culture is a part of their university course, but for Andrew it is purely an area of interest. Seeking explanations or developing interest in something following a film viewing is a relatively predictable outcome which no doubt happens across film more generally. However, I was surprised to discover that for some participants, elements of specific contemporary Japanese horror films had become part of a ritual shared with friends or family removed from a viewing context:

Abbie: The film that they watch [*in Ring*]. And umm, that little song in it "frolicking brine, goblins be thine" it's really silly. Me and my husband we sing that around the house a lot haha.

Elliot: I found by accident that I can do a similar noise [to the creaking ghost noise in *The Grudge*], so I've kind of normalised it a bit, the fact that I sometimes do an impression to people and it's kind of funny. It's definitely quite a bizarre thing... but I think I've got to the point where it becomes quite a joke.

In one aspect, these common uses create meaning for the films between groups of individuals, and suggests that they are part of what Altman (1999):

163) terms “private genres”. That is, a collection of films with a common personal meaning but not necessarily linked by genre classification. This is again suggestive of the idea of a common community that has seen the same films and has the ability to engage with them laterally. This is one of his key factors in defining a genre in terms of reception-driven definition.

Meaning was also related to individual experience. Three participants had direct experience of Japan, and each one of them was able to recount an incident where they linked their experience to contemporary Japanese horror film:

John: When I was in Japan, any time I walked past a house and it was a bit like the house from *The Grudge* I felt a bit eerie.

Jamie: At the end of *The Grudge 2*, where the child pushes his mother down the steps... those kind of bridges are really common in Japan, and I could never see one without thinking “watch out for any little children”.

Graham: Well, we were on the beach, and they put this kind of grave-y thing all wrapped on the seafront because something had died. So we thought like, well the guy I was with wanted to open it up and have a look inside and I was like “no way! you shouldn’t touch that, because we’re going to set off some chain of events and we’re all gonna be dead”.

Whilst this is suggestive of impact and the role that the films play in the lives of these participants, it is also necessary to reiterate that the everyday nature of contemporary Japanese horror film lends itself to such readings.

This section has begun to hint at contemporary Japanese horror film being read through the framework of ideas about Japanese culture. Thus three questions arise which are deserving of further analysis: how do UK audiences read contemporary Japanese horror films in relation to preconceived ideas about Japanese culture? How do they understand and interpret culturally-specific

elements within the films? And how do the films perpetuate ideas about Japan and Japanese culture? These shall be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

Results 3: How do UK audiences interpret culturally-specific elements within contemporary Japanese horror film?

“When a culture is markedly different from our own”, observes Ritchie (1988: 19), “we can and often do misinterpret the film, our viewing is partial or incorrect because we are not aware of common meanings given what we are seeing”. In the case of any viewer, a film is watched and interpreted within the frameworks which they have available to them. Accordingly, interpretations of films cross-culturally are removed from their original context and meaning. I would argue that these removed views are no less valid, and in fact play an important part in the process of transnational film watching and perceived notions of Japanese culture.

In her analysis of *Spirited Away*, Denison (2007: 318) has noted the way in which transnational reception of Japanese films is “Often based around partial recognitions and uneven cultural awareness that can foster *different* interpretations of the film”. Although, given a wide range of multiplicity amongst viewers little more than insight can be drawn, this chapter will build upon the previous two results chapters by asking “How do UK audiences interpret culturally specific elements within contemporary Japanese horror film?” Revisiting the concept of audiences equating a film with ideas about the nation which produced it, my purpose here is to provide an important overview of some of the ways in which contemporary Japanese horror film both influences and reinforces ideas about the nature of contemporary Japanese society. In this chapter I will demonstrate how the various frameworks of understanding that

are available to participants are applied to specific elements within the films, and how they are open to different interpretations when placed in the transnational UK viewing context.

The culturally-specific elements in question will be broken down into two sections to address the way in which meaning-making is a process of constant redefinition. The first section will focus on the three most common tropes which participants often correctly interpreted as being tied into Japanese folklore and tradition: Water, the appearance of Oiwa, and ghosts and spirits. However, participants tended towards giving perceived explanations of these which differed from the actual domestic and intended meaning. The second section addresses ideas about contemporary Japanese society through themes which participants perceived as present within contemporary Japanese horror film: Women and revenge, children and the generation gap, and honour, respect, bullying and suicide. How contemporary Japanese horror film influenced participants perceptions in conjunction with already-existing knowledge is explored.

UK audiences' interpretations of culturally-specific tropes

Contemporary Japanese horror film is indicative of a traditional meets contemporary aesthetic, where folklore often blends with modern anxieties. Given that cinema is a comparatively recent form of horror, it is unsurprising that, as outlined in chapter three, contemporary Japanese horror film owes much to earlier forms such as the folk story and Kabuki theatre. This section will examine participant interpretations of a selection of these traditionally-rooted elements. Those tropes that have been chosen for consideration were raised and

identified during focus group sessions, and were also deemed by participants in individual interviews to be common to contemporary Japanese horror film.

Water

In a culture which is surrounded by water, it is perhaps unsurprising that long wet hair, mysterious puddles, dripping taps, indoor rain and drowning are recognisable tropes of the contemporary Japanese horror film. However, beyond this, water holds further meaning in Japan. It is associated with birth and has a strong connection with the supernatural. In Japanese folklore, water is linked to the spirit world, and spirits are traditionally regarded as appearing wherever water exists. Of the case study films, water appears most prominently in this context in *Ring* and *Dark Water*, and interviewees tended to notice its presence. It is also used in *Ju-on: The Grudge*, where it did not seem to have made as much of an impact.

Many participants offered up more than one explanation as to the meaning of water in these films, both in terms of what it meant to them personally and what they perceived it to mean in its Japanese context. There was a large degree of cross-over in these readings, all of which differed from the intended meaning. Perhaps indicative of a UK society with heavy Christian influences, as opposed to the Buddhist and Shinto influences underlying much of Japanese folklore, many participants cited the idea of water as being associated with the idea of purity. A number of these participants offset the water in Japanese horror films against this idea, marking it as something that differed to their traditional view:

Abbie: I mean, it's certainly not like an image of water that is wonderfully cleansing and nourishing, it's definitely something around death and water or drowning, you know there's something... you wouldn't want to drink that water would you. It looks as though it would probably kill you, you know, it's really dirty and stagnant and nasty, yeah. It's not a nice bubbling spring haha.

Graham: And in *Dark Water* it's got all this water, it's raining outside, the house is really leaky, but then the good part of water is that you need it for drinking... Then the girl mentions, when the auntie is round, that the water is no good, in this film all water is bad. Even though everyone knows water kills people, people still desire water and have it around and I think as well, in *Dark Water*, the taps turn on on their own. People think they control water but really water's controlling them and it's getting everywhere.

Participants also framed their understanding of water in contemporary Japanese horror film around their knowledge of other areas of Japan. For example, that water must play a central role due to Japan being an archipelago. Other interpretations were more perceivably universal, such as fear of drowning or water being necessary for life. However, an unexpected temporal factor within frameworks of interpretation was observed. All interviews took place after the tsunami of 2011, which participants demonstrated a high awareness of. Most likely due to this, the majority of participants equated water within the films with a fear of water in everyday Japanese culture:

John: I mean, with *The Ring*, the water is essentially the unknown. Japan being an island country, the water was rarely positive in terms of how it impacts on the country, tsunamis, or the bad weather, typhoons and everything else. So, there's always been a fear of the effects that water can have, and particularly in the past not knowing what was in the water, and that attachment of fear probably carried over in *Dark Water* as well.

Graham: Well, I always thought that, like, water is just water so it's good and bad. It's necessary for life but it can take it away, so it's such apparent from what the Japanese are used to,

like a lot of tsunamis and floods and things, that water is really destructive.

Although it is presumed that participants knew of the existence of tsunamis prior to 2011, because of the prominent coverage in the UK media it was likely to have been more present in their collective imaginary. Given that many participants had watched the films prior to 2011, using knowledge in this way is fitting with the concept that the meanings which audiences find within films are not always linear. Meaning can be created retrospectively as new information is acquired.

For a number of participants, the device of water in contemporary Japanese horror film was something they viewed as little more than a Japanese aesthetic related to something unknown. For example:

- Craig: The puddles of water, I think. I don't think it's anything in particular but that, with those patches of water appearing everywhere just unexplained... it's just a bit creepy because it's borderline normal but unexplained kind of thing.
- Jodie: Yeah, just a bit... because it [water] was unexplained I think it was just really creepy and there's something sinister about it. Not necessarily frightening but it sort of makes you feel anxious.
- Jamie: Well water's used as quite a theme, isn't it? I think it's quite an interesting one, it makes you feel like there is something quite supernatural about water... again, it doesn't tell you what though, but there's something spooky about it. It does create an ambience.

In this context, water was regarded much in the same way as it was resituated within the Hollywood remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films, divorced from meaning. This relocation, alongside participants strong associations of contemporary Japanese horror film with the psychological (as discussed in chapter six), led to water being sometimes read as an extension of a character's

psychological state. Additional individual readings included water being evident of claustrophobia, and that it reflected on the past. For a number of participants, and usually those who had seen fewer of the films in question, the occurrence of water had no particular meaning other than being a narrative element.

Appearance of Oiwa

Many prominent contemporary Japanese horror films pay homage to the story of Oiwa through both story elements and the appearance of spirits. Perhaps the most well-known example is *Ring*, played out in the way that Sadako's ghost is portrayed, particularly in terms of her white dress, her eye, and the long hair obscuring her face. The story of Oiwa, (*Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*) is one of the most famous Japanese ghost stories and is frequently adapted for film. Having been poisoned by her husband, consumed with seeking revenge, Oiwa returns as *onryō*. The figure of Oiwa shares typical *onryō* aesthetic traits such as wearing a white dress to represent her burial kimono, and Kabuki portrayals of the story became the source of her long black hair and indigo-white face. Barrett (1989: 7) notes that this appearance also carries:

A substantial cultural and aesthetic weight, as long black hair is often aligned in the Japanese popular imaginary with conceptualisations of feminine beauty and sensuality, and the images of the gazing female eye (or eyes) is frequently associated with vaginal imagery.

One trait that sets Oiwa apart from other *onryō* and marks her as a visual influence for Sadako is her disfigured left eye, caused by the poison given to her by her husband. Oiwa is often shown as losing her hair due to this poison, another trait that permeates contemporary Japanese horror film, with characters finding mysterious clumps of black hair in *Ring*, *The Grudge* and *Dark Water*.

Although a few participants were vaguely aware that the appearance of Sadako had precursors, none linked her to these very culturally-specific folktale origins. Highlighting the differing reception contexts, UK audiences are unlikely to have been exposed to the roots of Sadako in the same way a domestic viewer might have been. A few participants shared their interpretations of the symbolism of Sadako, for example attributing her to being a representation of the atomic bombings, or as being rooted in the real-life story of a girl who was trapped down a well. However, it was far more common for participants to assign meanings to aspects of her appearance. Most participants commented on Sadako's long wet hair, which obscures her face. The meaning behind this was consistently linked to the idea of faces, and suggestive of prioritising the importance of seeing someone's face in British culture, something that is often communicated in Western horror films through the use of masks (Werner 2010). For example:

Andrew: I think that gives an air of mystery, you can't see her face, you don't know what's going on under there. It's literal as well as a metaphor... that's something which I suppose goes throughout horror with people wearing masks and having scarred faces and that sort of thing.

Elliot: I think what is very well done, I think he realizes the importance of faces, and I think that faces is important because although you know it's a girl and you can tell she's pretty young, you can't see the character at all. Seeing faces is an important thing because it's the way people register with people.

Alongside the inability to connect through seeing Sadako's face, another common interpretation was a fear of the unknown that lurked behind her hair. This was most prominently summed up in Andrew's observation that: "You can't see her face, you don't know what's going on under there...You can't see her face, and

when she shows you her face you die”. Only John offered an explanation of the hair itself, observing that “The hair is actually similar to a lot of the characters in Buddhist horror stories”.

Whereas the hair and eye of Sadako’s appearance are tied into very specific elements of folktales, her white dress is linked to the more accessible connotation of white with burial kimono even in modern day Japan. This example highlights the varying degrees of cross-cultural competency that emerged as having influenced participants’ interpretations. A number of interviewees had knowledge of Japanese culture, either as a student or from personal interest, and a few were able to discern the link to burial colours. John was able to recount an anecdote as to how he knew this, demonstrating interpretation through a lived experience: “Well, apparently white in Japan means death. I have a friend who was going to wear a white *yukata* to the Gion *matsuri* and he was told ‘do not do that’”.

Other participants were more hesitant in associating white with burial kimono even when they possessed this knowledge. Upon raising this association, these participants did so alongside an alternative meaning. Usually the alternative meaning was deemed either more or equally authentic. This demonstrates that an audience never just has one framework thorough which they can interpret, they have the ability to choose from a range of meanings which are available to them:

Dawn: I think the white is maybe innocence? Because white is the colour of innocence. I also know in Asia it’s associated with grief as well, because they wear white, traditionally, at funerals. But I would think innocence.

Elliot: I could be wrong on this, but I think white particularly in Chinese cultures is associated with death, and I think it

might be in Japanese cultures as well. They definitely wear black to funerals in Japan, I don't know whether they.... Because a lot of the spirits in Noh and Kabuki definitely wear white and have white faces. So I think white's maybe connected with death and ghosts, that's what I'd associate it with. Even if I didn't know that I'd probably associate it with ghosts.

Participants who had less exposure to Japanese culture, and therefore less potential cultural knowledge from which to determine a meaning, overwhelmingly interpreted Sadako's white dress through the Western equation of white with innocence. This was often justified with reference to narrative elements such as her having died when she was a young girl. Acknowledging Sadako's position as a girl, Jamie demonstrated intercontextual meaning-making by applying frameworks of British horror to the interpretation of her white dress:

Jamie: Well it's similar to traditional British kind of horror I think, like in those spooky ones with girls in white Victorian dresses and that kind of thing. I think that's the Japanese equivalent of that kind of era. I don't know if it is like a more traditional outfit but it has that kind of look to it.

The least discussed aspect of Sadako's appearance was her eye. Many participants found no meaning in this and simply dismissed it as a superficial creepy image, linked to an unknowability or inability to connect. Ideas about eyes as "the windows to the soul" were expressed as well as the belief that "everyone has a fear of eyes". A couple of literal interpretations based purely upon a reading of the narrative were also related. The implication of these narrative-based interpretations is that even when an audience does not possess a prior framework through which they can deduce meaning, the opportunity exists to deduce it from the text itself:

Ruth: I mean, is she looking up because she was looking up out of

(19, female, student) the well and her eye got fixed in that position because she was always looking up hoping for help from the well. I thought it was just general creepiness, yeah.

Elliot: I think it stresses the idea that she's watching him and she's always been watching him, and there's this kind of presence with whoever is a victim of this all the time.

Sarah expressed that the representation of Sadako's eye made it seem as if she was looking for revenge, an aspect of her character that will be discussed further in a later section of this chapter.

Ghosts and Spirits

In the representation of ghosts on film, there is generally a large difference between Japan and the West. Whereas Western horror films tend to fixate on the fear of, or the moment of, death itself, contemporary Japanese horror films are often not so much about dying as they are about what happens *afterwards*. *Ring* takes place after the death of Sadako, *Ju-on: The Grudge* revolves around a curse created after someone dies in rage. A primary figure within contemporary Japanese horror film is the vengeful female ghost, a trope that has been influenced and shaped by centuries of tradition in Japan (Iwasaka & Toelken 1994). These female ghosts are known as *yūrei*, and in many popular folktales they return, motivated by anger, to seek vengeance for their untimely deaths. Sometimes this is upon the person who killed them, and sometimes society itself is the wider target. Their final resting places are frequently lonely locations such as swamps or wells, another aspect that has carried over into contemporary Japanese horror film. Ghosts such as Sadako are often the consequence of a youth marked by suffering, and many of the ghosts portrayed in contemporary Japanese horror film are set on their path of destruction after a moment of

betrayal. Ghostly children such as those portrayed in *Dark Water*, *Ju-on: The Grudge* and *Ring* often come to be so as a result of some terrible crime, returning to threaten other children and be eventually confronted by female heroes. Rather than forming a storyline about monsters, these ghost children serve to highlight alienation and how modern society disrupts traditional family structures, leaving the most vulnerable of us alone in the world.

Within Japanese culture, Buddhist roots denote veneration for the dead and one's ancestors, which is substantially different from that which generally dominates Western culture. Whilst there is natural human sorrow at the passing of a loved one, there is not the well-defined borderline between the living and the dead common to Western thought (Shimazono 2012). Daily life in Japan is carried out in the belief that spirits naturally dwell in close proximity. The Japanese idea of ghosts is that they are so real they can be touched and encountered without even knowing they are dead. It is not unreasonable to assume that the attachment of a ghost to your body could significantly alter both your weight and posture. Nor is it beyond recognition that a ghost could blur the line between fantasy and reality as in *Dark Water*, a concept that was perhaps tellingly abandoned in its Hollywood remake.

Participants' meaning-making around ghosts in contemporary Japanese horror film can be divided into three categories: Appearance, revenge, and child ghosts. However, little meaning was attributed to revenge or child ghosts beyond that linked to Japanese society, which I discuss in the second half of this chapter. The main framework through which participants approached the portrayal of Japanese ghosts was one of difference, particularly in relation to their experiences of viewing ghosts in Western horror film:

- Elliot: Until recently I think Japanese horrors have been more reliant on the idea of vengeful spirits, whereas in the West there's a lot more of an idea of it being kind of society's outsiders who end up killing people, or people who are maybe um just disturbed. So it's more a kind of, more of a material element in Western horror.
- Mike: Like in *The Ring* and *The Grudge* and stuff like this, it kind of just, there's that sort of like supernatural theme where it's more sort of story, I guess there's not so much some geezer running round in a hockey mask with a chainsaw trying to cut people up. There's more sort of always coming to get you but not necessarily something like, I dunno, kind of just kind of normal rather than just all out fucked up.
- Graham: Like, for example, in *Dark Water*... It's very childlike, but she's obviously a monster because her skin's green and she has like no face, but she still acts like a child. Whereas in American horror films or Western ones, they're either sick people but they're still human, or they're like monsters who don't really act like humans.

These recognitions of difference begin to hint at the aforementioned prominent differences between Japanese and Western horror films: Differences in Japanese culture in approaches towards spirits, and differences in the representation of ghosts as something more tied into the real world that can mix with humans unidentified. Although many participants noticed a marked difference or "uniqueness" in this portrayal of ghosts, they generally lacked the Japan-specific cultural context through which to interpret them. As a result of this, interviewees often struggled to pin down the idea of the ghost despite recognising individual elements:

- Graham: As in they have human form and their motives are very human, like they wanna get revenge. But they're kind of like... I suppose they're like weird, they're not human, but they are at the same time, which makes them more scary.
- Peter: They're almost like half-ghost half-human. In other films where they're either ghosts or people, in these they're not... like in *Paranormal Activity*, the first one it's definitely a

ghost, it's not tangible, whereas in these Japanese ones they're like ordinary people but slightly ghosts.

Andrew: I just think that it's the fact that they are more human, they could be real. They're a lot like zombies, in *Dark Water* she's all green and stuff and moulded over. She's a person but she's not.

The image of ghosts in contemporary Japanese horror was thus often positioned as something unknowable. Interviewees attributed differences to unspecified different storytelling traditions, or unknown aspects of contemporary Japanese culture and religion. However, a range of cross-cultural competencies was present, with some participants more aware than others as to the Japanese idea of spirits:

Abbie: I don't know if I can put my finger on it, it's just something you'd never see in a Western horror film, it must be something that taps into a different ghost stories tradition in that country.

Mike: I dunno, but the whole sort of idea I guess of ghosts strikes me. I dunno if that's different culture, what's scary, what's supernatural and the things that connect to Japanese and the Western society might be different.

Elliot: I think there's definitely more of a reliance on the idea of, well I suppose it's two-fold. There's one of the wider cultural aspect, I think they rely more on the supernatural, but in a more kind of Buddhist way, like Shinto way, you know, the idea of spirits and kind of ghosts. So there's that added idea that they're tapping into an aspect of Japanese culture, kind of historical culture.

Peter: Yeah and there's a lot of things that have a more supernatural side to it I don't know if it's more linked in Japan, that side of some connection to the afterlife or whatever, but they are definitely underlying in a lot of their films.

John: Well, I suppose the Western culture and the idea of Christianity about people going up to heaven or being trapped in purgatory or whatever because of what's been done to them. I think it's similar in Japan, but the Japanese have this really interesting idea about – I don't actually

believe in it – but the idea of spirits around and I think that's something.

Despite varying degrees of cultural competency, the nature of ghosts in contemporary Japanese horror film were picked up by all participants as a prominent defining feature of the films. This was often through remarks such as “I think if you saw a picture you'd be able to identify that that was a ghost from a Japanese horror film” (Abbie). Even participants who claimed that they could not identify any meaning acknowledged that they could identify a certain style, and that it marked the film as Japanese. This would support the previously mentioned conclusion that, for a number of UK viewers, the Japanese element of contemporary Japanese horror film largely relates to aesthetics or stylistic conventions. In turn this may be a contributing factor in the confusion between contemporary horror films from different Asian countries. However, that is not to imply that these ways of consuming contemporary Japanese film outside of its intended meaning are any less valid. As I strongly opine, too much focus is placed by academia on the intended meaning or the meaning located within the text itself, often leaving the wider multiplicity of audience interpretations unduly neglected.

UK audiences' perceptions of Japanese society

As Stringer (2005: 96) observes, it is “Natural for viewers to want to draw conclusions regarding what the films they consume may have to tell them about the society that produced them”. Indeed, much analysis around contemporary Japanese horror film has made an attempt to draw conclusions about how the films reflect societal issues. However, the impressions of Japanese society that

viewers gain at least in part from watching contemporary Japanese horror films has been largely ignored. Taking the most relevant aspects of Kuhn's (1990: 1) theory of cultural instrumentality as a way of looking at what a film genre *does* rather than simply what it *is*, the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film can be read as both repressionist and reflectionist. Repressionist criticism assumes that texts are a place where the unspoken and the unspeakable are embedded and meaning ultimately relates to the social. In the reflectionist model the issues dealt with resolve themselves into two types: social preoccupations through the mirroring of attitudes, trends and change in society; or social-psychological preoccupations through expressing the collective psyche of an era. The assumption therefore is that social trends and attitudes in a sense produce films which can then be read as evidence of those trends and attitudes.

This section deals with elements of Japanese society which participants identified in relation to their viewing of contemporary Japanese horror films. The implication of such discussion is that contemporary Japanese horror film, and the way in which it is framed in its transnational context, has the potential to influence ideas about Japan. I have broken down the most frequently mentioned societal elements into groups due to crossover and for ease of analysis.

Women and revenge

Likely due to the prominent positioning of vengeful female spirits and the revenge-taking character of Asami in *Audition*, revenge and women were topics which were often discussed inter-relatedly. As Caroline framed it: "It's the saying of 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'". Revenge was not framed as being an element that is exclusive to Japanese society, or to contemporary Japanese

horror film. However, participants did communicate the idea of vengeful female spirits as being something which had distinct Japanese origins in ghost stories, and perceived these stories to be well-recognised in Japanese society. A couple of participants suggested an alternative reading of revenge, linked to their perception of Japanese society as placing importance upon honour, particularly in their interpretations of *Ichi the Killer*.

The character of Asami was well-positioned for participants to reflect on their perceptions about the treatment of women in Japanese society. A number of participants cited a more pronounced divide between men and women in Japanese society, reinforced traditional gender roles, and a belief that women are regarded as second-class citizens in Japan. The switch in roles when Asami becomes the one with the power led to a number of participants positioning *Audition* as a feminist film in terms of her revenge and retribution. While John perceived *Audition* as commentary, Elliot perceived it as a direct critique:

John: I actually interpreted much of it as a commentary on the role of men and women in a relationship in Japan. After the main character's wife dies, he eventually moves on but obviously he meets that girl and essentially he's filling the void of his lost wife, the void still exists even if he insist he's moved on. On the other hand the girl has had a bad experience of men in the past. For her, filling in the void of someone else is hardly a positive thing, yet that would be a natural thing expected by society.

Elliot: The idea of women in Japan, it was the idea of their position being critiqued, and a look at the way that women are treated. You know, they're effectively in many, many ways second-class citizens in various aspects of Japanese life. And, not that I'm saying it's good that she got revenge, but the fact that she got revenge was an interesting way of him [the director] looking at that relationship between men and women

In particular, the fact that the male character in *Audition* was auditioning for a new wife was picked up by interviewees as a weird and unnatural element. Participants believed it to be a comment upon the role of women in Japanese society. Perhaps due to the way in which a “weird Japan” discourse is popularised in the UK media, a number of participants unquestioningly believed that these auditions were something which actually happens in Japan.²⁰ An unexpected point of caution was uncovered here, in participants taking things at face value, or drawing unquestioned conclusions about a nation based upon their films.

Children and the generation gap

Children were regarded by many participants as being a specific feature of contemporary Japanese horror film, both in the form of child ghosts and human protagonists. The way that children in these films interacted with each other and with other generations allowed participants to project or create associations about Japanese society. Child ghosts tended to be sympathetic characters amongst participants, often linked to neglect. For example:

Graham: The girl in yellow, she was left by her mother and then she fell in the water cooler thing. Then, at the very end where the ghost girl comes back and she's hugging the mother and the mum's like "Yes I'm your mother", then her daughter's left alone so that's like a pattern. And then when she's older and she's at the kindergarten and she sees that girl waiting all left alone, it's like this thing is continuing, it's not really about the spirits, it's talking about childhood neglect I think.

²⁰ One need only browse a newspaper to see that any strange anomaly within Japanese culture seems to be picked up and positioned as being indicative of a widespread and inherently “weird” culture. For example, following a National Geographic documentary in Japan, “bagel head” became a recognised Internet meme, and was reported as a trend in a sensationalist manner by publications including the UKs’ *Daily Mail* (2012) and *The Sun* (2012). This widespread misreporting was subsequently debunked by part of the crew that made the documentary in their personal blog. See: <http://www.lacarmina.com/blog/2012/10/bagel-head-trend-japan-truth-japanese-bagelheads-website-saline-forehead-inflation-donut-taboo/>

Anna: When I was doing psychology, we were looking at how much pain the separation causes a child when the mother leaves, and apparently Japanese babies get it the worst because Japanese mothers are the most kind of...mothering, apparently. So that was always in the back of my mind, but, I know that Japan has cram schools and suicide rates are really, really high as well, so maybe it is a commentary on working parents and children are neglected, maybe the children's emotional welfare is questionable.

The injustices suffered by these child ghosts are often family-based. The frequency alone of the child ghost trope was a contributing factor which led some participants to conclude that it must constitute a problem in modern Japanese society, rather than something rooted in traditional folk stories. This was a revelation, as other findings of this study would point to supernatural tropes being uniformly linked by audiences to the more traditional roots of the films, rather than to modern society.

Living children in contemporary Japanese horror film, perhaps by the merit of being more realistic, tended to draw more direct comparisons with perceived societal issues in Japan. Participants who were more discriminate in applying the term horror tended to tie this issue strongly into social commentary. This is perhaps reflective of the categorisation of films such as *Confessions* and *Battle Royale* as a kind of "social horror", distinct from the regular horror genre. Readings ranged from sympathetic, with observations about broken homes, to commentary upon disruptive students:

Caroline: Well, in *Confessions*, I think the children aren't necessarily the bad guys. I mean everything about the teacher and the way she sort of plots it out...I think it reflects on society. Like, sometimes when kids are so bad it's not necessarily their fault.

Sarah: Probably, because they say *Battle Royale* happened when students didn't respect their teachers, or appreciate life or whatever, so they do this in order to make them think,

that's what they think, where they're heading. Making students appreciate life... that's what I got from it.

John: I mean, in *Battle Royale*, there's no connection between the children and their parents or teachers. A lot of them come from either broken homes where one of the parents is no longer around, or they have been a victim of child abuse. The teacher just cannot relate to his pupils at all, and these kinds of issues are often ignored in Japan, or people act like they are not real problems, and that you only really see them via film.

With *Battle Royale* in particular, much attention was paid to the way it dealt with student-teacher relations and the gap between generations. Some participants assumed these to be social problems in Japan purely due to frequency of portrayal and absence of supernatural elements increasing the likelihood that it "could actually happen". Others cited already being aware that these were existing problems, having read about them prior to having seen the films. This application of inter-media frameworks is similar to that demonstrated by participants in their readings of water in light of the 2011 tsunami. However, in this case the knowledge applied was not done so retrospectively so as to force a reevaluation, but was brought to the viewing of the film, having the potential to then reinforce or question these ideas. For Graham, the way in which *Battle Royale* and *Confessions* portrayed these elements made him question perceptions about Japanese society which he had gained from other contexts:

Graham: I just had this idea that Japan is like... did you ever see the world school rankings for maths and language? Japan is always on top so you assume the kids are studious and polite. You'd assume all the kids are obedient and nice but, especially with *Battle Royale* and *Confessions* it shows they're really not, the kids are like borderline evil, especially killing that little girl in *Confessions*. Then in *Battle Royale*, how one of them stabs the teacher in the leg. I think it's created out of... it must be a commentary on what's happening in society, but it's nothing I personally know

about. Watching it I'd say that Japanese adults at least think that Japanese kids are becoming unruly.

The major platforms for perceptions like this were two of the most contested "horror" films, *Battle Royale* and *Confessions*. For some participants, the focus on what they perceived to be Japanese societal problems was enough for them to not class a particular film as horror, and instead position it as a "critique". As Elliot observed, "I think that's what distances it from a horror, it's saying that this is a critique of Japanese society and the problems between generations".

Honour, suicide and bullying

Unlike the previously discussed elements, when interviewees mentioned ideas about honour within Japanese culture, these were universally based on a wider cultural knowledge of Japan that they recognised within the films, rather than being influenced by the films themselves. Honour in Japanese society was often presented as something which you "wouldn't get in Western culture", or a variance upon that idea:

Mike: Ummm, no not really, I dunno, maybe they are a little bit more... reserved, a little bit more thoughtful with their actions. Just a bit more mutual respect for everyone, and you never get any over here. I just don't get that from watching most Japanese cultural stuff, whether it be a horror film or a TV series or, I think I get my sort of feelings from Japanese culture as a whole really.

David: I dunno, Japanese people have this sort of whole thing about honor, and she [the teacher in *Confessions*] doesn't go and get revenge in a fast way by going out to kill them, she goes out to try and show them what they've done is wrong.

Andrew: When you see the surgeon [in *Grotesque*] and the way he talks about things, I don't have much knowledge about these sorts of things, but the way he talks to people, it

always seem so traditional. I don't know what they call them, but the word endings that you add to someone's name, he uses them. Even though he's chopping you up bit by bit, he's still showing you respect. I think you wouldn't get that in Western culture.

Suicide, which interviewees usually discussed in relation to honour, was regarded as a social problem. Participants perceived it as universal but somewhat more pronounced within Japanese society. On more than one occasion, the way in which a character commits suicide was described by interviewees as a particularly "Japanese" way of doing so. Participants were often able to provide a number of examples of suicide across the contemporary Japanese horror film genre. In line with Kuhn's theory of cultural instrumentality, this would suggest (at least to interviewees) that frequency of representation is linked to how prominent the social problem is. This was supported with comments such as "I suppose that was something happening in Japan at the time and they decided to represent it" (Adam).

Bullying, although also perceived as prominent within Japanese culture, was regarded as a much more universal phenomenon.

Elliot: The idea of competition within society. I mean, with all societies, but maybe particularly Japanese society where you have so many people competing. The idea of competition and the idea of group mentality and bullying and kind of confrontation in that respect as well.

Caroline: Because with *Confessions* the whole message to me was that in Japan with the parents, children need to be disciplined, and against bullying. And that's happening all over the world.

The conclusion drawn with these particular responses is that, although they were seemingly universal problems, through a reflectionist reading of the films, the prominence of the problem is positioned as a social preoccupation which was

mirrored in the frequency of its appearance. For the purposes of this study it suggests that transnational context does little to deter readings related to frequency, and also shows the power that film has as an avenue for influencing ideas about the country which produced it.

Crime and violence

Although crime and violence were the least discussed amongst the societal themes addressed, they provided perhaps the most interesting insight into participants' understanding of Japanese culture. This was due to them being the only elements through which participants believed contemporary Japanese horror film to say something about Japanese audiences. This did not, however, mean that other meanings were rejected. In line with the other societal elements discussed in this chapter, participants interpreted violence within contemporary Japanese horror film through perceptions which they already held about crime within Japanese society. Often these interpretations were indicative of the extreme facts or ideas that are perpetuated by Western media. A few participants mentioned *Yakuza*, and two specifically mentioned the same "fact" about serial killers:

Abbie: Because she's [Asami] just really damaged isn't she... she doesn't do particularly pleasant things at the end of the film... I mean, I guess I did wonder where that particular film as a Western viewer captures that feeling of, you know... you always get that statistic there's more serial killers per head of population in Japan than anywhere else in the world.

Craig: Because they've got a big problem with serial killers haven't they, it's one of the big things that you read about Japan. They've got a high rate of serial killer in a lot of places. I think maybe it's, if you did have that as a culture, you'd probably want to explore why.

Although it was largely considered to be part of a Japanese stylistic aesthetic, a number of participants saw the use of violence in particular contemporary Japanese horror films as saying something about the Japanese audience for whom it was intended:

Andrew: I do, because, not in the sense that in Japanese culture that's how they'd always kill someone [like in *Grotesque*], but in a sense that there isn't a market for it, seemingly, in the Western market that would push something to that level.

Caroline: Absolutely, absolutely, yes, because I mean, watching the news and things that kind of thing follows. Even if the film was not necessarily to do with the Japanese, It's disgusting because it's their path into it.

Jodie: I did think it could maybe be anywhere in the world. But I mean, it doesn't relate to the Western society, you know.

Indeed, *Grotesque* was banned in the UK, indicative of the differences between rating systems and censorship for films between the two countries. However, this does not mean that it is a commentary on Japanese audience tastes. The film still found an audience through illegal download in the UK which included two of the participants. Of course, while it is natural for audiences to want to make assumptions about a society based on its films, it is a more complicated matter altogether to judge a society based upon one perceived viewing demographic.

On the absence of meaning

The search for meaning plays a central role within contemporary Japanese horror film, not just in the case of the transnational audiences interpretations presented in this chapter, but also in terms of their narrative and images. Often, part of the pleasure of viewing these films is tied up with solving such mysteries as the tape in *Ring*, or the red school bag in *Dark Water*. Contemporary Japanese

horror film, both in its narrative and in its positioning as a largely unfamiliar text, actively invites interpretations as part of the viewing process. Film by its nature is an entertainment media, and participants related pleasure both in being able to provide meanings, and in recounting their own experiences of seeking out meanings. However, meaning-making is by and large a subconscious process. What then when the audience declares that they find *no meaning*?

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, even signs which are seemingly universal have the potential to work differently in a transnational context, and to be completely removed from their original intended meaning. Understandably, this chapter has focused on those instances where participants provided meanings. However, one of the most common responses from participants was that certain elements had no particular meaning to them, or that the particular reason why some tropes were “creepy” lay in their perceived unknowable nature. This does not, however, render the films themselves or participants’ readings any less legitimate in a transnational context. Any absence of meaning enables the postmodern consumption of these texts in line with the idea of non-meaning. As Malcolmson (1985: 25) observes in relation to Barthes’ (1970) *Empire of Signs* “Once meaning is denied (‘absented from’) the object (a poem, a gesture), the pain of understanding is relieved”. In the final chapter of this thesis I will provide an overview of the findings drawn from the process of analysing transnational audience understandings of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, and present the wider implications of these.

Chapter 9

Conclusion: You don't have to go to Texas for a chainsaw massacre

Implications

This study has implications for a number of fields, in particular film and genre studies, and audience reception studies. However there are also implications more widely for cultural studies. Throughout the previous eight chapters I have actively worked towards presenting new approaches to the under-addressed areas of the cross-cultural audience and genre in a transnational context.

In terms of genre studies, this thesis opens up a new approach to genre through its audience-led nature and consideration of transnational context. In doing so, it draws attention to the previously uncontested Western-centric nature of the field through an investigation of the way in which domestic Japanese genres are neglected. In addressing audience reception studies, I have highlighted the benefits of studying audience reception simultaneously with the context in which the text is received, particularly when that text is removed from its original context.

The analysis performed in this thesis probes the question of what is at stake in the transnational movement of texts, meaning, and their consumption and re-appropriation. As demonstrated, there is a loss of meaning when an audience encounters a text from another culture. However, this simultaneously has the potential to create new meanings. In terms of the implications for cultural studies, while globalisation continues to alienate texts from their origin,

this study demonstrates that films concurrently have an impact upon the formation of ideas about the nation which produced them.

The findings of this study also have implications beyond academia, for marketers and distributors of contemporary Japanese horror film in the UK. Although the use of constructed genre terms to encompass a range of films played a large part in getting them to a UK audience, the reductive nature of shoehorning into genres is shown to be damaging for business. Participants of this study were more likely to not enjoy a film on which they were mis-sold, particularly when it did not fit with their idea of horror. In turn, they spoke negatively of it without prompting. This suggests that they also spread negative word-of-mouth following viewings of films which they perceived as not fitting within the genre which they were promoted as, or met the expectations created.

Perhaps most importantly, I have taken influence from all of these areas in order to pioneer an audience-led approach to defining genre in a transnational context. As outlined in chapter two, this approach consisted of combining four specific areas into two combined approaches: *genre/transnational context* and *cross-cultural reception/individuality*. This thesis offers potential for moving the research literature forward by presenting a number of hypotheses as to future use of such an approach, and these are outlined later in this chapter. Notably, these hypotheses extend a definition of genre that goes beyond semantic and syntactic elements, which have been the key way through which genre has previously been defined. The implications beyond contemporary Japanese horror film of these hypotheses are evident. They are particularly applicable to transnational film in general (where agents can often be at odds with each other in defining genres), but are also applicable to other transnational media, and also

in taking a more subjective approach to domestic genres. Ultimately, all genres are subjective on behalf of the viewer and their previous experiences and film-viewing competencies.

Made in the UK: The genre of contemporary Japanese horror film(s)

The title of this chapter plays into my immediate thoughts in summing up the findings of the study: First, that the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film is a UK construct, and we cannot look to Japan for a definition of it. Second, there is a high level of variation amongst audience interpretations. Although I still strongly advocate an audience-led approach, it does entail a lot of *mess*. Perhaps the *massacre* of the title is representative of what happens when a fragmented audience meets an unstable genre.

Although there was no clear consensus as to the films which constitute contemporary Japanese horror film, audience research highlighted a clear duality upon which viewers were divided: *supernatural* and *gore*. Whilst all interviewees considered the supernatural films as emblematic of contemporary Japanese horror, there was a clear divide regarding those which were based in violence and gore.

Two surprising revelations emerged as to how UK audiences defined the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film. These demonstrated that the ways in which audiences define genre differ from the rigid ways in which it is defined by critics, and go beyond shared semantic and syntactic elements:

1. Value judgments: Participants who strongly disliked a particular film (for example, those who disliked *Ichi the Killer* because of its violence) were less likely to see it as a horror film.

2. Internalisation: Participants were as likely to judge a film and vocalise it to be contemporary Japanese horror based upon how it made them *feel*, as they were to identify it based upon common tropes of themes. For example, if the film created a feeling of *shock, suspense, tension or disgust*.

Overall, participants displayed a significant amount of resilience and free-will in their determination of whether a film was representative of the contemporary Japanese horror genre. Although context played a large part in their interpretations, this was more in terms of factors related to individuality or to film-viewing as an experience. The contextual factor of reductive marketing (Dew 2007, Shin 2009) was not as influential as might be assumed. Participants who were aware of *Tartan Asia Extreme's* marketing actively rejected it, and often participants had bypassed any sort of marketing all together, for example, having been introduced to a film by a friend. One problem of the constructed genre of contemporary Japanese horror film is that it is often misused in ways which conflict with audience expectations. When a film was strongly suggested to be something which it was not, participants expressed annoyance at this, and in turn did not speak positively about it, preferring to focus on the negative points or how it differed from what was presented in its promotion.

As observed by Altman (1984, 1999), in order to form a strong and durable genre, texts must share both semantic and syntactic elements. Given the variation amongst participants as to the boundaries of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film, it would seem that it is indeed unsubstantive. This study reinforces that the existence of common tropes and themes plays a large part in the formation of genre, and finds that these are not explicitly shared across what can be regarded as contemporary Japanese horror

film in the UK. This is, of course, due to films originating from a wider variety of domestic genres in Japan.

Changing too, and forcing constant re-evaluation, is the nature of contemporary Japanese horror film itself. Horror, being based in social anxieties and preoccupations is a fluid and ever-evolving genre. The contemporary Japanese horror film genre addressed in this thesis is different from the traditional ghost tales of the 1950s such as *Onibaba* and *Kwaidan*, or from the violence, gore and body horror of the 1980s embodied by films such as *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. The question frequently posed when a genre becomes viewed as exhausted is that of “where do we go from here?” More recent Japanese horror is evolving towards a play on new media, and I think it won’t be long before we see horror based on social networks and selfies, and perhaps moving towards more universal themes that are increasingly familiar to a transnational audience in an ever-connected world.

Audience competencies and interpretations

A wide range of competencies regarding contemporary Japanese horror film and Japanese culture as a whole were present amongst participants. Where participants did not have the appropriate knowledge to define culturally-specific elements according to their intended meanings, they drew knowledge from other areas. This included the application of knowledge intercontextually, from other films, from their own experiences or both. Thus reinforcing that audiences read a film within the frameworks that are available to them.

Notably, many UK and Japanese interviewees cited the influence of personal experience in making sense of contemporary Japanese horror film and

culturally-specific elements within. This suggests personal involvement with the films, and also that both meaning-making and definition is personal and unique to the individual. A number of interviewees had carried forward their film viewing experiences into other areas of their life, for example in being reminded of particular films in their everyday life or experiences of Japan. This is fitting with the previously mentioned aspect of contemporary Japanese horror film definition being largely experience-based and internalised.

A number of the interviewees who admitted that they actively sought out information were able to explain accurately some of the deeper meanings or traditions of elements within the case study films. At other times, broad assumptions made by interviewees about links to traditions or folklore were correct. Interestingly, in interviews with Japanese individuals, the majority did not identify the traditional or folklore background of some of the tropes common to contemporary Japanese horror film. This suggests that, in its domestic context, these elements have become removed from their original meanings. Japanese interviewees tended to relate culturally-specific elements within the films to things which were more present in the current cultural imaginary, such as urban legends. This highlights the importance of not assuming that audiences are fully culturally-competent, even when receiving a film which is embedded in their own culture.

Just as the nature of contemporary Japanese horror film was shown to be multi-faceted, interpretation of culturally-specific elements by UK participants and the frameworks used were highly individualised. This is emblematic of a more complicated aggregate audience than that which was targeted by UK distribution companies such as *Tartan Asia Extreme* (Dew 2007). In combination

with the aforementioned importance of personal experience, I would suggest that further analysis of transnational audiences would benefit from using a methodological approach influenced by phenomenology, rather than, for example, interpretive communities (Fish 1980).

Towards an audience-led model of transnational genre

Transnational genre has a dual meaning. It represents a body of texts in a transnational context (which may or may not belong to different domestic genres), whilst simultaneously being a construct of the transnational context in which it is received. Given its fluid nature, this study took a pioneering audience-led approach to the definition of transnational genre.

Given the fragmented and individual nature of audiences, only insight rather than firm conclusions can be drawn. Therefore, I propose that future audience-led approaches to transnational genres should consider the following hypotheses:

1. Audiences can express duality, or beyond, within a single transnational genre.
2. Audiences read transnational genre texts through a variety of frameworks: Textual, intertextual, intecontextual and personal.
3. Cross-cultural audience definition of genre is influenced by context, both widely (for example, the reception landscape and marketing) and more narrowly (for example, personal experiences).
4. Audience definition of transnational genre is often internalised. Genre can be determined based upon how a film makes the audience *feel* rather than relying purely on shared syntactic and semantic elements.
5. Experience and ritual tied up with texts play a large part in audience definitions of transnational genre.
6. Audiences are more likely to determine a text as belonging to a genre which they place value on if they like the text itself, and if it fits with the expectations imposed by marketing and distribution practices.

Limitations

In moving towards the conclusion of this thesis, it is necessary to provide a reminder of the limitations of the study as originally addressed in chapter three. These limitations have particular implications in terms of the generalisability of the results discussed in this chapter, hence the decision to offer up hypotheses rather than conclusions. The limited sample size of this study in turn gives a limited picture of the full range and definition of the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film. Although larger sample sizes would likely suggest a wider range of interpretations, this would presumably not be exponentially so.

As this study was deliberately locally, historically and culturally specific, findings are not necessarily extendable across a long-term trajectory, or across other cultures. However, it is hoped that this research could provide a starting point for such studies. Given the individual and fragmented nature of audiences, neither are the opinions of the participants extendable to audiences outside of this study. However, given the New Audience Research approach, it is asserted that the general frameworks identified are applicable to further studies.

The inevitability of researcher bias must also be addressed. I conducted this study as a single researcher and knowingly positioned myself at the same level as the interviewees, as a fellow viewer of contemporary Japanese horror film. In order to allow for emergent theories, I based my areas of analysis upon participant responses. However, it is inevitable that I brought prior knowledge to the study. Although all efforts were made to acknowledge my positionality and its influence upon interpretations of the data, bias always remains a possibility.

In addition to the limitations originally discussed in chapter three, there are two key questions which the results of this thesis pose, which can be linked

to limitations emerging as a result of the methodology and structure of this thesis:

1. What are the differences within the UK audience itself, and can they be grouped into sub-demographics?
2. Is it really possible to group UK audiences' interpretations so neatly into sections as this thesis implies?

Audiences by their very nature as individuals are heterogeneous. In examining the results of the audience interviews it is evident that certain attributes of an individual were likely to have influence upon their interpretations. For example, interviewees who were towards the upper-limit of the age range were far more likely to be aware of, and have experienced, *Tartan Asia Extreme's* marketing, and interviewees with first-hand experience of Japan often structured their answers differently from those who had none. While this is acknowledged to some extent in the results chapters, in retrospect it would have been beneficial to set out to actively sample different demographics within the UK audience, rather than taking those between eighteen and thirty as a demographic in itself.

It is both a limitation and a concern of this thesis that the grouping of audience interpretations in the results chapters may give the impression of an overly-simplified reception landscape. Reception is, of course, incredibly multi-faceted and it is unlikely that any two interviewees had exactly the same interpretation. For the purposes of gathering similar data, individual interviews mainly took place around particular areas identified during the focus group research, and in order to present the results coherently interpretations were grouped together under broad headings. While I still believe that my methodology was appropriate for the purposes of this research and in minimising my own bias, with more time and resources the study could have

benefitted from a third stage of anecdotal interviews where participants would have been encouraged to talk at length about their experiences of a particular film in their own terms and without prescribed categories of focus. These would then be analysed from a phenomenological perspective, in order to gain an extremely subjective and 'messy' idea of how an individual interprets a particular contemporary Japanese horror.

Suggestions for further study

As Klinger (1997) mentions, looking at cross-cultural reception poses a re-evaluation of all the contextual factors both present in the transnational content, and those in the domestic context. In conjunction with the aforementioned hypotheses, I pose the following areas in particular as suggested possible directions for further related study:

1. Further study reevaluating the UK context of contemporary Japanese horror film, and its differences from the original Japanese context.
2. Application of the methodology to alternate media.
3. Comparative study of another transnational context of contemporary Japanese horror film.
4. Comparative study of various demographics within the UK transnational audience itself.
5. Further research testing the proposed hypotheses, particularly on other transnational genres.

The definition of genre and why it differs transnationally is an important area for further study as it has implications as to the importance of context, and in particular cross-cultural context, in relation to film viewing. It was evident that for many interviewees, contemporary Japanese horror film had an influence on their ideas about Japan as a nation. However, contemporary Japanese horror film is just one way through which the outside world can address Japan. Further research could apply the same audience-led approach to other popular media,

such an anime or J-pop. Studying the meanings taken from these areas and beyond provides a new way to approach Japanese popular culture in the age of cultural globalisation.

As outlined, this thesis takes an original blended approach in the emerging areas of cross-cultural audience reception and the transnational flow of texts and genre. Both of these areas are justified in, and have the potential for, further research. In terms of transnational genres, it was noted that the genre of contemporary Japanese horror film was not equivalent to the horror genre in Japan. It would be interesting to see if the same is true of other genres in a similar study. This thesis also highlights the centrality of UK cross-cultural audiences in defining the contemporary Japanese horror genre, again this is something which could be interesting if applied to other reception contexts. The fact that this study has generated hypotheses rather than firm conclusions implies that by their very nature these hypotheses should be tested further, and in my future research I hope to continue reacting to the centrality of textual-based methods in genre studies through application of this audience-led approach.

A final point that I wish to make is that this thesis opens up a new approach to contemporary Japanese horror film, one which hopefully disproves the misconception outlined in the introduction that “Japanese horror film is dead”. In doing so, this reception studies based research highlights the potential value of further research taking a historical materialistic approach towards contemporary Japanese horror film. Although a complete history of the genre is impossible, it is hoped that this thesis provides a stepping stone to developing new views on the topic that take into account variations of context. It is hoped

that myself and other researchers will continue to see the value of Japanese horror film, and move towards producing further research that contributes towards a historic materialistic approach to the genre, building a more complete history of Japanese horror film which takes into account not just how it changes across time, but also across different national contexts.

Appendix 1

Interviewee biographies

Abbie

Abbie is a 30 year-old female, and is married to another of the interviewees, Craig. She is originally from Bristol and now lives in Sheffield, where she recently completed her PhD. She learnt about the study through the Sheffield volunteering mailing list and a factor in her participation was the difficulty she faced with recruiting interviewees for her own PhD. Abbie is very sociable and cites film-watching as a major activity that she participates in with friends and her husband. During her PhD she held regular film nights with housemates and other flats in her accommodation, which occasionally featured Japanese horror films. By her own admittance she doesn't know much about Japan, but she used to watch a lot of Chinese ghost story films and fondly remembers a book about Chinese ghosts from her childhood, and often applied this knowledge during the interviews.

Adam

Adam is a 27 year-old male, originally from Leeds and now living in London. He works as a line manager for a large energy company in Windsor. He graduated from Hull University with a BA in marketing and advertising. During his time as an undergraduate he took a module in Japanese language but only remembers how to say "I like beer". He is enthusiastic about Japan in general and one of his dreams is to visit Japan and eat a cream puff from *Beard Papa*. Adam largely dislikes Western horror films but is a big fan of Japanese horror films. His

favourite film is *Battle Royale* and he cites it as the exception to his rule of never watching a film more than once.

Andrew

Andrew is an 18 year-old male who lives in Sheffield. He recently completed his A-levels and is currently unemployed. He heard about the study through one of his housemates who is a student at the University of Sheffield. Andrew is a big fan of Japanese popular culture, particularly films, anime and manga, the latter of which he rents from the public library. He particularly enjoys anime and films based upon his favourite manga series. Andrew placed high importance on cultural capital and demonstrated seeking out shocking and lesser-known films as well as recommending them to others. He mentioned watching films more than once, often with different people. He was one of only two participants who had seen *Grotesque*, and its banned nature was the main attraction for him.

Anna

Anna is a 28 year-old female who works as an administrator for a large energy company in Windsor. She is originally from the area and returned there five years ago after studying for a degree in psychology at Newcastle University. Anna is not a fan of Japanese horror films but has seen quite a few of them, and doesn't deem them to be particularly scary although the more visceral scene in some of the film make her feel "grossed out". She has some knowledge of Japanese society gained from the media, and often applied knowledge from her psychology degree to her readings of the films. In one particular instance Anna

recalled learning about the attachment specifically between Japanese mothers and their children, assumedly referring to the concept of *amae*.

Caroline

Caroline is a 29 year-old female, she lives in Slough with her husband and works for a large energy company in Windsor as an administrator. She did not attend college or university and has worked in a variety of jobs since the age of 16. Family is very important to Caroline. She is a very social film viewer, often watching films with both her own family members and members of her husband's family. Caroline likes Japanese horror films but doesn't seek out Japanese films in particular. She enjoys both foreign films and horror films in general and watches these regularly on Film4. Amongst the participants, Caroline provided the most extreme instance of repeat viewing, having watched *Confessions* three times in one week, once on her own and twice with other people who she thought would enjoy it.

Craig

Craig is a 30 year-old male who has lived in Sheffield all his life. He is married to Abbie. Craig works in a shop and creates music in his spare time. He has a large technical knowledge of music, and often focused on this element alongside sound when talking about the films. Alongside this applied knowledge, Craig also drew from his experiences of a number of different film genres when talking about aspects of contemporary Japanese horror film. He and his wife watch a lot of films and watching Japanese horror film has become something of a ritual for them. Craig was one of the only interviewees who recalled some of *Tartan Asia*

Extreme's marketing, and was even able to recite the review text featured on the box of *Audition*, despite it having been years since he rented it.

Dawn

Dawn is a 21 year-old female, originally from Northampton. She is a third year undergraduate student studying Korean Studies at the University of Sheffield. Dawn often referred to Korean films and directors as a point of comparison when talking about contemporary Japanese horror films. Dawn also picked out elements that she said related to Asia as a whole, and often did not actively differentiate between things being applicable to contemporary Japanese horror film or culture, or to Asian horror film and culture generally. Dawn prefers Asian horror to Western horror film, which she feels is too obvious. She is a big fan of manga, in particular *Deathnote*, but feels like movie adaptations of manga are never as good as their source material. Dawn was one of the interviewees who spoke explicitly of skipping through films rather than watching them in their entirety, in particular *Ring*, where she skipped through to see how it ends.

David

David is a 29 year-old male from Slough. He works as an installation engineer at the Slough branch of a large energy company based in Windsor. He heard about the study through a colleague at the Windsor office and was keen to take part as he is an avid fan of Japanese horror film. David has a wide knowledge of Japanese horror film, and was one of the few participants who remembered and actively mentioned the *Tartan Asia Extreme* label. David self-admittedly does not have much knowledge about Japanese society and culture, and perhaps related to this

he has a tendency to attribute factors that he could not explain as being based in something which is unique to Japanese society.

Elliot

Elliot is a 20 year-old male from London. He is a second year undergraduate student at the University of Sheffield, studying East Asian studies and he aspires to be a filmmaker. He is taking a film-related module as one of his electives and actively attends events about Japanese cinema and world cinema as a whole.

Elliot was the only participant to associate J-horror with the boom period rather than with a particular set of films or features within those films. He tended to focus on the technical aspects of the films and placed great importance on directors, actors and facts rather than his own interpretations. He described choosing to watch certain films based upon the reputation of the director, and often commented on how certain elements showed the skills of the director or actors. Elliot strongly enjoys discussing films with other people, even if they haven't seen the films in question.

Graham

Graham is a 26 year-old male from Stoke. He is a third year medical student at the University of Sheffield, and a member of the Territorial Army. Graham is a horror film fan, with a self-admitted fascination with the macabre. He was one of only two interviewees who had seen the banned film *Grotesque*. Graham was the only interviewee who actively rewatched the films before the interviews, and mentioned that he often watches Japanese horror films more than once. Graham practices Okinawan martial arts and has first hand experience of Japan, having

visited the country to train a few years ago. He was able to recount experiences from during his trip which he tied into his understanding of the relationship between contemporary Japanese horror film and Japanese society.

Hiromi

Hiromi is a 25 year-old Japanese female. She is a Masters student studying anthropology at Waseda University and works part-time in the university's portal office. She doesn't like horror film anymore, but watched a lot of them with her friends when she was younger. Hiromi gave a lot of examples about how contemporary Japanese horror film was closely related to the everyday, and things that 'could happen'. This was fitting with her narrow definition of contemporary Japanese horror being in line with the classical definition of J-horror in Japan. In particular, she demonstrated the impact of Japanese horror film being set in actual, rather than fictional, places, recalling her feelings when visiting the island where *Ring* was set.

Jamie

Jamie is a 20 year-old male from Leeds. He is a second year undergraduate student on the Japanese Studies course at the University of Sheffield. Japanese horror films were, in part, a contributing factor to his decision to study Japan, as watching *The Ring* led to an interest in Japanese society and whether it was similar to how it was portrayed in the film. Jamie has visited Japan and believes that the Japan portrayed in contemporary Japanese horror films is a reflection of what Japan is really like. He was also able to relate how moments during his trip to Japan reminded him of specific incidents in contemporary Japanese horror

films. Jamie had very strong ideas about what he did and did not consider a Japanese horror film, and only included supernatural films such as *Ring*, *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *Dark Water*. Jamie also had an awareness of Korean and Chinese horror films, and demonstrated intercontextual meaning-making by applying frameworks from the horror output of these countries, as well as traditional British horror.

Jodie

Jodie is a 25 year-old female from Lincoln. She moved to Windsor a year ago to start a job as a timesheet clerk at a large energy company. Jodie is not a fan of horror film in general, although she has seen quite a few and remembers some contemporary Japanese horror films very well. Her main 'problem' with horror films is that she doesn't find them particularly scary. She can appreciate the building of tension or suspense in Japanese horror films, but is largely disdainful about Hollywood horror films and views them as formulaic. Jodie was able to identify a number of common elements to contemporary Japanese horror films and how they reflected society, but did not view these as being exclusive in any way to Japan.

John

John is a 22 year-old male. He is a fourth year undergraduate student on the Japanese studies course at the University of Sheffield and recently returned from a year abroad in Japan. He recounted a couple of experiences during his year abroad which had reminded him of events in contemporary Japanese horror films. John is extremely knowledgeable about Japanese society and culture and

was able to make a number of observations in relation to contemporary Japanese horror films, both in the way they reflect society, and the how they are rooted in tradition and folklore. He has a wide knowledge of Japanese horror films and was the only one to mention lesser-known films such as *The Locker*. John prefers Eastern horror to Western horror as the concentration is on building atmosphere and tension.

Keiko

Keiko is a 30 year-old Japanese female, studying for a Ph.D at Waseda university. She has spent a year abroad in America, and related the differences she observed between Japanese and Hollywood horror film, tying these into the respective cultures. Like many of the other Japanese interviewees, she had a personal story which she could relate to contemporary Japanese horror film. In her case, it was that Koji Suzuki, author of *Ring*, had been her cram-school teacher. Keiko does not class herself as a fan of Japanese horror film, but does enjoy watching them. Like the other Japanese interviewees, to her the definition of horror in Japan was narrow, and not inclusive of films such as *Ichi the Killer* or *Battle Royale*.

Kentaro

Kentaro is a 22 year-old male. He is an undergraduate at Waseda University studying law. He classes himself as a horror fan, but draws a clear distinction between what is horror film in Japan and Hollywood horror film. Japanese horror to him is based in reality and everyday life. He states that American horror is not realistic to Japanese people because it isn't daily life, for example, zombies. Kentaro was not familiar with any of the folk stories that were the

source material for contemporary Japanese horror films, and instead saw them as based in urban legends and folklore.

Kevin

Kevin is a 28 year-old male, originally from London. He now lives in Windsor where he works in procurement for a large energy company. He has a degree in Business Studies from the University of Leeds. He does not have an interest in Japan and does not class himself as a fan of Japanese horror film, or of horror film in general. He has, however, seen quite a few films which he classifies as Japanese horror films. Most of these were during his time as an undergraduate student when he regularly attended film nights and watched a wide variety of films. He posits a clear distinction between shock and scare, seeing films that scare him as horror, and films that shocked him (such as *Battle Royale* and *Suicide Club*) as not being horror.

Masato

Masato is a 26 year-old Japanese male. He is a Masters student at Waseda University. Masato is an avid film watcher, and while he doesn't prioritise horror over other genres, he watches a lot of Japanese horror films. Like the other Japanese interviewees, he had a very narrow definition of horror film in Japan which excluded many of the films which are considered to be Japanese horror films in the UK. Unlike some of the other Japanese interviewees, Masato was aware of the traditional roots of many contemporary Japanese horror films as well as their literary source material. He observed that these were rarely direct translations, but more likely to just be referenced and adapted in the films.

Mike

Mike is a 30 year-old male from Slough, where he works as an installation engineer for a large energy company. He is a big fan of horror film, particularly Asian horror film, and actively seeks out films with shocking elements. He strongly dislikes formulaic Hollywood horror films. Mike has very strong but contradicting views as to what constitutes a contemporary Japanese horror film, positing that they must contain supernatural elements, but also acknowledging the existence of psychological horror. He actively dislikes remakes, to the point that he walked out of the cinema halfway through watching the Hollywood remake of *The Ring*. He was one of the few participants who recalled the marketing of contemporary Japanese horror films, stating that he had decided to seek out *Audition* after reading a review that said it was deeply disturbing. Although he states that he doesn't know much about Japanese society, he attributes some of the content in the films as being a reflection of Japanese culture and society.

Peter

Peter is a 28 year-old male. He is from Peterborough and works in Windsor as a contracts engineer for a large energy company. He studied engineering at the University of West England. Peter likes foreign films in general, and has a particular affection for Japanese films, which has led to an interest in Japanese culture and a desire to one day visit Japan. He also enjoys Hollywood films but does not actively seek out Hollywood horror films. Peter finds Japanese horror films generally scary, and has tried to watch *The Grudge* a couple of times but has never made it to the end. He made a lot of interesting observations about unique

elements in Japanese horror films, and had a tendency to relate these to ideas about Japanese society. However, he also believed that there were a number of elements that could equally be observed in Western horror.

Ruth

Ruth is a 19 year-old female. She is originally from Nottingham and is in the first year of an undergraduate degree in psychology at the University of Sheffield.

Ruth enjoys watching a wide range of films and has only seen a couple of contemporary Japanese horror films. She watches films at the University's film club, and before coming to Sheffield she often went to cinema and frequently watched films on Film4. Ruth states that she has no knowledge of Japanese culture and often doesn't understand elements of the films. At times she offered up literal explanations for culturally-specific elements drawn purely from the storyline itself. For example, her interpretation of why in *The Ring* Sadako's eye is looking up was because she was always looking up from the well.

Sarah

Sarah is a 21 year-old female. She is from Sheffield and commutes from home to study at the University of Sheffield. She is in her third year studying dentistry.

Sarah enjoys horror films and was one of the interviewees who preferred to watch films alone first, and then recommend them to other people, often watching them again with the recomendeed. She recognised the everyday element of Japanese horror film, but was unsure of whether the element of gore was a defining factor and contradicted herself over the inclusion or exclusion of films outside of the narrow canon of J-horror. Ruth made some assumptions about

audiences as well as the films, for example, saying of *Battle Royale* that it was popular with Western audiences because of the gore, and that Japanese audiences have more belief in ghosts and hence this is represented in their films. Sarah also had some experience with the source material of contemporary Japanese horror films, having read the novel that *Ring* was based on.

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