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The depiction of women in contemporary J-horror cinema

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Table of contents

Introduction **2**
Chapter 1: History and contemporary society **4**
Chapter 2: The vengeful and the protector in Ringu **8**
Chapter 3: Mental illness and motherhood in Kotoko **12**
Chapter 4: The danger of beauty in Helter Skelter **16**
Conclusion **21**
Bibliography **22**

Introduction

Film has the power to transport the viewer to different worlds and awakens strong feelings and emotions towards what is seen on the screen. There are lots of different genres of film, ranging from the sweetest romance to the goriest action. One genre in particular can induce the coldest chills and create the worst nightmares for kids and adults alike: horror. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'horror' is described as "the extremely strong feeling of shock and fear, or the frightening and shocking character of something".[1] Horror movies in itself are interesting to me because of the different techniques used to create the thrilling and scary aspect of the movie, and because of the question of why people experience something as scary.

Some of the most popular horror movies originate from Japan. Everyone knows the image of pale women with incredibly long, sleek hair appearing out of nowhere, being the main source of scariness in the movie. Why is it, however, that women are so often used as the embodiment of malice or the victim of terror? For my thesis, I would like to focus on women in Japanese horror movies. I want to focus on women in Japanese films because the female figure is often used as either the monster or scary ghost in Japanese cinema or the victim. My research question is 'how are women depicted in contemporary J-horror cinema?'. I will answer this question by doing a literary review of previous research and analyzing selected Japanese horror movies myself.

Why is this research relevant? There has been research about women in movies and the gender aspect (for example the male gaze) that can influence the way women are depicted. Research on Japanese film has been done in the past, among others by Jay McRoy[2], and even on the 'monstrous feminine' in Japanese film, for example by Raechel Dumas[3]. However, I want to discover more about female driven characters in horror. I would like to not only focus on the feminine source of evil but on the broader aspect of the depiction of women in Japanese horror films, and the influences modern society has on the movies. I will therefore analyze contemporary additions to the J-horror film genre. The films I have chosen to analyze are *Ringu* (1998) for its popularity both in- and outside of Japan and the classical depiction of the feminine evil character, *Kotoko* (2011) for its display of motherhood and mental illness, and lastly *Helter Skelter (Heruta Skeruta)* (2012) for its depiction of celebrity idolisation in Japan and its critiques on beauty obsession. These movies all have a female protagonist, and in the case of *Ringu* there is a female antagonist as well.

To fully understand the depiction of women in Japanese horror, I will take into account the Japanese societal and cultural background the decision of the depiction might have. This way I avoid an orientalist or Westernized view on the matter, while still implementing my own views on gender issues, such as gender inequality, in movies. Orientalism is a strategy for understanding the East that is founded on the Orient's unique position in the history of Europe and the West. The orient serves as the definition of the Other in the eyes of the West, and by existing defines the West as well. [4] In his book *Orientalism*, Said says that the term 'orientalism' is employed by the West as a means of reshaping, dominating, and exercising control over the East.[5] The discourse where certain themes and subjects in the East are looked at through a western lens and judged according to that lens is part of this concept. This is a dangerous thing in researching Asian film as well, in this case as well since it is very easy to make comparisons between Japanese cinema and western cinema (*Ju-on* and *Ringu*, for example, have American remakes which makes the comparison even easier). This is one of the dominant trends when researching Japanese cinema. However, this is a western or Eurocentric way of approaching this type of film and can lead to stereotyping through a western lens.[6] Realizing this, I will still include some studies, for example on gender, that have been done by western notions and insights to help give a bigger picture of the genre in general.

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[1] Website: dictionary.cambridge.org, accessed on 30-01-2023.

[2] McRoy, *Japanese Horror Cinema* and *Recent Trends in Japanese Horror Cinema.*

[3] Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture.*

[4] Said, *Orientalism,* p. 1.

What does one mean with the term ‘horror’ in relation to film? Balmain states that a movies' resemblance to nightmares defines the "horror" genre. The many depictions of death and the representation of the dead in horror movies embody the "otherness" that is inextricably linked to humanity, but is ultimately a parallel and disturbing expression of it.[7] Horror’s focus on the dead lets people, in my view, face visions of the ‘afterlife’ of which we know so little, which is already scary in its own right since everybody is going to face it someday. Together with a touch of the supernatural that lets a movie bring the dead to life or make something impossible happen, it can give viewers the dreaded feeling of horror. Not only are they faced with the reality of death that awaits us all, the supernatural gives it a touch of the unexpected, the unpredictable.

Why the focus on Japanese horror? Beginning in the 1980s, *Ringu* and *Ju-On* were two of the movies that inspired Western audiences to love Japanese horror cinema. These alternative possibilities captured the attention of Western audiences who were growing weary of the overly familiar horror films that were all around them and adding creativity to their Westernized conception of horror. Western spectators considered Japanese films to be boundary-pushing because they featured excessive physical brutality and corporeal deformity. This contributed to the idea that the East is strange and grotesque.[8] In the rising popularity, it also became clear that there is an abundance in Japanese horror with women as the source of evil and terror, often in the form of undead or ghosts. Balmain questions whether there is much to be gathered from the fact that Japanese ghosts are almost always female. Is it national guilt that has been converted into terror as a result of the lowly position women once held in society? Is that an admission that most of the wronged people are women?[9]

The aspect of women in cinema is interesting because there is a common theme in the way a woman is presented on screen. Mulvey (1975) states that the male gaze projects a fantasy onto the female figure, and that mainstream film upholds this. The character that is a woman draws out a reaction or action in the male character, either coming from the love or the fear that she inspires in him. In itself, the woman has no importance.[10] This is quite a strong statement and I feel that there are (modern) films where this is not true, but it holds true to various films. Mulvey’s article was seen as a staple for feminists studying film, but it is written in a different, past era of film and women’s studies. In her commentary on Mulvey's piece,

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[5] Said, *Orientalism,* p. 2-3.

[6] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 3.

[7] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 5.

[8] McRoy, *Recent Trends in Japanese Horror Cinema*, p. 407-408.

[9] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 82.

[10] Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 10.

Thornham claims that women could no longer be stereotyped in the same way as in the past. Yet, students and other users of the essay still refer to it and respond to it, adapting it to contemporary cinema and new media.[11] Not only Thornham herself admits to doing this as well, I have had the same impulses to take this essay and try to apply it to film today. Keeping in mind that some of the themes in Mulvey's article are dated, there are still some useful ideas that I want to include here. Because after all, however feminist we might think the world is right now, women are still viewed and portrayed a certain way. So, what is interesting about Mulvey's statement is that it speaks of a fear that a female character can draw out in a male character, influencing his actions that lead the movie. This idea is very useful in the analysis of women in horror movies, especially when the source of fear is represented by a female character. For example, Wee (2011) tells us in her article about the comparison of *Ringu* and *The Ring* (the American remake) that the wrath of the ghostly female character in *Ringu* is directed at the men who did not fulfill their 'manly duty' (as seen by the standards of Japanese society) to protect her.[12] What drives the story, just as Mulvey said, is the emotion evoked in a man that in turn has its effect on the female character (in this case, she gets killed). This could be a common theme that is encountered in Japanese horror movies. Is this a result of societal ideas based on gender norms? I will talk more about the gender aspect in chapter 1.

In this thesis, I will first give more background information on certain themes in Japanese horror, and I will discuss gender in horror in general. Then I will give an analysis of three Japanese horror movies that have been chosen by their popularity in the horror genre and by the use of female characters as either main character, source of evil or both. Then I will conclude by stating the situation of depicting women in Japanese horror.

Chapter 1: History and contemporary society

In order to be able to fully engage in the discussion of women in Japanese film, I want to dive into some background information that is useful for better understanding this topic. Then, I will talk more about the gender discussion in Japan.

What exactly is J-horror? The term J-horror, meaning Japanese horror, has come into existence fairly recently. It is most often thought to have gotten popular around the time of the releasing of Hideo Nakata's film *Ringu* in 1998 which was an unexpected international success[13], while Brown argues that the actual start can be attributed to a series of scary films by Tsuruta Norio, called *Scary True Stories* (*Hontô ni atta kowai hanashi*), in 1991.[14] It is important to note that there is a whole history of Japanese scary films that were made in the pre-war era and post-war era before the term J-horror got popular that helped Japanese horror get to where it is now. With the worldwide popularity of films like *Ringu*, discussions on Japanese horror often start there, disregarding the influential films that came before it. Lots of these older scary films, called *kaiki* films, were based on traditional ghost stories (*kaidan*).[15]

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[11] Thornham, *On 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 882-883.
[12] Wee, Valerie. *A comparative study of* Ringu *and* The Ring*,* p. 154.
[13] Crandol, *Ghost in the Well,* p. 200.
[14] Brown, *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations,* p. 2.
[15] Crandol, *Ghost in the Well,* p. 4-5.

In the 1980s, the term *horâ* (horror) started to be used the most for referring to scary stories and films in Japan. *Kaiki* was now used to refer to older forms of unnerving film. J-horror does differ from *kaiki*, however, so it is not just a continuation of the same concept.[16] Transnational influence is a great part of the construction of the J-horror genre, while still using themes from Japanese stories and legends. Other countries, in turn, will also use themes of J-horror in their own respective films, not only restricted to but including the American remakes of *Ringu* and *Ju-on* for example. In English, the term 'J-horror' is often used to refer to all Japanese horror films made until now, but this would disregard differences between *kaiki* films and films classified as J-horror such as *Ringu*. It would also be overgeneralizing different kinds of film made that have a scary or unnatural aspect to them.[17] J-horror as we know it now is in essence a combination of *kaidan* (traditional ghost stories) and elements of international film.[18] J-horror has the same sense of 'realism' as Western horror: ghosts and monsters pop up in the most mundane places, such as modern houses or elevators, which sets them apart from most *kaiki* films where ghosts would reside in haunted houses or other uncanny locations where they would be less out of place.[19] And, where *kaiki* film focussed more on traditional ghost stories, J-horror grew alongside modernization of film and society. Fears concerning a rapidly modernizing world were fueling the J-horror genre, as I will discuss throughout this thesis.

There are differences in theme and feel between *kaiki* and J-horror as I discussed, but the one could not have existed without the other. J-horror creators such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi name both *kaiki* and Western horror influences as big inspirations to their creations.[20] J-horror was internationally sold as being 'typically Japanese', but when creators are actively crediting international films as great influences for the genre, how 'J' is the horror really?[21]

Here I will discuss the situation of women in contemporary Japanese society. After the collapse of the economic bubble in the 1990s, the discourse on this family structure was impacted. The idea of the typical 'salaryman' with a lifetime employment at the same company was not the norm anymore, and the association of masculinity with being a salaryman and breadwinner of the family diminished. [22] However, the threat of the diminishing of masculinity related to the "salaryman" and the upcoming female empowerment movement created anxieties for men and caused friction. The feminist movement and laws promoting gender equality were criticized by the media in the 1990s, and gender distinctions were emphasized. The deterioration of the salaryman identity as the primary provider in the nuclear family worsened this problem. Women's public perception was viewed as a threat to the stability of the country.[23] Starting from the 1980s, the term 'career woman' was seen as the opposite of being a full-time housewife and was at first a sign of the improvement of gender equality in the workplace. However, very soon thereafter, these women were portrayed badly by implying that the choice to pursue a career was selfish, since it was chosen instead of married life and motherhood. It did not go well from there: in 1990 terms as

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[16] Crandol, *Ghost in the Well,* p. 11.
[17] Crandol, *Ghost in the Well,* p. 201.
[18] Brown, *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations,* p. 5.
[19] Crandol, *Ghost in the Well,* p. 210.
[20] Crandol, *Ghost in the Well,* p. 205.
[21] Nelson, *Circulating Fear,* p. 6-7.
[22] Dasgupta, *Salaryman anxieties in* Tokyo Sonata*,* p. 255-256.
[23] Ellis-Rees, *Fear and Female Revenge in Three Contemporary Japanese Horror Films*, p. 231.

‘parasite single’ were used to describe women that were unmarried and lived at their parent’s house even though they were employed, and in 2003 the term ‘loser dog’, used to refer to unmarried women without children, made its way into the rich vocabulary used to undermine women. After that, women in situations mentioned here were called ‘demon hags’. [24] All these derogatory terms used to refer to women that did not follow the expectations of society shows how misogynistic the patriarchy was and is. It also shows the reality of societal expectations of the female body only being purposed for childbearing.[25] This shows the backlash that is created when men feel threatened by the emancipation of women, since they believe it is a danger to their own sense of masculinity. This also translates to film, as we will also discover in the analysis of the films that will follow. In horror, the body of women is often used as a metaphor for the anxieties of men and for the change in (Japanese) society. What is often done in the distracting scary aspects of the film, is that outright horror diverts viewers' attention away from misogyny and homophobia, which otherwise would prevent men from fully engaging with other female-centered genres like romantic comedies.[26]

Concluding this chapter, I have given background information on the subject of J-horror and women in contemporary society. I have discussed the genre of J-horror to give a better understanding of the analyses that will follow. J-horror is a loose mix of *kaiki* influences and international aspects of film, so to say that J-horror is an inherently Japanese genre would simply be false. I also discussed the uprising of the feminist movement in Japan and the loss of the association of masculinity with the salaryman in the 1990s contributed to the anxieties of men towards women, which greatly affects the way women are depicted around that time and onwards.

Chapter 2: The vengeful and the protector in *Ringu*

In 1998, the movie *Ringu* by Hideo Nakata was released in Japan. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, this movie came out in the early stages of J-horror, and became internationally popular.

The movie follows Reiko Asakawa, a journalist who gets into contact with a cursed video, cursing her after she watched it. The video seems to consist of unrelated random scenes and ends with the view of a water well, looking from the inside to the round opening. After seeing the video, Reiko receives a phone call in which she hears a slight screeching, indicating she is cursed. She decides to try and figure out more about the curse and how to stop it. Together with her ex-husband, Ryûji Takayama, she finds out that the curse will kill her after 7 days if it is not stopped. During this process, Reiko’s 7-year-old son also watches the video and is thus cursed as well, giving Reiko extra motivation to make the curse go away. She starts seeing visions and apparitions. Through those visions and some research, they learn about the tragic story of Shizuka and her daughter, Sadako. Reiko sees Shizuka in a vision, and she is demonstrating her psychic abilities to a room of researchers, under supervision of another researcher, Dr. Ikuma, who is also Shizuka’s lover. One of the researchers accuses Shizuka of being a fraud, and after he stands up yelling at her, he suddenly drops dead. Panic ensues, with Shizuka running off the stage with Dr. Ikuma. When she does, she suddenly stops to yell at a smaller figure with long black hair covering her face, and shouts at her that it must have been her doing. The figure is her daughter, Sadako, and it is insinuated that she has killed the researcher in order to protect her mother, thus also displaying strong psychic abilities. Shizuka, in her despair of how things turned out, throws herself in an active volcano, killing herself. In J-horror, certain aspects were discovered by filmmakers to work really well with audiences. For example, the scary ghost with the long wet black hair.[27] This is the iconic image that a lot of fans see when they think of *Ringu.* The display of long hair for women has a meaning with roots in Buddhism. It was said that young women could attract *kami* (divine beings) who would temporarily enter their long hair and stay there.[28] The cultural significance of long black hair on women may account for why it appears so frequently in Japanese horror films. It demonstrates how these women are connected to the divine or the paranormal. Especially in the case of *Ringu* the use of hair catches the eye. Both Shizuka and Sadako are depicted with long, black hair, and both characters show their psychic abilities in the movie, so the association of long hair on women and the supernatural is definitely displayed here.

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[24] Fruhstuck, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan,* p. 93.
[25] Fruhstuck, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan,* p. 101.
[26] Humphrey, *Gender and Sexuality Haunts the Horror Film*, p. 40.

Japanese mythology refers to malevolent ghosts as *yûrei*, and these ghosts are typically female. The way that *yûrei* are portrayed in movies is quite similar to how it is portrayed in classic ukiyo-e prints from they Edo period (see figures 1 and 2).[29] The spirits were often depicted clad in white, with sleek black hair and a pale face. As I pointed out above, this image of a female ghost is now a common feature in some of the most popular Japanese horror movies, like *Ringu*. An example of this depiction in *ukiyo-e* is this print made of an actress playing Oiwa in a play (Figure 2). This resemblance shows the connection the movie still has with *kaiki* film, while steering right into the different direction of J-horror at the same time: the monster shows up in a normal family house and makes use of (for that time) modern technology, here video tapes and television.

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[27] McRoy, *Recent Trends in Japanese Horror Cinema*, p. 409.
[28] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 67.
[29] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 47.

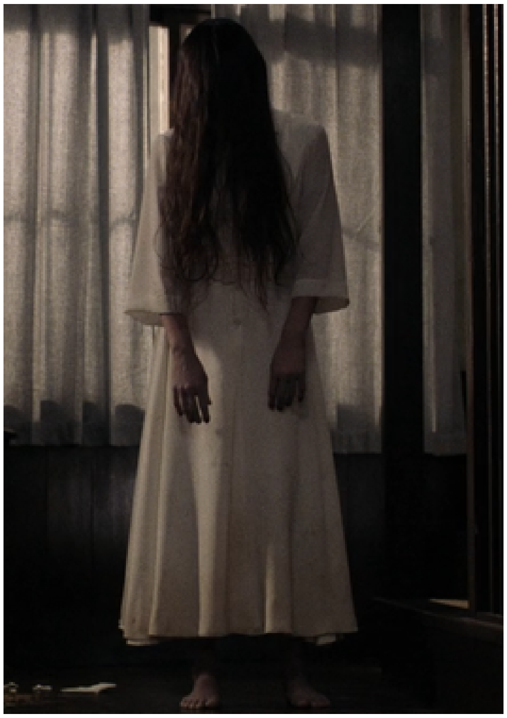

Figure 1: Sadako in *Ringu.*

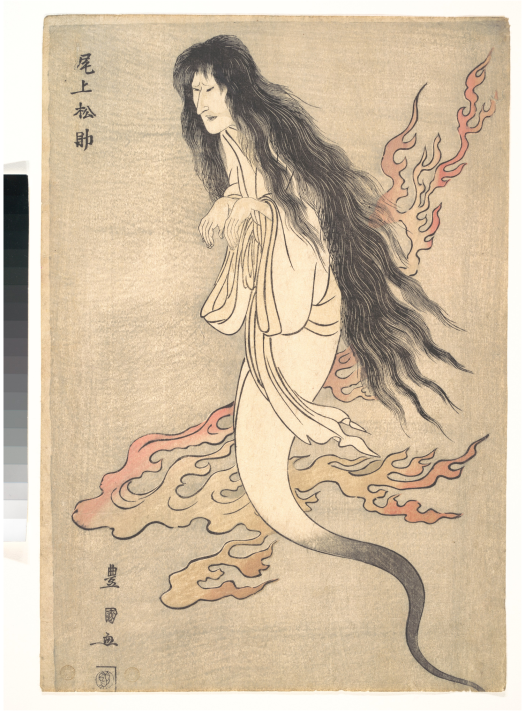

Figure 2: Onoe Matsusuke as the Ghost of the Murdered Wife Oiwa, in " A Tale of Horror from the Yotsuya Station on the Tokaido Road", Utagawa Toyokuni, 1812.

On their quest for information on the curse, Reiko and Ryûji travel to the old house of the couple and their daughter, Sadako. In the crawlspace under the house, they find a well that is sealed off. In another vision, Reiko finds out that Dr. Ikuma had taken Sadako in his care after Shizuko died. When she had grown into a teenager, he was scared of her abilities. He killed her and threw her into a well. Sadako, apparently still alive, is left to die in the well. Her rage and feelings of vengeance create the curse, and they are willed upon a videotape together with images of her memories, ending with her view from the well she died in. Images of water, including ponds, lakes and wells, can be seen as alluding to the idea of the "sacred maternal", while simultaneously acting as a metaphor for corruption and pollution. Apart from that, water is often a metaphor for both solitude and alienation.[30] Important to note here is that women's bodies are often used as objects of defilement in horror. Blood, feces, and other bodily fluids are considered to be "abject." Because of monthly blood, the abject is most closely associated with the female body.[31] The metaphor of water, which stands for both the sacred and pollution equally, perfectly describes Sadako's situation when she is trapped in the well: A young woman, both inhabiting the sacred maternal mentioned and the fact that women are seen as defiled, dies in the well filled with water that is symbolic for her solitude in the last moments of her life.

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[30] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 139.
[31] Humphrey, *Gender and Sexuality Haunts the Horror Film*, p. 39.

Reiko and Ryûji find the remains of Sadako in the well, covered in her long black hair. They find her just before Reiko was supposed to die. In this scene, an important recurring theme in Japanese film is visible. Many current Japanese horror movies put the viewer's empathy to the test by portraying the violent female antagonists as both victims and perpetrators of violence.[32] By challenging patriarchal presumptions, the monstrous feminine invites the audience to alternatively identify as the victim and the monster.[33] This alternation in feeling empathy and fear for Sadako is well displayed in the scene where Reiko finds her body and gets a vision of how the girl met her tragic end. She discovers that Sadako is also a victim, and speaks up on how horrible it is that she died at the hands of her father figure so gruesomely. She embraces the skeleton, hoping to give her rest while feeling empathy for Sadako. Ryûji either does not hear her or ignores her and continues what he was doing. This could be interpreted as a scene where two women share a communal mourning on the topic of assault against women, and this could be why Reiko immediately feels empathy for Sadako after seeing the vision, even though the curse could kill her that same day. The viewer of the movie is emotionally challenged by feeling empathy and fear at the same time for a tragic 'monster'.

After Reiko and Ryûji discover Sadako's body and Reiko does not die after the seven days are up, they believe the curse to be lifted. However, a few days later, Ryûji is killed by Sadako who crawls out of his TV screen in his apartment. This is an iconic scene, and it holds representations for both the situation of women in Japan at the time and new developments in horror stories. The 1990s, in which time *Ringu* was released, were a changing period for Japan. A greater number of women were compelled to work once the economic bubble burst. Additionally, male identities were seen as being threatened and being destabilized by this.[34] The view of the nuclear family where the man is the sole breadwinner and caretaker of the family was not the exclusive norm anymore. This changing dynamic of society is often used in movies, as it was an uncertain and demoralizing change for many men. The depiction of a female 'monster', in this case Sadako, serves as a metaphor for how gender, family, and cultural norms are shifting in contemporary Japan.[35] Another scary thing about the 90s was the growing role of technology in society. *Ringu* has played a significant role in the resurgence of Japanese ghost stories in addition to adding the technological sphere, a well-known and much debated source of postmodern horror.[36] It captures the Japanese generation's growing anxiety about the non-identity of emerging technologies in the 1990s[37], with the fatal consequences of watching a videotape and a monstrous girl that comes out of the TV.

The creation and depiction of the female vengeful spirit in this movie can in my opinion be seen in two ways. First, it can be analyzed as criticism of a society where women are subordinate in the patriarchal system and are, through the character of the *onryō*, given agency to take revenge on the men. As I have explained before, the spirit of Sadako comes back to kill people in the same fashion she was hurt and killed. This all started because the man in her life failed to protect her and harmed her instead. However, this can be viewed as an action of taking back agency regarding Sadako. She is taking matters into her own hands because she was wronged. She shows dominance, however rooted in evil it may be. The scene in which Sadako crawls out of the TV screen to kill Ryûji is an example of the taken agency and returning of the gaze. When Sadako leaves the supernatural television world and enters the real world, she defies movie norms. She does this while giving the objectifying masculine gaze that ultimately caused her death a death glare in return.[38] Being her full terrible self, Sadako's full head of sleek dark hair comes through the screen first, that in itself already being a horror of natural impossibilities. She then fully heaves herself out of the TV, crawling towards her victim with bloody fingers from trying to claw her way out of the well she got trapped in. At first, she is on the ground with Ryûji looking down on her, but she soon straightens herself up fully and now Ryûji is on the ground, her looking down on him. Showing dominance and terror, she follows him around until she gives him her deathly stare, her eye more open than humanly possible and all her terror unleashed. Not only is the literal stare she gives her victims the return of the gaze, her crawling out of a TV screen is an indication of taking back agency by taking spectatorship away from viewers watching the screen. Mulvey says this as well about the movie theater. She states that the majority of movies only present a narrative for the viewer to observe. Even more so, it may be argued that the darkness of movie theaters serves to foster the notions of spectatorship and voyeurism by dividing the audience members from one another. By doing this, the ability of viewers to project their suppressed desires into the characters on film is improved.[39] Even though the third wall is not actually broken, *Ringu*'s Sadako gives anxieties about that third wall being broken by breaching the line between object and anonymous gaze, taking spectatorship away and creating agency for herself. Ellis-Rees explains this as the 1990s shift in gender norms being reflected in the display of confrontation between the piercing masculine gaze and the presumably monstrous female object that dares to return that stare.[40]

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[32] Ellis-Rees, *Fear and Female Revenge in Three Contemporary Japanese Horror Films*, p. 228.
[33] Dumas, *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese popular culture,* p. 40.
[34] Dumas, *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese popular culture,* p. 7.
[35] Dumas, *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese popular culture,* p. 38.
[36] Dumas, *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese popular culture,* p. 22.
[37] Dumas, *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese popular culture,* p. 46.

The second way the depiction of *onryō* can be analyzed is as the inherent fear that men carry for women. Balmain explains that the core issue of horror, and that which is truly horrific, is often that women's sexuality makes them alluring but also threatening to men.[41] This is because for men, femininity is instilled with a fear of the female reproductive system as a realm outside the purview of paternal law's regulatory authority. So, because the female body is out of the patriarchal control and therefore a wildcard, the depiction of said body is often used to be a metaphor of societal issues and fears of men.

Ultimately, Reiko finds out what they did wrong in trying to stop the curse, and she realizes the curse was not lifted from her, but she passed it on to Ryûji by copying the cursed tape and showing it to him. With her son thus also still being cursed after watching the tape, she copies the tape again with the intention to show it to her son's grandfather, by whom he is staying, to pass on the curse and save her son.

Even though both Reiko and Sadako are portrayed in different ways, both visually and morally, I want to note that both are being affected by familial ties in the movie. Reiko is trying to protect her family, especially her son, and tries to keep him from dying by an evil force: the curse that is the pure rage and resentment that was emitted when Sadako died by the hands of her own family, her father. Sadako is made the way she is depicted in the movie: a white, ghostly appearance with long sleek hair with terrifying eyes peeking through. The likeness to *onryô* is quite visible, however Sadako is a contemporary version of this concept in the way she appears in regular settings of daily life, and that she is not just haunting the person that hurt her, but is actively trying to spread her curse to as much people as possible.

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[38] Ellis-Rees, *Fear and Female Revenge in Three Contemporary Japanese Horror Films*, p. 234.
[39] Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,*p. 9.
[40] Ellis-Rees, *Fear and Female Revenge in Three Contemporary Japanese Horror Films*, p. 228.
[41] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 6

To conclude this chapter, I want to highlight that *Ringu* is a ghost story with a somewhat *kaiki* feel, but it is made for a contemporary audience by playing into themes like the fears that came with the fast increase of the use of technology. The character of Sadako functions as a link to the *kaiki* genre but rings in the new era of J-horror as well. Cultural and religious references are made as to why women are portrayed a certain way, but they do not determine the image of the women. The patriarchal system that has been so present in Japanese society has a bigger impact on the way not only the feminine 'monster' is portrayed, but also affects the other female characters in the movies, such as the main character. This is for example shown in the similarities in the situations of Sadako and Reiko as the male gaze (brought to life by the image of the man in the ring of the well) looks down on both of them. Empathy is created for the 'monster' due to the tragic life and end by the hand of assault, a topic that can be all too real for viewers in real life. Certain motives can, however, be interpreted as the empowerment of women, but these aspects do not prevail in *Ringu*. The central theme is still the actions of men that created the female monster.

Chapter 3: Mental illness and motherhood in *Kotoko*

The movies that I will discuss from here on deal more with subjects such as mental illness, nihilism and gore instead of ghosts. They are considered part of J-horror due to the dark themes and scary images that are used throughout.

The 2000s in Japan were roughly a continuation of the chaos that was started by the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s. Even though Japan started isolating itself again on a diplomatic level, globalization had a great effect on society, with people having access to media from all over the world. However, cinema in Japan remained primarily focussed on Japanese society, only using Japanese language and cultural themes aimed specifically towards the Japanese audience.[42] Melodramas loaded with sentimental nostalgia towards earlier times and love stories became more and more popular. These films avoided the idea of Japanese identity and the question of what that identity entailed. This holds a contrast to the popular national cinema of South-Korea, where the central theme in most movies is a focus on the South-Korean national identity.[43] The avoidance of the question of Japanese identity seems to differ greatly from films made in the 1990s, especially in the horror genre. As we have seen before, Japanese horror films then were packed with historical and cultural references that would be quickly understood by a Japanese audience. This does, however, link with the notion that in the 2000s, movies were made specifically for a Japanese audience.

Kotoko, directed by Shinya Tsukamoto (who features in the movie as well), is about a single mother named Kotoko who tries to take care of her baby, but this is made extremely hard due to the hallucinations she experiences. Whenever she sees a person, whether it be her own child or someone passing on the street, she sees two of them. The hallucinations she sees are violent, and the 'people' try to attack her. This makes her extremely anxious, and she becomes paranoid by the thought that people are trying to hurt her, but most of all her baby. Single motherhood and mental illness are phenomena that occur worldwide and definitely do not restrict itself to Japanese society, but the situation of single mothers in Japan has a history of being difficult. After the war, the daily life situation for single mothers was dire. The support system that was implemented before the war (the Motherhood Protection Law) was abolished in the postwar period. The education level of 78.1% of single mothers was limited to elementary school, and finding a job with a high enough salary to maintain a family was incredibly hard. Although most of the single mothers were working, the income was low. In contemporary times, there are different support systems in place for single mothers, a demographic that is often defined as 'hard to employ'. Examples of these support systems are availability of no- or low-interest loans and training programs for work purposes. Single motherhood is often associated with financial struggles in Japan, which creates prejudices and misconceptions.[44] Childcare for working single mothers is also available at an often lowered cost, but this is only for the privileged. Lower-income single mother households do not get the same treatment as higher-income households. What is interesting to see is that single mothers are expected to work full time, as the support systems also imply. This stands in contrast to the expectations for married mothers in the middle class. These expectations lean more to the idea of being a full-time housewife, or are at least very accepting of that idea. Single mothers that work full time and try to get a permanent function have more difficulties while also raising small children. This affects income negatively as well.[45] Kotoko does have a job, as we see her sometimes underlining sales advertisements at a desk. It is not made clear whether this is a full-time or a part-time job, however it seems like she is home a lot and working scenes are few. She lives in a small apartment with her baby. Finding housing as a single mother after, for example, a divorce, can lay bare the social stigmas and discrimination that come with the new status. There are some instances where single mothers are not able to rent an apartment, because it is only offered to couples. This is also a reason why single mothers of young children often return to live with their parents or other family, something that is not a possibility for everyone.[46] This shows the discrimination that is still in place against single mothers that make their lives even more difficult.

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[42] Inuhiko, *What is Japanese Cinema? A History,* p. 186-187.
[43] Inuhiko, *What is Japanese Cinema? A History,* p. 190.

Further along in the movie, Kotoko endures a mental breakdown at home with her child, and the baby is taken away from her to be in her sister's care. When she is allowed to visit, she gets on the bus and sings a song to herself. It is an intimate scene with long closeups of her sitting on the bus, singing. Singing seems to be the only thing calming her down and keeping her from seeing the hallucinations. The song is noticed by another person on the bus, award-winning writer Tanaka, and he becomes somewhat obsessed with Kotoko. He wants to be with her, even though Kotoko has made it quite clear that she has no interest, mainly by stabbing a fork in his hand, which is something she will keep doing to him. He shows up by her house often, and Kotoko either ignores him or closes the blinds. At one point, Tanaka feels that he has to run over to her house at night, and in a panic he climbs through the window to find Kotoko with her wrists slit in the bathroom. Kotoko has been making slight slits in her wrist since the beginning of the movie, to see if she is still allowed to live at that moment. Tanaka tries to help a very calm but weak Kotoko, but she eventually wants to escape. In this escape scene, they both get hurt badly, while Kotoko goes through an episode of sadness and rage. The scene is shot in a way that always makes sure the viewer is close to Kotoko, to see her emotions and outbursts. It is never mentioned what the condition Kotoko suffers from is, causing her hallucinations and paranoia. But even when the condition is not named, it does represent mental illness in a general way, impacting the viewer. Learning about mental health through a narrative can be very impactful because the narrative enables deep learning since it reaches people on an emotional level. Narratives, like movies, can create emphasis on certain aspects of the story, which intensifies the experience of the viewer, expanding their minds. When fully engaged in the story, it can create reflection on the subject in the viewer.[47] Representations of mental health issues are important: many people struggle with mental health problems every day, and it is often not visible on the outside. With the use of long, almost uncomfortable scenes of Kotoko suffering, the viewer is placed in proximity to the issue and can thus feel connected to her. Viewers are then able to reflect more on the subject of mental health, having seen such intimate images of it, which could lead to more acceptance and awareness in daily life.

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[44] Ezawa, *Single Mothers in Contemporary Japan,* p. xiv-xv.
[45] Ezawa, *Single Mothers in Contemporary Japan,* p. 14-15.
[46] Ezawa, *Single Mothers in Contemporary Japan,* p. 62-63.

Eventually they get into a relationship, in which there are small moments of peace, but a lot of moments of Kotoko beating Tanaka into a pulp, drawing a lot of blood. Tanaka sits there and takes it and when Kotoko starts spiraling, he says it is no problem that he is hurt. They also go to see Kotoko's son at her sister's house, and this seems to be a scene of complete normalcy. Tanaka plays with her son, and Kotoko is pictured on the beach with the kid, being happy.

In a long scene filmed in one shot, we see Kotoko performing a song in her own house, with Tanaka watching. The camera is placed in a way that the viewer sees her through the eyes of Tanaka. Kotoko (the actress being a singer in real life) gives a whole show, singing and dancing without any background music, just her voice. The scene is so long and unbroken that it almost feels uncomfortable to watch, also because Kotoko is going through some intense emotions during the song. It not only feeds back into the voyeurism that Mulvey talks about in her article[48], but the scene creates a vulnerable image of Kotoko which also serves to sympathize with her, albeit out of secondhand embarrassment. The camera being positioned to give Tanaka's view, however, does create the concept of the 'male gaze'. Although Kotoko shows throughout the movie that she likes to sing, and it actually helps her mediate her hallucinations, her performance in front of Tanaka is sexy and theatrical, as if her image at that moment is made purely for the erotic gaze of her male counterpart, which is an image that is often created in film.[49]

One day, Kotoko hears that she is considered healed enough to get her child back, and when she runs home to tell Tanaka, he is gone. When her child, now a toddler, is back in her house, she gets feelings of anxiety and paranoia again. She wants to save her child from those who want to hurt him, and she tries to take him out of the world herself by strangling him. In modern Japan, there is a greater public awareness of difficulties involving the relationship between mother and child, such as child abuse, mother-child suicide, and neglect, as a result of increasing media coverage. As a result, the mothers engaged in these situations have frequently been portrayed in the media as "deviators" from the norm and dismissed with terms like "unfit mother" and "demon".[50] With a feminist perspective, these moms who society perceives as engaging in immoral behavior might be considered as victims of the symbolically charged position they are required to play.[51] Especially in the case of Kotoko, it can be said that there are more factors that contribute to the dangerous situation a mother-child relationship can be in. For the viewers, her actions are an accumulation of her thoughts and fears she gets from her condition. At that exact moment that she chooses to take her own child's life, she really believes it is to protect him from wrongdoers. Kotoko is clearly a victim of her own mental illness, and this scene is the ultimate proof of that. This means Kotoko is here depicted as a victim who harms and kills, which strongly relates back to the monster-victim idea that was so prominent in *Ringu* as well.

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[47] McAllister, *Connecting Narrative with Mental Health Learning through Discussion and Analysis of Selected Contemporary Films*, p. 306.

[48] Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,*p. 9.

[49] Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,*p. 12.

[50] McKinlay, *Unstable Mothers*.

Another subject that relates *Ringu* and *Kotoko* is the supposed 'mother obsession' Japan has had since the post-war period. With the father gone a lot and the mother always there for the children, raising them and educating them, a special bond is said to be made between child and mother, creating an obsession with mothers and placing them on a pedestal. Some have even argued that the trend in Japanese fiction in the 2010s was the absence of a father figure, and that this image of a woman alone with her child might even be a look into the future of Japanese society.[52] The flip side of this holy image of the mother, is the 'nightmare mother' that is either mad or dabbles in the supernatural.[53] Both Sadako's mother and Kotoko herself fit this image of the 'nightmare mother', with the relation to the supernatural or the 'madness' respectively. It is a bit short-sighted to just label these characters as such, however, especially in the case of Kotoko. To name the mental issues she has as a reason for her 'nighmarishness' as a mother would disregard the struggles many other people in real life also endure. In the case of Sadako's mother it is a bit more fitting, since the supernatural powers she has are an unrealistic tool to increase the horror of the film, adding to an actual nightmare feeling. It is notable, however, how both characters have elements of the feared nightmare mother that has a role in creating horror in Japan.

Child neglect and domestic abuse, subjects that are clearly featured in *Kotoko*, are often used as symbols of societal breakdown in film. [54] Where the female body was initially used as a metaphor for postwar societal issues, these new themes have taken its place. This is most probably because they are thought to be 'contemporary issues', as mentioned before about child abuse, but child- and domestic abuse are covered more by contemporary media and the visibility makes for more awareness. The use of these themes as symbols of problems in society shows a shift in the depiction of women as well: women's bodies are less the focus when trying to convey notions of societal breakdown.

Following the attempted strangling of the child, is a scene of pure delirium, and eventually we learn that Kotoko was taken into a mental hospital. She is seen in a white dress, sitting and silently waiting in a room, when she is told she has a visitor. The visitor turns out to be her son, who she apparently did not kill, and is now an older child. He tells her about his day and about school, but she says nothing. After he leaves, he waves to her in the same way she used to do to him as a child. She is allowed outside for a smoke in the rain, where she is left dancing intensely while it pours. The final scene is her sitting in her room in the hospital and singing next to the window, as she used to do in her home.

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[51] McKinlay, *Unstable Mothers*.
[52] Guarini, Letizia. "研究発表 「父親の不在」を文学は告げている?, p. 110.
[53] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 130.
[54] Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film,* p. 148.

Not only does the movie deal with subjects that are recognizable for the whole world, the movie was released at the Venice International Film Festival and even won an award there. The film broke loose of the former trend of films aimed solely towards a Japanese audience and gained fame worldwide, similar to what *Ringu* did in the 1990s.

The depiction of women in *Kotoko* is focused on the character of Kotoko, struggling with being a single mother, which is made more difficult due to her mental illness. Single motherhood is a touchy subject in Japan, since discrimination against single mothers is an issue that continues today. Fewer opportunities are available for single mothers in the workplace and in society, even more so for lower income households. The character of Kotoko is also used to convey representations of mental health issues, something that can have a big impact through narrative. What really comes forward, however, is the concept of the victim-monster, where the viewer can sympathize with the female character while she commits horrible acts, in this case harming her male counterpart and trying to kill her child. This resonates with *Ringu* in the way that the victim-monster is a vital part of the female characters, which forces the audience to have conflicted feelings when watching the film.

Chapter 4: The danger of beauty in *Helter Skelter*

The 2000s also saw a rise in female movie directors. In the 1900s, women that wanted to direct films were expected to put emphasis on hyper feminine aspects of life, and this was not something all women directors wanted to do. However, after the win of Naomi Kawase of the 'new directors prize' at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997, the rise of women making movies began. One of these rising directing stars was Ninagawa Mika. She is known for making quite intense and grotesque films with a feel of kitsch.[55] This can also be said for her film *Helter Skelter* (2012), showing the beautiful downfall of a complex character while critiquing contemporary beauty standards.

The movie is about Lilico, a famous model and celebrity in Japan. She is celebrated for her impeccable beauty, and is seen on the cover of every magazine and in every commercial. She has everything she wants: beauty, fame, and people that idolize her. We learn that Lilico has quite an ego and is rude to her staff, spitting water in her assistant's face, for example.

Lilico frequently goes to a special clinic to get procedures done on her body. She has undergone full-body plastic surgery to look the way she does, which is a secret towards the public. Her manager, whom she calls 'mom', pays for these surgeries. While Lilico is at the clinic, she sees another girl covered in dark spots screaming to see a doctor while she is being dragged away, and a doctor whispers to the head surgeon that the girl's bills were not paid. This is the first glimpse the viewers get of the consequences of the surgeries the clinic offers and what happens when the bills do not get paid.

In Japan, going to specialized salons to get beauty work done has become increasingly popular for girls and women. Beauty has been something sought after for ages, but what differs from the past is that now, images of beauty standards and desired looks are widely circulating through the internet and social media, which makes them easy to access and consume. Not only are these pictures, but also precise descriptions of how to attain these beauty standards.[56] Apart from the standard beauty parlors where make-up and hair is done, there are ‘aesthetic salons’ where supposedly body-altering services are provided, either through a multitude of massage appointments or through plastic surgery. The aesthetic salon offers modern techniques for commercializing body transformation, and strive to maximize their profits from beauty through science, a strategy that appeals to Japan's appreciation of empiricism.[57] The constant changing of the body brings forward the idea that the body is a ‘project’ that needs work.[58] This is obviously problematic for the self-image of people. The way the clinic is pictured in the movie relates to the idea of the aesthetic salon. The boss of the place is a surgeon, and everyone is wearing lab coats, adding to the feel of science being related to the beauty work that is being done at the place. However, many real-life ‘aesthetic salons’ are discovered to be not exactly legitimate businesses and are borderline shady operations.[59] The scene of the girl screaming and the look of her skin decaying in the clinic shows this side of the salons very effectively. Not only does it show the shady side of salons and clinics where body modifications are being done, at the same time it addresses the risks of undergoing such modifications in the movie and in real life.

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[55] Inuhiko, *What is Japanese Cinema? A History,* p. 193.

Throughout the movie, the viewer gets fast-paced images of Lilico’s insane life, working as a model every day and appearing on shows, leaving hardly any time for herself. Even her boyfriend has to visit her while she is at work. The scenes about her are colorful, with bright reds and pink dominating the screen. The rest of the world outside of Lilico’s life is colored quite neutral, creating an extreme contrast that pulls the viewer deeper into the experience that is Lilico’s world. It is showing femininity in a whirlwind of color, sex and agency, with a mixture of the cute aesthetic that is shown when Lilico is working and a sexy and deeply feeling character when Lilico is off work. The cute-sexy dichotomy is something that has been prevalent in Japanese society for a long time. In the postwar era, both the image of a wholesome, cute Japanese woman and ideals of a sexy Euro-American woman were popular for women to attain, and in the 1970s and 1980s the era of cute aesthetic really began, ideals distancing themselves from the western standards. The cute aesthetic is still sought-after in popular culture today.[60] The way Lilico is presenting as both aesthetics gives the viewer a clear division between her work life and her personal life.

Suddenly, Lilico starts to notice spots of decay on her body. The marks of deterioration of her beauty send her spiraling in anger, fear and insecurity, scared to be thrown off her pedestal. She starts hallucinating, seeing butterflies come out of nowhere. We slowly see her mental state break down further and further, while she harms the people around her in the process. Encouraged by her ‘mom’ manager, she already used sex to get higher up in the modeling industry, and now she uses sex to denigrate her assistant. She eventually starts controlling her assistant and the assistant’s boyfriend and persuading them to do dirty work for her. After Lilico’s boyfriend breaks off their engagement for another girl, the pair have to mutilate the new girl’s body by throwing acid on her, for example, showing a rivalry for beauty.

In the meantime, there are other scenes where we see an investigation team looking at photos of girls that committed suicide, which appears to be an increasing problem. The girls are all young, and the cases are thought to be related to a certain clinic the girls went to undergo plastic surgery. They are ending their lives because they could not afford to go back for the procedures needed to keep up with their looks, and their bodies started to deteriorate, which correlates with the rise of plastic surgery and beauty work in real life society: these girls would rather die than look literally rotten. The investigation team is increasingly suspecting Lilico to be a client there as well, and in need of information, the leader of the team gets more and more infatuated with her, wanting to meet her to solve the case. They eventually do meet and Lilico is made aware of the suicides and the suspicion of her plastic surgery, which makes her lose it even more.

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[56] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 8.
[57] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 41.
[58] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 11.
[59] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 42.
[60] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 24-25.

While Lilico is increasingly struggling with her beauty, drugs and mental state, a new model enters the industry. She is younger than Lilico and very beautiful, which makes her an immediate threat to Lilico's fame. The younger model, Kozue, takes over some of Lilico's work and Lilico feels like she is stealing her shine, making her more anxious and spiraling even more. She throws rage fits and harasses her assistant, and eventually gets her to try and mutilate Kozue, making sure Lilico stays the most beautiful in the industry. The assistant fails, however, because Kozue's calmness and rationality (the opposite of what Lilico is) throws her off, and she is unable to harm her. In a scene where Kozue talks about her life as a model, she states matter-of-factly that of course she vomits to stay thin, and that every model does that, as if it is a normal part of her daily routine. Since a few decades, having a slim or thin body has become a beauty ideal in Euro-America and Japan alike. The main focuses of aesthetic salons are therefore the slimming of body parts. Women are made to believe that they are not beautiful if they do not fit these body standards. [61] Given the preoccupation on the thin-ideal among young Japanese women, as seen by the 2016 survey findings of the Japanese restaurant chain Skylark, which revealed that 84.9% of women in their 20s were interested in dieting[62], this shows how effective the implementing of these beauty ideals are. With Kozue stating it so casual, the normalisation of eating disorders in the beauty industry becomes blatantly clear in the movie. It also reflects the modeling world in real life, showing that the movie directly critiques the beauty standards of today through the emphasis on how normal such a harmful thing is for Kozue, her being a model within the same standards of beauty in real life.

Meanwhile, Lilico is appearing as a guest on a tv-show where she has a complete mental breakdown due to a buildup of all her anxieties, hallucinating and screaming on set and passing out. Lilico's assistant is done with all she had to endure, and sends pictures of how Lilico looked before plastic surgery to the media, unmasking her. It turns out that Lilico, who used to be chubby, was not perceived as pretty, and her 'mom' manager took her in and made her 'beautiful' so she could make money off of Lilico. Now exposed, we see Lilico in her apartment, covered in dark spots and media at her door. She screams at her assistant that she could as well be dead, because what should come of her now she lost her stardom and her fans? And indeed, we do see short clips of teenage girls that idolized her in the beginning of the movie now slandering her, saying she just used to be a "fat prostitute", and she is fake anyway. In Japan, there is a mutual relationship between fans and the idol or celebrity. The celebrity actively seeks the indulgence of the fans. They are not only being supported by fans through their money, but also the fans' active spread of the celebrity's content. This is how fans make a person into a famous idol. The fans, in their turn, see their favorite celebrity grow in popularity and get identified as part of that certain fandom. One can only exist in relation to the other.[63] This is why Lilico sees her fall off her pedestal as the end of her life: she can not exist without her fans taking her further into stardom. This also reflects the harsh reality of cancel-culture and the consequences of not being able to keep up with the beauty standards. It is not just a matter of patriarchal ideals of how women should represent, or how advertisements want women to feel about themselves. When a woman does not conform to the beauty standards, she will also be confronted about it by female peers.[64] The way her (female) teenage fans drop her the instant she does not give off the perfect image for them is another critique of the harsh reality of idolization, especially in Japan.

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[61] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 48-49.
[62] Ellis-Rees, *Soft, Round and Squishy,* p. 164.
[63] Yano, *Charisma's Realm,* p. 336.

Lilico is supposed to give a press speech, but when she is about to speak, she stabs herself in the eye and seemingly kills herself, in a dramatic scene with red feathers raining down on her. We then see Kozue live out the model life Lilico had, and when celebrating the end of a shoot at a bar, she suddenly sees Lilico's assistant. Kozue follows her down to a backroom, fully decorated with extravagant colorful furniture reminiscent of Lilico's home, and in the middle sits Lilico before a vanity on a dais, with an eye patch covering her stabbed eye, and she smiles. The movie is already a whirlwind of colors and emotions, but every time someone cries in the film it is depicted as if they are laughing, only adding more to the delirious experience.

Idol culture is very big in Japan. The term 'idol' is used for singers, media celebrities and models that have become popular in Japan.[65] Beauty and fashion trends are often greatly influenced by famous idols. An example is a famous Japanese singer in the 1990s, Amuro Namie. She had a small face, so new markets for face creams that would slim your face or expensive facial treatments came into existence. She also wore shoes with high platforms, so women started buying similar shoes en masse.[66] This shows how far the influence of idols can go. The image of idols is worshiped, and the idols often appear in other forms of media such as TV shows and commercials. It is connected to the rising significance of marketing to fans through what is called "affective economics" that idols and celebrities have been the focus of Japanese television and advertising in recent years. Fans, who are devoted watchers, often watch television more intently and deliberately during the broadcast. Due to the emotive impact of the fan's affiliation with the idol, they are also more responsive to targeted advertising. Advertisers and marketers brand their products to create customer loyalty by fostering a long-lasting relationship with a fan base.[67] This is exactly what is shown through the character of Lilico as well, showing scenes of people grabbing every magazine that has her on the cover and buying the products she advertises. However, throughout the movie we are reminded of the fact that it is Lilico's image that is celebrated, not her as a person. Even after her death, her image is still used publicly, and Kozue has taken over her role as top model. The way an idol is presented with a lack of autonomy or without an authentic self makes them interchangeable, and their image becomes useful as a commodity.[68] Personality or wellbeing does not matter, as long as you are pretty.

In *Helter Skelter,* we can again see how the horror of reality is used. The downside of beauty standards, body modifications and model life, all parts of contemporary Japanese society, are extensively displayed and critiqued in the film. The character of Lilico is used to give a face to the horrors of the life women could endure while trying to conform to beauty standards or living life as an idol. Apart from the high standards for body image, it is very possible that idols, just like Lilico, get overworked and overtired and start getting delusional, making it again something that could happen in real life, too, which makes it scarier to look at. Self-image is something people, and especially women, since the societal pressure on them to look a certain way is bigger, and something they maybe struggle with every day. Seeing their struggles enhanced in film makes it not only more relatable, but makes them aware that the downward spiral Lilico ends up in could happen to them as well. Since her downfall is so tragic and mostly out of her own control, the character of Lilico awakens sympathy in the film's audience. Being a victim of the idol-world and having a public image and her being an incredibly difficult and mean person combines to create the victim-monster that we have seen in the previous films as well, creating a trend in the female character discussed. Lilico is depicted in a headstrong and dangerous but feeling manner, taking agency in her sexual endeavors but also being relatable due to her struggles with self-image, and I feel this complex character is made possible by the fact that the character was directed by a woman as well.

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[64] Ellis-Rees, *Soft, Round and Squishy,* p. 163.
[65] Galbraith, *The mirror of Idols and Celebrity*, p. 2.
[66] Miller, *Beauty Up,* p. 28.
[67] Karlin, *Advertising, Idols, and the Making of Fan Audiences,* p. 85.
[68] Galbraith, *Idols: The Image of Desire in Japanese Consumer Capitalism,* p. 194.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have discussed Japanese horror cinema and the depiction of women in specific films in this genre. There are some important findings that I want to discuss here. First, we have seen that Japanese horror often reflects the fears and problems of society, and that female characters are used to display these fears and problems. In *Ringu*, societal issues of the growing anxiety men had for women are reflected in the female source of evil, the anxieties being the uprising of the feminist movement and the decreased prestige of the salaryman. Also, playing into the fear or apprehension in new technology adds to the horror aspect: showing what can actually be scary regarding a topic that is already sensitive in real-life society. In *Kotoko* and *Helter Skelter,* contemporary societal problems like mental illness and the dangers of obsessions are the main focus, and these themes are embodied through the female protagonists. Kotoko's character can also be seen as another example of the anxieties of men by depicting her as unstable and aggressive, and she also bears the image of the mother obsession that reigns in Japanese fiction. Single motherhood has been a difficult subject in Japan for a long time, and together with a painful display of mental illness and a little bit of gore, it is a solid formula of horror for Japanese society shown in *Kotoko*. For *Helter Skelter*, it is the mix of the ever-prevalent idol culture of Japan mixed in with cancel culture and the recent rise of body modifications to feel beautiful. These are all themes that Japanese society is dealing with right now, and the horror factor of the movies displaying these themes is that it could happen in real life. The tension created by the recognition that a viewer might have for the subjects and the impending doom that it might happen in real life is the real new subject of horror in Japanese cinema. Female characters in the films I have discussed are portrayed as victim-monsters. They invoke a feeling of compassion and empathy in the audience, while also committing 'evil' or harmful acts. In *Ringu*, the viewer's compassion is awoken for Sadako by the fact that she was murdered by her father figure as a child that did not know how to use her powers, even though as a ghost she haunts and murders people, which creates the image of the monster. In *Kotoko*, empathy can be found in the way Kotoko herself is a victim of mental illness, something she can not control. The monster image is created in the scenes where she hurts her partner and tries to strangle her child. In *Helter Skelter*, Lilico is a victim in the way she got mixed up in the model industry that tries to make her fit in a set image, and how she is built up and torn down by the public. The monster is created by showing how she hurts and manipulates people. This creates a dual sensation in the viewer and the moral grayness combined with the display of real-life horrors makes for intricate characters that have a great impact that viewers can take into the real world. In J-horror, the horrors are still often embodied by female characters, as we have seen in the movies discussed. So, even though the focus of the Japanese horror film has changed, the depiction of women is still used to display the horrors of society and, occasionally, to be a conduit for the anxieties of men.

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