"Our Fear Has Taken on a Life of its Own": The Monster-Child in Japanese Horror Film of The Lost Decade,

Jessica Balanzategui

University of Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

The monstrous child of Japanese horror film has become perhaps the most transnationally recognisable and influential horror trope of the past decade following the release of "Ring" (Hideo Nakata, 1999), Japan's most commercially successful horror film. Through an analysis of "Ring", "The Grudge" (Takashi Shimizu, 2002), "Dark Water" (Nakata, 2002), and "One Missed Call" (Takashi Miike, 2003), I argue that the monstrous children central to J-horror film of the millenial transition function as anomalies within the symbolic framework of Japan's national identity. These films were released in the aftermath of the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in the early 1990s — a period known in Japan as 'The Lost Decade'— and also at the liminal juncture represented by the turn of the millennium. At this cultural moment when the unity of national meaning seems to waver, the monstrous child embodies the threat of symbolic collapse. In alignment with Noël Carroll's definition of the monster, these children are categorically interstitial and formless: Sadako, Toshio, Mitsuko and Mimiko invoke the wholesale destruction of the boundaries which separate victim/villain, past/present and corporeal/spectral. Through their disturbance to ontological categories, these children function as monstrous incarnations of the Lacanian gaze. As opposed to allowing the viewer a sense of illusory mastery, the J-horror monster-child figures a disruption to the spectator's sense of power over the films' diegetic worlds. The child's presence threatens symbolic wholeness, exposing a glimpse of the amorphous real: a fissure in the symbolic order which prevents the spectator from viewing the film from a safe distance. The frisson resulting from this sudden loss of mastery correlates with anxieties surrounding the child's symbolic refusal to remain subordinated in its 'proper place' in contemporary Japanese society, particularly in response to the disintegration of secure narratives of progress in The Lost Decade.

Much insightful criticism has already been written about the explosion of transnationally popular Japanese horror films which emerged in the late 1990s, heralded by the release of *Ring* (Hideo Nakata) in 1998, which remains Japan's most commercially successful domestic horror film. Yet to date this criticism has elided or understated the most tellingly new commonality that underpins this assemblage of films: the monster-child, a figure who embodies tensions about national progress. The group of films under discussion, known transnationally as "J-horror", seem to be deeply intertwined with certain socio-cultural and technological shifts that were taking place in Japan at the time of their release. In fact, as both Kinoshita (2009) and Phu (2010) have pointed out, the term "J-horror" does not necessarily denote a nationalized film genre, but, to use Kinoshita's terms, more of a "movement" (105). While scholars such as Tateishi (2003) have positioned this swell of J-horror films as a "resurgence" of the Japanese horror genre popular in the sixties (295), Wada-Marciano (2009) suggests that J-horror does not constitute a resurgence of a previous genre as such but an entirely new movement associated with the conditions of the late 1990s, a suggestion with which I agree.

In fact the liminal period straddling the late nineties into the new millennium can be seen as a moment saturated in anxiety and apprehensions within grand narratives of socio-cultural progress across the world, however in Japan the period from the late 1990s into the 2000s was rather pointedly fraught as a result of the bursting of the bubble economy. The period from approximately 1991-2003 has become known in Japan as "the lost decade"[1], as the incredibly rapid economic growth that occurred in Japan from the late 1970s until the early 1990s suddenly slumped dramatically and incomprehensibly: scholars in both Japan and around the globe are still picking apart the ruins of the lost decade in attempts to determine its causes. Fletcher and Staden (2012) have explained that "the experience of the lost decade has been traumatic for Japan….. Observers no longer claimed that Japan was 'number one'….. the effects of the economic stagnation linger as the nation has not found a way out of its economic purgatory of slow growth over the past two decades" (275).

The lost decade marked an uncomfortable disruption to the narratives of rapid progress that have buttressed conceptions of national unity and pride since the dissolution of the Allied Occupation in 1952; the anxieties surrounding this collapse are expressed through the figure of the monstrous child. With the collapse of the bubble economy in the mid-'90s and subsequent lost decade, this unity of national meaning seems to waver, and the monstrous child embodies this threat of both socio-cultural and symbolic collapse in each of the films under discussion: *Ring* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2002), *Dark Water* (Nakata, 2002) and *One Missed Call* (Takashi Miike, 2003). In alignment with Noël Carroll's (1990) definition of the monster as "categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete or formless" (32), the children in each of these films exist between hermetic categories rather than within them. Sadako, Toshio, Mitsuko and Mimiko embody the wholesale destruction of the boundaries which separate victim/villain, past/present and corporeal/spectral.

[1] In fact, this term is often revised to be "the two lost decades", as Japan struggles to overcome this period of economic stagnation.

In alliance with their disturbance to ontological categories, these children function as monstrous incarnations of the Lacanian gaze. Usually in filmic discussions of the gaze, as in Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), the spectator's gaze, as shaped by the camera, allows the viewer a sense of illusory mastery over the filmic world. Instead, these children figure a disruption to the spectator's sense of power over the films' diegetic worlds through their disturbance of coherent temporal frameworks. The relationship between the spectator's gaze and the monster–child thus instead becomes a source of anxiety and powerlessness as, in the words of McGowan (2003), the gaze becomes "not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision" (33). The frisson resulting from this sudden loss of mastery is inherently bound up with anxieties surrounding the child's symbolic refusal to remain subordinated in its proper place in response to the disintegration of secure narratives of progress in the lost decade: in these films, the child no longer embodies the security of the future, but instead threatens national progress.

The child is a particularly over-determined symbol of national cohesion and progress in Japan. Child education has been central to the national project of industrial and economic advancement in post-Restoration Japan, a project renewed with heightened impetus and exigency following the traumatic ruptures of World War II. The child in the horror films discussed discomposes linear modes of national progress, most commonly through invading technology — one of the most potent signifiers of Japan's extremely successful post-war progress. The ghostly children featured in J-horror of the millennial turn make circularity of progress, as leisure technologies and related emblems of Japanese modernity repeatedly become home to vengeful spectres which restate the primacy of the spiritual and temporal modes of pre-modern Japan.

Much of the scholarly discourse currently extant about the J-horror film discusses the figure of the *onryo* (vengeful female ghost) or broader category the *yurei* (female ghost) and her symbolic power. Wee (2011), Balmain (2008), McRoy (2008) and Hand (2006) in particular have traced the *onryo's* prominence from classical ghost stories, or *kaidan*, originating in the Tokugawa Shogunate Era (1608-1868), woodblock prints, Kabuki, and Noh plays, before becoming a feature of post-war and contemporary film. These scholars offer insightful analyses of the *onryo's* filmic emergence and her influence on contemporary J-horror. Yet I suggest that in this discourse the way in which the child has become bound up with this figure has been largely elided.

The works of the scholars outlined above rightly discuss the ways in which contemporary J-horror films borrow "from the tradition of the Japanese female ghost story, adapting its conventions to express a growing masculine anxiety within contemporary Japan, where modernity and social change are steadily undermining previously entrenched gender roles" (Wee, 152). However I argue that the child is the central, and, most tellingly new common feature of the J-horror films of the millennial turn, and the continual emphases on the *onryo* alone have wrongly neglected this important development. For instance, McRoy cites Hendrix's discussion of the phenomenon of "dead wet girls", the common feature of most contemporary J-horror films. Yet both McRoy and Hendrix quickly neglect the girl, or specifically, child factor suggested in this constellation in favour of adult gender divisions. For instance, McRoy states that Hendrix's "recognitions both of the theme of water and of the

angry ghosts' gender is crucial" (82) to an understanding of much J-horror, deftly abandoning the (admittedly already vague) "girl" classification.

This imprecision between child and adult is perhaps understandable, as it is reflected in the most famous J-horror film series, the *Ring* cycle, in strange yet significant ways. The indecisiveness over whether the monstrous Sadako is a child or an adult is manifested in the large body of literature that has been produced in the last decade about the *Ring* films: many works resist classifying Sadako using age-suggestive terms, instead using the broad classification 'female' (as in Richards (2010), Martin (2008), Tateishi, McRoy, Wada-Marciano and White (2006)), some refer to Sadako as a 'child' or 'girl' (see Lowenstein (2009), Wetmore (2009), Lury (2010) and Balmain), others refer to her as a 'teenager' or 'young woman' (see Wee and Hand) while others still position her simply as a 'woman' (see Haque (2010)). A brief overview of Sadako's characterisation across the Japanese film cycle illustrates how this imprecision has come about.

The first film, *Ring,* tells the story of Sadako, a young girl with psychic powers, who murders a journalist responsible for taunting her mother at an exhibition of her mother's own psychic abilities. Eventually, threatened by her powers, Sadako's father tosses her down a well and seals her inside. Sadako's spirit festers as she remains trapped in the well, and from her watery sepulchre she uses her abilities to imprint her thoughts, an eerie, incoherent series of images, upon a videotape. Anyone who comes across her mysterious tape is doomed to die within a week unless they copy and pass the tape on to another victim.

The ghostly Sadako is presented as a child throughout most of the film, appearing as such in the haunted videotape which bares her curse, and in the psychic 'flashbacks' she inflicts upon protagonists Reiko and her ex-husband Ryuji. Thus, the haunting is seemingly carried out by a child figure throughout most of the film. However, Reiko and Ryuji come to learn that Sadako was murdered by her father at the age of 19; yet, as suggested by her haunting projections, has not mentally developed beyond an enraged, tantrum-prone child. Sadako also establishes psychic links with Reiko and Ryuji's young son Yoichi, a doubling which becomes increasingly threatening throughout *Ring* and its sequel, further placing Sadako within the realm of childhood.

However in *Ring 2* (Nakata, 1999) it is bizarrely revealed that Sadako in fact remained 'alive' in the well for thirty years, dying only a year or two before Reiko discovered her decaying corpse in the well. Confusing matters further, the prequel, *Ring 0: Birthday* (Norio Tsuruta, 2000) depicts Sadako as a socially and mentally stunted 19 year old girl, who unknowingly places a deadly curse upon almost everyone she encounters. It is revealed that this seemingly innocent teenage Sadako is latently inhabited, and at moments of fear or rage, taken over, by a second version of herself: the child incarnation of Sadako. It is only when this monstrous child version possesses the soft and gentle teenage Sadako that she loses control of her psychic powers and kills or torments people.

At the film's climax, terrified members of Sadako's theatre troupe brutally beat her, facilitating the child's take-over of her bent and broken body to wreak vengeance upon all of her aggressors, leaving none alive in her wake. It is after this massacre that her father tosses his daughter(s) into the well. Thus, Sadako's status as child or adult is extremely unstable and ambivalent throughout the *Ring* cycle.

It is particularly notable that both Nakata and Tsuruta choose not to depict the collapse in gender boundaries central to Koji Suzuki's book series, upon which the films are based — in the first novel, *Ring* (1991) the climactic twist occurs when Sadako is revealed to be a hermaphrodite. The film's screenwriters and directors replace this element with a thoroughly threatening vacillation between childhood and adulthood. This ambivalence places the horrors of the film not along gender lines, as in Suzuki's books, but along temporal ones. Sadako's uncontainable fluctuation between child and adult comes to structure the unstable time frames of all three films.

None of the J-horror films subsequent to the *Ring* cycle are as extreme in their ambivalence about relationships between childhood and adulthood; in the rest of the films discussed, all the child-ghosts remain exactly that for the duration of the film, having been killed while children. I suggest that the *Ring* films express such extreme instability because they mark a paradigmatic shift in the longstanding and firmly entrenched trend of the adult female ghost story in Japan. The *onryo* exposes the extent to which women in post-Restoration Japan were figured as both victims and threats: *onryo* rage against patriarchs who have defied their duties of care and responsibility, and who have thus thrown out the balance of society. Furthermore, the *onryo* condenses masculine fears of the feminine power elided in discourse about the passive (and oppressed) perfect Japanese woman, anxieties that escalated as the loosening of female oppression became a necessary element of socio-cultural progress in the early 20th century. The vengeful child ghost, who is also usually female, drags with it these tensions, as well as a host of other new anxieties. The bursting of the economic bubble in the 1990s brought with it an interrogation of progress and futurity, which ultimately boiled down to a renewed cross-examination of Japanese concepts of childhood.

The unstable time-frames incarnated by Sadako and her vacillation between childhood, adolescence and adulthood collapses linear narrative progress and the very notion of a child's 'growing up' — just as her supernatural invasion of optical media technologies disturbs notions of technological progress. As the series has progressed, Sadako has displayed an adept litheness in response to technological change, moving her curse between videotapes, computers, floppy disks, and the internet. Her supernatural 'virus' thus ensures that every new technological development becomes home to the same anxieties about progress and the uneasy repression of the pre-modern past — with her fractured movements and dressed in a white burial gown, Sadako recalls the archetypal *onryo* figure of pre-modern kaidan. Furthermore, her curse is enacted contagiously, as in order to survive, those who see her cursed video must copy and pass it on, and even then those who live are forever marked by her trace. Because she is so closely associated with childhood, the tensions involved in this disruption of narratives of progress become more acute, as the child, receptacle for the nation's future, instead renders temporal progress as an inescapable, contagious loop.

Ju-on, released soon after *Ring* in 2002 (and in fact it first appeared as two television movies in 2000), can be seen as another transition film, as the trope of the adult female ghost becomes intertwined with the monstrous child. In *Ju-on,* the monstrous spectres of a mother, Kayako, and her child, Toshio, linger within the house in which they were brutally murdered by Kayako's husband (Toshio's father). They haunt anyone who enters this space, yet in a subversion of typical haunted house tropes, this haunting is enacted, like Sadako's curse, via a traumatic 'infection' that is not escaped

once those effected have left the space of the haunted house. Instead, anyone who comes into contact with Toshio or Kayako experiences the wholesale collapse of linear timeframes in their everyday lives.

Usually, the ghosts of horror film compel audiences and characters to periodically experience moments of frisson through the re-exposure of traumatic pasts which rattle neat formations of linear time, but secure borders between past and present become restated at the conclusion. The J-horror child, to use Cua Lim's (2009) expression of ghostly temporalities in Asian fantastic cinema, impels "characters (and those spectators who identify with them) to experience *time with the ghost"* (Lim's emphasis, 161). As in *Ring*, the spectral hauntings of *Ju-on* figure temporality as an inescapable loop, as characters literally are 'haunted' by their own doomed futures, a mechanic escalated in *Ju-on 2*. In this film, for instance, characters Tomoka and Noritaka hear a mysterious banging noise seemingly coming from the wall of their apartment, which occurs at the same time each night. Eventually, as their experience of temporality becomes increasingly unstable, Tomoka, Noritaka and the viewer come to learn that all along this mysterious sound has been the result of Noritaka's own corpse: Kayako's ghost strangles him with her supernaturally-charged hair, leaving him hanging from the apartment's ceiling, and the ghost of little Toshio playfully (and monstrously) swings Noritaka's body backwards and forwards so that his feet periodically hit the wall. Thus Tomoka, Noritaka and the film's audience have been locked into a temporal cycle from which there is no escape.

The viewer's experience of the *Ju-on* films' narratives echoes being helplessly trapped within this doomed loop. In most ghost films, the audience follows a linear narrative which gradually advances our knowledge of the mechanics and motives of the spectres, as we progress towards a triumphant climax in which the protagonists satisfy the demands of the unquiet spirit and restore the coherency of past and present. Yet in the *Ju-on* films, we instead witness separate, non-linear segments which layer different representations of the same time period from the perspectives of each character as they meet their demise at the hands of Kayako and Toshio. The individual segments do not necessarily come together to form a coherent tapestry of narrative meaning, instead serving to lock the audience, like the characters, in to a pre-ordained, hopeless loop, as we become witness to the ways in which all the characters' stories intersect and double back upon each other. Little Toshio is forever stuck at a particular temporal moment and prevented from 'growing up' and enacting the future for which he is the receptacle, and his haunting forces characters and the audience of *Ju-on* to live out this collapse, as they drop out of a linear, progressive time-frame and are instead forced to experience temporality as an inexorable spiral.

While *Juon* and *Ring* may be seen as bridging films, as the child ghost becomes conflated or intertwined with the long established trend of the adult female *onryo*, in *Dark Water* (2002) and *One Missed Call* (2003) it seems the transition period has started to settle. Both of these films centralize hauntings by ghostly children — two figures who died while children, and who continue to enact the traits and habits associated with childhood, yet in monstrously distorted form, through their hauntings.

Like *Ring*, and in fact the film was directed by *Ring*'s Hideo Nakata, *Dark Water* centres on a single mother and her young child. Following her divorce, mother Yoshimi moves in to a dilapidated apartment building with her young daughter, Ikuko. Soon after they arrive at the building, the two become subject to hauntings

from the monstrous ghost of Mitsuko, a young girl who was abandoned in the apartment building, and drowned after falling into the water tank on the building's roof.

The film continually reinforces the hopeless repetition involved across the lives of the three females, often collapsing the boundaries between them, as we witness repeated scenes of the three characters being left behind by their parents as young children. The film opens with Yoshimi's childhood memory of waiting to be picked up by her parents from her kindergarten on a rainy day, and during the course of the film we watch a very similar scene from ghostly Mitsuko's past, as well as in the film's 'present' narrative when little Ikuko is left behind at the very same kindergarten Mitsuko once attended (on a similarly rainy afternoon) when Yoshimi fails to collect her when a job interview runs overtime. Past and present thus fold in to each other in this cyclic process of abandonment, both via the wispy tendrils of memory and the spectral hauntings of Mitsuko.

Ghostly Mitsuko desperately seeks the love of Yoshimi and wants to 'replace' her daughter Ikuko, and her hauntings intensify as her jealousy seethes. In order to save her daughter's life, Yoshimi sacrifices herself to forever play the role of ghostly surrogate mother to Mitsuko within the dilapidated walls of the apartment building — itself an image of arrested temporal progress which exists in a static state of decay and desuetude. Ultimately Mitusko's haunting involves forever locking Yoshimi into a single temporal moment, as metonymized by the dark, claustrophobic apartment in which little Mitsuko died.

The film concludes with an epilogue which presents a vision of temporal advancement contrasted against this arrested moment in time: young Ikuko, following the disappearance of her mother, has now grown into a teenager, but remains haunted by the memory of her absent mother. She returns to the decaying apartment to see if her mother is still there. The apartment appears just as it did over a decade ago when Ikuko lived there with her mother as a child. Ikuko briefly encounters the spectre of her mother, yet as she talks to Yoshimi, the blurred figure of Mitsuko appears ominously behind her shoulder — an image of frozen time pulling at Ikuko from behind. Ikuko senses Mitsuko's presence and whips around to catch sight of her, but the ghost evades her gaze, disappearing the moment Ikuko looks in her direction. When Ikuko turns back to her mother, she too has disappeared, and Ikuko sadly leaves the decrepit building.

In allowing little Ikuko to grow into a teenager, the film ends with a glimmer of hope that Japan's cultural identity may not be stuck at the moment of arrested progress represented by the lost decade. Yet tugging at this image of growth from underneath is the frozen moment rendered spatially by the apartment in which Ikuko and her mother once lived, troubling the process of Ikuko's growing up. Ikuko, like Mitsuko and Yoshimi before her, has become trapped within a cycle of parental abandonment. Furthermore as in *Ju-on*, monstrous child Mitsuko has ensured that Yoshimi herself will always remain trapped within this moment: the child's inability to grow up has blocked any chance of Yoshimi herself progressing into the future. As the film concludes, it leaves behind an ominous trace through the suggestion that the teenaged Ikuko, at the threshold of enacting her future as a productive adult citizen, will also be engulfed by this claustrophobic loop of parental abandonment. This tension is

signalled in the final shot as Ikuko's seemingly tiny body is dwarfed by the huge, decaying apartment building.

One Missed Call was released a few months after *Dark Water,* and it also clearly demonstrates the solidification of the paradigmatic shift from adult female *onryo* to monstrous child. The film centres on a cell phone curse passed from victim to victim; much like in *Ju-on*, *Ring*, and *Dark Water*, the viral nature of this curse thus marks out a threat to Japanese society wholesale. Victims receive a mysterious missed call from their own number, accompanied by a ringtone that is not their own. The voicemail left behind is dated from a short time in the future, and it in fact records the moment in which that person is doomed to die – with unfailing accuracy. Once the victim has died, the corpse mechanically types the number of the next victim into their mobile phone. Enacting the threat suggested by the final scene of *Dark Water*, most of the central characters are teenagers, on the threshold of their future as adults. The cell phone curse thus traps these future productive citizens, as in the earlier films discussed, into an inescapable loop which pre-determines and, ultimately, shuts down their future.

For most of the film, the protagonists attempting to discover the mysteries of this supernatural curse believe it to be the ghost of a vengeful and mentally unstable woman, Marie: a fit to the long-standing *onryo* trope. Marie was the mother of two little girls, and she supposedly had "Munchausen by proxy" syndrome — it is revealed that Marie's youngest daughter often required treatment for various injuries at hospital, and hospital staff believe that Marie repeatedly injured her youngest daughter in order to receive sympathetic attention. Both Marie and her oldest daughter, Mimiko, have since died under mysterious circumstances (Marie in a hospital fire, and Mimiko from an asthma attack), while the youngest child remains in care at an orphanage.

At the climactic twist it is revealed that it is not the supposedly disturbed mother who has been carrying out the hauntings, but her young daughter, Mimiko – a sadist who repeatedly injured her younger sister for her own enjoyment. Thus, the film overtly plays upon the cultural shift from the adult female ghost to the monstrous child, and the way in which this figure troubles progress at the interface between the cultural and the personal. As a ghost, Mimiko's sadistic tendencies are monstrously writ large, as she threatens to stop Japan as a whole from progressing into the future, just as she herself was prevented from growing up, through enacting the mass death of the teenagers who are just about to claim adulthood.

Ultimately, the J-horror films that started to emerge towards the end of the 1990s can be seen as a response to the cultural trauma of the lost decade, in which longstanding narratives of rapid national progress were suddenly destabilized. The child is a powerful receptacle for such tensions, as this vessel for national futurity defies its over-determined classification to instead monstrously *foreclose* the possibility of temporal and sociocultural progress. This mechanism is extended to the viewer via the ways in which the temporal dislocations enacted by the monster-child interrupt both narrative progress and character development, undermining the (illusory) power of the viewer's gaze. The monster-child remains a pivotal component of J-horror. For instance, 2005 saw the release of Takashi Shimizu's *Reincarnation*, in which a ghostly little girl instigates the wholesale replay of a grisly series of serial murders from the past. Furthermore, *Sadako 3D 2* (2013) the most recent addition to the *Ring*

franchise, clearly centralizes a monstrous child figure in what has so far been a series which confuses the boundaries between child and adult. Thus following the trans-millennial shift from *onryo* to monster-child — during which the child tended to be intertwined or conflated with an *onryo* — the monster-child's central place in J-horror, and the mechanics that underlie it, have become clearly demarcated.

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