

## From Scary to Scary-Cute: The Evolution of Japanese Horror Marketing

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### Introduction

In the early 2000s I remember seeing a clip from the popular TV Asahi program *Matthew's Best Hit TV*, the variety show that ran from 2001 to 2006 and featured comedian Takashi Fujii as the blond-haired, buck-toothed “Matthew Minami.” The segment focused on “things you can't watch” and featured the host and two guests being forced to watch a scene from *Ringu 2*, the sequel to Hideo Nakata's well-known horror film *Ringu*.<sup>1</sup> As the clip from the film played in the lower right-hand corner of the screen (keeping with the Japanese TV tradition of having the audience watch the hosts watch things), “Matthew” and his guests covered their eyes, occasionally peeking out from behind them to utter a shriek of terror. The audience, of course, played along, shrieking when the film cut to the lifeless face of Sadako staring up at one of the characters as she tried to climb out of a well. Everything was played up for the cameras, but the terror felt genuine.

Almost fifteen years later, I was in Tokyo at the height of the much more aggressive and widespread marketing campaign for the latest film in the *Ringu* and *Ju-on* franchises, *Sadako vs. Kayako*, which bills itself as a kind of *kaiju eiga* (Japanese monster movie) with vengeful female ghosts in place of actors in giant rubber suits. Appropriately, this time I consumed most of said marketing via my computer, the medium through which (via YouTube, Netflix, iTunes, or occasionally DVDs) I now consume almost all of my media, given that I don't have a subscription to any sort of TV cable package. What struck me about the

marketing campaign — which made use of YouTube promotional videos, a tie-in song with an accompanying video, Instagram and Twitter promotions, and live presentations at popular venues in Shibuya — was the ways in which the characters from the *Ringu* and *Ju-on* films, so completely terrifying a decade earlier, were now comical. Sadako, with her hair completely covering her face and her arms hanging limply at her sides, looked more like an awkward teenager than a vengeful ghost. Kayako and Toshio's vacant stares and jerky movements made them appear more pitiful than frightening. This tone — ironic, detached, poking fun — permeated much of the marketing campaign for *Sadako vs. Kayako*, leading me to think that the movie would be more of a satire than a genuine horror movie. It wasn't — though I'd hardly call it scary, it presented itself as a straight-up horror film, with only a few knowing asides. In recalling the film, though, it's hard to separate its mostly “straight” content from the humorous marketing that surrounded it.

In addition to revealing a shift in audience/producer perceptions of these characters, the marketing campaign also revealed how differently the audiences for the first *Ringu* and *Ju-on* films experienced media, particularly media related to two franchises that began with word-of-mouth campaigns and were now being promoted via a marketing juggernaut. Few Japanese media consumers in 2016 could have been unfamiliar with the figures of Sadako, Kayako, and Toshio, even if they might not have seen the original *Ringu* and *Ju-on* films. Promotions played on this knowledge and allowed viewers to consume the characters in a different way — not as ghostly threats, but as bobble-headed dolls, statues on an advertising truck in Shibuya, and comical characters in fake PSAs. Promotions also met the consumers where they were most likely to be — not in front of a TV or movie screen, but on YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.

The gradual shift in tone between the marketing of the first *Ringu* and *Ju-on* films and *Sadako vs. Kayako* is representative of an overall shift in Japanese horror and its marketing over the past fifteen years. Beyond a move from scary to a kind of wink-wink silly-scariness, changes also reflect a shift toward a much more media-saturated

culture, a different attitude toward the technology depicted in these films (from frightening to quaint), and a transition from feeling mystified/threatened by the questions of media saturation and completely surrendering to them. This paper will examine a group of paratexts — videos, social media promotions, and toys/collectibles — connected to the film *Sadako vs. Kayako* in an attempt to understand how the perception and marketing of contemporary Japanese horror narratives has shifted in Japan since the “J-horror boom” of the late 1990s and early 2000s. I will also examine a similar shift in the content, themes, and iconic imagery of the *Ringu* films between the late 1990s and the present, which, like the shift in the films’ marketing style, reflects potential audiences’ changing relationship to media and technology.

There is no shortage of scholarly writing on J-horror, particularly *Ringu* and its many sequels, prequels, and remakes.<sup>2</sup> Much of this writing, though, hails from the early and mid-2000s, a time before social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram dominated the lives of so many film viewers, before a large percentage of film viewing moved away from television and movie theaters and toward computer screens, and before horror film marketing was dominated by social media campaigns. Additionally, little scholarly writing on J-horror examines its marketing paraphernalia and overall marketing strategies.<sup>3</sup> In focusing primarily on these aspects of *Sadako vs. Kayako*, and in examining *Ringu* from a late 2010s, hyper-mediated perspective, I hope to illuminate the ways in which the media that *surrounds* J-horror dovetails with J-horror content, and how the changes in both of those reveal a dramatic shift in how Japanese audiences perceive and consume horror narratives. I will also attempt to situate *Sadako vs. Kayako*’s paratexts within the context of Japan’s changing media landscape, especially as that landscape relates to horror film content, horror film marketing, and the materiality of horror media (the physical means through which it is promoted and consumed).

## 1.0 *Ringu* and the Spread of J-Horror

Japan has been telling ghost stories for hundreds of years, and making scary films since the golden age of Japanese cinema. One of the earliest cinematic iterations of the now-familiar vengeful female spirit appeared in Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 *Ugetsu*, about a peasant who is seduced by a beautiful, malevolent woman who lures unwitting men into her home. Similar characters could be found in Shindo Kaneto's 1964 *Onibaba*, about two women who murder passing samurai and steal their possessions to survive, and 1968's *Kuroneko*, by the same director, which concerns two women who return as vengeful spirits after being raped and murdered by soldiers.

The so-called "J-horror boom" refers to a period from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s during which a group of similarly-themed Japanese horror films enjoyed considerable popularity at home and abroad, spawning numerous sequels, prequels, and English-language and Korean-Language remakes. The films in this category include *Kairo* (*Pulse*) and *Cure* (both directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa), *Audition*, *Visitor Q*, and *Chakushin ari* (*One Missed Call*) (directed by Takashi Miike), the *Ringu* franchise and *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (*Dark Water*) (directed by Hideo Nakata), and the *Ju-on* (*Grudge*) franchise (directed by Takashi Shimizu). Though Jay McRoy writes that J-horror represented a wide range of themes, from "avenging spirit" films to body horror to serial killers to apocalypse (3-8), I would argue that the most recognizable J-horror themes and images can be found in movies like *Ringu*, *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, and *Ju-on*. These include vengeful female spirits, a sense of lurking malevolence, a preference for building dread and suspense instead of relying on "jump scares," a general lack of extreme violence and gore, and endings that hint that defeating the malevolent presence is impossible, while containment is "achievable, if only — as in Nakata's *Ringu* — through a process of eternal deferment" (McRoy 2005, 176).

Like *Ugetsu*, *Kwaidan* (1964), and *Kuroneko*, which took inspiration from folk tales and older collections of ghostly short stories, J-horror films of the 1990s and early 2000s drew from a mix of Japanese folk tales, urban legends, and Japanese film tropes. The image of a slow-moving woman, often dressed in white and with long, black hair, immediately conjures up images of the *yūrei*, the vengeful spirits of Japanese folklore who frequently wore white clothing, had long black hair, and had hands that dangled lifelessly. There are also the *onryō*, spirits who linger in the mortal realm because of a wrong done to them during their lifetime. The evil entities in *Ringu*, *Ju-on*, *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, and *Chakushin ari* all bear a visual and thematic resemblance to *yūrei* and *onryō*. Even Asami, the sadistic protagonist of *Audition*, though not a supernatural entity, has a mane of long black hair (and is at one point pictured with her hair hanging over her face) and tends to dress all in white.

Though several of these films (*Ringu*, *Ringu 2*, *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, *Ju-on*, *Ju-on 2*, *Kairo*, and *Chakushin ari*) were remade in English, *Ringu* and *Ju-on* are arguably the two most familiar films both inside and outside Japan. *Ringu* is one of the only J-horror films to be a massive box office success both at home and abroad<sup>4</sup>, which is remarkable considering that its fame spread before social media use (and even, to a certain extent, the Internet as we know it today) was widespread. Before the Japanese film was widely available with English subtitles, and before the American remake hit theaters in 2002, most people had accessed it in the way that many Japanese videos were accessed at the time — through copies of copies, often “fansubbed” (subtitles created by fans), and through word of mouth. Carlos Rojas writes that Gore Verbinski, who directed the American remake, first came across the film as a very poor-quality video tape, a “dub of a dub of a dub.” Marketing for the American remake played up this idea with a stunt involving abandoned VHS cassettes:

“... the studio planted unlabeled promotional tapes in public locations around the country. Accompanied only by a

suggestive note saying something to the effect of ‘watch this and die,’ each of these tapes contained a copy of the film’s infamous haunted video, with no other explanation apart from an Internet address at the end of the video that led to a website containing (fictional) testimonials about a deadly videotape” (Rojas 2014, 435).

A major part of *Ringu*’s appeal, then, was its elusiveness, with the movie itself characterized similarly to the haunted video at the center of its narrative. This sort of elusiveness couldn’t last, of course, but for a time it was an effective marketing tool. As Malcolm Gladwell has noted, “hyper-proliferation” is death to the appeal of certain commodities. Too much of a thing will make consumers suspicious of it, so the key is to encourage them to spread it unconsciously, without the trappings of a marketing campaign (Gladwell 2000, 272–273). One of the keys to *Ringu*’s popularity, I would argue, is that it seemed to spread unconsciously, quietly, without the fanfare of TV commercials, trailers, and product tie-ins.

For a film like *Ringu*, distributors had to strike a delicate balance between hype and distance, or perhaps more accurately, hyping the film while appearing not to hype it (and allowing consumers to do the work of spreading the word). In 2016, nearly 20 years after the release of the original *Ringu* and a universe away, media-wise, from the world in which *Ringu* was born, elusive media is almost nonexistent. For *Ringu* and Grudge descendant *Sadako vs. Kayako*, then, a decidedly different marketing campaign emerged, one that embraced the omnipresence of social media and bombarded consumers with images from the film long before its release.

## 2.0 Paratexts: Creating Meaning

In *Seuils* (translated as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*), Gerard Genette defines a literary paratext as an

“undefined zone’ between the inside and outside ... (it) constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that — whether well or poorly understood and achieved — is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (Genette 1987 [1997], 2).

How we read and interpret a text, Genette argues, is heavily informed by information that comes to us before we read the text itself (and while reading it). Reading Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a very different experience for someone who comes to its pages aware of its status and the criticism surrounding it and someone who begins reading with no knowledge whatsoever of the author or the place of his book in the modern literary canon.

More than twenty years later, Jonathan Gray expands Genette’s concept of the paratext to examine how we interpret film and television, arguing that hype — in the form of film trailers, commercials, TV interviews, toys, games, product tie-ins, and many other paratextual elements that now accompany most film and television texts — “creates meaning” (3). A paratext

“acts like an airlock to acclimatize us to a certain text, and it demands or suggests certain reading strategies. We rely upon such paratexts to help us choose how to spend our leisure time: they tell us which movies and television programs to watch, which are priorities, which to avoid, which to watch alone and which to watch with friends ... paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us ‘into’ the text, and they provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption” (25).

For Gray, paratexts are not simply “extras” — they play an active

role in *creating* a text and imbuing it with meaning.

Gray writes that paratextuality has always been present in film and TV, but I would argue that it exists on an entirely different level in the late 2010s. Where film and TV paratexts used to be accessed primarily through television, movie theaters, radio, and stores, it is now possible to be completely immersed in them 24/7 via the internet. Blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, and an endless collection of fan communities mean that every film arrives on the scene more heavily infused with meaning and expectation than ever before. The fact that all of this information can now be accessed via phone, and that so much online communication and bonding happens via “sharing” content with like-minded friends, is ideal for film and TV producers. Though millions of dollars are still spent on marketing campaigns for big-budget movies, much of the promotion has been outsourced to social media, where the hype feels less like hype and more like sharing things that you love with friends.

Paratextuality has also become much more interactive in recent years. In addition to sharing content, media consumers dress up in costumes from their favorite films, create their own media-inspired fan art, fan fiction, music videos, and even their own jewelry and clothing, which they share and occasionally sell online.<sup>5</sup> Production companies walk a fine line in their response to this kind of fan-initiated creation — they seem to have realized that, copyright issues aside, it’s good for business and mostly turn a blind eye, though they have been known to crack down when fan-produced content begins to generate too much of a profit or infringes on the production company’s own profits.<sup>6</sup>

Hype can ensure a good opening weekend for an expensive film (something that is more and more necessary as the window for box office success continues to shrink). But negative hype can also doom it, or at least have a negative impact on ticket sales. For almost a year before it opened, the U.S. live-action remake of Oshii Mamoru’s animated film *Ghost in the Shell* was dogged by criticism of whitewashing (for casting Scarlett Johansson as a character many perceived to be Japanese). A studio-led viral marketing campaign that asked users to



tweet their own pictures and comments turned hostile, with many making comments about Hollywood's lack of Asian representation (Han 2017). *Ghost in the Shell* went on to perform poorly in the U.S., something that of course can't be entirely attributed to the whitewashing controversy, but the negative press did likely influence more than a few viewers (Loughrey 2017).

Hype can also be incredibly misleading, creating a positive opening weekend for a film but then a sharp drop in ticket sales when word of mouth takes over. Sometimes this happens in the form of a carefully edited trailer that presents a film as something quite different from what it actually is — a light comedy when it's actually violent and dark, a horror movie when it's actually a drama. Such confusion happens not only through trailers and promotional materials but through a film's intertexts — the book or TV show it was based on, its prequels and sequels. Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* was presented in trailers as a horror film, but it was actually more of a gothic romance, leaving many horror fans disappointed. The Seth Rogen/Anna Faris vehicle *Observe and Report* played off the success of *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, a light comedy, and presented itself as such, when it was in fact a much darker, more adult film.

For horror films, marketing has always attempted to at least appear more reserved — these are typically R-rated films for teens and adults, and thus they're unlikely to be accompanied by toys or extensive product tie-ins that attempt to get as many people into the theater as possible. The aim is to create a low hum, rather than a roar, of anticipation. Trailers tend to be shorter and reveal less. For found footage horror films, viral marketing often plays up the question of the film's "realness," as with one of the first-ever viral marketing campaigns: for *The Blair Witch Project*, which created detailed backstories for the film's characters and created a website where viewers could see "news" about the events in the film. Even more so than with other genres, hyper-proliferation is anathema to the success of a horror film — these films tend to be better served by steady word of mouth. In Japan, where film budgets are paltry compared to those in the U.S., marketing

campaigns for horror films have always been comparatively tiny, which is why the rather extensive marketing campaign for *Sadako vs. Kayako* was a surprise.

### 3.0 *Sadako vs. Kayako* in a Hyper-Mediated Universe

The original *Ringu*, released in 1998, is based on a novel by Kōji Suzuki and tells the story of a cursed video cassette created by the vengeful spirit of a young girl. Anyone who watches the video, with its enigmatic collection of black and white images, will die in seven days. After watching the video herself and accidentally exposing her son to it, single mother Reiko is desperate to solve the mystery and lift the curse. She ultimately discovers that the only way to escape the curse is to make a copy of the video and show it to someone else.

The first theatrical *Ju-on* film was released in 2002 and was also a story of vengeful spirits. Suspecting that his wife is having an affair, father Takeo murders both his wife Kayako and son Toshio. Kayako and Toshio return as vengeful spirits, first killing Takeo and then anyone who enters the house. Unlike *Ringu*, *Ju-on* gives no hint that there is any way to lift the curse (other than simply never entering the house). By the end of the film there is a very high body count, missing person flyers all over the street, and the sense that Kayako's rage may have passed into another victim, Rika.

*Sadako vs. Kayako* picks up the threads of both of these stories: two female college students discover Sadako's cursed video in a used electronics shop, while another young woman moves with her family into the house next door to the one that Kayako and Toshio haunt. Eventually characters start to die, and in a rather complicated bit of theorizing from a professor of urban legends and a team of ghost-hunters we learn that a possible way to lift the curse is to simultaneously summon both Sadako and Kayako and have them fight each other. They do, but this doesn't seem to solve the problem, just to create a new sort of hybrid villain, "Sadayako."

Both *Ringu* and *Ju-on* spawned numerous sequels and remakes,

though the figure of Sadako, clad in a white dress and with her long, black hair hiding her face, is arguably more familiar to viewers inside and outside Japan than those of Kayako and Toshio. Though the story and the characters are mostly the same, *Sadako vs. Kayako* shifts many key details in the *Ringu* narrative. The main characters are no longer adults — they're teenage girls played by young and attractive women, reflecting an overall shift in J-horror toward teen characters. The “seven days until you die” *Ringu* curse has been shortened to only two days, which might reflect shorter audience attention spans (or limited script ideas). The film contains a scene in which the characters have to buy a video cassette player (with one of them explaining to the other what it is, arguably necessary in a period when many teenage viewers may never have used a VCR). One of the characters is able to escape the curse of the video because she's distracted by her ever-present cell phone. When the dreaded post-video phone call comes, it comes via cell phone, not land line. Finally, where the original *Ringu* required the characters to make individual copies of the video cassette and share it by hand, when one of the characters in *Sadako vs. Kayako* turns homicidal and decides to make multiple copies of the video, she simply uploads it to the internet.<sup>7</sup>

The changes in the narrative arguably reflect the fact that potential audiences for *Sadako vs. Kayako* have a very different relationship with media and technology than audiences in 1998 and 2002. Even if these viewers had never seen a *Ringu* or *Ju-on* film, they would likely be familiar with the characters and basic storylines through the endless images and references to them in film, TV, and social media. Young viewers today also have a very different concept of “virality” and the spread of media images — in the late 1990s this happened via a physical tape and machine to copy it, whereas now it's as simple as “sharing” or uploading via social media. It is this relationship to social media in particular, and the way that it dominates so many viewers' lives, that accounts for the biggest changes in both the film's content and its marketing.

*Sadako vs. Kayako* was released at a time when its target audience (arguably teens and twenty-somethings)<sup>8</sup> were quite literally glued to

their smart phone screens and to a stream of constant “likes,” comments, and interactions via social media. Common Sense Media reported that in 2015 teenagers aged 13–18 spent an average of nine hours a day consuming media, including online videos, music, games, social media, and written material (Common Sense Media, 2015, 16). In Tokyo in 2017, a typical train journey reveals that the majority of passengers are engaged with their smart phones, usually exchanging messages (and “stickers”) via the Line app, playing mobile games, watching movies or TV shows, or checking Twitter.<sup>9</sup> Concerts and live performances are a sea of raised hands holding phones, with spectators constantly capturing video and photos. As Sherry Turkle and others have written, these new technologies have created a situation in which no one is ever truly “disconnected” from other people or from a constant stream of digital information (Turkle 2011).<sup>10</sup>

*Sadako vs. Kayako* was also released at a time when, partially due to the high cost of movie tickets (usually between 1500 and 1800 yen), the majority of Japanese teens and twenty-somethings access their films not through movie theaters, but through DVD, Blu-ray, and online streaming services. As Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano has argued, the development and popularization of J-horror has coincided with (and benefited from) the spread of DVD use in Japan, allowing cheaply-produced films to be viewed more widely and affordably by a larger number of people (2012, 39). Such a shift has also, Wada-Marciano writes, transformed the film viewing experience “from a collective experience to an individual one” (1). Where the actual viewing experience may be solitary, though, community is experienced via endless hype and promotion, which often encourages consumers to share videos, images, tweets, and info about an upcoming film (and effectively outsources much of the marketing/advertising to fan communities). “Viral marketing” has arguably been central to horror film marketing since the release of *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999, which was accompanied by extensive extra-filmic elements (video clips, “interviews,” character biographies) on its website and which relied heavily on (carefully curated) word of mouth to spread the word about the film. In the case of J-horror, modern viral

marketing often takes the form of promotional images and videos distributed via Line, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and domestic TV, with the hope that fans will do the work of spreading information about the film before it's released. With *Sadako vs. Kayako*, most viewers would watch the film (most likely on DVD, though it did fairly well in theaters) already possessing a huge amount of information gleaned from Internet and TV, making for a very different experience than that of viewers who went to screenings of the original *Ringu* and *Ju-on* films in the early 2000s knowing comparatively little about the films.

Like any film released in a post-Twitter, post-Facebook, post-Snapchat, post-smart phone world, *Sadako vs. Kayako* relied heavily on social media-based promotional campaigns in the weeks and months leading up to its release. Given that any major film release will tend to bombard consumers with “teasers,” YouTube trailers, and promotional tie-ins before its release, *Sadako vs. Kayako*'s approach isn't necessarily surprising. What is surprising, though, is that the marketing was so widespread, especially compared to other horror film releases of the last decade, which have tended toward minimal or almost nonexistent marketing campaigns. (Given that many of these films [like Hideo Nakata's 2015 *Gekijōrei (Ghost Theater)*] have featured current or former pop stars, promotion often happens via the already-established fan communities for these pop stars.) Also surprising was the general tone of humor and cuteness in the promotional campaign, especially given that the film itself contained little in the way of irony or jokes. (Though the film did begin its life as an April Fool's Day prank on the promotional website for the most recent film in the *Ju-on* series, *Ju-on: The Final*.)<sup>11</sup> Even the film's poster seemed to send a mixed message. Though presented in the standard style of horror film posters (dark colors, shots of the lead actors looking frightened, images of the monsters in the background), the title and the positioning of Sadako and Kayako, facing off in profile, recalled posters for *kaiju eiga* (Japanese monster movies) like *Godzilla vs. Mothra*.<sup>12</sup>

One of the reasons for the cute angle may have been the transformation of *Ringu* and *Ju-on*'s content from scary to quaint in the minds

of most viewers. *Sadako vs. Kayako* was released in a year when many of its viewers may never have used a VCR, and when the idea of a “haunted videotape” inspired more curiosity than fear. Even the image of a ringing landline and a voice on the other end is likely to inspire nostalgia (not surprising, then, that in *Sadako vs. Kayako* the dreaded phone call comes via cell phone, not land line). In their heyday, though, the VCR and the VHS cassette were seen as groundbreaking devices that fundamentally changed the nature of film viewing, creating “a time that is shifted, borrowed, made asynchronous. The VCR is like an electronic melatonin, resetting the viewer’s internal clock to a chosen moment from the past” (Friedberg 2000, 445). Such capability is of course multiplied a thousandfold now, with videos and video clips no more than a click away on a smart phone screen. This may lead to a fondness for older forms of technology, even if the person in question has never really used them:

“As video fades into obsolescence as a medium, the scare factor behind the *Ring* texts, which revolve around a videotape, becomes less and less everyday and more and more quaintly antiquated. Given that all of the Ring-based texts rely directly or indirectly on video — even when they are transferred to DVD and that video as a medium has fallen into disuse, these texts indulge in a form of what Laura Marks calls ‘analog nostalgia’” (Wright 2010, 58).

Where once a videotape and its potential to spread a curse may have inspired fear and dread, now it’s seen primarily as an object of nostalgia.

Also transitioning from scary to quaint are the antics of Sadako and Kayako, once considered terrifying but now, through endless repetition and reinvention, rendered somewhere between pitiful and *kimo-kawaii* (creepy-cute/gross-cute), that particular brand of cuteness found in certain Japanese mascots that adds a dark, awkward, or slightly creepy edge to the traditional kawaii aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> The image of

Sadako, clad all in white, arms hanging limp at her sides, her hair completely obscuring her face, was once considered terrifying enough (within the world of the *Ringu* films) to frighten her victims to death. As rendered in video promotions for *Sadako vs. Kayako*, though, Sadako resembled something closer to Cousin Itt from the Addams Family, able to move around and interact despite being completely blinded by her own hair. Similarly, Kayako's open-mouthed stare, jerky movements, and "a-a-a" death-rattle vocalizations come across in promotions as more goofy than frightening, especially when paired with the emotionless face of her son Toshio.

The emphasis on humor and awkwardness (rather than scares) in the *Sadako vs. Kayako* marketing campaign is in line with a general shift from scares to schlock in J-horror over the past decade. *Ringu* director Nakata Hideo's 2015 *Gekijōrei*, about a life-sized doll that terrorizes the cast of a play, didn't seem to be trying for genuine scares, opting instead for repeated shots of the doll lumbering slowly toward its victims and the main character (former AKB 48 performer Haruka Shimazaki) staring wide-eyed into the camera. More and more horror films now feature pop idols or former pop idols (or sometimes an entire idol group) in starring roles,<sup>14</sup> making these films feel more like promotional material than horror films. Japanese horror films of the past decade, even when they're not part of an established franchise, have also tended to recycle plot lines and character types (vengeful female spirits, haunted schools, cursed objects, urban legends), to the point that viewers will have few surprises by the time they sit down to watch a film in a theater (or, more likely, a DVD at home). In conversations with my own students at Tokyo University, I found that very few watched horror films at all, and most preferred familiar, predictable movies with happy endings (or sentimental ones). A marketing campaign that presents *Sadako vs. Kayako* as more ironic than genuinely scary would arguably be just the type to draw these students in.

#### 4.0 Dancing Ghosts and Happy Families

The *Sadako vs. Kayako* marketing campaign made use of a variety of video promotions, some of which played in movie theaters, some on television, and nearly all of which appeared on YouTube (as ads or stand-alone videos). These video spots usually included clips of the song that plays over the film's end credits, "Noroi no sha-na-na", performed by the Japanese heavy metal band Sekima-II. Japanese horror films (and Japanese mainstream films in general) frequently have a pop song tie-in, sometimes known as an "image song," which can be jarring when the often light and fluffy song plays over the end credits of a particularly dark film (as happened in *Kairo*, *Chakushin ari*, and *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*). Sekima II's song, though, is a bit rougher and has lyrics that relate specifically to the film ("Once you see the girl in the white dress in the cursed video ..."). The music video for the song also features dance sequences reminiscent of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, with ghoulish dancers plus a few Sadako, Kayako, and Toshio lookalikes dancing to the music. At one point Sadako and Kayako lookalikes play electric guitars, and Sadako (this time in white sweatpants and a white shirt) has a breakdancing sequence.

Watching the music video, it's clear that Sadako and Toshio's signature movements — a slightly tilted head and dead-eyed stare for Toshio, flopping arms and jerky movements (created by staticky interruptions in the videotape) for Sadako — have been transformed from uncanny to cute (or at least cool). The dancers dance with their heads cocked to one side, arms extended stiffly, staring blankly forward. Sadako's breakdancing sequence takes her original "entrance" via the cursed video, in which she seemed to undulate like a snake as the image on the screen cut in and out, and turns it into a collection of snake-like dance moves. The music video has all the trappings of scariness, but the usual markers — the movements, the stare, the lifelessness — are now re-imagined as a kind of dark humor.

Dark humor is also the primary tone in a series of video spots that



use the film's characters to teach good theater manners. These videos originally aired in movie theaters before the film's release and were widely viewed on YouTube (different versions of the video spots total over a million views). They take the form of typical videos that usually air before the main film, promoting good theater manners and advertising special concession stand deals. In one video, Sadako, Kayako, and Toshio stand against a stark white background as text and a dry-voiced narrator list typical movie theater rules (no cell phones, no talking, no recording). For "no recording," Sadako holds up a copy of a video cassette. For "no talking," Kayako emits her signature rattling sound. Near the end, the commands get a bit silly: "If you can't see the screen because your hair is hanging in front of your face, please cut it"/"No crawling out of the screen." This spot ends with the narrator saying "Is it all right if I leave now? This is a little scary" before the video cuts to the film's title and release date.

Another of these video spots promotes the typical "ladies day" discounted rates at Japanese movie theaters, when female customers can get a discount (usually on Wednesdays). Sadako and Kayako appear to become enraged when the narrator questions whether they're "really women." Another spot encourages viewers to become "friends" with Kayako and Toshio on Instagram (as the two make cute "photo" symbols with their hands) or with Sadako on Twitter (cue Sadako flapping her arms like a bird).

Another pair of videos sought to promote the "vs." aspect of the film by conducting an online poll to see who was scarier, Sadako or Kayako. Toward this end, Sadako and Kayako each appear in mock *seiken hōsō* (political broadcast) videos similar in style to those produced by Japanese politicians during election season. The videos are edited in a bland, community cable access style, with each character sitting behind a desk and gesturing/making noises while an "interpreter" translates their message. Both are running as "independent" candidates. Kayako's professions are listed as "destroyer," "housewife," "mother," and "stalker," while Sadako's are "psychic," "actor," and "vengeful spirit." Kayako talks about the challenges of being a single

mother, while Sadako talks about how she wants to “energize Japan and the world through the power of curses.” At the end of Kayako’s video, the interpreter is pulled downward out of the frame and screams, while at the end of Sadako’s video, the film cuts to static in the style of Sadako’s cursed VHS cassette.

Sadako, Kayako, and Toshio remain completely in character during all of these videos — that is, they maintain their signature body movements and sounds. We never see Sadako’s face, Toshio never speaks, and a blood-spattered Kayako moves her head and arms jerkily while speaking only in a rattle. (Sadako, however, does occasionally move a bit faster and more naturally than her cinematic counterpart.) At the same time, their *characterization* is completely different. They’re hawk-ing popcorn, promoting a political position, and interacting with the viewer and each other as if deadly vengeance were the last thing on their minds. Their scariness is more of an accessory than a defining feature.

The film’s promotional campaign also made frequent use of Twitter and Instagram (“Sadako” had had an active Twitter account for several years). Sadako’s Twitter persona bears little resemblance to her on-screen character (mostly because Twitter Sadako “speaks” where cinema Sadako is silent). The account appears to be used primarily to promote movies and comic books in the *Ringu* franchise, though it has occasionally featured images of “Sadako” boxing DVDs, playing a taiko drum, and watching a baseball game. There isn’t really a specific “voice” to the account — all of the tweets read like ad copy.

On Instagram, however, Kayako and Toshio present a strange and fascinating re-imagining of domestic bliss. Instagram is a platform known for “filtering” how we see the world (and turning otherwise mundane images into small pieces of art). Here, “Kayako” posts photos of herself with Toshio, the two of them engaged in everyday mother-son activities like viewing cherry blossoms in the park, getting ready for school, and cooking together. Of course it’s a promotional vehicle, but unlike Sadako’s Twitter feed, Kayako and Toshio’s Instagram account actually pieces together a domestic narrative. Every caption

opens with Kayako's signature "a-a-a" rattling sound, which is also always included as one of each photo's hashtags. Other hashtags include #elementaryschoolboy, #studiouslydoinghomework, and #kidfriendlyparadise (from a picture taken at a local playground with Toshio sliding down the slide).

Kayako and Toshio's transformation (in paratexts if not in the actual films) from murdered, vengeful spirits to idyllic representations of mother and child is also intriguing in the context of Japanese horror's frequent focus on domesticity and the mother-child relationship. In films like *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, *Ringu*, *Shibuya Kaidan* (*Shibuya Ghost Story*), and *Chakushin ari*, there is the insinuation that the films' monstrous, vengeful children are the product of maternal neglect. The films also present the idea (sometimes as a bit of misdirection before the film's actual climax) that such monsters can be "saved" if only they are cherished by a mother figure. On Instagram, Kayako and Toshio represent a strange mixing of the monstrous and the ideal. On a platform known for presenting an unrealistic, too-perfect image of everyday users' lives, they are the epitome of domestic bliss — and also very obviously evil spirits and murder victims, with their white faces, sunken eyes, and (in the case of Kayako) blood-covered body. Instagram seems to allow them to have things both ways — they can be redeemed and allowed to live out their lives that were cut tragically short, but they can also continue to be vengeful and frightening.

## 5.0 "Being scared is fun"

Movie theater pre-/post-screening and TV promotions for *Sadako vs. Kayako* followed a familiar format — the main actors and the director thanked the audience for coming, urged more people to see the film, and answered a few bland questions about the film and themselves. The two young actresses (Tina Tamashiro and Mizuki Yamamoto) were already fairly well-known as models and were thus presented as fashionable, demure, and pleasant. Director Shiraishi, known for his eclectic collection of films that range from the graphically violent

(*Grotesque*) to the bizarrely comedic (*Bacchiatari bouryoku ningen* [*Cursed Violent People*]) mostly talked about his directing process and his love of scary movies.

Mixed in with all of this, though, was an emphasis on the idea that the movie was “fun,” and in particular that “being scared is fun” (or at least cathartic). In one pre-screening event, at one point the director and the two actresses were interrupted by the arrival of “Demon Kakka,” the lead singer of Sekima II (the band behind the film’s theme song), in full “demon” costume (Demon Kakka famously never appears out of character). As fog blasted the stage and pre-recorded shrieks echoed through the theater, Kayako and Toshio crawled down a flight of stairs, Sadako crawled out of a well on stage, and the two characters did a bit of fake fighting.

When the bit was over, the actresses, laughing and smiling, talked about how “surprised” they were, saying that their “hearts were pounding” but that the whole experience was “fun” (*tanoshii*). At a similar event, actress Tina Tamashiro made a point of thanking the audience for their “ganbaru” efforts at watching a scary movie even if they didn’t usually watch scary movies. The actresses then joked around for a few minutes in the presence of Sadako, Kayako, and Toshio, laughing when Kayako did an awkward “guts pose” (fist pump).

In interviews for *Cinema Today*, Tamashiro and Yamamoto emphasized their friendship during filming, focusing on how they were “like sisters” to each other. The atmosphere of the video is mild and calming, with no real “horror” vibe (though they do mention that they grew tired from shrieking so much). When asked why anyone would want to see a horror movie, Yamamoto seems to channel Noel Carroll in arguing that the feeling of relief after being scared is fun, and that you feel a sense of community with others around you. This, combined with an overall marketing message that presents *Sadako vs. Kayako* as being more quaint than genuinely scary, feels like a fairly direct attempt to attract the (probably large) number of potential audience members who simply don’t watch horror films.

Like the film’s video and Instagram/Twitter promotions, *Sadako vs.*

*Kayako*'s live screening events toyed with the blurred lines between reality and fantasy, mixing fictional characters and on-screen personae. Like many Japanese actress-models, Tamashiro and Yamamoto essentially played versions of themselves on screen: innocuous, stylish, feminine characters who would be unlikely to stir controversy or be deemed "unlikeable." We never meet or learn anything about the actors who play Kayako, Toshio, and Sadako, though the characters are a major part of screening events. In the same way, the lead singer of Sekima II never breaks character, maintaining the illusion that he is, in fact, an *akuma* (demon) from another dimension. All of this is presented, of course, to a very media-savvy audience that is both aware of the line between fiction and reality and also enjoys suspending disbelief.

### **Conclusion: Same Story, Different Paratexts**

Overall, the marketing campaign for *Sadako vs. Kayako* seems to be performing a kind of bait-and switch in the style of *Crimson Peak* and *Observe and Report*. Via its paratexts, the film is packaged as ironic, scary-cute, and occasionally silly, but the film itself is for the most part straight-up horror, a genre that has had limited box office success since the end of the J-horror boom. Perhaps unconsciously, though, fans may remember it as more humorous and ironic than it actually was, thanks to the nature of its marketing campaign. Though it's impossible to say how much the film's marketing campaign influenced its box office earnings, *Sadako vs. Kayako* did reasonably well in theaters — while not a huge box office success, it did make a total of over 900 million yen, coming in 61st in terms of domestic box office for 2016, a significantly better performance than other Japanese horror films of the past decade.<sup>15</sup> The film has an overall rating of 3.3 out of 5 on the film review website *eiga.com*, with positive reviews calling it interesting, fresh, and funny. Negative reviews mostly criticize the film for not being scary enough, for having a muddled plot, and for looking cheap (<http://eiga.com/movie/83789/review/>), but don't specifically mention the differences between the marketing campaign and the film itself.

The marketing campaign that surrounded *Sadako vs. Kayako* made savvy use of social media, attempted to both induce nostalgia for past scary movies and also ease anxieties about whether the new movie was really scary, and relied on the target audience's memory of two rather memorable characters (if not the characters' films, which many younger audience members may never have seen). The use of YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter in particular to make a series of in-jokes about the characters and the film helped to create a sense of community among viewers — a sense of community that arguably replaces the one that used to be found in seeing a movie together in a theater, something that happens less and less as Japanese audiences opt to view their films at home. The pre- and post-screening events, as well as commentary by the lead actresses, also emphasized the idea of being scared as a sort of communal activity, where viewers could bond over being scared together without necessarily having to be in the same theater.

If, as Jonathan Gray and Gerard Genette have written, paratexts actually create meaning within a text, then the marketing campaign surrounding *Sadako vs. Kayako* arguably imbued the film with a stronger sense of humor and camaraderie than audiences might have perceived without the campaign. To be sure, the humor was there, but it's also possible that viewers who described the film as “funny” or “fresh” might have been recalling one of the many humorous paratexts that surrounded it. At this point it's difficult to say which direction J-horror will take — more cheaply produced ghost stories featuring pop stars? More expensive, “safer” properties with a ready-made fanbase like *I Am a Hero* (based on a very popular manga series)? More artfully filmed horror-dramas that earn high praise on the festival circuit, like Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Creepy*? Whichever form dominates (and they may all play a role in J-horror's future), it's certain that paratexts will continue to both frame and shape Japanese horror content for audiences that seem completely willing to embrace their combinatory role as fans and dispensers of both hype and textual meaning.

## Notes

- 1 Japanese titles of all films referenced refer to the original Japanese films, while English titles refer to the English-language remakes.
- 2 See, for example, Jay McRoy's *Japanese Horror Cinema* (2005); Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano's *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (2009); David Kalat's *J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge, and Beyond* (2007); Ruth Goldberg's "Demons in the Family: Tracking the Japanese Uncanny Mother Film from A Page of Madness to *Ringu*" (2004); and Colette Balmain's *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (2008).
- 3 Exceptions include the essays collected in Kristen Lacey's *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in The Ring* and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano's *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, which discusses the way that new media has impacted horror films specifically.
- 4 The original Japanese *Ringu* grossed approximately 1 billion yen in Japan and 11 million dollars worldwide, making it by far the most successful Japanese horror film of the "J-horror boom" period. Japanese horror films have not traditionally been huge box office successes — Hideo Nakata's *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* made just over 100 million yen domestically (imdb.com-b), while *Ju-on* made less than half that amount. Source: 1998. *Ringu* box office. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt\\_0178868/business?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt_0178868/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus), 2002. The *Grudge* box office. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt\\_0364385/business?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt_0364385/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus).
- 5 Fan engagement with popular films and televisions shows in the form of clubs, conventions, and cosplay has of course existed for decades. In the late 2010s, though, it exists on a much larger scale, with large gatherings like Comic Con and the Anime Expo attracting tens of thousands of visitors and generating a huge amount of online buzz.
- 6 While fan-produced content such as fan fiction has mostly been left alone by production companies and original creators as long as it does not generate profits, there are occasionally lawsuits and cease-and-desist orders. J. K. Rowling's representatives have tried to crack down on sexually explicit Harry Potter fan fiction (Goddard 2002), Anne Rice and a few other authors and their estates have indicated that they do not approve of fan fiction of any kind (Internet Archive 2006), and Paramount Pictures recently sued *Star Trek* fan Alec Peters for making a 90-minute film based on

- an original *Star Trek* episode (Mele 2017).
- 7 A recent low-budget, English-language update of *Ringu, Rings* (2017), also imagines the cursed video originating and spreading online.
  - 8 I corresponded with Kadokawa publishing to ask them about the marketing strategy for *Sadako vs. Kayako*, particularly who they saw as the target audience for the film. They declined to answer any of my questions. Given that *Sadako vs. Kayako* features teenage protagonists, however, as well as the fact that horror film audiences tend to skew young, it's safe to assume that Kadokawa intended teenagers and young adults as their primary market.
  - 9 Line and Twitter are much more popular in Japan than Facebook. Line is by far the most popular social media platform, with 50 million active users in early 2016, while Twitter has approximately 35 million and Facebook 25 million (Chew 2016).
  - 10 In class discussions on this subject at the University of Tokyo in 2015 and 2016, my own students seemed confused when I asked them about their longest periods of "screen-free time" (time in which they didn't interact with computer, tablet, or smart phone screens). Most indicated that their only screen-free time was during class, their part-time jobs, or when they were asleep.
  - 11 Anime News Network, "Sadako vs. Kayako Film Brings Together Ring, Ju-on Franchises," December 10, 2015, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2015-12-10/sadako-vs-kayako-film-brings-together-ring-ju-on-franchises/.96308>
  - 12 Director Koji Shiraishi admitted that he initially thought of calling the film *Ring vs. Grudge* and that for him the "vs." recalled movies like *Freddie vs. Jason* or *Alien vs. Predator*. (Koji Shiraishi interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3WKzINd2qA&t=411s>)
  - 13 For more on the *kimo-kawaii* aesthetic and particular mascots that fall into this category, see Patrick St. Michel's "The Rise of Japan's Creepy-Cute Craze" (*The Atlantic*, April 14, 2014).
  - 14 Such titles include *Gakkō no Kaidan Noroi no Kotodama* (starring five members of Tokyo Girls' Style), *Eyes* (starring Marika Ito of Nogizaka 46), *Shirome* (starring the girl group Momoiro Clover Z), and *Gekijōrei* (starring former AKB 48 member Haruka Shimazaki).
  - 15 Other Japanese horror films that ranked in the top 100 for 2016 included Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Creepy* (84th, box office just over 500 million yen) and



Shinsuke Sato's *I Am a Hero* (40th, approximately 1.4 billion yen). Most Japanese horror films of the past ten years have barely cracked the top 100.

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