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## **POINTS OF CONTACT: CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN UNDERSTANDING JAPANESE LITERATURE AND CINEMA**

„It rips off *The Changeling*. If you haven't seen this horror classic with George C. Scott, you should.

This film was released in 1979 and has the same elements about the ghost of a young child murdered and thrown into a well. Very similar, only I like *The Changeling* more because it didn't contain cheap CGI effects like with the black-haired girl and flies buzzing out of a TV screen.

The author of *Ringu* obviously liked *The Changeling* too.”

„The author of *Ringu*, Koji Suzuki, based his story on a Japanese folk tale. If you would've actually read the book, then you would know, that it's very different from the films. Also, if *The Ring* supposedly ripped off *The Changeling*, then so did *Stir of Echoes*, *What Lies Beneath*, and many other similar films, so quit being so daft.”

The above comments come from the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) message board, and they concern Gore Verbinski's 2002 film *The Ring*. Although remakes as such are not the main subject of this paper, the comments quoted above point to a larger, more important matter.

The remakes are, however, a good starting point. Remaking a film means, to some extent, translating or remaking the idea or concept into our own cultural background. To work and perform as a successful production, a remake has to describe culturally strange premises by means of culturally familiar elements. Books cannot be remade in the same way that popular films can. Hollywood remakes describe culturally strange prem-

ises by means of familiar cultural elements or elements present in American culture. In this way, every instance of remaking tells us a lot about the cultural reception of the story. A John Smith may watch *The Ring* and decide it was interesting. He may then find out that it is a remake of the Japanese film *Ringu*, track it down and watch it. If he is still interested, he might also find the TV series from 1999 and discover that the story, which is very different, is actually closer to the original book by Kōji Suzuki. Then, if he's still not satisfied, he might even obtain the book, legally or illegally in this day and age, and proceed to compare and contrast the content. He might react just like the viewers quoted above, or he might react differently. What is important is the fact that he will be *able* to obtain those titles – something that would have been virtually impossible twenty years ago. Moreover, today on the Internet there are countless subtitles or translations available for many films, TV series or anime series which are not even commercially distributed, all provided by talented fans. As Roland Kelts puts it in his book *Japanamerica*, “thanks to the Internet, non-stop flights, and restless new generations, Japan is a lot closer to America than ever before.” And not only to America, but to the rest of the world as well.

This opportunity to access works available in the reader's – or viewer's – native language is actually the key matter here. There would be little sense in a comparative analysis of two phenomena that exist independently, without ever overlapping. There are many prominent works discussing American culture, American Gothic and American horror cinema. Similarly, outstanding studies on Japanese culture, Japanese folklore and Japanese literature abound. Those interested in either of these subjects will find not only the information they need but also extensive explanations on the cultural, historical or religious context of the subject of research. The main focus of the semi-comparative approach presented here is the point of contact of the two cultures in question, the point that has been emerging for some time now due to technological progress and significant changes in information handling and distribution. The translation of works of literature and graphic novels, the distribution of consumer DVD releases of films (often subtitled) and, first and foremost, the Internet allow easy access to books, graphic novels, films and music for a Japanese audience interested in the artefacts of American popular culture and vice versa. This audience, however interested, is more often than not culturally unprepared

for what they encounter. This tangency of Japanese and American culture, as well as the phenomena emerging at the point of that tangency, are the main concern of this paper.

Japan occupies a curious place in literary and cultural theory. It would seem that the geographic location of the country would automatically place it somewhere in the binary opposition between the West and the East (the Orient). And yet the problem with this opposition, like with all binary oppositions, is that sometimes lines and borders which would seem very obvious or important, tend to blur if analyzed more closely. Edward Said's vision of Orientalism highlighted clear borders and motives in the relation between the body of ideas called the Orient, and another body of ideas called the West. This theory, however, cannot be applied to Japan for many reasons. Mostly because the very nature of Orientalism is asymmetrical; Japan and United States are not asymmetrical in the sense the Orientalist theory would imply (and require). To address the specific situation of Japan, Brian Moeran, offers the term "Japanism". In a collective work *Unwrapping Japan* Moeran identifies the phenomenon known as "Japanism" as "a way of coming to terms with Japan that is based on Japan's place in Western European and American experience. Japanism is a mode of discourse, a body of knowledge, a political vision of reality that represents an integral of Western *material* civilisation both culturally and ideologically, with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery and doctrines." (Ben-Ari, Moeran, Valentine 1994: 1). Most importantly, Moeran stresses: "in talking about Japanism in this century, we are referring to a *Western* academic tradition, a style of thought, and a corporate institution designed to dominate, restructure and thus gain authority over Japan." (Ben-Ari, Moeran, Valentine 1994: 1-2). In this way, Japanism does resemble the complex colonial discourse. There is a lot to testify that the cultures of Japan and America are poles apart.

That easily imagined clash of cultures, or rather the line clearly separating one cultural frame from the other resembles, in the cases of Japan and America, a magnified newspaper photograph. When looked at closely, the line turns out to be composed of tiny dots — elements of both cultures. This is what I initially referred to as points of tangency. The tangency, or the cultural dialogue, between Japan and the United States of America is important for many reasons, but the one I would like to focus on is the mutual influence of both countries as far as popular culture is concerned.

In the words of Raymond Williams, popular culture is culture “actually made by the people for themselves” (Williams 1973: 237), further defined as culture “widely favoured” and “hopelessly commercial” by John Storey (Storey 1993: 7 and 10). As such, mass culture is by nature closely related to globalization. In the present day and age, popular culture is, according to Waldemar Kuligowski, a “self-sufficient, inwardly diverse cultural system that is open to various interpretations” (Kuligowski 2007: 120). Moreover, as Kuligowski argues, the recipients of contemporary popular culture are by no means passive or weak-willed — “they are active individuals, creatively contributing the meaning of distributed texts, understanding and re-interpreting everything in their own, sometimes surprising way” (ibid.).

Because of this active, creative process of receiving the texts of popular culture, cultures can shape and be shaped by one another. Japanese pop-culture as we see it today, and also American pop-culture as we know it, have been shaped partly by that mutual influence. Both countries have a long history of borrowing and fascination with each other, which Roland Kelts describes as “the dense web of interrelations . . . too complex for a ‘once upon a time’ framework” (Kelts 2006: 7). Loan words, products and customs have been introduced to both cultures, and, as happens most of the time, some of them have undergone interpretation, adaptation or transformation within the aforementioned active cultural reception. Incorporating foreign elements is not a sign of cultural pollution, but a natural process of evolution of a culture. One of the features defining culture is that the culture is always in a state of flux. Insisting on the *status quo* of any cultural element, tradition or period values preserves the given element or values in a rigid state that has little – and less with every passing day – in common with living culture (Kuligowski 2007: 69). In this sense, at some point the “borrowed” or “inspired” elements cannot be really treated as foreign anymore, because they have been indigenized and creolized, merging irretrievably with the indigenous culture. In other words, contemporary Japan would not be the contemporary Japan as we know it if it were not for the United States, just as America as we know it would be different without Japan.

There are those who argue that the content and shape of what could be called global mass culture is dictated by America. Obviously, popularity is one of the issues here. Johanna Blakley points out that some of the arte-

facts of American culture, such as Hollywood productions, tend to be “tailor-made for international consumption and competition” (Blakley 2001: 10). Kelts, on the other hand, notes that no-one in the United States is surprised by the fact that the artefacts of American popular culture are popular (Kelts 2006: 7). That popularity, somewhat automatically assumed, is not unbalanced. Due to the fact that my field of interest is horror fiction, the examples I shall provide will naturally be limited to my research field. They can, however, serve as a metonymy of the cultural flux between the two countries.

One of the most interesting instances of Japanese-American cultural exchange are the works of Hideyuki Kikuchi, the author of the Vampire Hunter D novels. Hideyuki Kikuchi is a writer of science fiction novels that border on horror and are frequently compared to Stephen King or H. P. Lovecraft of Japan. Although he is a prolific writer and the author of many other series of novels, he is arguably best known for the Vampire Hunter D series. So far 17 titles of the series have been released in the English language. Two of the series’ novels have been loosely adapted into full-length animated feature films. The first Vampire Hunter D film, directed by Toyoo Ashida and Carl Macek, was released in 1985, and it immediately became “a hit with horror movie fans” (Patten 2004: 342) in Japan. What is more interesting, in the context of this paper, is that it was also one of the earliest anime releases in America, where it gained popularity among both horror fans and anime fans. Meanwhile, Hideyuki Kikuchi continued to write, and the first novel about D was followed by several others.

In a post-script to the English edition of the fifth volume of the series, *The Stuff of Dreams*, Kikuchi writes:

“Japan, the land of my birth, has developed a culture quite different from that of the English-speaking world. . . . [E]ven when I use something like the European vampire theme in my work, it differs fundamentally from what might be created in your world. Perhaps that’s what makes the Vampire Hunter D series so enjoyable.” (Kikuchi 2006b: 173)

In the same post-script, Kikuchi mentions an English film *The Horror of Dracula* as a source of inspiration. Naturally, Kikuchi participated in

the same cultural reality that America did at that time, fascinated with the appeal of the story of Count Dracula. Whereas in the United States the shape of that story, or at least its main elements, remained recognisable at almost all times, the vampire theme in Hideyuki Kikuchi's story transformed significantly, and that change, that transformation of the familiar into the new, exotic and exciting, was well received. So well, in fact, that partly in response to America's growing demand for anime, as well as the enthusiastic reception of the first film, in 1997, the production of the second, new Vampire Hunter D film was started.

*Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*, also directed by Yoshiaki Kawajiri, was released in 2000, and from the beginning the mixture of Japanese and American influences was not limited to Hideyuki Kikuchi's original concept. The animation was carried out in Japan, at the Madhouse studio, but the post-production took place in California. The sound effects and other post-production work were directed by Kawajiri, but the marvellous score was composed by Marco and Terry D'Ambrosio (Patten 2004: 344). Most significantly, the voice-acting was originally recorded in English; the film was theatrically released only in its English-language version, thus catapulting the film into the same world of accessibility to the international audience as any other American production. In Japan, the film was released with Japanese subtitles.

Interestingly enough, in *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews*, Fred Patten mentions both kinds of manifestations of the dualistic nature of the Vampire Hunter D world; he refers to the "feudal aristocracy" of vampires as "modelled after Dracula" only to call D a "taciturn knight-errant/ronin" a few lines down (Patten 2004: 343). Indeed, Kikuchi entwines in his work the feel of the East and the West. The Western imagery and references to American Old West lore, which exist in the novels, are all the more striking in the film. The small villages of the desert-like Frontier and saloons where Hunters meet give off an unmistakable feel of a Western movie. The Hunters usually ride cyborg Horses and carry "old-fashioned, gunpowder" revolvers in holsters (Kikuchi 2006a: 7). Among them D, who seems to be loyal to his sword alone, gives off a distinctively Japanese air. Similarly, the commonness of many other creatures, apart from vampires, inhabiting Kikuchi's world seems to be profoundly Japanese — especially the village of Barbaroi, faithfully portrayed in the film, inhabited by creatures of demonic or mixed origin,

sometimes strikingly similar in appearance or concept to some Japanese *yōkai*. Inspired by the Euroamerican horror culture, and then received more than favourably in the United States, the Vampire Hunter D franchise is a truly fascinating mix — it is a well-known concept rearranged into something fresh and exotic but still recognisable and comfortably familiar.

The microcosm of American and Japanese horror film is yet another indication of the interrelating nature of the Japanese-American cultural relations. According to Eimi Ozawa, “Hollywood horror films also have been a product of globalization, being aligned with cultural capitalism . . . they had been monopolizing the market of the genre in Japan until the Asian horror boom has occurred past the decade” (Ozawa 2006). Ozawa also suggests that after the mass production of horror films, the quick, enthusiastic consumption thereof caused the industry to start eating its own tail, slipping into clichéd, self-referential styles and formulas, the industry turned to remaking Japanese horror films as a way of pulling itself out of deadlock, charmed by the ambiguous, atmospheric aesthetics of Japanese story-telling (ibid.).

Whatever the reason, we have recently witnessed a wave of remakes, which, as Gang Gary Xu notes in his article “*Remaking East Asia, Outsourcing Hollywood*,” “none of the previous remaking trends . . . could match . . . in scale, intensity, publicity or profit.” Indeed — when the film credited with setting off the series of remakes, Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring* was released in 2002, it was an immediate box office success both domestically and worldwide, earning almost five times its cost of production. It also exerted a significant influence on the American horror cinema.

The matter here, however, was more complex than the simple switch of location and ethnicity. The interplay between the American and the Japanese styles and factors surfaces not in the remake, but already in the original Japanese film. Xu suggests that the 1998 *Ringu*, as it was introduced to the cinemas, was already “Hollywoodized” to a considerable extent:

“As John Chua aptly points out in his Ph.D. dissertation on the horror film as a genre, what makes *Ringu* adaptable is its already Americanised features: American suburban life style, the strong-minded yet vulnerable female as the “final girl”, unambiguous sexuality, and thrilling yet non-threatening horror. These features

met DreamWorks' demand to make *The Ring* a profitable PG-13 instead of an R-rated film that is almost synonymous with box office disaster. Chua further notes that Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* was already a remake of a 1995 version that is much darker, horrifying, and sexually ambiguous. . . . In this sense *Ringu* was already Hollywoodized before it was remade into *The Ring*.” (ibid)

*The Ring*, received as a good remake and horror film, was obviously even more schematic than *Ringu* in the sense that it fell neatly into the pattern of what the American audience understands as a horror film (notably, the earlier Japanese horror movies, such as *Onibaba* or *The Ghost of Kasane Swamp* did not enjoy such popularity<sup>1</sup>).

A series of American remakes of Asian horror movies followed, including *The Grudge* (2004), *Dark Water* (2005), *Pulse* (2006) and *One Missed Call* (2008). The sudden surge of remakes as such was not an extraordinary phenomenon. Many of them, however, similarly to *The Ring*, revealed a cultural mechanism more complex than just a remake. Some of the American productions were directed by Japanese directors, as was the case with both parts of *The Grudge* (*The Grudge* and *The Grudge 2* were directed by Takashi Shimizu in 2004 and 2006 respectively). Some were not remakes per se, but continuations or inspirations, like 2005 *The Ring Two*, which is not so much a remake as it is a sequel to the American version of the story (also directed by a Japanese director, Hideo Nakata) And some were “Japanized” even though they were not related to Japan at all to begin with, such as the film *Shutter* from 2008, directed by the Japanese director Masayuki Ochiai. The film tells the story of a young man cursed by a woman he had wronged. There would be nothing extraordinary about this film if it were not for the fact that the original *Shutter* is a Thai production, directed in 2004 by Banjong Pisanthanakun. For some reason the American producers decided to move the whole story of a remade version of the Thai *Shutter* to Japan. It would seem that, to the American audience, Japan has become synonymous with horror folklore to such an extent that a horror movie set in Thailand was simply not enough to create the required mood. Again, a mix of the native Japanese concept of fear combined with entertainment, introduced in a manner familiar to American

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Dariusz Brzostek for pointing this out to me.



audience, and then re-adapted into American cultural frame, proved to be popular and entertaining.

The most newfangled cultural medium interrelation I would like to address are films based on video games; specifically, the Silent Hill franchise and the 2006 *Silent Hill* film, directed by Christophe Gans. Silent Hill games are survival horror video games published by Konami Corporation, the first of which was originally released in the year 1999. In *The Anthropology of Fear: Learning About Japan* Chris Pruett argues that an overwhelming majority of horror video games come from Japan. Among them, some titles are designed to reflect traditional Japanese horror themes and some are designed to create a more Euroamerican atmosphere (Pruett 2006).

What makes the Silent Hill franchise interesting (and, again, relevant in terms of this paper) is exactly that strive for the American feel. The Silent Hill games are set entirely in fictional American towns; the action in the first three instalments, on which the film was based, takes place in the titular Silent Hill. There, the player can experience quite a unique mixture of American Gothic and modern Japanese horror as the player's avatar, an outsider Harry Mason, sets out to find his daughter and discovers a gruesome secret of the town's people and terrible fate of a wronged girl. The 2006 film constitutes a loose adaptation of the first Silent Hill game, at the same time borrowing some elements from the second and third installments, accompanied by the famous original soundtrack from the game series (throughout the production of the film Christophe Gans collaborated closely with Akira Yamaoka, the sound designer of the original Silent Hill and producer of *Silent Hill 3* and *Silent Hill 4*.)

As any other adaptation, Gans' *Silent Hill* differs significantly in some aspects from the original Masons' story arc. Some plot elements, like the drug subplot, disappeared entirely due to the obvious limitations of time offered by a cinematic production. Other elements were changed to an extent exceeding ordinary adaptation freedom (even if we were to treat the film as a hybrid of the first three games of the franchise). The pivotal point of the plot (sacrificing Alessa to fire in order to induce the birth of the cult's god) has been simplified into a *Scarlet Letter*-like scenario stemming from the Puritan roots of American fiction. The portrayal of human nature was clearly divided into a typical Euroamerican dualistic convention by means of the introduction of a completely new element: the

Reaper. Alessa and Sharon are not two parts of the same soul, but “goodness”<sup>2</sup> and “the dark side” separated. Although physically resembling Alessa, the Reaper is an outside force, who has “many names”<sup>3</sup>, which also alludes to a very Puritan motif – the Devil. Gans himself commented on this:

“For every fan that has read the synopsis of the first game's story in the strategy guide of Silent Hill 3, they all know that we are dealing with doppelgangers—and it's a very cross-cultural concept, both Japan and Europe have this myth. But in Japan, it means that every character has aspects of a God and aspects of a devil inside them. It's a very shocking concept if we attempt to transpose that into a North American, traditionally Christian perspective. The line between good and evil is much more clear in North America, especially today.” (Gans 2006)

Apart from the plot changes, the film adaptation of Silent Hill was a fairly faithful portrayal of the game's imagery. More importantly, it was not just a one-sided, ephemeral manifestation of attraction; on the contrary – the adaptation left a print of its own on the franchise. The sixth installment of Silent Hill franchise, *Silent Hill: Homecoming*, released in 2008, features some changes that clearly point to the film's imagery. The most apparent influence is the representation of the shift from the normal world to the Otherworld, as well as the creatures' sensitivity to light. The inspired became the inspiring once again.

According to Pruett, Yamaoka described Silent Hill as an attempt to make “Hollywood horror” (Pruett 2010). Ironically enough, the “Hollywood-horror” game was then made into a bona fide Hollywood horror, fuelling both the circle of re-interpretation of interpretation as well as mutual inspiration. We might see the result of this re-fuelled fascination when the sequel to Silent Hill film is released.

As demonstrated above, the horror industry may actually be a good starting point for a discussion on cultural interchange in the reality of

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<sup>2</sup> „The little girl is what's left of her goodness.” *Silent Hill*, 2006. Directed by Christophe Gans.

<sup>3</sup> „I have many names. Right now, I'm the dark part of Alessa.” *Silent Hill*, 2006. Directed by Christophe Gans.

globalisation. The above examples, although not numerous, address a number of important aspects of Japanese-American cultural exchange. Most of those examples relate to transformation in various forms and for various purposes. The adaptations, distribution and popularity of Hideyuki Kikuchi's works, as well as American remakes of Japanese horror movies show the transformation of the familiar and well-known into the new and entertaining. The audience welcome this as much as they welcome new concepts explained in a familiar way. Cultural dialogue can bring about the rejuvenation of an exploited genre or motif with fresh concepts from outside our cultural frame, or at least fresh new takes on concepts otherwise familiar. And yet the case of the Silent Hill franchise still reminds us that every imagining of the other culture is actually a re-imagining, susceptible to being again re-imagined by that same culture.

Ultimately, there are many channels of cultural exchange, and there are as many, if not more, outcomes to that exchange. All those channels I have mentioned have one thing in common: they are commercial channels — they entail commercial distribution. The dialogue between Japan and America which influences both countries has been a commercial dialogue for a long time. But even these intermingled, intermixed cultures keep mutating and evolving as we speak, nourished by the global access to information and the active, critical reception of cultural texts. Between message boards, peer to peer file-sharing, fan-subbing communities and social networks, the interchange is moving away from official, controllable, and subject to censorship channels to amateur, unsupervised channels fuelled not by professionals, not even by fans, but completely random people. How will the mutual fascination of Japanese and American culture evolve in these circumstances? The speculation can go on and on. Will the official, commercial channels diminish in importance in favour of the unofficial ones? Will access to anything, anywhere, anytime possibly raise the cultural awareness of the audience? Or perhaps the cultural inspirations and influence will continue to split and splice again, until they blend to an extent when it is impossible to tell apart the inspiring from the inspired?

Whatever the effects, they will most certainly affect the ongoing cultural dialogue of Japan and the United States and, consequently, change our understanding of what we think of as "Japanese culture."

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