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The Confusing Spiral: The Adaptation of Junji Itō's *Uzumaki* in the Eyes of Non-Japanese Audiences

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns Internet user narratives concerning the 2000 film adaptation of Junji Itō's manga, *Uzumaki*, of the same title and their characteristic traits. The focus are the individual testimonies of Internet users who make up the non-Japanese, English-speaking audience of the film, and the image of reception of it that they paint. A closer analysis of narratives about *Uzumaki* reveals a variety of ideas and attitudes regarding not only Japanese popular culture, but cinema and adaptations in general as well as specific patterns of response—including the technical aspects of the film text and more comprehensive cultural nuances.

KEYWORDS: Junji Itō, *Uzumaki*, user narratives, reception

Introduction

Junji Itō's famous manga, *Uzumaki*, was first published in 1998, and adapted into a film only two years later (*Uzumaki* [2000]). The film was the first rendition of Itō's story available to the American audience (the manga was published in English in 2001 and later re-released in 2007.) *Uzumaki* (both the manga and the film) is characterised by all the peculiar elements that mark the majority of Itō's works; an end-of-the-world scenario, protagonists who are ordinary people suddenly involved in extraordinary events, and, seemingly, no limit to the imagination or the scope of the story – a whirlwind of abstraction. Plotwise, *Uzumaki* appears deceptively simple: this, as Robin Brenner calls it, “masterpiece of horror manga (...) tells the story of a seaside town haunted not by a vengeful ghost but by a shape (...) As people's minds and bodies are twisted to conform to the shape, the townspeople witness the slow dissolution of their world and sanity” (Brenner 2007: 183). Although both the manga and the film are familiar to critics and scholars alike, it is the film which excites more attention, most probably due to the fact that works and essays on film are far more numerous than essays and articles concerning Itō's graphic novels. As a horror text, *Uzumaki* (from here on designating the film, unless otherwise specified) is usually regarded by scholars partly in the context of its premise,

which is taken directly from the manga, and partly in the context of its distinctive, “[h]ighly experimental” visual style (McRoy 2007: 153):

Uzumaki borrows from a plurality of secular and religious sources. Higuchinsky eschews conventional narrative paradigms and ‘classical’ filmmaking practices (like Hollywood-style cross-cutting and detailed exposition) in favour of a story that is itself a kind of cinematic vortex. In conveying his recursive tale, Higuchinsky melds what Benoit Mandelbrot would describe as the ‘fractal geometry of nature’ (1982) with a frenetic pacing marked by disquieting moments of Lovecraftian menace. (McRoy 2007: 137-138)

Many aspects of *Uzumaki* that are criticised by both the viewers and reviewers are regarded by the scholars as deliberate, inherent elements of the text – from “intentionally exaggerated performances” and “playful conflation of horror film and romantic comedy tropes” (McRoy 2007: 153), to the director’s “use of split screen photography, as well as the film’s numerous instances of digital manipulation, varying focal lengths, chiaroscuro and low key lighting, and the application of exaggerated sound effects,” which is considered to constitute a “kind of visual hyperactivity” that does not allow the spectator to “slip into an optical or narratological ‘comfort zone’” (McRoy 2007: 155-156). The same elements, however, in the eyes of critics and members of the audience, are sometimes regarded as the film’s shortcomings: the acting as weak, the editing as confusing, and the tone as inconsistent. This disparate response, however not surprising, is nonetheless tremendously fascinating; naturally, any given pop-culture text will be perceived and experienced differently by scholars and by the members of the – for lack of a better word – commercial audience. There is the *Uzumaki* text as it is described and analysed by scholars (some of the characteristic features of which have been mentioned above), and there are numerous *Uzumaki* texts experienced by the fans, viewers and users. How does one translate into the other? And how close can the scholars come to accessing the actual reception of the text, one might ask? With the help of one of the most powerful and easily accessible communication networks that is the Internet – closer than ever before.

A site that offers quite a detailed rating mapping for *Uzumaki* is Internet Movie Database. Abbreviated IMDb, the Internet Movie Database is an online database of information related primarily to films as well as television programs and video games. The message boards are one the most-used features

of the site. Posting on the message boards and rating films is only possible for registered users, who must verify their accounts by providing some personal data. According to IMDb, 5762 users have given the film a weighted average vote of 6.3 / 10, and a Metascore (provided by Metacritic.com) of 62/100¹. Out of those, 1351 US users thought the text deserved a rating of 6.5, for example, and 3024 Non-US users² believed it deserved only 6.1³. Based on this data it could be theorised that the American audience was more accepting of the film – or enjoyed it more – than the audience from other countries, and different cultural frames, but that would be little more than speculation based on thin data – numbers, stars, percent (Wilson 2009: 25). The real potential of the Internet in terms of studying reception is realised in the thick data: words, comments and discussions that form narratives more elaborate than mere “good/bad” distinction, or any gradation in-between (Wilson 2009: 25). Even a brief look at the discussions about and reviews of *Uzumaki* presents a more complex image of the text. It is, for instance, immediately noticeable that while the manga is considered to be mostly “amazing,” “really scary,” and “weird” or “bizarre” – and only rarely “stupid” or even “mediocre” (Goodreads, Amazon, IMDb), the film adaptation often tends to be regarded as “weak,” “very Japanese” (this trait is barely mentioned in the context of the manga), intentionally incomprehensible (also not mentioned in the context of the manga) and only sometimes as “weird.” Some users refer to the film as “very bad,” “stupid” or “mediocre,” but only few describe it as “really scary;” there are also voices saying that the film is “amazing”. Additionally, people tend to advise others to read the manga before watching the film, or emphasise the superiority of the manga (IMDB, Amazon, MovieStack).

These, however, are still single words, organised by quantifying concepts such as “mostly,” “often” or “few,” and quantitative counts exclude qualitative *accounts* (Wilson 2009: 25, my emphasis). Thin observable data, meant to objectify the viewers’ reactions, deprives the audience of voice (Wilson 2009: 30). Numerous accounts of those who have seen *Uzumaki* can be found on the

¹ See: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0244870/ratings?ref_=tt_ov_rt. DOA: VII 2014, <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/spiral-2002> DOA: VIII 2016.

² According to Alexa Internet, Inc. (a California-based company that provides commercial web traffic data and analytics), almost one third of the people using IMDb comes from the United States, with the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany users adding up to further one tenth. Therefore, “non-Japanese audiences” in this case designates audiences that are in fact largely Western. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/imdb.com>, DOA: VII 2016.

³ See: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0244870/ratings?ref_=tt_ov_rt, DOA: VIII 2016.

Internet, in the form of comments, discussions, and reviews. Those accounts, thick narratives of response (Wilson 2009: 30) recorded online, provide a glimpse into the *Uzumaki* as it is experienced by the audience, and reveal that its reception is characterised by a number of discernible perspectives; in the eyes of the users, *Uzumaki* is, first and foremost, a j-horror text, i.e. a product of Japanese pop-culture, as well as a truly “Japanese” product – a text characterised by Japaneseness (or, rarely, by the lack thereof), i.e. the alleged originality or “uniqueness” typical of the Japanese cultural artefacts (Picard in Perron 2009: 101). It is also perceived as a cultural counterpart – namely a text that performs in its native culture a function equivalent to a particular text from the user’s culture. Lastly, it is sometimes perceived and judged simply as a text. All those perspectives and narratives are further characterised by distinct user discourse and points of view.

This paper is not an online fandom study, because cited testimonies do not come from interpretive communities, nor are they a result of any collective strategy or communal effort (Gray et al. in Gray et al. 2007: 2). The approach adopted in this text is also not the same as the Encoding/decoding model of communication (Hall et al. 1980), although it relies on the concept of the relationship between the text’s inferred meaning and the individual interpretation (shaped by personal and cultural background) of any given audience member, inspired by transactional reader-response theory (Iser 1978, Rosenblatt 1978). The focus of this paper are the individual testimonies of Internet users, their heterogenous nature and the dissensus natural to the multivocal orientation of the online environment (Kozinets 2009: 170), and the image of reception they paint.

Material Analysis

The Internet narratives concerning *Uzumaki* as a product of Japanese pop culture refer to the text within the context of generalisations, racism (negative or positive), or attempted neutrality, out of which generalisations seem to be the most common. Generalisations about *Uzumaki* span a whole variety of concepts, from assumptions and stereotypes concerning Asian films as such and film adaptations of manga, to motifs, conventions and tropes found in Japanese films. For instance, *Uzumaki* tends to be characterised as a “typical” Asian (or sometimes Japanese; these terms appears to be exchangeable to some users) film: kluseba (IMDb) calls it a “typically modern Asian movie,” while

another user, DA (IMDb), refers to it as a “typically bland Japanese horror movie,” which suggests that there exist some particular characteristics which the users associate with and expect from Asian cinema texts. Some of those attributed characteristics of Japanese narratives are, for example, the innovative content and the unpredictable progress of the plot. “In an American movie, you know who’s going to die (...) That’s not true in Japanese horror” (ShimmySnail, IMDb). Other attributed traits concern the way in which the plot is resolved — some users appear to hold a belief that contemporary Japanese films end in a certain manner, ambiguous and abrupt: “Japanese horror movies of late just stop instead of having some sort of ending” (17jellybeans, MovieStack). A number of generalisations are related to the faults attributed by the users to all Japanese cinema texts, such as the lack of developed, realistic characters or unrealistic behaviour of those characters: in tommyknobnocker’s opinion (IMDb) the film “suffers from Japanese cinema’s lack of character development,” and the protagonists are merely “stock characters wandering through an amazing situation”. Lastly, numerous generalisations construct not only *Uzumaki*, but all Japanese horror films as strange and exotic in contrast to Western horror film. “If you are into Japanese horror, you probably already know what to expect,” writes Jack Thanatos (Amazon); “they have an unusual way of doing these movies, which makes them original.” This particular perspective establishes Japanese horror films as unusual, peculiar narratives marked by “idiosyncrasies” that need to be acknowledged and accepted (orvuus, Amazon).

Many generalisations concerning *Uzumaki* tend to be highly favourable in tone. In the eyes of the users, Japanese directors seem to possess superior skills in film-making: “Somehow Japanese directors have learned to create horror with skill which far surpasses anything any U.S. director has done in years” (Kindle Customer, Amazon). This approach, which dictates that all of Japanese horror films are in some manner remarkable – and also that even a weak j-horror text is a text superior to an average, or good, Western horror text – is closely related to the attribution of positive qualities to Japanese horror common among users. This attitude is especially easy to notice during discussions and arguments, when users attempt to explain their appreciation or high opinion of *Uzumaki*:

It’s not the greatest J-Horror I’ve ever seen, but to give this movie a 1/10 is to say that you don’t really get the general conceits [sic] and

aesthetics of J-Horror. Sure, we as a non-Japanese audience think that the acting is campy, but the fact is that what we see as camp is actually a far more intricate, nuanced, and historically informed craft than the acting we see in the US. As for the music, have you ever heard a John Carpenter score?

It sounds like this genre just isn't for you. I'm sure there's an American remake of this film in the works...you'll probably enjoy the film once it's raped of all its non-literal theatricality and cultural uniqueness. (Kayes, MovieStack)

This post illustrates quite well the specific mixture of assumptions and generalisations recurring in the users' opinions and arguments. While Kayes is not far from the truth when he or she says that there exist certain "concepts and aesthetics" that can and should be understood for better appreciation of Japanese horror texts, the rest of the post is full of presumptions and oversimplifications. Like Kayes, many users believe that those who are critical of *Uzumaki* are simply ignorant in one way or another, regardless of whether the matter concerns acting, storytelling, or music – and, consequently, they believe that a more knowledgeable viewer would automatically recognise the text's merits.

One more fairly important and easily noticeable fact is that the generalisations very often tend to be accompanied by a specific sort of racist discourse, both positive and negative. Positive racism, where positive traits are attributed to a Japanese text simply due to its origin, is predominantly associated with the more elaborate opinions and descriptions. As responses to *Uzumaki* illustrate, negative (conventional) racism is much less common, but it does happen occasionally, taking the moderate shape of unfounded theories or offensive, politically incorrect vocabulary. For instance, xridingthebusx (IMDb), while apparently favourably disposed towards *Uzumaki*, comments on the overall story (which he believes to be told by "someone who is crazy"), using an expression "the japs like that kind of explanation a lot," while deathofagod (IMDb) is even more aggressive, stating that "[j]ust because the movie is Asian doesn't mean the sun shines out of its ass." While the first comment, apart from employing the offensive term, proposes some imagined quality shared by the Japanese people (who would like a certain manner of resolving narratives), the second comment suggests the existence of a consensus of opinion concerning the Japanese horror texts (where every Japanese horror film would

be superb), which needs to be countered⁴. It is worth to note that there are also opinions and points of view which balance between the positively racist and the conventionally racist attitudes, where users do not fall into either racism or positive racism, but instead attempt “colour-blindness,” i.e. an approach where they opt to ignore any and all cultural context and judge the story in abstract isolation (which, obviously, is an unworkable position in itself, since the audience does not exist in isolation, but firmly within the boundaries of their culture). “I don’t bother bringing ‘culture’ into it, I don’t see in race or colour,” declares deathofagod; “I just watch a movie and decide whether I enjoyed it.” This attitude, apart from being fairly illusory, reveals that the user does not take into consideration how the lack of comprehension of the conventions and characteristic features (from social conventions and rituals to aesthetics and story-telling characteristics) often-times naturally results in misunderstanding and misconceptions. The strive for objectivity is, in this case, futile, since to understand the convention (the “race and colour”) is to be able to judge the quality of the conventional text, and therefore to be able to form an informed opinion. Although the later statement of the same user – “cinema is there to be enjoyed” (deathofagod) – is undeniably valid, the “attempted colour-blindness” attitude rejects the fact that the enjoyment is contingent on understanding.

Some of the users who refrain from commenting the story within the context of Japanese film-making and Japanese culture actually manage to maintain the necessary distance and address only the premise of the story itself (which is to a great extent culture-independent). Such opinions mostly express appreciation of the imagery and/or criticism of either the premise (spiral curse) or the lack of a comprehensive story; some users are critical of *Uzumaki*, claiming that it is a “bad,” “completely ridiculous” film, “since the town is cursed by a shape” (z_williams16, IMDb), and that there is “nothing frightening about it” (Lizard, Amazon), while others are indifferent to it, judging it to be a “bizarre film” filled with “interesting images” but not much else: just “images joined together by special effects” and a story that is “never really fleshed out” (gac1003, Amazon). Others still consider it to be a good text, “a whimsical horror that’s really brilliant,” and suggest watching it again (and again) for better comprehension (AWC, Amazon). Some users, while appreciative of the film,

⁴ Additionally, deathofagod’s comment indicates that the non-Japanese audience think exceedingly highly of Asian cinema texts, regardless of their quality, which would further imply that Asian films are universally considered to be good even if they are not.

do not recommend it to everyone – based on the characteristics of the text itself, not its cultural characteristics – stating that it “may not please and be suited for all publics” since “it has an experimental touch, a weird surreal story and no precise storyline” (kluseba, IMDb).

Another important aspect of the *Uzumaki* as it is constructed in users’ opinions is its Japaneseness, the elusive quality which in Western eyes characterises only “truly” Japanese products (films, video games or literature) (Picard in Perron 2009: 101). To these users, the film is what it is because it is a product of Japanese culture, and Japanese cultural products are original and unique (Picard in Perron 2009: 101):

It’s Japanese Horror. That’s all the “why” you should need. Take off your Western blindfold if you want to enjoy Japanese movies.
(the_faery_fox, IMDb)

Japaneseness of *Uzumaki* automatically and effectively justifies all the whys and hows. The problem with this particular quality is that it attributes exoticism, creating a situation in which otherness “becomes a necessary element in [the] appreciation and contextualisation” of the text” (Eleftheriotis and Needham 2006: 9). It is a subjective feature that is difficult to gauge, and for some users there is in fact not enough Japaneseness in *Uzumaki*: for gonzogonzalez45 (IMDb), for instance, the music in *Uzumaki*, which there was “too much” of, made it seem “like an American movie.”

As a stand-alone text *Uzumaki* is most often received within the context of other texts: while sometimes those are Western texts to which *Uzumaki* is, in the users’ opinion, comparable, the film is regarded primarily within the context of the manga. Those who read the manga most often hold the opinion that the film is inferior to Junji Itō’s graphic novel. Kidra-Risirthid (Bloody-Disgusting) admits to being “sorely disappointed” with the film, as it “failed to even remotely touch the complexities of the manga and only grazed 1/3 of the story line.” Others do not hesitate to use word such as “abomination,” maintaining that the film did not “capture even a tenth of the horror conveyed in Itō’s work” (Amazon Customer, Amazon). Some users are more lenient, saying that while *Uzumaki* “misses the mark, it is still “the best shot anyone has taken at adapting Itō so far” (GeneticSugarKane, IMDb).

Many users attempt to place *Uzumaki* in a familiar context by comparing it to well-known Western texts. By describing the unfamiliar within the context of

something familiar – and often influential – they establish a frame of reference and familiarity for the exotic. Comparisons refer to a variety of works, from classic texts, such as works of H. P. Lovecraft, where “atmosphere is the important thing, rather than stories or explanations,” and the “evil is fundamentally unknowable and completely alien, as well as inescapable” (Zack Davisson, Amazon), to low-budget cult pop-culture texts, such as *Evil Dead* (General Zombie, Amazon). Whenever the overall style of the director is discussed, names such as Tim Burton (General Zombie, Amazon), David Lynch or David Cronenberg (yajdubuddah, Amazon) are mentioned. The comparisons are not, obviously, limited to pointing out the similarities between texts. Numerous comments and opinions juxtapose the characteristic traits of the film and its story, whether in favourable or unfavourable light, with patterns and tropes from Western horror texts. In this sense, *Uzumaki* tends to be regarded as a text almost antithetical to “western-culture movies” (Girlso, MovieStack):

Japanese horror doesn't follow the Scooby-Doo logic we grew up with... it's not about “solving the curse,” finding who killed the ghost so it can finally rest in peace, or killing the monster. The movie is simply about evil taking form. (the_faery_fox, IMDb)

It is worth to note that many contrasting statements are also generalisations which fall into the approval/disapproval categories, but more often than not amount to variations of the assumption that “they do not make films the way we do” – i.e. that a Japanese text will be different on the account of being Japanese. An approach closely related to this position is the opposite of the previously mentioned attempted colour-blindness – namely, the effort to understand or assess the film in the context of its native culture. A number of users approach the text bearing in mind the importance of the “race and colour” (deathofagod, IMDb), which can be observed in their comments – they believe that it is impossible to “watch a foreign film without exploring the cultural context and expect to get it, or even enjoy it” (wawetwister04, IMDb). “The Asian performance arts outdate most known modes of performance – there's an enormous history, imagistic, gestural and thematic,” insists wawetwister04; to “condemn this movie without at least trying to accept these concepts is to sell yourself short,” he or she argues. Cheshirestog (IMDb) agrees:

It basically is saying I didn't get it because I am from a different culture. Which is ridiculous. You probably just haven't seen enough movies to understand movie history or technicalities. Most of America hasn't. It is hopped up on instant gratification unoriginal explosion movies.

The important aspect of this particular attitude is its prevalent neutrality. Comments and opinions formed by users whose reception of *Uzumaki* is determined by the cultural context tend to abound in explanatory statements and suppositions, but they are hardly ever overly positive or overly negative. Frosti Rabbit (Amazon) admits, for instance, that at times the film came across as “unintentionally funny just because Japanese culture can seem strange to Americans.” She supports this statement with an example, mentioning Kirie and her father's reaction to the expensive melon they receive as a gift: “in America it's just a cantalope. In Japan apparently cantalope is the bizz-omb because they got just a little too excited about it” she remarks, adding that it made her laugh. Teuthis (IMDb) agrees, pointing to the “cultural differences between Japanese and American perceptions” as the reason for the film appearing “slightly funny instead of scary;” wais67, (IMDb), on the other hand, would not recommend *Uzumaki* to “the average North American” because it is “just simply something that we're not accustomed to.” All those opinions clearly illustrate that there are numerous viewers who are perfectly aware of the fact that culture can be a major barrier to enjoyment of a text.

Conclusion

The Internet narratives concerning *Uzumaki*, created by the users, are characterised by a range of traits. Online, the viewers become the speaking subjects; they create substantial meaning from screen narratives (Wilson 2009: 30), which they later record online in the form of accounts – accounts that can now be accessed easily and analysed. It is clear that discussions about *Uzumaki* reveal complex sets of ideas and attitudes concerning not only Japanese (pop-)culture, but cinema and adaptations in general. The viewers' attitudes and strategies of reception, such as generalising or juxtaposing and contrasting, reveal certain patterns of response. In the case of the text as peculiar and bizarre as *Uzumaki*, it would seem that although the users are rarely able to identify specific film techniques, cultural elements or tropes – or even recognise them – they are nonetheless aware of the fact that such techniques,

elements and tropes exist and may well be present in the film. While that cultural and technical insight does not necessarily correlate with more enthusiasm about the text, even the smallest degree of that insight allows the users to experience the text not only to a more satisfactory extent, but also in a manner that is more comprehensive, thorough and informed.

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Internet Links

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