

## Review of *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes*

Marcus Harmes

University of Southern Queensland, [Marcus.harmes@usq.edu.au](mailto:Marcus.harmes@usq.edu.au)

Volume 3.2 (2014) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2014.101 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Abstract

Valerie Wee's monograph on American remakes of Japanese supernatural horror films is a contribution to Routledge's Advances in Film Studies series and examines a cluster of films made in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These are films which in their first incarnation were Japanese (such as *Ringu*) which were then remade by Hollywood (for example *Ringu* became *The Ring*).

**Keywords:** Japanese, Horror, Culture, Remake, American Film



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).



Review of Valerie Wee, *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2014. Xiii + 258 pp. ISBN 9780415888608.

Reviewed by:

Marcus Harmes, University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Valerie Wee's monograph on American remakes of Japanese supernatural horror films is a contribution to Routledge's *Advances in Film Studies* series and examines a cluster of films made in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These are films which in their first incarnation were Japanese (such as *Ringu*) which were then remade by Hollywood (for example *Ringu* became *The Ring*).

Although Wee acknowledges that since the 1990s both American and Japanese horrors have followed numerous trajectories, including torture and slasher horrors, her focus in this collection is on supernatural and/or ghost horrors that originate as Japanese films but have prompted the creation of palimpsests by American film makers, or else by Japanese film makers lured across to Hollywood.

The collection's methodological cohesion comes from her interrogation of the texts as adaptations and the questions this process prompts about originality. Her introductory statements situate both originals and remakes in a particular cultural and political context in Japan and USA (alluding to cultural anxieties, fear of terrorism and economic uncertainty) but also in a longer history of adaptation and borrowing between national cinemas. She usefully points out that earlier scholarship which has asserted the very notion of a 'national cinema' can overlook what she calls the 'porosity' of cultures of cinema. She usefully reconstructs the

commercial and creative interactions between Hollywood and Tokyo's cinema that be charted as early as 1915.

Much of the first section of the book is devoted to an extensive background to the films of the 1990s and 2000s that are the focus of the remainder of the analysis. In this section Wee makes overuse of already standard works on horror cinema, especially Andrew Tudor's *Monsters and Mad Scientists*. The first 80 pages are taken up with extensive digressions away from the adapted Japanese films with discussion instead of the cultural and political backdrop to American and Japanese horror production from the early-twentieth century, including such well-trod territory as the emergence of the slasher film. Wee does however offer some useful correctives to standard views that Hollywood is the appropriating agent, instead pointing to the extent to which Japanese cinema has adapted from American templates, especially from 1970s American horror onwards.

The remainder of the book comprises chapters which pair off a Japanese horror film with its American remake, from *Ringu* and *The Ring*, *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* and *Dark Water*, *Ju-On* and *The Grudge*, *Kairo* and *Pulse*, and finally *Chakushin ari* and *One Missed Call*. While all the films assessed are horror films, they allow Wee to cover a wide range of types and sub-genres, including teen-oriented horror, apocalyptic horror, technological horror and themes including maternal and paternal sources of horror.

While each chapter compares and contrasts an original and a remake, Wee resolutely resists any analysis that would suggest an original is inherently 'better' than a remake. Instead her concern is to draw out what the comparison of an original and a remake suggests about cultural differences and similarities, as well as the commercial and creative priorities of film makers in different national contexts. In resisting any easy judgments about the relative value

of an original against its remake, Wee also makes the valuable point that the boundaries between original and adaptation are porous and at times ambiguous; for example one of the comparisons shows that the director of the Japanese original was brought across to the US to direct the remake.

Wee does adduce a number of significant points of contrast however between Japanese and American horror cinema. Given that her focus is specifically on supernatural horrors, where ghosts or spirits intrude into the natural world, much of her analysis considers the contrasting cultural backgrounds in both societies that shape how the supernatural is portrayed. Wee particularly stresses the contrast between the Judeo-Christian inheritances that (however obliquely) influence the standard emphasis on good counter posed against evil in Hollywood horrors, with the Shinto-influenced sense of good and evil not occupying these contrasting positions. She further suggests that the themes in a number of the Japanese originals relating to family structure and female agency, such as in *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, are to be understood in the light of the Confucian social structures that traditionally prevailed in Japanese culture and she positions a number of these films as expressions of cultural angst in Japanese society as a younger female demographic began to push against these norms (p.160).

This text sits within a now very broad body of scholarship on adaptation studies, including the works of Linda Hutcheon, Simone Murray and Laurence Raw. Its focussed methodology, in terms of the analysis of the paired films, allows for a series of meaningful arguments about both similarities and differences in contemporary horror cinema and is a useful addition to this expanding field of study.