

# Horror film term papers example

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When it comes to representation through the mise en scene in film, there are a lot of different ways to show the tensions at work between past and present within the horror genre. In fact, it is these tensions that have stood at the core of the horror genre since its very beginning. In the first major work of horror, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, it is the tension between the time before the creation of the monster and the time after, when Dr. Frankenstein encounters so many vivid reasons to wish that he had never stitched those body parts together and brought them to life, that gives the novel its suspense. The fact that the monster is coming for Dr. Frankenstein's fiancée is inevitable, but that inevitability is not what creates the tension. Instead, it is that overweening echoes of the voices that had warned the doctor not to push the boundaries of science into the province of life and death. In one of the first major horror tales of the Gothic era, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," it is the tension between the narrative present, in which the narrator wants to (and does) kill his employer and the past, a time in which the two must (one thinks) have had a better relationship, that is an important part of the suspense of the story. One process that shows this tension is the split character; in *Frankenstein*, the split character is the doctor, shows a moral split that allows his mind to contain a conventional sense of right and wrong, at least insofar as the creature should behave, as well as that amoral impulse that allows him, in the first place, to contemplate digging up dead bodies in order to create life in almost a synthetic way. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the split character is the narrator, who on the one hand can act as such a docile servant while also fostering such cold and calculating plans for murder. In *Gin gwai (The Eye)*, released in 2002, split

identity is mapped onto tensions between the past and present in a live action horror movie. If one outlines the ways in which it is possible to figure fracture identity into live action cinema, one can understand more easily the ways in which a fractured identity shows up in other films as well.

The Eye is the tale of Wong Kar Mun (Angelica Lee). She lost her sight at the age of two, but when she is twenty, she has corneal transplants that restore her sight after eighteen years. At first, it appears that the surgery has gone well, as Mun slowly gets her sight back and starts adjusting to a world that is, once again, visual. She starts a course of therapy with Dr. Lo (Edmund Chen), that helps her interpret the things that she sees as visual input rather than depending on her sense of touch to help her navigate the world around her. It is not long after the surgery, though, that Mun starts seeing images that she quickly comes to realize are ghosts. It is clear that what she is seeing are the images that the person who had the eyes before her had seen. Mun thus has access to images from the past that represent a supernatural power. After Mun tells these concerns to Dr. Lo, he assists her with tracking down the person who had donated the corneas, a person named Ling (Chutcha Rujinanon). After some additional research, Dr. Lo and Mun find out that Ling had the gift of foreseeing all sorts of disasters, including deaths. Even though Ling had attempted to assist her village by giving them warnings of impending disasters, the villagers treated her with anger and ostracized her, making her a modern analog of the Greek prophetess Cassandra, who was cursed never to have anyone believe her prophecies, even though they would turn out to be true. The only one who remains supportive of Ling is her mother, but her mother's love is not

enough. Eventually, Ling hangs herself because the isolation in which she lives makes her so desperate; another contributing factor is the fact that she cannot stop the disasters she foresees, because no one will believe her. Mun has undergone possession by virtue of her eyes, and it is someone from the past who possesses her. The narrative twins the two women through the link of the shared eyes; Ling and Mun then become the epitome of the gargantuan chasm between present and past. In this case, the notion of fracture is doubled; not only is the split introduced through a set of “twin” characters, but the film also hints that all orders in society are subject to contradictions, fractures and cracks through a blending of present and past in situations that lack the ability for reconciliation.

The split between past and present is a theme that runs throughout *The Eye*, suggesting a degree of tension between modern traditions and those of older times. One example involves Mun’s visit to a teacher to figure out the trade of calligraphy, and the teacher points out that only a handful of people want to learn a type of writing that is so traditional. When the calligraphy teacher was at his busiest, he had three full classes a week; when Mun starts learning from him, she is his only student. This suggests that older traditions are on the way out because of the influence of the modern world. The fact that so many ghosts are appearing to Mun is just another indication of the pending death of older traditions. The ways in which the ghosts are presented as looming in the film shows the large scale of this tension. The juxtaposition of ghosts with visual stimuli from the narrative present involves the use of *mise en scene* to place past and present next to each other, even when it is clear that this tension makes this juxtaposition impossible on a

realistic level.

However, while the merging of ghosts and the living in the same visual plane makes for an unusual mise en scene in *The Eye*, it is *Chakushin ari* (One Missed Call) that takes ghostly presence to the next level in Asian horror film. This is one of the “J-Horror” films that started coming out when *Ringu* emerged in 1998 to critical and commercial success that was completely unexpected. *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (Dark Water) followed in 2002 as well as *Ju-On: The Grudge* in 2003, and they encountered the same levels of success. When *Chakushin ari* came out, it received less of a positive response in Japan but mirrors the others in area of emphasis and in the use of mise en scene.

Stated at its most basic, *Chakushin ari* is the tale of a curse that moves throughout the entire keitai network. Victims get a call on their phone, but the ringtone sounds odd and eerie; it is one they fail to recognize. When they realize that their phone shows “one missed call,” they look at their messages. The message actually comes from themselves – a few days into the future – and the details of the message are about the moments they live right before dying. These messages are, of course, time stamped, which means that the victims will die at a very specific time. When Yoko (Anna Nagata) dies after receiving one of these calls, her friend Yumi (Kou Shibasaki) investigates. She meets an acquaintance at Yoko’s interment ceremony who tells her that the murderer is a woman who gets people through their phones. After each killing, she takes a number from her victim’s phone and uses that to get the next person; sure enough, the next two people to die are Yoko’s boyfriend and then one of her good friends.

Yumi gets a mortician called Hiroshi (Shinichi Tsutsumi) to help her figure out the cause of the curse, to see if they can bring it to an end.

While the cell phone is a new form of technology, the onryo, or the female ghost bent on revenge, is anything but new in Japanese culture. Whether it is the ghost who emerges from the television in *Ringu* or the harpie who is using cell phones to pursue her own course of revenge, this is a figure that represents the center of the Japanese tradition of horror. Film is far from the first genre in which the onryo appears; she also shows up in classical Japanese drama. The onryo first appears in the Edo period (1600-1867) in the *Ugetsu monogatari* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain) collection from Akinari Ueda. This collection features quite a few stories involving female ghosts. In the Kabuki tradition of theater, the living characters are usually the ones who enact revenge, but when *kizewamono* (domestic theater) became more popular in the nineteenth century, this vengeful ghost emerged as a stock character. In their early incarnations, the onryo were bound to one particular place, and their anger was focused in the same way, as the onryo would only bring justice to the people who had caused her demise. This is consistent with the Gothic tradition, which asserts a connection between a spirit or curse and specific places, such as a cemetery or a haunted house. However, in the tradition of J-horror, the onryo has no restrictions on place and can show up anywhere. The origins of a particular onryo can go back to a specific place, such as the well in *Ringu*, but now she is not limited to appearing in that location. Her anger has now become more general as well, emerging arbitrarily from the cellular network in *Chakushin ari*. This change in the onryo is expressive of the transformations that have taken place in

communication technology. Keitai has radically shifted the whole concept of communication, and the gripping iconography that marks the mise en scene in J-horror supports this idea completely.

In contemporary Japanese horror, technology is the defining feature of the genre. Technology allows the onryo to carry out its power to show up anywhere, giving her the ability to wreak her anger on the entire world as though she were a virus of some sort. However, while technology gives her a platform, she comes to depend on that technology for her very existence. There has always been a tension between the modern and the traditional in Japanese culture, which is why so many horror films from Japan (J-horror or otherwise) are centered in the technological landscape. J-horror is so centrally focused on this interaction in the landscape of technology that Matt Hills has called it “ media horror” because these films take a look at the “ potentially cataclysmic effect that technology and the desensitization of modern life can have on the populace of Japan” (167). J-horror, then, becomes a promising subgenre for exploring the ways in which the Japanese connection with technology expresses the tension between past and present.

And so when the onryo shows up in *Chakushin ari*, she should be a symbol of a self that is archaic, going back before the time when technology was so prevalent. The implication is that, even though Japan has become much more secular, the popular imagination of the nation has never released the ravenous ghosts that dwell in its past. The ghost in *Chakushin ari* shows the trials that are going on in the present for the Japanese, as the onryo serves as a metaphor for the changes that have taken place in contemporary Japan

as a result of the keitai phenomenon. This is a phenomenon that is different in Japan than it is in the United States or the United Kingdom. The North American term cellular phone focuses on the technological inner workings of the device; the British term mobile phone focuses on the fact that this phone is not tied to a cord or a charging station; it can go anywhere where the phone can access the service network. The word keitai has a different association altogether. The term was initially keitai denwa to express the notion of the “portable phone.” When the Internet became mobile, the word denwa was dropped, making keitai the accepted term, and it means roughly something that one can carry along with oneself. It is a tool that supports one’s close connection to one’s technosocial peers, giving communication a constant presence that is still weightless. This term indicates the keitai is not only everywhere, but it is an important part of Japanese living.

Another form that the tension between past and present assumes in Chakushin ari is the ambivalence that technology produces within members of a society. The cell phone has become virtually a universal device, and so has the ambivalence associated with the phone. If you watch the *Scream* films, you see technology as a force that threatens the boundaries of identity and space, but the cell phone is still the province of the human realm. In *Chakushin ari*, though, the cell phone becomes something supernatural, making it a lot more invasive. A ghost using the network of keitai can act with a smooth omniscience and ubiquity that the murderer in the *Scream* series might dream of but could never attain. Here, keitai is not an Other but instead is a vision of seamless, virtual integration of all realities.

So is *Chakushin ari* an attack on technology? The fact is that vengeful spirits



take up a great deal of space within Japanese culture. These spirits can inhabit living things as well as inanimate objects, and the presence of so many different types of ghosts goes back to the ancient teachings of Shinto. However, the mise en scene that is involved with the use of keitai is much more frightening than what one would expect with a haunted house, video cassette, or even the Internet. Using haunted keitai allows more fear because of the fact that a cell phone can be just about anywhere. Also, people generally carry a cell phone on their person at just about all times, making the horror even more personal. This is why the onryo in *Chakushi ari* is so unique; she takes on the dimensions of the technology. The cell phone combines a physical object with a digital presence around it that connects it to the rest of the communication system. The restless onryo is just as ubiquitous, bringing the spiritual to bear on the physical. The digital presence of keitai appears in this film as a ghostly presence. Even though it is hard to perceive digital presence - you don't see wires running from your cell phone to a pole, and it is easy to imagine the structure of the keitai within a larger social group. Even if you have a silent cell phone that is not ringing, the presence of the cell phone is everywhere and is understood. Because just about everyone has a cell phone on them just about all the time, the possibility of getting this call that will indicate the impending end of one's life is just about universal. This means that even a quiet cell phone can be menacing, because at any time, the call or message can come through, and if your number appears in the phone of the last victim - or any earlier victim's phone - you could be marked for a death that you can't even see coming. It is also difficult to discern the presence of ghosts, but when ghost

presences can't be seen, the director works to ensure their perceptibility. This is why the keitai has such a major role within the larger mise en scene. No matter whether the phone appears in extreme close-ups or in long shots, keitai insists on receiving the focus when it appears. The director often zooms in and out on people in the film as they talk on their cell phones; this technique illustrates the dramatic significance of the cell phone. The film shows an urban world that is populated with keitai. Even in the initial title sequence, credits float on top of a sound collage made of fragmented conversations taking place on cell phones as well as people dialing cell phones and those phones ringing. Those sounds layer on top of pixilated CCTV video images in which people put their cell phones to use. The beginning of the film shows a bird's eye shot in the exterior, looking down at the crowds that populate Tokyo. This exposition dissolves into a close-up featuring four cell phones sitting on a table. As the film unfolds, the camera moves in a flowing, fluid way, hovering around each of the characters. The camera oscillates back and forth between low and high angles, giving an unstable perspective that acts like a ghost, moving without any moorings. This lack of moorings is expressive of the tension between past and present in Japanese culture, and within the horror genre as a whole.

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