

The Evolution of Yōkai in Japanese Horror Cinema from the 1950's to the Present.

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) 3D Design, Modelmaking & Digital Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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## **Abstract**

Jefery Jerome Cohen, Dean of Humanities at Arizona State University, has described the monster as a “cultural body”. His meaning being that a monster is a representation of the fears and anxieties of the culture that has created it. As cultures change over time so do the ways a culture depicts the monsters it has created.

This thesis shall examine the relationship between monsters and their cultural context by examining the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema from the 1950’s to the present day. This shall be undertaken by examining the conventions and tropes of yōkai depiction established during Japan’s past and what patterns can be seen in how yōkai are used in Japanese horror cinema because of cultural change.

Many of the tropes of yōkai were established during Edo period (1603 - 1867). The characteristics of yōkai established during the Edo period later laid the foundation of how they would be depicted in Japanese horror cinema in the post-World War II era as Japan looked to its past for inspiration following the American Occupation.

However, in the modern age international horror cinema trends and a shift in attitude as to how yōkai were perceived in Japanese popular culture (largely in part due to the manga of Mizuki Shigeru) saw yōkai largely no longer used as characters for horror cinema, excluding a certain kind of yokai, the onryō, which was heavily used.

Through the examination of yōkai depiction in Japanese horror cinema from the 1950’s to the present, and how this depiction has changed and been influenced by cultural factors, it will be possible to establish the relationship between monsters and culture. This thesis will illustrate how monsters are reflective of their cultural context and are indeed a “cultural body”.

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## Introduction

*“The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment— of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture.”*

Jeffery Jerome Cohen<sup>1</sup>

In his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, Jeffery Jerome Cohen in 1996, states that a monster is a “cultural body”. In other words, a monster is emblematic of the fears and the background of the culture which has created it.

Monsters have long existed as an important part of the culture of humanity. People’s fears, anxieties and their taboos are all displayed in the monsters they create. Each nation has its own monsters tied directly to it. In Japan these monsters are often referred to by the collective term *yōkai*.

This thesis examines the changes in the depiction of *yōkai* in Japanese horror film between the 1950s and the present day and will show how this is directly related to Japanese cultural lifestyle change over this time. The examination of cultural context and transformation of *yōkai* during this time frame will illustrate the relationship between monsters and culture, as proposed by Cohen. This shall be undertaken by exploring the interpretation of *yōkai* in several films from different periods of cinema. As monsters are a source of fear it is natural that horror cinema would make use of them to scare audiences, as in the case in the Japanese cinema.

However, culture is not stagnant so a particular culture’s views on monsters can change over time. This can clearly be seen in how the interpretation and usage of *yōkai* has changed during the history of Japanese horror cinema. To fully understand *yōkai*, it is important to examine the Japanese beliefs and philosophies which are foundational to the depiction of *yōkai* once they begin to appear in Japanese horror cinema.

The term “*Yōkai*” is often translated to “monster” in English. But this translation is limited. The word *yōkai* consists of two Japanese characters which can be translated as ‘suspicious, doubtful’.<sup>2</sup> In its broader sense, *Yōkai* refers to any supernatural or unexplainable phenomena, and also to many subcategories of singular supernatural entities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Jeffery Jerome. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, Arc Humanities Press, 2018. Pp. 44–54.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 13

<sup>3</sup> “Chapter 1. Introduction to the Weird.” *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*, by Michael Dylan Foster, University of California Press, Los Angeles, United States of America, 2008. Pp. 1–29.



There are numerous types of yōkai. Examples of some of the subcategories include:

- bakemono (meaning transformed thing) which are yōkai that can shapeshift.
- mononoke (strange things),
- ayakashi (spooky things)
- tsukumogami (inanimate objects which have come to life).<sup>4 5</sup>

In traditional Japanese folklore it is believed that animals over a certain age gain supernatural abilities and can shapeshift. These are a type of bakemono subcategory of yōkai. The two most famous examples are the kitsune (fox) and tanuki (raccoon dog).

One particularly important category of yōkai that frequently appears in Japanese horror stories and cinema are yūrei (ghosts). There are many kinds of yūrei but the most commonly appearing in Japanese horror media is the onryō. Onryō are the souls of the deceased who died with a terrible grudge or hatred. They exist purely to extract vengeance.<sup>6</sup>

While there are many subcategories of supernatural phenomena and creatures in Japanese mythology the term yōkai can still be used when referring to the supernatural in general, particularly when referring to monsters.<sup>7</sup> For this thesis the term yōkai will be used in reference to Japanese monsters.

When examining how yōkai appear in cinema, it is important to understand the cultural moment that led to their creation and rise to popularity.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will set the scene examining the origins of yōkai stemming from Japanese religion and folklore and why yōkai culture became so established during the Edo period (1603 – 1867), laying the foundation for its use in Japanese horror film. The Edo period is one of the most important moments for art and culture during Japanese history as for the first time in centuries Japan was at peace<sup>8</sup>. This social and political stability allowed cultural life to flourish with arts and entertainment becoming accessible to the general population. At this time horror stories and stories of yōkai became popular and embedded in the Japanese conscious, forming the foundation for their use in the future Japanese horror film industry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema during the 1950's and the 1960's. Following its defeat in World War II, Japan was occupied by American forces and there was censorship of certain themes in film production, such as 'showing revenge as a legitimate motive'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sekien, Toriyama, et al. *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yokai Encyclopedias of Toriyama Sekien*. Dover Publications, 2017. Pp. vi

<sup>5</sup> Frydman, Joshua. *The Japanese Myths: A Guide to Gods, Heroes and Spirits*. Thames & Hudson, 2022. Pp. 192-193

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, Matthew. *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yōkai*. 2012. Pp. 164

<sup>7</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 5

<sup>8</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 31-32

<sup>9</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 113

which meant that the Edo kaidan (ghost stories) would not pass the censors. However, when the occupation finished there was a re-emergence of traditional horror film. The greatest variety in the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema emerged in the 1950's and 1960s. These depictions stem from the conventions laid during the Edo period.

Chapter 3 will examine a shift in attitude towards yōkai in the modern era. This can largely be attributed to the manga of Mizuki Shigeru which emerged in the mid-1960s featured many traditional yōkai. His work became incredibly popular across Japan and established yōkai's new role as romanticised symbols of Japan<sup>10</sup>. By the late 1990s' to 2000's, Japanese horror had become a genre of international interest. In popular Japanese media, yōkai become emblems of an idolised past and characters for the fantasy genre. In the horror film industry, the only yōkai in popular use is the onryō, which has become more antagonistic following international horror trends, where good is less likely to prevail over evil. It is only outside of mainstream horror and general popular Japanese media that a greater variety of traditional yōkai are seen as horror figures. Although their characterisation has changed due to the same trends that have affected the onryō.

The areas examined by each chapter will show how cultural expression, and cultural context, at a national and international level shape the monsters created in media. The time periods in each chapter will show key moments which clearly show how culture, and audience reception changes over time, which is reflected in how yōkai are depicted. Supporting Cohen's premise that 'a monster is emblematic of the fears and the background of the culture which has created it'.

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<sup>10</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 160-182

## Chapter One: Yōkai during the Edo period and the establishment of Yōkai in Japanese entertainment.

The Edo Period in Japanese history occurred between 1603 and 1867. A series of civil wars had ended, and the status of capital city was moved from Kyoto to Edo (modern day Tokyo)<sup>11</sup>. What followed was a time of peace when social and political stability allowed cultural life to flourish with arts and entertainment becoming accessible to the general population. It was during this time that interest in yōkai began to become popular in Japan and much of the tropes and ideas that became foundational to the depiction of yōkai began.

Zack Davisson, in his book *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost* contributes this rise in popularity to a feeling of safety during the Edo period allowing for the general public to feel comfortable seeking entertainment in macabre subjects.<sup>12</sup> It was also during the Edo period that books became widely available to the general population. This allowed for books purely made for recreational reading to appear. Amongst these the most important books created on the topic of yōkai were the encyclopaedias of yōkai created by Toriyama Sekien. Sekien published a total of four encyclopaedias on yōkai between 1776 and 1784.<sup>13</sup>



Fig 1: Illustration of a Ningyō (Japanese Mermaid) by Toriyama Sekien c.1781

These encyclopaedias provided illustrations (Fig 1) that would later become the visual basis for how many yōkai were depicted. This can be seen in films

<sup>11</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 31-32

<sup>12</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 32

<sup>13</sup> Sekien, Toriyama, et al. *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yokai Encyclopedias of Toriyama Sekien*. Dover Publications, 2017. Pp. v

such as *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters* (1968),<sup>14</sup> where many of the yōkai physical appearances appear very similar to Sekien's artwork, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

While artwork like Sekien's provided the visual basis for many yōkai as they would appear in Japanese popular media for centuries after, the characterisation of yōkai and how they behave or operate has its origins in folktales and religion. The spreading of folktales and ghost stories, called kaidan, became popular during the Edo period. While these stories pre-date the Edo period the availability of printing presses during this time allowed for their wider distribution in books<sup>15</sup>. Kabuki plays were also a popular form of entertainment which allowed for the spread of kaidan as many popular kabuki plays featured yūrei<sup>16</sup>. Without these two forms of entertainment spreading awareness of yōkai during the Edo period, it is unlikely they would have persisted into modern forms of entertainment as much as they have. The nature of yōkai in these stories have much of their foundations in the two primary religions of Japan: Shinto and Buddhism. These religions were prominent both during the Edo period and today.

According to Shinto, numerous objects and natural phenomena have a divine essence known as *kami*.<sup>17</sup> The word *kami* is often translated into English as "god". However, this does not fully convey the meaning of *kami*. While there exists *kami* which are extremely like western examples of gods, being divine beings associated with concepts or phenomena (examples being Amaterasu, goddess of the sun or Inari, god of rice and commerce), a waterfall or mountain may too be labelled as a *kami*.<sup>18</sup> This idea of objects having their own spirit or character is also present in the subcategory of yōkai "tsukumogami" mentioned previously.

The concept of *kami* is extremely complex and nuanced, but it can be roughly interpreted as being anything which inspires awe or a sense of worship. While both *kami* and yōkai are both supernatural in nature and overlap with each other in many ways, they are treated as two separate concepts. A distinction made between *kami* and yōkai by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt is that yōkai exist in our world physically and interact directly with humans.<sup>19</sup> Yōkai are also not actively worshipped like *kami*.<sup>20</sup> However *kami* and yōkai both exist on a moral spectrum. While *kami* are generally positive forces, they can cause damage or upset when their mood is foul. *Kami* are sometimes worshipped to appease them or whatever force of nature they hold dominion over.<sup>21</sup> Yōkai likewise vary in morality between each other. Some yōkai, like oni, are inherently evil beings however morality of some yōkai may be dependent on the individual. For instance, kitsune are observed in legends to sometimes be malicious but some are seen serving

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<sup>14</sup> Yasuda, Kimiyoshi, director. *Yokai Monsters: 100 Monsters*. Daiei International Films, 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 36-37

<sup>16</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 41-51

<sup>17</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 40- 43

<sup>18</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 40-46 & Pp 48 -49

<sup>19</sup> Sekien, Toriyama, et al. *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yōkai Encyclopaedias of Toriyama Sekien*. Dover Publications, 2017. Pp. vi

<sup>20</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 15

<sup>21</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 46- 50

Inari.<sup>22</sup> The varying nature and morality of kami in Shinto is very similar to yōkai and may have been an influence on the characterisation of yōkai. This varying morality of yōkai can be observed in Japanese horror cinema where yōkai operate as both antagonists but also forces of good which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Another aspect of Shinto that can be seen in the character of yōkai is the view Shinto takes towards death. Life and nature are venerated highly in Shinto. Death on the other hand, is viewed as a pollutant or corruption. Shinto seldom deals with the topic of death. While practices around death, such as funerals, are present in the religion, some believe that Buddhism was able to take off as much as it did in Japan when it arrived from mainland Asia in part due to Shinto not discussing death or the afterlife in detail.<sup>23</sup> The negative view of death in Shinto can be traced to one of its creation myths. In this myth two kami, Izanami and Izanagi are responsible for the creation of the islands of Japan. After giving birth to myriad kami, Izanami dies. Grief stricken Izanagi departs to the underworld, Yomi, to find his lost wife. When he finds her, he discovers she has become a horrific, rotting corpse. He then flees the underworld in horror.<sup>24</sup> After sealing the gate to the underworld, Izanagi is threatened by Izanami. Izanami declares that if she is not released, she will cause 1000 deaths each day. Izanagi retorts by declaring that he will create 1500 lives each day.<sup>25</sup> This story illustrates death as a purely negative force that should be avoided. It also shows “the life-giving properties of kami” and places them in contrast to death.<sup>26</sup> This fear of death and it being viewed as a negative force is clearly illustrated in the form of the yōkai, the onryō. Onryō in stories are portrayed as antagonistic which ties back to Shinto fears surrounding death as can be seen in kabuki plays such as *Tōkaido Yotsuya kaidan*. Kabuki plays featuring onryō were popular around the Edo period, *Tōkaido Yotsuya kaidan* being a prominent example. The play was first performed in 1825 and features the onryō, Oiwa<sup>27</sup>. The Shinto attitude toward death is clearly illustrated in the onryō who rose to popularity during the Edo period. The conventions laid by the depiction of onryō during the Edo period persist to this day in Japanese horror cinema which can be seen in film franchises such as the *Ju-On* series (1998-2020).

Buddhist belief has had as much of an influence on Japanese folklore as Shinto. Many early kaidan styled tales were spread by Buddhist monks in Japan to teach and enforce Buddhist ideals<sup>28</sup>. This draws a direct link to Buddhism and the nature of yōkai. During the Edo period these stories entered wider circulation with the availability of books for the masses, allowing the connection between Buddhism and yōkai to persist into the future<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Frydman, Joshua. *The Japanese Myths: A Guide to Gods, Heroes and Spirits*. Thames & Hudson, 2022. Pp. 168-169 & Pp. 180

<sup>23</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 35

<sup>24</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 53-55

<sup>25</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 55

<sup>26</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 55

<sup>27</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 90

<sup>28</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 33

<sup>29</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. P. 36

Buddhism, unlike Shinto, has clearly illustrated systems of belief surrounding morality and the cosmic order.<sup>30</sup> Much of these beliefs are shown in the depiction of yōkai. Buddhism states there are four noble truths, these being:

1. The truth of suffering. This truth outlines that suffering is an inherent part of life and needs to be fully recognised.
2. The origin of suffering is desire. This truth states that all suffering is born from man's desire. Disappointment and pain are all born from want and one's own self. (It is important to note this is not in reference to physical pain)
3. The truth of the end of suffering. This truth states that suffering can be stopped by living within the moment. Not desiring or wishing for anything beyond it will stop suffering and awaken one to the happiness of the present.
4. The Eightfold Path. This truth states that by living in a way which does not bring harm to oneself, or others is the key to enlightenment. Buddha outlined the Eightfold Path to attain this. This being: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration<sup>31</sup>

Desire being a source of evil is clearly shown in many yōkai. The onryō's inability to let go of emotions and the desire for vengeance illustrates this. Because the onryō cannot let go, its suffering continues, and it serves as a reminder of the horror of failing to embrace the Four Noble Truths. Another yōkai that has its character deeply linked with Buddhism is the oni.

Oni are the most common yōkai appearing in Japanese folklore. They typically appear as humanoid creatures, sprouting horns, fangs, or tusks, having large eyes, large noses, sometimes wild unkempt hair, and claws (the number of fingers they have often varies).<sup>32</sup> The skin colour of oni varies between them. The colour of an oni's skin is reflective of its personality or desire it is associated with. Examples being the colour blue, associated with wrath and red, being associated with avarice or greed. These kinds of negative emotions are condemned in Buddhism.

The oni's links to Buddhism are also shown in how they come to be in some cases. If a human is evil enough during their lifetime, they will become an oni<sup>33</sup>. This concept is very similar to certain Buddhist beliefs surrounding reincarnation. Depending on the life one has led they will reincarnate into six possible kinds of existence, as a, a demi-god, a human, an animal, spirits referred to as a hungry ghost and finally demons. The lowest form of reincarnation is reincarnating as a "hell creature", like an oni.<sup>34</sup> Oni also serve as the punishers of the damned in hell. There are numerous artworks

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<sup>30</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 25-26 & Pp. 35

<sup>31</sup> St Ruth, Diana, and Richard St Ruth. *Zen Buddhism*. Bravo Ltd, 2009. Pp. 17

<sup>32</sup> Frydman, Joshua. *The Japanese Myths: A Guide to Gods, Heroes and Spirits*. Thames & Hudson, 2022. Pp. 168-169

<sup>33</sup> Meyer, Matthew. *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yokai*. 2012. Pp. 66

<sup>34</sup> "Death and Dying in Buddhism." *Online Guide | Department of Religion and Theology | University of Bristol*, University of Bristol, [www.bristol.ac.uk/religion/buddhist-centre/projects/bdr/chaplains/online-guide.html#:~:text=Buddhists%20recognise%20that%20there%20is,to%20become%20free%20from%20samsara](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/religion/buddhist-centre/projects/bdr/chaplains/online-guide.html#:~:text=Buddhists%20recognise%20that%20there%20is,to%20become%20free%20from%20samsara). Accessed 12 Feb. 2024.

depicting oni punishing sinners through a variety of means from Japan<sup>35</sup>. The character of the oni is deeply woven into the fabric of Japanese culture. It is the quintessential villain of Japanese folklore<sup>36</sup>, and its iconography is a deeply linked with religious belief. The link with yōkai and religious belief was further established when kaidan published during the Edo period were also used for religious moral teaching.<sup>37</sup>

All this evidence shows that the Edo period was a pivotal point in the characterisation of yōkai. Many of the conventions and ideas surrounding them were cemented and refined during this time. The Edo period established yōkai as figures to be used in popular entertainment<sup>38</sup>, through Sekien's encyclopaedias and kabuki theatre. The folktales and religious beliefs of this period a large effect on the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema that was to come. The yōkai of early Japanese horror cinema would serve as moral teaching tools, much like how they appeared during the Edo period.

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<sup>35</sup> Kajitani, Ryouji, et al. *Hell in Japanese Art*. Pie Intl Inc, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Frydman, Joshua. *The Japanese Myths: A Guide to Gods, Heroes and Spirits*. Thames & Hudson, 2022. Pp. 168

<sup>37</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 36

<sup>38</sup> "Chapter 2. Natural History of the Weird: Encyclopedias, Spooky Stories, and the Bestiaries of Toriyama Sekien." *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*, by Michael Dylan Foster, Los Angeles, United States of America, 2008, pp. 30–76.

## Chapter Two: Yōkai during the “Golden Age” of Japanese Horror Cinema

When examining the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema a good point to begin analysis is during the 1950's and 1960's. Although yōkai were used in prior decades of Japanese horror cinema, it is during this time frame that the greatest variety of yōkai appear in film. This chapter will establish patterns in the depiction of yōkai during this period that were based upon traditional ideas established during the Edo period and how they were popularised again due to changes in cultural life after the second World War.

Following defeat in World War II, Japan was occupied by American forces until April 1952. During the occupation there was censorship of certain themes in film production such as ‘showing revenge as a legitimate motive’.<sup>39</sup> This meant that films based on traditional Edo kaidan were censored. When the American forces left, these stories could once again be told. The horror film industry re-emerged and a great variety in the depiction of yōkai occurred in the films produced at this time. The cultural moment of freedom from western occupation reflects this expansion of creativity and revival of traditional ideas in film.

Japanese horror cinema from its beginning, in the early 1900s, was primarily focused on the adaptation of kaidan stories to the screen<sup>40</sup>. However, during the American occupation of Japan after World War II there was heavy censorship of film. Themes such as karmic revenge were largely removed from film and yōkai did not appear in films generally<sup>41</sup>. Once the American occupation ended the Japanese film industry once again produced horror films with much of the classical trappings of kaidan and yōkai that were formed during the Edo period. Some modern critics refer to the period from the 1950's to approximately the mid 1960's as the “golden age” for the classically styled Japanese horror film<sup>42</sup>. However, it is important to note that contemporary critics did not generally look favourably at horror films in Japan, and they mainly occupied the B-Film scene<sup>43</sup>.

Themes of vengeance, karmic retribution and transgression of cultural norms are at the heart of most kaidan. These tropes of kaidan were evidently present in early examples of Japanese horror cinema<sup>44</sup>. This usage of traditional tropes is also present in the depiction of yōkai during this period. While onryō or bakeneko (shapeshifting cat) typically served as the antagonists of these films there are examples of other yōkai being used to

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<sup>39</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 113

<sup>40</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp.22

<sup>41</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp.113

<sup>42</sup> Harper, Jim. *Flowers From Hell: The Modern Japanese Horror Film*. Noir Publishing, 2008. Pp.7

<sup>43</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp.40

<sup>44</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp 45-46



serve this role. While there are examples of non-traditional monsters as antagonists, a notable example being *Godzilla* (1954) (original title: *Gojira*)<sup>45</sup> who served as a metaphor for the horrors of nuclear war, classical *yōkai* still dominated the period. One of the most notable examples of a *yōkai* being faithful to their original source is the onryō Oiwa from the film *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959) (original title: *Tōkaido Yotsuya Kaidan*).



Fig 2: Oiwa before her death in *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959).

*The Ghost of Yotsuya* was directed by Nobuo Nakagawa and was released in 1959. It is based on the kabuki play of the same name first staged in 1825<sup>46</sup>. The plot of the film is largely the same as the original play and the depiction of Oiwa in the film is certainly accurate to the source material. Much of her character, behaviour and appearance after her death is derived from traditional Japanese beliefs, much like other on screen *yōkai* during this period of cinema. At about the halfway point of the film Oiwa is poisoned by her husband Iemon. As she dies, she laments how Iemon could abandon her and their child so cruelly. She vows to seek revenge upon Iemon before dying (Fig.2). After this Oiwa quickly returns as an onryō to extract her vengeance upon her wicked husband.

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<sup>45</sup> Honda, Ishirō, director. *Godzilla*. Toho, 1954.

<sup>46</sup> Shimazaki, Satoko. "Overturning The World: The Treasury of Loyal Retainers and Yotsuya Kaidan." *Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost*, Columbia University Press, 2016. Pp. 99–100.



Fig 3: Oiwa's ghost appears to torment lemon in *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959).

The accuracy in following classical ideas around yōkai during the 1950's and 1960's in Japanese horror cinema is clearly illustrated in Oiwa. Oiwa's physical appearance as an onryō follows traditional conventions. Once returned as an onryō Oiwa develops incredibly pale skin, wears a white kimono, and retains the wounds she developed during her death (an exception to this being when she appears to her sister and at the film's climax) (Fig 2).



Fig 4: *Iemon and the ghost of Oiwa* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Ukiyo-e Print, 1848

Appearing with such wounds is typical of onryō<sup>47</sup>. Many depictions of onryō and other kinds of yūrei in traditional Japanese art show them to have pale white skin while wearing a white kimono. Ukiyo-e prints from the Edo period often depicted Oiwa specifically with her half-melted face as it became a recognisable symbol of her character (Fig 3)<sup>48</sup>. Retaining these features shows the desire of upholding traditional ideas when depicting yōkai in cinema that was present during the 1950's and 1960's. All aspects of Oiwa's behaviour are typical of the traditional onryō also. This further shows the dedication of maintaining traditional depictions of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema of the 1950's and 1960's.

In his book *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* Matthew Meyer breaks down the nature of the onryō. He describes onryō as “the ghosts of people who have died with such strong passions – jealousy, rage or hatred – that their soul is unable to pass on”. The fact an onryō is unable to let go of its passion goes against the third noble truth in Buddhism<sup>49</sup>. This truth states that one can only achieve happiness by letting go of one's desires as desire is the origin of suffering. However, an onryō cannot achieve this happiness as the very reason for its existence is to seek vengeance, a form of desire. This transgression of the Buddhist truth would certainly serve as a terrible taboo in

<sup>47</sup> Meyer, Matthew. *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yokai*. 2012. Pp. 164

<sup>48</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 92-93

<sup>49</sup> St Ruth, Diana, and Richard St Ruth. *Zen Buddhism*. Bravo Ltd, 2009. Pp. 17

traditional Japanese culture, given Buddhism is one of Japan's two major religions. Oiwa continuously torments lemon with visions and hallucinations to drive him mad. At one point she uses these hallucinations to trick him into murdering the noble family he married into after her death. Her existence after death entirely revolves around making lemon, and his conspirator Naosuke, suffer for their crimes. She is unable to let go of her grudge. It is not until her sister and her sister's lover avenge her death at the end of the film that Oiwa and her son's spirits can peacefully pass on into the afterlife. This ties Oiwa's depiction back to traditional cultural fears. Onryō traditionally have always been beings purely motivated by vengeance and Oiwa fits this mould perfectly. This further shows the accuracy to tradition in the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror films of the 1950's and 1960's.

However, despite her nature being a source of dread she also upholds justice, which is a common trait of monsters in Japanese horror cinema from this period<sup>50</sup>. Oiwa punishes lemon for his transgressions which go against the law and Japanese culture when he betrays and murders her. She is a perfect example of a monster returning the world to a state of order which was a very common theme in Japanese horror cinema between the 1950's and 1960's. Oiwa serves as a warning of what would happen to those who go against the ideals upheld by Japanese culture, especially those held traditionally. Yōkai often were used as vehicles to show how misdeeds and transgressions would be met with punishment in the kaidan of the Edo period<sup>51</sup>. Thusly, Oiwa's depiction in *Ghost of Yotsuya* is emblematic of how yōkai were modelled following classical ideas during the 1950's and 1960's in film. Other depictions of yōkai following traditional ideas by upholding the order of the world and punishing the guilty is even more apparent in another of Nakagawa's films, *Jigoku* (1960) (translates to Hell in English).

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<sup>50</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp 44-45

<sup>51</sup> Davisson, Zack. *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Chin Music Press, 2020. Pp. 33



Fig 5: Sinners enter one of the rivers of hell in *Jigoku* (1960)

*Jigoku* while having a contemporary setting for the time of its release, is still a horror film that has its sources of terror derived from traditional Japanese culture and belief. The film does not have any supernatural elements until after approximately the one-hour mark. At this point all the characters in the film have died and have had their souls condemned to hell. The depiction of hell in *Jigoku* is based off how it appears in Buddhism<sup>52</sup>. The main character Shirō travels through the various planes of hell where he encounters the other characters of the film who explain to him their punishments and sins (Fig 5).

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<sup>52</sup> Genshin. "10. The Essentials of Pure Land Rebirth." *Buddhist Hell: Visions, Tours, and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*, by Eileen Gardiner, Italcia Press, Inc., New York, United States of America, 2012, pp. 59–79.



Fig 6: An oni in *Jigoku* (1960)

The depiction of hell and the punishments the characters suffer, ties directly into Japanese religious fears. While in hell Shirō hears the voice of Emma-ō, the ruler and judge of hell in Buddhist cosmology.<sup>53</sup> To help carry out punishment in hell, Lord Enma had many oni under his command. The oni present in the film serve a very similar role to those seen in mythology and classical Japanese art<sup>54</sup>. They appear as hairy, brutish humanoids that torture the sinners of hell using a variety of methods (Fig 6).

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<sup>53</sup> Gardiner, Eileen. *Buddhist Hell: Visions, Tours, and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*. Itasca Press, Inc., 2012. Pp. 162

<sup>54</sup> Meyer, Matthew. *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yokai*. 2012. Pp. 66

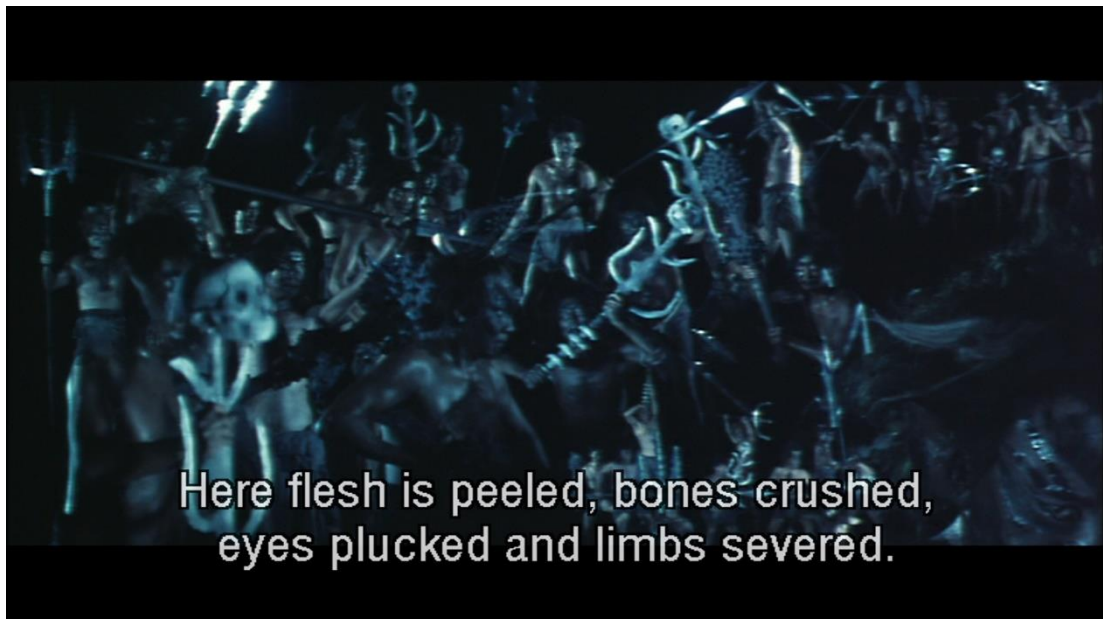


Fig 7: Comparison between a gathering of oni in *Jigoku* and a traditional Japanese painting of oni punishing sinners.

Oni were the face of punishment for sinners in Buddhism and as such the fear of them is deeply rooted in Japanese culture<sup>55</sup>(Fig 7). Like *Ghost of Yotsuya* we see yōkai being used in the film to inflict terror but also maintain the cosmic order. However, the idea of yōkai being used to maintain justice and punish the guilty is much more obvious in *Jigoku*. The oni are technically in service to the divine. It is their job to punish the sins of man as is ordained by the cosmos<sup>56</sup>. All elements of horror in *Jigoku* illustrate the fear of transgressing cultural taboos and the importance of respecting cultural law and it is clearly illustrated in how yōkai are depicted in the film. This further shows how yōkai in film during the 1950's and 1960's era appeared much like their traditional counter parts.

Perhaps one of the most stand out examples of a Japanese horror film using yōkai is *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters* which was produced in 1968. Like the

<sup>55</sup> Kajitani, Ryouji, et al. *Hell in Japanese Art*. Pie Intl Inc, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Meyer, Matthew. *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yōkai*. 2012. Pp. 66

two previously discussed films the yōkai present in this film have their depiction rooted in tradition. However, the sheer volume and variety of yōkai depicted in the film far surpasses the previous two films discussed.

The film centres around a group of corrupt officials who plan to demolish a shrine and a tenement building to build a brothel. One evening shortly before the demolition goes ahead the officials engage in a form of ghost story telling party called *hyakumonogatari*. In the *hyakumonogatari* participants are told ghost stories while being surrounded by a group of candles<sup>57</sup>. As each story concludes, one candle is extinguished. The host of the *hyakumonogatari* warns that after the final candle is put out, the yōkai in the stories will appear, unless a cleansing ritual is performed. The officials choose to ignore this as mere superstition and do not perform the ritual. They then become haunted by a group of yōkai which eventually led them to their deaths. The *hyakumonogatari* was a past time developed during the Edo period and its usage in the film links to Japan's traditional past.

Once again, the yōkai in the film are shown to uphold justice, linking them back to traditional ideas. The corrupt officials twice ignored religious practises, firstly refusing to gain permission to demolish the shrine without receiving proper clearance from the magistrate and secondly refusing to engage in the cleansing ritual. As a result, they are punished by yōkai. These elements further enforce how traditional ideas were followed when depicting yōkai in Japanese cinema during the 1950's and 1960's. Another important element of note about this film is the extreme faithfulness it shows in the physical depiction of the yōkai based on traditional art.

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<sup>57</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 52-53





Fig 8: A side by side comparison of a rokuro-kubi as depicted by Toriyama Sekien and in *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters* (1968)

Some of the yōkai depicted in the film have appearances remarkably close to those depicted in traditional art, some bearing a great resemblance to yōkai depicted by the artist Toriyama Sekien<sup>58</sup>. For instance, the depiction of rokuro-kubi in the film is remarkably like Toriyama's illustration (Fig 8).

<sup>58</sup> Sekien, Toriyama, et al. *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yōkai Encyclopaedias of Toriyama Sekien*. Dover Publications, 2017.



Fig 9: Comparison of the yōkai at the end of *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters* parading out of the mansion and traditional art depicting yōkai on parade.

Also, the scene of the yōkai leaving the mansion during the climax of the film also evokes many traditional depictions of yōkai parading about (Fig 9).

While Japan was occupied by America following WWII, the use of yōkai in the Japanese horror film industry was censored. When the occupation ended, there was a cultural shift and freedom of expression was restored. This led to a great variety of yōkai appearing in films in the 1950s and 1960s as explored in this chapter. Their depiction and behavioural characteristics are clearly based on the traditional forms which became established during the Edo period, reflecting a revival in traditional Japanese beliefs and culture following the war.

### Chapter Three: Onryō and Yōkai in Modern Japanese Horror Cinema

In this chapter the shift in attitude towards yōkai in the modern era is examined. Following on from the 1950's and 1960's the next most important era of film making, when examining the depiction and evolution of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema, is from the late 1990s to the end of the 2000's. During this period Japanese horror rose to popularity internationally and the idea of yōkai shifted from monsters of legend, fit for use in horror media, to emblems of a romanticised Japanese past. This can largely be attributed to the manga of Mizuki Shigeru. Shigeru wrote a series of manga aimed at children which featured many traditional yōkai. His work became incredibly popular across Japan and established yōkai's new role as romanticised symbols of Japan<sup>59</sup>. His manga was also adapted to television numerous times between the 1970s and 1990s, spreading their popularity further<sup>60</sup>. This new viewpoint on yōkai removed them from returning to the forefront of Japanese horror cinema during the 1990s, with onryō being the exception. The onryō's depiction had been altered since the 1950's and 1960's following international trends in horror cinema. It is only outside of mainstream horror, and general popular Japanese media, that a greater variety of traditional yōkai are seen as horror figures. However, their characterisation has changed due to the same trends that have affected the onryō. The main trend was a shift in how films ended. Before this horror films typically ended on a positive note but following films such as *The Exorcist* (1973)<sup>61</sup> and *Halloween* (1978)<sup>62</sup> endings were negative or ambiguous.<sup>63</sup> This style of ending was adopted by Japanese horror cinema.

The changes to the depiction of onryō in modern Japanese horror cinema can clearly be seen in films such as *Ring*<sup>64</sup> (1998) and *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002)<sup>65</sup>.

*Ring* is often credited with starting the Japanese horror boom of the late 1990's to early 2000's<sup>66</sup>. The plot of the film revolves around the onryō Sadako Yamamura and a curse she has created. Her curse spreads via a haunted video tape. After the tape has been watched the viewer will die in seven days. Sadako's depiction has some similarities to the depiction of onryō from the Japanese horror cinema of the 1950's and 1960's. However, Sadako exhibits many traits that deviate from this classic depiction and shows a more modern imagining of the onryō, showing how the perception of yōkai in Japanese horror had changed.

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<sup>59</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 163-164

<sup>60</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 166

<sup>61</sup> Friedkin, William, director. *The Exorcist*. Warner Bros., 1973.

<sup>62</sup> Carpenter, John, director. *Halloween*. Compass International Pictures, 1978.

<sup>63</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp.10

<sup>64</sup> Nakata, Hideo, director. *Ring*. Toho, 1998.

<sup>65</sup> Shimizu, Takashi, director. *Ju-On: The Grudge*. Lions Gate (US), 2002.

<sup>66</sup> Harper, Jim. *Flowers From Hell: The Modern Japanese Horror Film*. Noir Publishing, 2008. Pp. 7

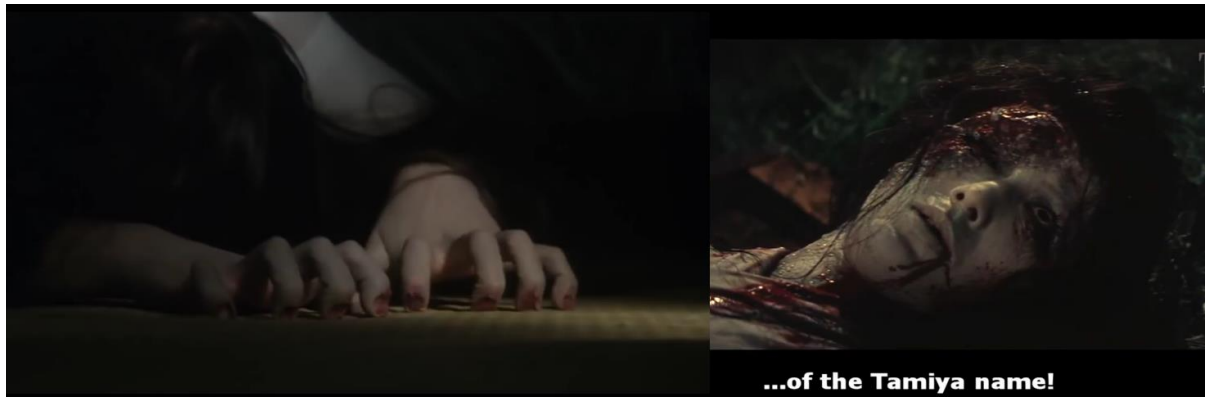


Fig 10: Comparison of Sadako's appearance as an onryō in *Ring* (1998) and Oiwa's appearance in *Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959)

Ways in which Sadako is like onryō of the past include her physical appearance and the well motif surrounding her. Sadako's physical appearance is like most classical onryō. She is pale with dishevelled hair and retains injuries she had as she died, such as her loss of her fingernails because of trying to climb out of the well her father dumped her in to kill her (Fig 10).



Fig 11: Sadako emerges from the well seen on the Television screen towards the finale of *Ring* (1998).

The well motif around Sadako also evokes a kaidan called *Banchō sarayashiki* (The Dish Manor at Banchō)<sup>67</sup>. *The Dish Manor at Banchō* features the ghost of a woman whose body was disposed of by dumping it in a well and her ghost emerges from the well later. During some of the climatic scenes of *Ring*, Sadako is seen emerging from a well on a TV screen, before she physically crawls out of the television to kill the character Ryuji (Fig 12). Sadako's emerging from the well strongly alludes to *The Dish Manor* story.

<sup>67</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 1

However, most of Sadako's characteristics do not follow the classical trappings of how yōkai previously appeared on film.

Sadako deviates from the classical depictions of onryō largely in how she behaves. In classical Japanese Horror films like *Ghost of Yotsuya (1959)*<sup>68</sup> the wrath on the onryō is targeted specifically towards those that have wronged them<sup>69</sup>. Oiwa's revenge is entirely focused on her husband lemon and his co-conspirator Naosuke. While Oiwa does manipulate lemon into killing his newly wedded wife she never targets innocents outside of this one instance. She only really targets lemon and Naosuke for torture. Unlike Oiwa, Sadako however targets people entirely unrelated to her suffering. This shows a departure from how yōkai were traditionally depicted.

Sadako's curse spreads through a VHS tape, which could be watched by any unwitting victim. The first victims to die at the hands of Sadako in the film are a group of teenagers who watched the cursed tape. These children had no relation to Sadako and had done no wrong to her in any capacity. Sadako's attacks against the innocent, stands in stark contrast to the classical monsters of Japanese horror, who only targeted those who have performed some kind of taboo<sup>70</sup>.

Sadako also deviates from classical onryō in that a vector is used to spread her curse and kill victims. In the past onryō, like Oiwa, would simply haunt their victims upon their death. For Sadako to attack a victim they first must watch the cursed tape.

The rules surrounding Sadako's curse, and its spread are much more complex than the hauntings of classic onryō. It is revealed at the climax of *Ring* that by showing the cursed tape deliberately to another person, after the curse has taken hold, the curse will cease to affect the original viewer. The curse will then be transferred to the second individual. It is also explained that if the tape is copied the copy is now the vector of the curse and the original tape loses its supernatural properties. In depth mechanics revolving around curses and hauntings are not present in the traditional depictions of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema, like those seen in films such as *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters (1968)*<sup>71</sup> or *The Mother Tree (1958)*<sup>72</sup>. The haunting or curse merely begins and doesn't follow much structure other than the victim is tormented by the supernatural, usually by the usage of hallucinations. The new complexity behind supernatural attacks shows the change yōkai underwent in their portrayal since the 1950's and 1960's. The establishment of rules around how Sadako operates is quite like the character Freddy Krueger from the film *A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)*.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Nakagawa, Nobuo, director. *The Ghost of Yotsuya*. Shinto Company, 1959.

<sup>69</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 44-45

<sup>70</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 44-45

<sup>71</sup> Yasuda, Kimiyoshi, director. *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters*. Daiei International Films, 1968.

<sup>72</sup> Kadono, Gorō, director. *The Mother Tree*. Shinto Company, 1958.

<sup>73</sup> Craven, Wes, director. *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. New Line Cinema, 1984.

Freddy operates around a clear set of rules in how he can or can't attack victims. Clear rules in how a villain operates is quite common in western horror films. Sadako's curse having a similarly rigid structure in how it functions may have been inspired by films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* showing how international horror had affected Japanese horror.

Sadako also does not uphold some form of cosmic justice or return the world to a state of order unlike the yōkai of classical films<sup>74</sup>. Oiwa in *Ghost of Yotsuya*, the oni from *Jigoku* (1960)<sup>75</sup> and the group of yōkai of *Yōkai Monsters: 100 Monsters* all uphold justice in some regard. Oiwa punishes her treacherous husband for his transgressions, the oni serve in hell as punishers of the wicked, and the yōkai punish those that would conspire to replace a shrine with a brothel. Sadako merely causes torment out of her own anger and hatred. She is not punishing guilty parties for their sins or restoring a state of balance. Her wrath attacks the innocent. This distances her from classical depictions of yōkai. Along with this Sadako does not vanish at the end of the film once a sense of balance has been restored. *Ring's* end implies Sadako's curse lives on and will continue to claim lives. She is never truly defeated or exorcised. Sadako's targeting of the innocent and *Ring's* tonally negative ending is much like those of the western horror films previously mentioned, showing how modern attitudes and international ideas had changed how yōkai were depicted in Japanese horror.

The trend of onryō deviating from their traditional depictions and being more antagonistic would also be seen in the character of Kayako Saeki from *Ju-On: The Grudge*<sup>76</sup>.

The plot of *Ju-On: The Grudge* centres around Kayako Saeki, her son Toshio, and the curse they have created because of their murder by Kayako's husband. After their deaths their former household becomes cursed. Any who set foot within the building become a victim of the curse and will inevitably die because of it.

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<sup>74</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 44-45

<sup>75</sup> Nakagawa, Nobuo, director. *Jigoku*. 1960.

<sup>76</sup> Shimizu, Takashi, director. *Ju-On: The Grudge*. Lions Gate (US), 2002.



Fig 12: Kayako's appearance during the end of *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002).

Much like Sadako, the onryō of *Ju-On: The Grudge* have their appearances based on classical conventions. Kayako and Toshio both have pale ghostly skin like traditional onryō. Kayako also appears at some points during the film bearing the wounds inflicted upon her by her husband (Fig 14).



Fig 13: Toshio's ghostly form (Left) and Toshio's human form (Right) in *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002).



Fig 14: Kayako appearing in a shadowy form near the beginning of *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002)

However, Toshio and Kayako exhibit the ability to take different forms during the film. Toshio at first appears as he did in life (Fig 15) and Kayako appears as a shadow during the early scenes of the film (Fig 15). The ability of onryō to take different forms was seen in some classical Japanese horror films like *Ghost of Yotsuya*, in which Oiwa appears in a human form to her sister, but it is a very rare occurrence<sup>77</sup>. The ability of Toshio and Kayako to change their appearance does somewhat deviate from the classical depiction of onryō in cinema.

Outside of their visual appearances Kayako and Toshio do not follow traditional conventions of yōkai depiction and follow more modern ideas. Much like Sadako's curse in *Ring*, Kayako's curse also targets the innocent. *Ju-On: The Grudge* follows the perspective of multiple characters across various chapters, each chapter starting with a title card featuring the main character of the respective chapter's name. This illustrates the wide-reaching nature of the curse. None of these characters have any real personal ties to Kayako and generally have done no wrong. This targeting of the innocent is a contrast to how onryō only targeted the guilty or villainous in classical Japanese horror cinema<sup>78</sup>. The mechanics of how Kayako's curse is spread are also more akin to those seen in *Ring* than those seen in classical Japanese horror cinema, in that there are rules that it follows that do not specifically target an individual related to the onryō's grudge and that it can easily affect the innocent. An idea not present in the depictions of yokai in Japanese horror of the 1950's and 1960's.

<sup>77</sup> Nakagawa, Nobuo, director. *The Ghost of Yotsuya*. Shintoho Company, 1959.

<sup>78</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 44-45





Fig 15: Rika's appearance mirroring Kayako at the end of *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002).

Like in *Ring*, the onryō of *Ju-On: The Grudge* do not return a sense of order to the world by the film's conclusion<sup>79</sup>. *Ju-On: The Grudge* ends with Kayako dragging the character Rika into the curse and making her a mirror of herself. The film ends with a shot of Rika's corpse in the attic, where Kayako's body was left. Rika's appearance now resembles Kayako's (Fig 16). The ending implies Rika will now act out in a manner like Kayako and that the curse is an endless cycle that cannot be stopped. Unlike most classical Japanese horror films, the ending of *Ju-On: The Grudge* is completely void of any hope or sense of good having prevailed. A motif likely inspired by western horror as previously discussed. Kayako's maliciousness and the end of the film show how *Ju-On: The Grudge* was created using modern methods of yōkai depiction, influenced by national and international cultural factors.

Sadako and Kayako are prime examples of how the depiction of onryō changed during the 1990's to early 2000's. Other films from the period such as *One Missed Call* (2003)<sup>80</sup> and *Pulse* (2001)<sup>81</sup> have similar depictions of ghosts in which they target the innocent and remain to cause harm at the films end. These films also all share negative or ambiguous endings. *Ring*, *Ju-On: The Grudge*, *One Missed Call* and *Pulse* all received American remakes during the early to mid-2000's.<sup>82838485</sup> The adoption of western philosophies when creating horror seen in these films may have been a

<sup>79</sup> Crandol, Michael. *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021. Pp. 44-45

<sup>80</sup> Miike, Takashi, director. *One Missed Call*. KADOKAWA, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Kurosawa, Kiyoshi, director. *Pulse*. Daiei Film, 2001.

<sup>82</sup> Verbinski, Gore, director. *The Ring*. DreamWorks Pictures, 2002.

<sup>83</sup> Shimizu, Takashi, director. *The Grudge*. Sony Pictures Releasing, 2004.

<sup>84</sup> Valette, Eric, director. *One Missed Call*. Warner Bros., 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Sonzero, Jim, director. *Pulse*. Dimension Films, 2006.

contributing factor as to why these films were successful enough outside of Japan to receive American remakes.

During the late 1990's to early 2000's, it is very rare to find depictions of other traditional yōkai outside the onryō in Japanese horror cinema. The idea that yōkai had become avatars for an idealised Japanese past thanks to the manga of Mizuki Shigeru had been firmly established in the Japanese sub-conscious. The film *The Great Yōkai War* (2005)<sup>86</sup> clearly illustrates this. The film follows the story of a young boy who, aided by the help of traditional yōkai, must defeat the evil Yasunori Kato. Yasunori Kato fuses traditional yōkai with machinery, to create monsters to serve him, to destroy Japan. The film clearly illustrates the shift in attitude of yōkai being seen as part of tradition and are given the noble role of protecting Japanese life from upheaval<sup>87</sup>. While the onryō remained in horror films it seemed that other yōkai had been removed from the Japanese horror genre mainstream.

Despite this in the Japanese horror B-film scene yōkai, or at least monsters inspired by them, could still be found. A great deal of the work of director Kōji Shiraishi makes use of yōkai, or creatures based upon them. However, global horror trends can still be seen as having influenced their depiction as the yōkai of Shiraishi's work do not restore order to the world of the film and the films end negatively.

While it is debatable that Kōji Shiraishi is a B-film director, the lack of distribution and academic discussion around his films in the West suggest he is. While Japanese horror films like *Ring* are discussed commonly in academic sources on Japanese film from the West<sup>88,89</sup>, none of Kōji Shiraishi's films have received in-depth analysis academically. Most of Kōji Shiraishi's works are also very hard to find translations of in English. One exception being his film *Noroi* (2005)<sup>90</sup> which was available to stream on the horror streaming service Shudder, although it is no longer available as of writing.

Many of Shiraishi's horror films fall into the subgenres of found footage and documentaries, *Noroi*, *Occult* (2009)<sup>91</sup> and the *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi!* series (2012-2015)<sup>92</sup> all being examples. Many of Shiraishi's found footage films make use of yōkai or at least creatures inspired by them. This is especially true of *Noroi* and the *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi!* series.

The main antagonist of *Noroi* is a demonic entity known as Kagutaba. Much of the characterisation of Kagutaba is derived from Shinto beliefs. While

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<sup>86</sup> Miike, Takashi, director. *The Great Yōkai War*. Kadokawa Pictures and Shochiku, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 212

<sup>88</sup> "5. Back from The Grave: The Death of a Genre and the Kaiki Legacy of J-Horror." *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*, by Michael Crandol, Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc), 2021, pp. 189–217.

<sup>89</sup> Harper, Jim. "Chapter Five: Hideo Nakata and the Ring Cycle." *Flowers from Hell: The Modern Japanese Horror Film*, Noir Publishing, Hereford, UK, 2008, pp. 113–131.

<sup>90</sup> Shiraishi, Kōji, director. *Noroi*. Xandoux Company, 2005.

<sup>91</sup> Shiraishi, Kōji, director. *Occult*. Creative Axa Company Ltd. and Image Rings, 2009.

<sup>92</sup> Shiraishi, Kōji, director. *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi!* Albatross, 2012-2015.

Kagutaba is an original monster created for the film, his foundation in ancient religious ideas does make him comparable to traditional yōkai<sup>93</sup>.



Fig 16: An example of the looped rope motif associated with Kagutaba in *Noroi* (2005).

For instance, a re-occurring motif associated with Kagutaba during the film is a complex loop pattern tied into rope or any form of cord (Fig 17). Sacred rope, called shimenawa, is often used in Shinto to denote a sacred object or place<sup>94</sup>. The looped rope motif therefore could be seen as a perversion of shimenawa.

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<sup>93</sup> Meyer, Matthew. *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yokai*. 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 84



Fig 17: Part of the pacification ritual in *Noroi* (2005).

At one point during *Noroi* archival footage of an appeasement ritual for Kagutaba is viewed (Fig 9). The ritual is performed by a priest at a Shinto shrine and involves a costumed shrine maiden playing the role of Kagutaba. Ritualistic dance, performed by shrine maidens, is practiced in Shinto.<sup>95</sup> These elements further tie Kagutaba's identity with religion, like other ancient yōkai. From Kagutaba's links to Shintoism it is evident that Shiraishi took inspiration and influence from Japanese tradition and yōkai in the creation of *Noroi*. This makes *Noroi* a rare example of classical yōkai conventions being used to create horror in modern Japanese cinema. However, Kagutaba shows the same modern trends seen in *Sadako* and *Kayako* in that he targets the innocent. Kagutaba frequently targets children or parties unrelated to him for attack. By the end of *Noroi* Kagutaba is never defeated. He escapes free to inflict more suffering. The targeting of the innocent and *Noroi*'s negative ending show the influence of modern horror trends on the depiction of yōkai.

Although Kagutaba is an original character based on conventions of yōkai., Shiraishi has used traditional yōkai directly in a horror context in the third film of the *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi!* series. *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi! File 03: Legend of a Human Eating Kappa* (2012)<sup>96</sup> uses kappa, a very famous and popular yōkai in folklore,<sup>97</sup> as antagonists. Elements directly lifted from folklore are used in the film's depiction of the kappa. For instance, kappa, in folklore are known to love cucumbers.<sup>98</sup> At one point during the film

<sup>95</sup> Reader, Ian. *Shinto*. Bravo Ltd, 2007. Pp. 106

<sup>96</sup> Shiraishi, Kōji, director. *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi! File 03: Legend of a Human Eating Kappa*. New Select K.K., 2012.

<sup>97</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. "6. Water - Kappa (Also Kawatarō)." *The Book of Yōkai: The Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*, University of California Press, Oakland, United States of America, 2015, pp. 157–164.

<sup>98</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. "6. Water - Kappa (Also Kawatarō)." *The Book of Yōkai: The Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*, University of California Press, Oakland, United States of America, 2015, pp. 157

cucumbers are used to try to lure a kappa from a pond where it is hiding. This shows Shiraishi maintaining tradition in how he depicts the kappa.



Fig 18: Comparison of an illustration of a kappa by Toriyama Sekien (left) and how the kappa appears in *Senritsu Kaiki File Kowasugi! File 03: Legend of a Human Eating Kappa* (2012).

The kappa in the film, while only seen briefly and greatly obscured, have their physical appearance based on how they were depicted in traditional Japanese art (Fig 19). This further illustrates how Shiraishi used traditional ideas and *yōkai* depictions to create horror. However, Shiraishi's kappa is also affected by modern ideas. The kappa in the film attack innocent civilians and are not defeated by the end of the films. Two characters are cursed by the end of the film and begin to transform into kappa themselves. This is another piece of evidence showing how the depiction of *yōkai* has changed as Japanese culture has evolved.

From the patterns in *yōkai* depiction in the films discussed in this chapter it is apparent that *yōkai* in modern day cinema has greatly changed from the 1950's and 1960's. Modern horror conventions and the change of status of *yōkai* in general Japanese popular culture shows that classical ideas around their depiction have been dropped. *Yōkai* now occupy the role as avatars of a romanticised Japanese past or have evolved to fit in with horror conventions of international cinema. While some aspects of traditional *yōkai* are present in their depiction on screen, adaptation to modern horror trends clearly took priority over sticking to tradition in the Japanese horror cinema of the late 1990's to early 2000's.

## Conclusion

As previously mentioned, in 1996 Jeffery Jerome Cohen, in his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, wrote that a monster is a “cultural body”, emblematic of the fears and the background of the culture which created it.<sup>99</sup> The contents of this thesis show that the depiction of traditional Japanese yōkai and patterns in their characterisation, used in Japanese horror films have evolved in response to cultural change over time in Japan, thus supporting Cohen’s statement.

Chapter 1 illustrates how yokai were created from traditional Japanese ideas expressed through religion and folklore and how the peaceful, cultural environment of the Edo period led to their rise to popularity. Chapter 2 examines how the post-World War II environment saw Japan look back upon its traditional, cultural past resulting in the use of the conventions of the Edo period to depict yōkai in cinema. Motifs and ideas present in films from the 1950s and 1960s were discussed and analysed to show how the yokai used in this period were products of their cultural context. Chapter 3 explored how the manga of Mizuki Shigeru changed how yōkai were viewed in popular culture and how international trends in horror cinema changed how Japanese horror films were made. Both factors caused the depiction of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema to evolve in the modern era.

As monsters, like yōkai, are created by ever-changing culture, they evolve to match this new cultural context. This process of change can still be seen evolving today. *Ring* and *Ju-On: The Grudge* are both highly successful films, spawning multiple sequels and American remakes in 2002 and 2004 respectively. However, this popularity led to the characters of Sadako and Kayako becoming akin to mascots. The latest entry in the *Ring* franchise *Sadako DX* (2022)<sup>100</sup> leaned into the comedy genre and even had a YouTube channel where Sadako posted comedy style videos to promote the film prior to its release<sup>101</sup>. Sadako and Kayako also appeared together in the 2016 film *Sadako vs Kayako*<sup>102</sup>. The film revolves around the two onryō battling each other. The film leans more into action tropes than those of horror. In the same way yōkai of the past transformed from monsters of legend to symbols of nostalgia, modern day Japanese horror characters, like Sadako and Kayako, have transformed into a role more akin to mascots or pop-culture icons. Certainly, horror films involving onryō or yūrei are still being produced, one example being *Immersion*<sup>103</sup> (2023), but onryō seem to have begun to become a tired trope given the current status of Sadako and Kayako. This is

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<sup>99</sup> Cohen, Jeffery Jerome. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, Arc Humanities Press, 2018, pp. 44–54.

<sup>100</sup> Kimura, Hisashi, director. *Sadako DX*. Kadokawa Pictures, 2022.

<sup>101</sup> “貞子の井戸暮らし.” *YouTube*, YouTube, [www.youtube.com/@sadako\\_official](http://www.youtube.com/@sadako_official). Accessed 23 Nov. 2023.

<sup>102</sup> Shiraishi, Kōji, director. *Sadako vs. Kayako*. Kadokawa Daiei Studio, NBC Universal Entertainment Japan, PKDN Films (via. Universal Pictures), 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Shimizu, Takashi, director. *Immersion*. Toei, 2023.

further evidence showing monsters to be “cultural” bodies, whose status changes with their cultural context.

When examining the role of yōkai in Japanese horror cinema it is important to remember how yōkai originated. According to Michael Dylan Foster, yōkai of Japan’s ancient past were used to explain strange phenomena or to enforce a cultural fear<sup>104</sup>. Taking this into account it can be argued that modern urban rumours and myths spread on the internet are the contemporary incarnation of yōkai. The argument for urban legends being yōkai can be seen directly in the kuchisake-onna scares of the late 1970’s.<sup>105</sup> During the late 1970’s Japan was swept by the fear of a masked woman, with a slit mouth, abducting children. While reports of the woman were untrue the nation was nonetheless captured by the idea of her. This mysterious figure, dubbed kuchisake-onna, was almost immediately dubbed as a yōkai by the Japanese public.<sup>106</sup> This incident shows that the fear of yōkai still exists in Japan and the concept of yōkai can adapt to the modern era. This fear has persisted into the creation of internet tales or further urban rumours of supernatural or unexplainable phenomena. Such stories have been adapted to Japanese cinema as is seen in the films *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman* (2007)<sup>107</sup>, a film based on kuchisake-onna, and *Kisaragi Station* (2022)<sup>108</sup>, a film based on a popular internet rumour of a supernatural train station. These films illustrate yōkai to be ever changing with the culture that creates them.

Yōkai have moved from the countryside of ancient Japan into its sprawling urban environments. The films and time frames examined in this thesis have shown yōkai to be ever adapting to the cultural environment they find themselves in. The nature of yōkai will continue to evolve alongside Japanese culture, as an immortal “cultural body”.

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<sup>104</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 2

<sup>105</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 183- 186

<sup>106</sup> Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*. University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 186

<sup>107</sup> Shiraishi, Kōji, director. *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman*. Tornado Film, Tartan Films, 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Nagae, Jirō, director. *Kisaragi Station*. Hakuodo DY Music & Pictures, 2022.

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