

Internet and the Idea of Self:

Identity and Technology in Contemporary Japanese Horror Film

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Horror films play a very unique and interesting role in the media landscape. Horror has the ability to capture what sort of trends and ideas are currently causing unease in the minds of filmmakers and audiences. According to Jay Mcroy in his book *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*, horror films tend to “provide insight into not only a culture’s dominant ideologies, but also those multiple subject positions that question or contest the status quo” (Mcroy 2008, 17). This makes analyzing the content of horror films very illuminating, it’s easy to see what ideas and forces were challenging the status quo at the time the film was made. In contrast to other genres like science fiction, horror tends to reject societal change instead advocating for a return to the status quo as what is best for society. The horror genre inherently suggests that it is better to be surrounded by what is known and considered to be safe as opposed to anything that could herald a changing of society and a departure from familiarity.

In this regard, it would make a lot of sense for changing technology to be a frequent topic explored by horror films. By virtue of being human, a large chunk of any given population will be wary about growing use of new technologies due to its inherent strangeness and the uncertainty over how it will impact the structure of any given society. This makes it an easy target for horror films to fixate on, there is essentially an invitation to exploit the current fears of how new technology will negatively affect society. In recent memory, no technology has dramatically shifted the way human society functions more than the internet. Not only does it allow easy access to the breadth of human knowledge, but it also allows instant long-distance communication with friends, family, and strangers.

Japanese horror films made in the early days of the internet use the internet within their plots to expound on how increasingly drastic shifts in social technological development and

societal norms have impacted the idea of Japanese people's identity. It is easy to see why Japanese media in particular would be willing to explore the concept of identity. In the 20th and 21st centuries, Japan's population has had to cope with a sense of identity that is indeterminate and ambiguous. According to Timothy Iles's book *The Crisis of Identity in Contemporary Japanese Film: Personal, Cultural, National*, in Japan there is a profound need to communicate with others yet there is also a barrier that prevents communication which "effectively cuts off society's members from not only their neighbours but from a pragmatic relationship with their cultural pasts, as well, in effect alienating them from history and their fellows. From this profoundly isolated condition, it is difficult to develop a whole, encompassing, and stable sense of self-identity" (Iles 2008, 5)

Films such as *Pulse*, *Perfect Blue*, and *Noriko's Dinner Table* all incorporate use of the internet into their plotlines, but each takes a unique perspective on the relationship between changing technology and identity and how the idea of identity has shifted in Japan. These films serve as reflections of Japan's fears over changing identity in concert with the advent of the internet, but these films also act as a sort of catharsis for the audience. This is shown through the growth of the protagonists throughout each of these films. At the end of the film, despite being subjected to terrifying experiences, the protagonists self-actualize and end their stories more confident in their identity and place in the world than before. In a way, these contemporary Japanese horror films are distinct from traditional horror films that yearn for the status quo. Instead, these films show their protagonists carving their own spot within the new changed society, essentially creating a new status quo.

In Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue*, the film is centered on the experience of the former idol turned actress Mima as she deals with a folie à deux spurred on by delusions of her manager.

The film spends a large chunk of its runtime focusing on Mima struggling with differentiating reality and fantasy, but this disconnect reflects how Mima struggles with the idea of her identity. Mima's struggle with identity stems from the growing disparity between her public identity as an idol/actress and how she views herself. Her transition from singing to acting has fractured her identity one step further, leaving her stuck between Mima the actress, Mima the idol, and her own self-perception. According to Iles, "Perfect Blue involves its audience in Mima's own growing personal alienation and her loss of confidence in her identity—the film resolutely clings to Mima's point of view even as that point of view becomes indistinct, diffuse, and uncertain" (Iles 2008, 113). *Perfect Blue* makes excellent use of animation as a medium to visually display Mima's mental state throughout the film. Mima's fracturing identity is represented within the film by a spectral hallucination of another Mima that represents Mima as an idol. This hallucination is colored by intense washed-out colors and is given a hazy halo around her form compared to the rest of the animation, but from Mima's perspective this aspect of herself has been given autonomy and is just as real as she is. This tension between her disparate identities is exacerbated by the introduction of a website called "Mima's Room", which is run by her stalker with help from her manager. The website is an eerily accurate diary written from the perspective of Mima, though she is not the author. According to Iles, "over time [Mima] comes to check the Web site to discover what she herself has done on any given day, and how she has felt about events" (Iles 2008, 112-113). In the context of *Perfect Blue*, the internet has bridged the gap between public and private perception of herself. She literally allows the internet into her room and within it she finds a distorted reflection of how she perceives her identity.

This commentary on the role of the internet in the creation of fractured identities seems prescient in the age of social media. The idea of a public persona contrasting your actual self

would seem foreign to anyone before the advent of the internet and social media, except for celebrities like Mima within *Perfect Blue*. This is why the idea of a website that you've invited into your home through the computer being a distorted reflection of that same home is so potent and upsetting within the context of *Perfect Blue*. The internet has essentially allowed Mima's public persona to infiltrate the space that once belonged to Mima's private life. This website is mirrored in reality by her manager Rumi's recreation, but the existence of both of these parallel rooms are literal manifestations of Mima's fracturing identity and mental state.

Fear of losing touch with reality and one's own perception of themselves permeates *Perfect Blue*'s narrative. This is shown through the spectral manifestation of her public persona and her new career as an actress. This is a reflection of the newfound fear that the internet produces, being able to go online and immediately access a variety of social media and websites has started blurring the line between everyone's public and private identity and placing more emphasis on always presenting an idealized form of yourself. The internet asks people to constantly perform, becoming actors like Mima does within the film.

Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse* views the internet's relation to identity in a different way. Unlike *Perfect Blue*'s fear of identity fracturing, *Pulse*'s anxiety rests in the idea that the internet, in tandem with late-stage capitalism in Japan, is flattening the human-experience leading to isolation, destruction, and a loss of one's identity. The plot of *Pulse* is very apocalyptic. Within the film the internet serves as the entrance point for ghosts to invade the physical world, luring people through doors outlined with red tape called forbidden rooms. When contact is made between people and ghosts the people lose the will to live, eventually dissolving into dust leaving behind human-shaped outlines eerily reminiscent of atomic bomb victims. The plot follows two

protagonists, Michi and Ryosuke, as they deal with the fallout of the ghosts' invasion as their friends and family are consumed by the vengeful ghosts.

A sense of loneliness permeates both how the film is shot and the protagonists' stories. It is rare for more than one character to be the subject of any given shot, and they are largely placed in the periphery of the shot as if to emphasize how alone they are. When characters are interacting on screen the dialogue is stilted and awkward, and their placement within the shot has them separated by the background or scenery to visually represent the disconnect between them. According to Colette Balmain's book *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, "The use of predominantly medium and long shots, and deep focus, throughout the narrative effectively mirrors the feeling of quiet despair that exists between the main characters" (Balmain 2008, 185). This isolation is present throughout the whole film as well, showing that Kurosawa believes the internet is only an exacerbating factor and not the cause of Japan's feeling of loneliness. It can be inferred that society's condition before the rise of the internet is to blame.

The loneliness of *Pulse* is reflected in their storyline too, Ryosuke's first encounter with the ghosts is when he sets up his computer to go online to find a semblance of companionship. His story involves another college student named Harue. Their relationship is very stilted, it's almost as if the characters have forgotten how to interact with each other in a normal manner. She only interacts with him because he was able to access the website that the ghosts were on, and he only interacts with her because he is desperate to find a relationship with anyone. Michi slowly loses all of her friends to suicide or ghosts until she is all alone. We see her futilely struggling to convince her friends not to fall into despair. When the two encounter each other later in the film after society has begun to crumble around them, Ryosuke can't even remember his name. In this sense, Ryosuke has lost his own identity and he inevitably ends up encountering

a ghost within one of the forbidden rooms. The ghosts' use of the internet points to a large fear that the internet is exacerbating the existing social conditions in Japan. According to Iles, *Pulse* "reflect[s] upon the acute alienation many experience living in crowded, late-industrial urban settings marked by the presence of emerging communication technologies in all of their copious manifestations" (Iles 2008, 165) In this way, *Pulse* presents the internet as just another way for existential hopelessness to seep into the lives of those living in Japan's urbanized late-stage capitalist society of the early 21st century.

In contrast to *Perfect Blue* and *Pulse*, *Noriko's Dinner Table* views the concept of identity as something rooted within your self-perception of the 'role' you play in the world and the relationships with people around you. A central question posed to characters throughout the film is "What is your relationship with yourself", and thematically the film relies on the idea of familial relationships in conjunction with the idea of 'self'. Separated into 5 chapters, *Noriko's Dinner Table* tells the story of Noriko and her family. The film follows Noriko and her sister Yuka as they run away to Tokyo to join an organization that exists to send their members to homes of lonely people where they roleplay how a family would act. Noriko is first exposed to Kumiko, the leader of the organization, through the message board on the website 'www.haikyo.com'. When the two sisters join Kumiko's organization, they shed their old names and identities becoming Mitsuko and Yoko. The film's climax involves their father Tetsuzo tracking down his daughters through the organization's services in order to confront Kumiko, but he is swept up into the fantasy family situation he has created. The first four chapters of the film are each named after Noriko, Yuka, Kumiko, and Tetsuzo. Within these chapters the narration is based on the internal monologue of said characters. The shifting perspectives gives us insight into how the characters view themselves and highlights how artifice lies at the heart of all the

relationships in the film. Noriko and Yuka forsake their identities and run away from home in order to escape their unhappy home lives but end up involved in an organization that only exists to provide people an artifice that is essentially the same fake familial relationships they tried to escape from. The film blames both a generational gap which prevents communication between Noriko and her parents as well as a society that would allow an organization that provides fake relationships to rise in prominence through the internet. *Noriko's Dinner Table* presents the idea of identity as something that is heavily influence by the social factors surrounding you, but self-actualization requires a true understanding of yourself.

Though films such as *Perfect Blue*, *Pulse*, and *Noriko's Dinner Table* all have something to say about the relationship between the internet and identity, all of these films have different interpretations regarding the impact of how new social technology has affected the idea of identity. But the one thing these films do have in common is their endings all contain a sense of acceptance in finding a new identity. The horror found in these films is rooted deeply within the question of "Who am I?" The ambiguity of this question regarding social roles, relationships, and identity is found within all of these films. So, it is interesting when all of these films have a protagonist reaffirm who they are and what they want after experiencing the events of the film. In *Perfect Blue*, after the events of the film when Mima leaves the facility where Rumi is kept, she looks into her rearview mirror and confidently says she is the real version of herself. In *Pulse*, Michi starts and ends the film by saying that she has finally found happiness because she has a strong sense of who she is and what she wants, a stark contrast from the rest of the population within the film. In *Noriko's Dinner Table*, Noriko ends the film by deciding to discard her identity as Mitsuko and her ties to 'www.haikyo.com'. She returns to her identity as

Noriko, completing her journey of realizing that happiness can only come from genuine human connection.

Horror films typically tend to prop up the status quo. Since their subject matter is largely based on a fear of what has the capacity to change the status quo, horror films will thematically vanquish the threat to the status quo and return the characters back to the safety of what is known. This is why horror media tends to be more conservative, idealizing tradition and forsaking anything that threatens to change society. *Perfect Blue*, *Pulse*, and *Noriko's Dinner Table* are exceptions to this rule, their protagonists end up forging new, concrete identities to match the world that has changed around them. The threat to the way society functions has cemented itself within the world of these movies, yet these protagonists have still found a new status quo and their own identities. This is why Japanese horror films from the late 20th and early 21st centuries focused on the internet do more than just reflect the fears of a society reckoning with the change that the internet and other social technology might bring. For the sake of the audience, these films also positively reframe the idea of changing technology and changing identity. According to Sarah Henry in her graduate thesis, cinema has the “potential [to act as a] catharsis for a society enduring deep and lasting change rather than mere entertainment and escapism” (Henry 2020, 38).

These films prove that horror as a genre has the capacity to crystalize the fears felt by a society facing immense change and show the audience that the societal change won't break them, even when tackling nebulous concepts like identity and relationships. In order to make this work, films need to initially reflect the current society and its fears before presenting its catharsis. In order to reflect Japanese society at the time these films were made, all of these films feature young adults and teenagers in urban environments dealing with the current society before

thrusting them into horrific scenarios where they grow and learn. In *Noriko's Dinner Table*, haunting questions such as “What is your relationship with yourself?” are posed to both the characters within the film and the audience, and by the end of the film the characters prove that the audience too can find a place within a strange new society.

In conclusion, Japanese horror films dealing with topics such as social change and technological change rely heavily on reflecting societal fears regarding identity, but in contrast to conventional horror media these films recontextualize those fears into a positive message for the audience. Films such as *Perfect Blue*, *Pulse*, and *Noriko's Dinner Table* prove that horror films have the capacity to simultaneously echo the anxieties of a populous grappling with an identity crisis during an emergence of new social technology while also promoting the idea that self-actualization is still possible in spite of the current state of society.

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