humanities

IMPACT FACTOR 0.3

CITESCORE 0.5

Article

Modern Anxieties and Traditional Influence in Horror Anime

Anik Sarkar

Special Issue

Once upon a Time the Horror Genre—a Quest to Give the “Nonsense” a Meaning

Edited by

Dr. Carolina Scaglioso and Dr. Elena Casalini

MDPI

https://doi.org/10.3390/h12050118

humanities

MDPI

Article

Modern Anxieties and Traditional Influence in Horror Anime

Anik Sarkar

Department of English, Salesian College Siliguri, Siliguri 734004, India; aniksarkar.official@gmail.com

Abstract: Japan has a longstanding tradition of horror narratives that feature a variety of macabre embodiments. They draw upon ancient folklore, thereby providing a unique perspective on spirits specific to Japanese culture. The influence of these countless supernatural beings from Japanese mythology and folklore has molded many incarnations seen in popular culture, which have been commonly deemed "strange" and "weird". This study seeks to demystify the ambiguity and "strangeness" surrounding three Japanese anime series, *Another*, *Yamishibai*, and *Mononoke*. It attempts to analyze how each of these anime employs folklore and traditional art-styles to portray a modern society plagued with sociocultural complications.

Keywords: anime; *Yūrei*; uncanny; tradition; anxiety

1. Introduction

"J-horror", a term associated with the consumption of contemporary horror films originating from Japan, has become immensely popular. Japan has a longstanding tradition of horror narratives that feature a variety of macabre embodiments, including demons, cursed objects, vengeful spirits, and peculiar beasts. These narratives draw upon ancient folklore that are steeped in faith and worship, thereby providing a unique perspective on spirits that are specific to Japanese culture. While contemporary J-horror has also been influenced by western horror, it is crucial to recognize the distinctiveness of Japanese horror and its roots in traditional beliefs. In the Shinto religion, there is a belief in the presence of *Kami* (translated as both God and Spirit) which manifest in the real world—in locations, living beings, as well as in objects. *Kami* is also associated with guardian spirits, who are in charge of protecting a place (Picken 2016). The spirits of the deceased that receive a proper ritual are believed to protect the living from harm, whereas those that face injustice or undergo unfulfilled death rites may turn into *Yūrei*. In his book, Zack Davisson notes that, "*Yūrei* are also one of the primary elements of Japanese storytelling. Death and the dead are as essential to Japanese storytelling as love and marriage are to Western traditions; perhaps even more so" (Davisson 2015). Though *Yūrei* are typically more common in ghost stories as avenging figures, another term for supernatural force commonly found in these stories is *Yōkai*. These are monsters as well as lesser Gods of the natural world found in Japanese mythology and folklore and are also said to be "personifications of phenomena themselves", that are an attempt "to put names and faces to inexplicable happenings", depictions of which can be found in household decorations (Yoda et al. 2012).

Earlier artistic pieces, particularly those from the late Heian era, exhibited significant characteristics of the developing ghost iconography, which suggests that the Japanese in the past tended to view ghosts as indistinguishable from real men and women rather than the stunningly identifiable icons encountered in popular horror media (Sumpter 2006, p. 10). The representations of ghosts in paintings in the Edo period were more widespread, and they were typically depicted without feet. Being a pictorial depiction, this also helped the viewers distinguish between ghosts and the living (Kajiya 2001). In the research article "Reimagining the Imagined: Depictions of Dreams and Ghosts in the Early Edo Period" Kenji Kajia explains the distinctions between ghosts and demons (*Yōkai*):

check for updates

Citation: Sarkar, Anik. 2023. Modern Anxieties and Traditional Influence in Horror Anime. *Humanities* 12: 118. https://doi.org/10.3390/h12050118

Received: 6 September 2023
Revised: 7 October 2023
Accepted: 11 October 2023
Published: 13 October 2023

Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

> The literary scholar Suwa Haruo defines ghosts as the spirit of dead persons in the Other World (*takai*), appearing in the shape they had in life. Ghosts are distinguished from demons (*yokai*), who are living creatures of nonhuman shape residing in Different Worlds (*ikai*), mostly areas peripheral to the residential spaces of human beings. And this distinction between ghosts and demons hinges on whether they have a human form. (Kajiya 2001, p. 98)

However, many terms that point to the supernatural and the unexplainable have been variably and interchangeably used. "*Mononoke*" meaning supernatural spirit, usually refers to beings with evil intent and is also associated with *Yōkai*. "*Mononoke*", in ancient times, was used in a broader sense to refer to things that could not be naturally explained. *Yōkai* on the other hand, had gained popularity as a term and had been widely used in later periods. As Michael Dylan Foster explains, in the Edo period there were two approaches to the representation of *Yōkai* which finds an existing resonance even today. One is what he calls "encyclopedic" and the other being "playfulness", as in "a kind of ludic sensibility" (Foster n.d.). Other sub-categories of *Yōkai* include *Oni*, which are close to what could be associated with ogre-like demons in Anglophone cultures, and *Bakemono*, which are shape-shifting demons. *Ayakashi* is another sub-category of demons, or *Yōkai*, that appear above the surface of water.

These ghostly icons and their accompanying figurations have been represented variously in contemporary anime, or in another sense, the influence of these numerous supernatural entities from Japanese folklore and cultural imaginary have shaped many embodiments that can be witnessed in anime, and which have been frequently referred to as "strange", "weird", or "bizarre".[1] In a research article, Natsuki Fukunaga notes that a survey participant, Emily, shared anecdotes about her apprehension regarding the lack of understanding from fellow students in her college dormitory (Fukunaga 2011, p. 216). In her reflective essay on the interview, Emily conveyed her discomfort and unease as she faced criticism and ridicule for her interest in "cartoons", anime, and fantasy novels, including manga, but she embraced the terms "weird" and "strange" in a positive manner, using them to describe anime shows, her anime friends, and herself, emphasizing the value of being "weird" within her anime community (Fukunaga 2011, p. 216). For Fukunaga, an investigation of anime fans reveals their awareness of the limited social acceptance of anime, as evidenced by their struggle to reconcile their enjoyment of anime and related activities with the perception of being "weird" by others, including family, friends, and educators (p. 218). Citing Napier, he acknowledges that anime fans may feel a greater sense of marginalization compared to fans of American cultural phenomena due to the unique nature of their interest (p. 218). Fukunaga's perspective introduces us to a general and overarching notion of weirdness associated with anime, one that does not particularly focus on horror. Nevertheless, there are additional references that connect weirdness, the supernatural, and horror within Japanese culture, narratives, and art-forms, including anime.

In his book *Pandemonium and Parade*: *Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, Michael Dylan Foster states that "such supernatural creatures, the weird and mysterious "things" that have been a part of Japanese culture (and perhaps every other culture) for as long as history has been recorded, are the subject of this study" (Foster 2009, p. 2). He further notes that, "In contemporary Japanese discourse, they are most often denoted by the word *Yōkai*" (Foster 2009, p. 2). It is important to note that rather than taking the typical dismissive approach to the weird that can result in "otherization", Foster provides a critical perspective in which he categorizes the weird and mysterious by emphasizing that the weird focuses on showcasing inexplicable yet tangible phenomena, sparking intellectual curiosity and prompting categorization, while the mysterious typically evokes emotional reactions like fear or wonder (Foster 2009, p. 25). Foster signifies that with each new generation, the landscape where *Yōkai* dwell changes, yet every evolving landscape offers a rich setting for the weird and mysterious to establish its unique emotional and aesthetic significance in the narrative of Japan's history, while concluding his book with discussions on films

and anime such as *Gakkō no kaidan*, Takahata Isao's *Heisei tanuki gassen Pompoko* and Miike Takashi's *Yōkai daisensō* (Foster 2009, p. 26). In *Asian Horror Encyclopedia* (Bush 2001) Laurence C. Bush claims that, "Asian weird literature often teaches the reader not to fear the supernatural or how to deal with it" while also noting that, "Anime is frequently a medium for horror, usually adapted from popular horror manga. This conveyance of horror is arguably the best known outside of Asia. See Akira, Bio Hunter, Darkside Blues, Demon City Shinjuku, Devil Hunter Yohko, Doomed Megalopolis, Judge, Ogre Slayer, Saran Eyes, Urotsukidoji, Wicked City" (Bush 2001). While it may be considered that anime has encompassed several other genres apart from horror and supernatural, a lot of horror anime had been circulated and consumed in the West at the end of the 20th century, as also depicted in Bush's claim. On the other hand, Dagmar Van Engen in "Trans/Pacific Entanglements" claims weirdness as a prime factor in the popularization of anime in the West: "anime became popular and profitable in the West because of, not in spite of, its seedy underside of weird sex" (Engen 2023, p. 283). Despite the fact that the anime industry, numerous anime enthusiasts, and academic experts on anime invest considerable effort in distancing themselves from adult-oriented anime, it is a reaction that aligns with the prevailing tone of North American anime reception, where the horror porn subgenre is frequently sensationalized, leading to broad assumptions about Japanese culture and stereotypes concerning Asian misogyny (Engen 2023, p. 284). Hence, through these sources we see how weirdness, horror, and supernatural elements are interlinked with the initial consumption and reception of anime in the West.

As Foster states, "by concentrating on the very things considered weird and mysterious, I hope the history of sensitivities I chart will also shed light on what is considered normal and explainable" (Foster 2009, p. 28), likewise, this paper seeks to analyze three Japanese anime shows, *Another*, *Yamishibai* and *Mononoke* in an attempt to dispel a form of uncritical weirdness, obscurity, and "strangeness" surrounding them. It attempts to reveal how each of these anime uses traditional folklore and art styles to represent modern anxieties through macabre and sinister embodiments in a neoliberal Japanese society. For the media and culture expert, Jason Wallin, "Horror is all about monsters, and those monsters are often the embodiment of social anxiety" (Barnes 2017). Likewise, anxieties analyzed in horror anime could be contextualized in the following three categories: social, sociocultural, and sociopolitical.

2. Anime, Modern Anxieties, and the Ghost Story

The identification of anime with "strangeness" may come primarily from two reasons. The first reason being an "otherization" of Eastern cultures, and particularly, Japanese art forms. If perceived through the theory of Edward Said, this otherization is connoted as Orientalism, wherein "cultural myth had been articulated through metaphors which characterize the East in ways which emphasize its strangeness and otherness" (Rosen 2000). Referring to Pointon, Engen states that Orientalism undeniably influences how Japanese anime is perceived in America, often portraying it as hypersexual and violent, which in turn leads to familiar concerns about such media negatively impacting young white individuals (Engen 2023, p. 284; Pointon 1997, p. 44). The second reason could stem from missing the link between Japanese traditional art forms, steeped in the pictorial depictions of spirits and their widespread influence over culture across ages, which also encompasses contemporary art forms across various mediums. Anime as a popular medium of cultural expression in Japan has incisively used traditional folklore and stylistic influences from medieval spectrality, to represent the modern anxieties that have developed in a growing neoliberal economy. If cinema is steeped in realism, which is influenced by the sociocultural milieu of its time, while also offering a critique of its past, future, society, and culture, anime as a medium of art and moving image approaches the horror genre in a distinctive way (Balik 2015):

> One of the many pleasures of watching anime derives from its style of representing movement and space, which often differs from the cinematic organization of

> the frame and movement. Importantly the medium of animation, or the imagery mediated through animation, can be thought through as a kind of haunting, because of the nature of movement and stillness in animation, and because there is no indexical link to the 'real'. (Ruddell 2013, p. 167)

The animatic form itself embodies a kind of "haunting", typically in the pre-CGI era. This slow, unnerving movement makes it useful in characterizing the dread, uncanny (*unheimlich*), and eerie in horror anime. The animations that emerged in the middle of the 20th century, although enjoyed by adults, had largely been targeted at children as denoted by Tracey L. Mitchell in ""Kids' Stuff": Television Cartoons as Mirrors of the American Mind" (Mitchell 1995). Anime, in contrast, encompasses numerous sub-genres, including but not limited to action, adventure, comedy, fantasy, hentai, history, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, and slice of life, thereby catering to a diverse audience that spans from young children to adults (Balik 2015). Through various lenses, sociocultural and technological challenges in Japan are frequently shown in the world of anime, such as in post-apocalyptic shows like *Akira*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Ghost in the Shell*. These anime investigate the effects of both technological and social progress on humanity and raise concerns involving technology's place in the Anthropocene. In other words, the genre captures the spirit of people's deepest anxieties by drawing on dystopian fears about biochemical warfare, plutocratic societies, and the perils of unbridled scientific advancements at a time of climate catastrophe. Likewise, as derivations of these dystopian impulses, the existential tropes and the burgeoning work culture associated with them make their way into contemporary horror anime.

There are numerous titles that deal with ghosts, demons, shapeshifters, and other supernatural beings which make their inclusion, classification, and sorting a difficult endeavor to undertake. Take for instance *Death Note* which features a *Shinigami* or "Death God" as one of its characters. Although an abundance of supernatural elements could be found, the anime is primarily a psychological thriller. In *Serial Experiments Lain*, the eponymous character Lain cannot be categorized as a human. Lain's quest for her identity unveils multiple paradigms of classifications ranging from a software, a posthuman, a God and even a "cyberghost". From all these baffling categorizations what strongly asserts a possibility is the fact that Lain is a "spectral" figure both on the internet-like space called "Wired" as well as in the real world. Particularly in the last episode, Lain returns as a forgotten entity after removing her memory from the collective consciousness of the world—it truly makes her a thing from the past, a being no longer remembered. Although, Lain has a "spectral" presence, it does not fulfil much of the criterion typically associated with a ghost story. Likewise, this paper attempts to discuss a handful of anime which have innovatively depicted modern anxieties in ghost stories and whose plots are significantly ghost-oriented.

The "ghost story" is understood as a narrative "designed to provoke dread and unease in its readers by bringing about a crisis in which fictional characters are confronted terrifyingly by spirits of the returning dead" (Baldick 2008). *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* designates "ghost stories" to showcase "the power of the dead to return to the world of the living" where "ghosts take many forms" and they can be "insubstantial wraiths, or corporeal creatures with the ability to inflict physical harm" (Birch and Hooper 2013). It further states that "in the literary ghost story, the ghost is central, and the arousal of fear is the story's primary purpose" (Birch and Hooper 2013). Considering the anime that are being explored in this paper, *Yamishibai* certainly fulfils the criterion of the "ghost story" narrative stated above, while *Another* cleverly subverts conventional tropes. However, both of these anime provoke dread and unease and, as stated later on, the presence of spirits are central in these anime while they accomplish the arousal of fear as the primary intent of the story. In case of *Mononoke*, which provokes the feeling of uncanniness, the arousal of fear may not be the central intent of the story but used only as a secondary effect. *Mononoke* unfolds as a cryptic supernatural mystery, seeking to confront the viewers

with the socio-cultural and political conditioning behind the existence of spectrality. In that manner, it widens the popular discourse on what ghost stories typically are.

3. Sociocultural Anxieties in *Yamishibai*

The long-running *Yamishibai* (2013-) with 10 seasons, is rather short on its runtime per episode—each one is of four and a half minutes. This format suits an earlier tradition of street play in the 20th century called *kamishibai*, which translates to "paper drama". Although this particular street play had a precursor in the form of 18th century *utsushi-e* or lantern shows, Tara McGowan states that 20th century *kamishibai* narrators replicated audio–visual techniques from early Japanese films as they operated their illustrated cards within a compact wooden platform, akin to how earlier-era *kabuki* performances condensed larger screen narratives into miniature versions (Tara McGowan n.d.). She also claims that "Both stylistically and in terms of subject matter, the street-performance kamishibai of this period can be dubbed the true predecessor of present-day animé, where virtuous adolescent heroes typically are called upon to save the world from adult corruption" (McGowan n.d.). Wasylak, on the other hand explicates how speed alterations in anime disorients our sense of motion and duration, by stating that, "the animetic and the cinematic in anime challenge our everyday perceptions of time and movement, adjusting the character's animation and image composition to different speeds of becoming in order to create a distinctive experience of motion" (Wasylak 2010). *Yamishibai* in this regard is differently orientated than typical anime and uses characters that appear to be sketched on paper and moved by hand, almost puppet-like, which makes the overall atmosphere still and slow-moving, unlike the usually speedy movement-oriented animation one is used to; "anime is a particularly dynamic medium; full of energy, pacey action, and spectacle" (Ruddell 2013). Under these contexts, *Yamishibai* (translated as theatre of darkness) incorporates the traditional *kamishibai* paper drama effect that imparts slow, unnerving sensations to mirror modern sociocultural anxieties.

Unlike the anime, *Another*, many episodes of *Yamishibai* do not contextualize the emergence of ghosts, and neither do some of them provide any closure. Instead, a cursory whiz-bang shock is imparted in each episode, with many openings that instigate investigations into the sociocultural and domestic anxieties that manifest in the form of dark and sinister environments. For instance, as per episode two, titled *Banzai*, where three men in a hospital shun an injured tourist who fell from a cliff, it does not offer explanations, nor does it carry a moral or redemptive undercurrent. When the tourist departs from the hospital, the three men are seen to be cheering him with a greeting he thought to be "*banzai*" meaning "long live!". Courtesy of his driver, he comes to know that the ritual they were performing was that of "*zanbai*" which would have a reverse effect. The episode does not reveal the guilt of the tourist nor the premise of why such a curse must exist. It ends with a truck speeding towards them. In the article, *The Stranger as God: The Place of the Outsider in Japanese Folk Religion*, Yoshida notes that, "The attribution of mystical evil qualities to newcomers may be a reflection of the Japanese villagers' traditional fears and suspicions of outsiders and stranger" (Yoshida 1981). Although the Japanese are known for their hospitality to foreigners, there is a concurrent perception of Japanese society as also closed to outsiders, stemming from historical and contemporary rural Japanese notions of the "stranger" creating an inherent ambiguity in their attitude towards foreigners and strangers (Yoshida 1981, p. 87). Yoshida also states that, "In many northeastern villages strangers and outsiders are not permitted to settle without establishing fictive kinship relations with one of the prominent families of the village" (Yoshida 1981). This trope around the otherization of the stranger can be seen recurringly in *Another*, and in few other horror shows, including *Higurashi When they Cry* and the Japanese horror film, *The Wailing*.

Another frequently discussed sociocultural issue in Japan is the *karoshi* culture, which is translated as "overwork death". In a discussion on work culture-based anxieties and the growing problem of "suicide by overwork", Yuko Kawanishi states that, "the tide of globalization has put great pressure on Japanese businesses to cut labor costs to compete

with growing economies such as China and other parts of Asia" (Kawanishi 2008, p. 69). Service overtime, often unrecorded and unpaid, represents the prevalent unspoken agreements within many Japanese workplaces constituting hidden working hours (Kawanishi 2008, p. 68). Additionally, a critical feature of the Japanese work environment is an individual's "positive cooperative mindset", thoughtfulness towards coworkers, and genuine eagerness to assist and collaborate with others (Kawanishi 2008). A haunted elevator is the focus in episode five titled *The Next Floor*, where a family of three, a father, son, and mother, are shopping for the son's birthday present. Like episode six, this points to the workaholic culture in Japan and the sociocultural issues generated in its wake. Amidst the tumultuous condition of the "*karoshi* culture", a father is summoned to his duty with immediacy. The initial scene depicts his son's tearful distress, but the father pacifies him by promising that his mother will procure his birthday present. Yet, as he steps into the elevator, his mind is consumed by ruminations on the mother's disposition.

The elevator operator behaves peculiarly, responding with a "certainly" to the father's silent plea for solitude. It mysteriously ascends to a non-existent level, where the father is startled by a ghostly apparition on floor B13. He approaches the lift operator, only to realize she is a mannequin as the doors close barely in time, leaving him perplexed. He is relieved to depart on what appears to be his original level, when he finds that the mall is deserted, as the mannequin-lady eventually reverts to her "human" form, reminding him of his previous casual longing for solitude. This episode portrays a complete narrative arc, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The father, caught in his own isolation and trapped in the confines of the elevator, bears the weight of responsibility for his condition. The episode reflects Japan's overwork epidemic, where the combination of a labor shortage and declining productivity placed immense pressure on the remaining workers, resulting in extended work hours, heavy workloads, and heightened social stressors, with up to 12% of the population working 60 h or more per week by 2004 (Dickinson 2023).

In episode six titled "The Overhead Rack", Japan's workaholism is explicitly portrayed through a slimy creature that appears to an office worker returning on the train. This strange creature appears at first as an illusion, which the worker interprets as "seeing things" as a result of working hard throughout the day: "I'm seeing this because I'm working too much" (*Yamishibai* Ep.6). Gradually as the episode progresses, the creature develops an eye that scans him closely, and reveals a frightening set of dentures, inching closer to the man who at first decides to negate its hallucinatory presence through a self-consolation: "I'll take paid leave! Screw work!" (*Yamishibai* Ep.6). As it does not seem to work, he then repeatedly denies its existence in his mind, and finally gives up: "This isn't a hallucination after all" (*Yamishibai* Ep.6). The grotesque creature, appearing as the insides of a body, immediately recalls to mind Kristeva's use of the term "abjection"[2], the resurfacing of a buried consciousness. Like a signification of the "inside-out", this encounter can be read as the man consumed by his own wretched and overworked body, drained and overwhelmed by the burgeoning work schedule, as the creature says, "You'll feel much better soon", (*Yamishibai* Ep.6) while its rapidly growing body appears to crush him.

As evident from the discussion, the slow, unnerving animatic-like "form" used in *Yamishibai* aligns with the traditional theatre of Japan, called *Kamishibai* which was prevalent in the post-war period, before the advent of the television. Showcasing reinterpretations of folktales and urban legends, *Yamishibai* captures many facets of modern anxieties that take a toll on human life, giving them macabre embodiments.

4. Social Anxieties in *Another*

A modern rendition of horror in anime is illustrated with the 2012 series *Another*. The speed and style of animation used in *Another*, or the manner in which the anime unfolds for the viewers is strikingly different from *Yamishibai.* In comparison, *Another* is fast-paced, violent, longer in duration, and follows an episodic sequence. The psychotic paranoia in *Another*, coupled with hack-and-slash action that unfolds in the final episodes are also reminiscent of Hollywood-style slashers. The death scenes with elevator malfunctions and

objects/vehicles that abruptly move echo the "fateful" mechanics in the *Final Destination* franchise. In this anime, fear and anxiety break out in society after a series of mysterious deaths occur at a school. It is the story of Sakakibara and his batchmates of Class 3, who have been fated to a gruesome curse. It is not, however, the usual form of a curse that results from the mishandling of an ill-fated object or through an act of trespassing, but an overtly mysterious one whose secrets are forgotten from memory.

In the continuous writing and re-writing of both collective and personal memory, a chaotic atmosphere unleashes in the class that limits how information is shared with Sakakibara. In the first few episodes, the mystery is deepened through the odd behavior, and collective social anxiety of his classmates who refuse to let out the secret that their school harbors. *Another* combines tropes that belong to high school dramas with a supernatural twist, by invoking the element of *Yūrei* or the trapped soul horror. In the tradition of Japanese ghost stories, the term *Yūrei* encompasses various entities, including the onryō, or vengeful spirits, whose tales have been recorded as early as eighth century (O'Sullivan 2020). *Goryo Shinko*, essentially, is the process of posthumously elevating individuals in court rank and title, followed by their enshrinement as *Kami* in Shinto shrines, which, according to belief, pacifies their vengeful spirits and turns them from destroyers into guardians of the afterlife (Davisson 2011). Similarly, in the anime, one suggestion to lift the curse was to visit the *Yomiyama* Shrine[3] and offer prayers. As the tensions deepen in the anime, social struggles such as the "otherization" of the stranger and the deviant come to the forefront through the pervasive persecution of both Sakakibara and Misaki—who wears an eye patch that covers a fake eye.

The anime subverts the traditional ghost story in different ways. Firstly, there is less of a spectral, bodily presence of ghosts. Even during the climax, when the ghost is revealed, there is nothing sinister or horrific in its presence. Unlike the madness and violent frenzy that grips the class, the ghost is depicted as a typical human figure in a ghost story, trapped, helpless, ignorant, and under mercy. The eerie and frightening sequences are developed through violent deaths and gore. The anime also flashes dolls randomly that do well to evoke the spookiness of pop-horror associated with them, but there is nothing evil that comes into being. Rather, the dolls signify the familial ties that the character Misaki shares with her sister and her past. In a review of *Another*, Abdul Rahman Shah contends that the anime can also be understood through the theory of a "self-fulfilling prophecy" wherein a false prophesy may come true if certain people act and behave under the influence of that prediction (Shah 2015). Cases of mass hysteria may occur in different sociocultural contexts, and in this perspective the paranoia and psychosis that pervasively unfolds in the anime could point to how delusions can collectively affect a certain group of individuals in a close-knit community. Citing examples of a heart attack, lift accident, and an internal brain damage, Shah contends that the deaths of the students were self-induced since they collectively agreed that the curse was real (Shah 2015).

Another breaks the conventional stereotypes and common anticipations that are expected in ghost stories by both naturalizing the supernatural and supernaturalizing the natural. It also incorporates traditional folktale elements such as *Yūrei*, conjoined dolls, and the *Yomiyama* Shrine to narrate a complex tale featuring collective amnesia and social anxieties.

5. Cultural and Sociopolitical Anxieties in *Mononoke*

Often compared to *Mushi-Shi* (2005) for being thematically similar, the 2007 anime *Mononoke* undertook unique aesthetic designs, mingling the traditional theatrical style called *kabuki*, *ukiyo-e* art, and references to popular horror franchises like *Saw* (Astra 2017). *Ukiyo-e* (translated as pictures of the floating world) developed during the Edo period, is associated with Japanese woodblock painting and print. David Bell states that an elusive aspect of *ukiyo-e*'s visual language involves nurturing a penchant for decadence, which can be broadly defined as an appreciation for, or fixation on, decline stemming from social or cultural discord, an inclination toward eroticism, exemplified by a morbid fascination with

the hedonistic and self-indulgent realm of pleasure, all while embodying a tension between artifice and nature, refinement and deterioration (Bell 2004, p. 10). This art style complements the unconventional, postmodern approach that *Mononoke* undertakes to represent both beauty and sociopolitical "decadence"—the oscillatory tensions that Bell locates in his discussion on *ukiyo-e*.

As Rajyashree Pandey posits, Japan satisfies many conditions of the postmodern world—since contemporary culture is characterized by the complete commodification of cultural products, the blurring of boundaries between high and low forms of culture, the rise of shallow, hybrid forms lacking in historical and narrative depth, the fragmentation and destabilization of the subject through information overload, and the breakdown of traditional structures (Pandey 2008). Pandey refers to Isolde Standish's idea in the context of *Akira*, wherein cities like Tokyo and New York cannot be differentiated, signifying an effacement of time and culture (Pandey 2008). As the distinctions between the high and low culture is erased, and history, modernity and myth come together, many representations of the postmodern condition also reside in pastiche, with a mishmash of aesthetic styles, repetition of tropes, and a nostalgia for a lost time.

Although *Mononoke* is a rich repository of traditional Japanese art, aesthetics, and storytelling, there exists an absurd leap that the anime takes in case of both, art style and historical timeline—the protagonist appears in feudal Japan and later in a train—the singular authority of history and truth is both challenged and subverted, which demonstrates how many facets of postmodernity can be also be located in the creative representation of ghost stories and folklore in the globalized East. The anime also projects the consequences of human action in fostering collective planetary suffering—deeds that affect both humans and nonhumans. In an era which was critical of anthropocentrism, *Mononoke* decenters the human subject as being ethical, rational, objective, and reasonable through its experimental aesthetic style that sets to capture unreason, fantasy, evil, and the impossible. Regarded as a spin-off of another horror show called *Ayakashi*, the episodes are based largely in the feudal period, with five arcs barring the final three episodes which takes place closer to the 20th century. Each arc revolves around a major "*Mononoke*" or *Yōkai* that needs to be vanquished by a mysterious medicine seller. The *Mononoke* hunter, albeit medicine seller also has an alternate persona revealed when his sword attains the following three fulfilments that are required to defeat the spirit: *Katachi* (translated as shape/form), *Makoto* (translated as truth), and *Kotowari* (translated as reason/regret).

As the medicine seller explains, a *Mononoke* is born out of people's negativity. When an *Ayakashi* clings onto a person's thoughts and feelings, its form is born out of people's intertwined fates. Like a psychoanalyst, the medicine seller probes into the reason and truth of the "*Mononoke*", two facets that are deemed as state of mind and state of physicality. Buried within are social problems that the characters underwent themselves or were subjected to through their course of life. *Mononoke* regards the spirits that haunt to be an embodiment of regret and guilt that are repressed deep within the catacombs of the human psyche. These repressions take a corrosive form that unsettles the self and the other(s) working within the premises of both, the outside—the socio-political environment, as well as the inside—the subjective experience of characters. The five arcs in the anime are based on different forms of spirits, but the most notable ones are *Zashiki-warashi*, *Umibōzu*, *Noppera-bō*, *Nue*, and *Bakeneko*.

The anime opens with the arc called *Zashiki-warashi*, based on Japanese mythological spirits, which Irene H. Lin categorizes as one of the "protective deities of the house or the boundary that manifested in the form of a child" (Lin 2014). The entire arc takes place at an inn where the medicine seller and a pregnant lady are resting for the night. The uncanny feeling is levied through the design and architecture of the anime, with patterns that weave in and out, objects that are ripe with symbols, rooms with changing appearances, multiple opening and closing of doors, and apparitions that shapeshift and convene in various colors.

In addition to the inherent difficulties of survival, the people of feudal Japan faced a strict taxation system, and the term *mabiki* which originally denoted the thinning of surplus plants in a rice field, was used to describe the practice of selectively reducing their excess children due to limited resources (Burch 1955, p. 140). Following the historical context, this episode may reflect the fairly recent *Mizuko kuyō* practice which became prominently visible in Japan from 1970 onward. As Elizabeth G. Harrison and Igeta Midori explain, the recent Japanese custom of *Mizuko kuyō* involves memorial services for the deceased, especially aborted and miscarried children, where grieving individuals pay for a religious ceremony aimed at the welfare of the departed child in the afterlife (Harrison and Midori 1995, p. 67). In the first episode, the inn was supposedly a brothel that forced abortions, and the *Zashiki-warashi* are spirits of those children who were never born. The lady pregnant with a child invites the spirits to rest inside of her so that she can give birth, as the medicine seller senses the formation of a *Mononoke* (negative spirit) to have taken place where their fates[4] are intertwined. The tainted history of the characters invites a negative energy, birthing a *Mononoke* that begins to haunt the living and requires an exorcism. Rather than fulfilment of a last wish or satiation through an act of vengeance, here the realization of guilt purges the negative spirit by way of constant interrogation and surrender.

In the final arc, that takes place in the Taishō era, the medicine seller is seen on a train in an urban town. The train is haunted by a *Yōkai* called *Bakeneko* (a supernatural cat), and its passengers, who share connections with the ghost's coming into being, have been jostled together in the same compartment. The arc focuses on the prevalent corruption in modern societies, the media's involvement in suppressing the events, and, in turn, how the paid media manipulates the crime narrative to support the politically connected perpetrators. In his usual investigative demeanor, the medicine seller unearths the events through the confessions of all passengers, which gradually reveals the murder of a young journalist, leading to the formation of the spirit. Under the running train, both human and animal life come under duress to point at how the unbridled technological ramifications have the capacity to sabotage modern life. In the large time frame that *Mononoke* is based on, it uniquely blends elements from both age-old tradition and contemporary pop-culture to illuminate a universal human nature over the ages that underwent little to exorcise corruption, greed, envy, insensitivity, opportunism, egotism, and their resultant specters that continue to haunt the modern world.

6. Conclusions

The paper attempted to address the connection between traditional Japanese art forms deeply rooted in the representation of spirits through pictorial depictions and their influence in popular horror anime. In the context of the anime analyzed in this paper, *Another* subverts the conventional ghost story while *Yamishibai* adheres to its parameters. These series effectively create sensations of uneasiness and disquiet through the presence of uncanny spirits that play prominent thematic roles, all with the primary goal of instilling fright in the spectator. As the paper demonstrated, each of these anime uses traditional folklore and art styles to represent sociocultural anxieties, seen in the wake of modern phenomena, such as *Mizuko kuyō*, *karoshi* culture, and mass hysteria, through the depiction of macabre embodiments. *Mononoke*, however, evokes an unnerving feeling of the uncanny, deviating from its narrative objective. Rather than emphasizing dread, *Mononoke* unfolds as a multilayered supernatural conundrum with the overriding goal of persuading viewers to address the complex sociocultural and political circumstances that underpin the spectrality.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] On the internet, anime has a reputation for being "weird". Here are some examples: A post on YouGoJapan bears the title "Why Is Anime So Weird? (And Why That's a Good Thing)" Link: https://yougojapan.com/why-is-anime-so-weird/#:~:text=Anime%20often%20features%20character%20archetypes,source%20of%20fascination%20and%20appeal (accessed on 3 September 2023). Another website, AnimeVania has a similarly titled article: "Why Is Anime So Weird?"; Link: https://animevania.com/why-is-anime-so-weird/ (accessed on 3 September 2023)

[2] Julia Kristeva explains abjection as the human reaction to a breakdown in meaning, often triggered by a sense of distaste or repulsion.

[3] Visit this link for a description of *Yomiyama* Shrine in *Another*, https://another.fandom.com/wiki/Yomiyama_Shrine (accessed on 3 September 2023).

[4] "Their" refers to the pregnant lady and the previously unborn children.

References

Astra, W. 2017. "Mononoke: Horror, Kabuki, and Ukiyo-e in Anime Format." Yatta-Tachi. Available online: https://yattatachi.com/tbt-mononoke (accessed on 6 September 2023).

Baldick, Chris. 2008. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Balik, Deniz. 2015. Spatial Encounters of Fantasy and Punishment in the Deadman Wonderland Anime. *Online Journal of Art and Design* 3: 33–47.

Barnes, Kateryna. 2017. Monsters in Modern Horror Culture Reflect Social Anxieties. Available online: https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2017/10/monsters-in-modern-horror-culture-reflect-social-anxieties.html (accessed on 30 October 2017).

Bell, David. 2004. Explaining Ukiyo-e. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Available online: http://Hdl.handle.net/10523/598 (accessed on 3 September 2023).

Birch, Dinah, and Katy Hooper. 2013. *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford: OUP Oxford.

Burch, Thomas K. 1955. Induced Abortion in Japan. *Eugenics Quarterly* 2: 140–51. [CrossRef]

Bush, Laurence C. 2001. *Asian Horror Encyclopedia: Asian Horror Culture in Literature, Manga and Folklore*. San Jose: Writers Club Press.

Davisson, Zack. 2011. Goryo Shinko—the Religion of Ghosts. 百物語怪談会 Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai. 百物語怪談会 Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai. Available online: https://hyakumonogatari.com/2011/06/22/goryo-shinko-%E2%80%93-the-religion-of-ghosts/ (accessed on 6 September 2023).

Davisson, Zack. 2015. *Yurei*. Seattle: Chin Music Press Inc.

Dickinson, Kevin. 2023. The World Must Learn from 'Karoshi,' Japan's Overwork Epidemic—Before It's Too Late. Big Think. Available online: https://bigthink.com/the-learning-curve/karoshi/ (accessed on 24 January 2023).

Engen, Van Dagmar. 2023. Trans/Pacific Entanglements Japanese Tentacle Porn in American Internet Culture. In *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*. Edited by Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzsche, Keren Omry and Wendy Gay Pearson. London: Routledge. [CrossRef]

Foster, Michael Dylan. 2009. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foster, Michael Dylan. n.d. About Japan: A Teacher's Resource | Yōkai: Fantastic Creatures of Japanese Folklore | Japan Society. Aboutjapan.japansociety.org. Available online: https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/yokai-fantastic-creatures-of-japanese-folklore (accessed on 14 June 2020).

Fukunaga, Natsuki. 2011. 'Those Anime Students': Foreign Language Literacy Development through Japanese Popular Culture. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 50: 206–22. [CrossRef]

Harrison, Elizabeth G., and Igeta Midori. 1995. Women's Responses to Child Loss in Japan: The Case of 'Mizuko Kuyō' [with Response]. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11: 67–100.

Kajiya, Kenji. 2001. Reimagining the Imagined: Depictions of Dreams and Ghosts in the Early Edo Period. *Impressions* 23: 86–107.

Kawanishi, Yuko. 2008. On Karo-Jisatsu (Suicide by Overwork): Why Do Japanese Workers Work Themselves to Death? *International Journal of Mental Health* 37: 61–74. [CrossRef]

Lin, Irene H. 2014. Third Series Number 6 (Fall 2004). Pacific World. Available online: https://pwj.shin-ibs.edu/third-series-number-6-fall-2004 (accessed on 10 October 2014).

McGowan, M. Tara. n.d. About Japan: A Teacher's Resource | the Many Faces of Kamishibai (Japanese Paper Theater): Past, Present, and Future | Japan Society. Aboutjapan.japansociety.org. Available online: https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/the-many-faces-of-kamishibai (accessed on 6 September 2023).

Mitchell, Tracey L. 1995. 'Kids' Stuff' [Microform]: Television Cartoons as Mirrors of the American Mind/Tracey L. Mitchell—Catalogue | National Library of Australia. Available online: https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/5586493 (accessed on 3 September 2023).

O'Sullivan, Dan. 2020. Japan's Onryō Spirits Inhabit a Purgatory of Revenge and Cosmic Rage. Atlas Obscura. Available online: https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/monster-mythology-onryo (accessed on 27 October 2020).

Pandey, Rajyashree. 2008. Medieval Genealogies of Manga and Anime Horror. In *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*. Edited by Mark W. MacWilliams. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
Picken, Stuart. 2016. Kami and Ancestors: Death in the Japanese Tradition (5/20). Available online: https://think.iafor.org/kami-ancestors-death-japanese-tradition/ (accessed on 6 September 2023).
Pointon, Susan. 1997. Transcultural Orgasm as Apocalypse: Urotsukidoji: The Legend of the Overfiend. *Wide Angle* 19: 41–63. [CrossRef]
Rosen, Steven L. 2000. JAPAN as OTHER: Orientalism and Cultural Conflict, Steven L. Rosen. Immi.se. Available online: https://immi.se/oldwebsite/nr4/rosen.htm (accessed on 6 September 2023).
Ruddell, Caroline. 2013. Cutting Edge: Violence and Body Horror in Anime. In *Controversial Images*. Edited by Feona Attwood, Vincent Campbell, I. Q. Hunter and Sharon Lockyer. London: Palgrave Macmillan. [CrossRef]
Shah, Abdul Rahman. 2015. [Review] Another (Anime). The Other Side of the Dice. Available online: https://theothersideofthedice.wordpress.com/2015/06/10/review-another-anime/ (accessed on 9 June 2015).
Sumpter, Sara. 2006. From Scrolls to Prints to Moving Pictures: Iconographic Ghost Imagery from Pre-Modern Japan to The Contemporary Horror Film. *Explorations: The Undergraduate Research Journal* 9: 10.
Wasylak, Katarzyna. 2010. Need for Speed: Anime, the Cinematic, and the Philosophical. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35: 427–34. [CrossRef]
Yoda, Hiroko, Matt Alt, and Shinkichi. 2012. *Yurei Attack!: The Japanese Ghost Survival Guide*. Tokyo: Rutland, VT Tuttle Pub.
Yoshida, Teigo. 1981. The Stranger as God: The Place of the Outsider in Japanese Folk Religion. *Ethnology* 20: 87. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.