



*Taking Something Normal and
Looking at It Backwards*

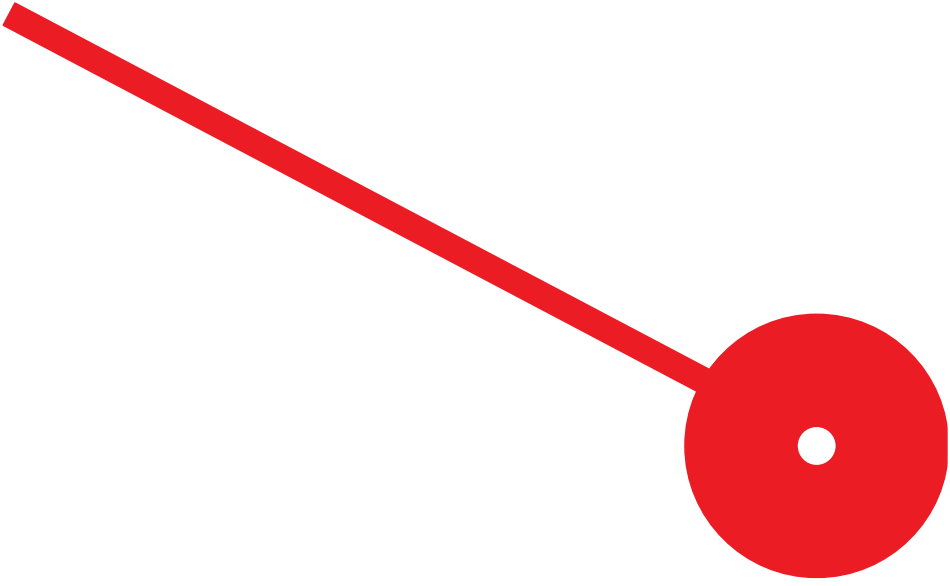
A Comparative Analysis of Horror in
Eastern and Western Cultures

Isabel Luís Machado Cardoso Ricardo

Final Version

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suggestions from the members of the jury)*

10/2019



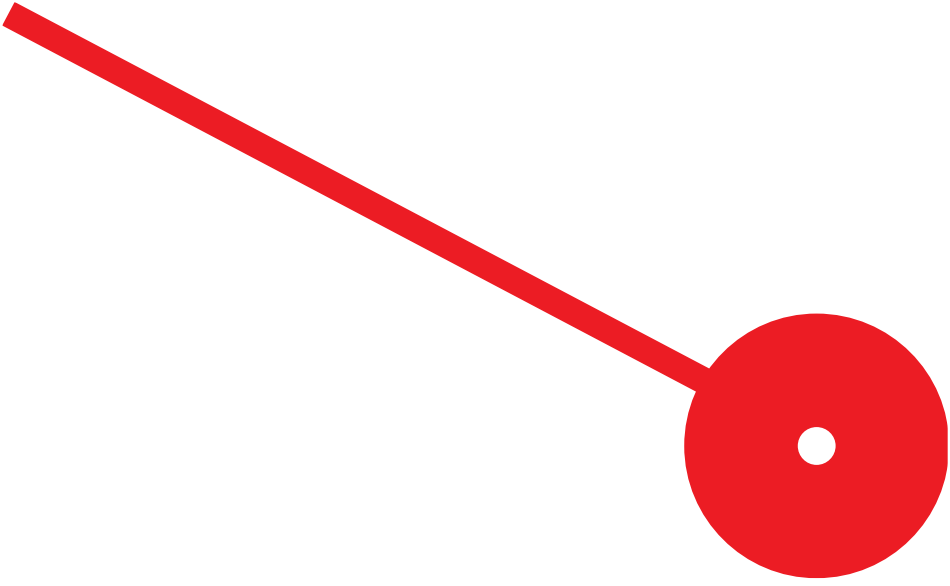


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Isabel Luís Machado Cardoso Ricardo

Dissertação de Mestrado apresentado ao Instituto Superior de
Contabilidade e Administração do Porto para a obtenção do grau de
Mestre em Tradução e Interpretação Especializadas, sob orientação
de Doutora Carina Cerqueira.



Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Doctor Carina Cerqueira for her wisdom and valuable advice, patience, and availability in guiding me while working on this dissertation. Its completion would not have been possible without her help and support.

I would also like to thank all my professors of the Masters in Specialized Translation and Interpreting for all the skills they have provided me with, which were necessary for the completion of this dissertation, as well as my classmates for their help and companionship.

I am also grateful to all the horror content creators from all over the world. The nightmares their works have brought me were a great inspiration in choosing the theme of my dissertation.

Finally, I also wish to thank my cat Chico for his unwavering companionship and emotional support. His playful antics have taught me the importance of maintaining an optimistic mindset, even when faced with frustration and adversity.

Resumo:

Esta dissertação irá focar-se na análise de duas obras de terror e o seu contexto cultural. O foco principal será a comparação de culturas orientais e ocidentais com especial ênfase nas diferenças entre cada cultura e como estas dão forma ao que é considerado assustador.

Com esta dissertação também procuro dar visibilidade a grandes obras de terror que considero subvalorizadas. Estas obras pouco convencionais que se situam fora do mainstream das duas culturas, no entanto espelham a versatilidade do género representativo, ao mesmo tempo que evidenciam a contextualização social e cultural. A opção pelo género da banda desenhada é ainda palco para a fuga à norma, a apresentação do terror, assim como a cultura do autor, os medos e ânsias promovidas pelo encontro extraordinário entre imagens e a palavra escrita – uma sinergia intercultural e representativa. A opção por um filme também irá permitir observar uma representação audiovisual da cultura ocidental, tendo em conta que os filmes de terror são um meio há muito usado para representar o espaço cultural e os medos e ansiedades da sociedade que os criou.

Para concluir, esta dissertação irá também abordar e analisar conceitos tradutivos, particularmente o conceito de tradução cultural.

Palavras chave: Terror, Japão, América, Cultura, Manga; Tradução Cultural

Abstract:

The dissertation will focus on the analysis of two works of horror and their cultural context. The main focus will be to compare eastern and western cultures with a special emphasis on the differences between each culture and how they shape what is considered scary.

With this dissertation I also seek to bring to light great works of horror that are often overlooked. These unconventional works that fall outside of the mainstream for both cultures nevertheless mirror the versatility of the representative genre, while at the same time make the social and cultural contextualization evident. The choice of a comic book genre is also a source for escaping the norms, the representation of horror, as well as the author's culture and the fears and anxieties brought up by the extraordinary encounter between images and the written word – an intercultural and representative synergy. The choice of a film will also allow for an audiovisual representation of a western culture, considering that horror films are a medium that has long been used to represent a cultural space, as well as the fears and anxieties of the society that creates them.

To conclude, this dissertation will also approach and analyze translation concepts, more specifically the concept of cultural translation.

Key words: Horror, Japan, America, Culture, Manga; Cultural Translation

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List of Abbreviations

EDs – Eating disorders;

AN – Anorexia nervosa.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will explore the cultural specificities of Western and Eastern works of horror and how, even horror that falls outside what is considered mainstream in a certain culture, will always be influenced by the culture of its creator. To achieve this, two works from a Japanese and an American creator will be used as case studies to examine the degree to which horror produced in a Japanese and American context are nationally-specific or if they can be easily translated and understood in other cultures.

Horror provides an interesting framing for a multicultural and cultural translation approach, considering that fear is such a universal emotion. The nature of a translator's work often requires the awareness of many cultural differences, and although the aim of many horror works might be universal, the resources used to achieve this end are very different and very specific according to different cultural contexts. As Danny Boey explains “[t]hese elements are mostly drawn from cultural artifacts such as literature and mythology, which are nationally-specific.”¹

Focusing on a cultural context, taking special attention to the particular interpretations and representations of horror in western and eastern scenarios, this dissertation will reflect on the following:

- a) What are the main characteristics of horror in Eastern and Western cultures?
- b) How has horror evolved in Eastern and Western cultures?
- c) Is it possible for works of horror created in the context of one culture to be perfectly understood by elements of different cultures?

In attempting to answer these questions, for each case study there will be a brief summary of the evolution of horror themes in each culture, as well as a brief presentation of the creator of each case study and elements of their life that might be relevant to the input of their work. The most prominent cultural aspects of each case study will also be analyzed in greater detail, as well as the creators' intentions in depicting those aspects of their own cultures. The fact that horror is a subjective experience should, however, always be kept in mind, as even members of a culture in which a work of horror was created might not all react to it in the same way.

The methodology used in this dissertation will take a cultural studies approach to the relationship between works of horror and the cultural identity of their creators. It mostly

¹ Danny Boey (2012), “Introduction”, in *The National Specificities of Horror Sources in Asian Horror Cinema*, Creative Industries Faculty, p. 2.

consisted of research on common horror tropes for eastern and western horror, theoretical concepts often used in the study of horror works, as well as information on the authors, their body of work, and, as mentioned previously, information about their personal lives that might be pertinent to the way they represent aspects of their own cultures. Research was also made on translation concepts, more specifically cultural translation, that will be relevant to the analysis and comparison of both case studies. The decision for this methodology was based on the concept of cultural studies and how they can be connected to translation studies

The research for this dissertation uses case studies as the primary approach to study the cultural specificities that inspired their creators, whether they were aware of this inspiration or not. The use of case studies will help to more clearly understand shared cultural experiences. As explained by Danny Boey, in a quote that refers more specifically to film, but that can be applied to all forms of fiction:

“film is a cultural construct within which the society’s values, practices and experiences are depicted or embedded. Through film, the existence of social groups is revealed; this existence includes their formation, maintenance, and definition against external groups.”²

Many academic works were also included in the methodology for this dissertation, both in the form of texts and of videos. As Boey explains, “textual analysis strives to identify idiosyncrasies, rather than making generalizations about the social phenomena. Its exploratory nature enables the researcher to be self-reflexive, hence making it ideal for the critical evaluation of cultural texts.”³ With this approach it can be accepted that there can be multiple readings of a text that can be accurate, even considering that not all of them can be acceptable.

This dissertation will also occasionally rely on articles that display the point of view of members of one of the cultures represented when it comes to some of the core themes and issues that are present in the works themselves. It is of the outmost importance to take into consideration the opinions of a member of the culture being studied, but it’s also important to consider the fact that it is impossible for everyone in a certain culture to share the same perceptions and thoughts about different issues. This approach presents

² Ibid., p. 8.

³ Ibid., p. 9.

what Boey describes as a paradoxical view on how social meanings are created and shared. He explained:

“[o]n the one hand, subjectivity is involved in the process as a person may see things and arrive at a conclusion based on his/her knowledge and experiences. However, as this knowledge and these experiences are built socially, he/she is likely to assume that the majority of the people are likely to share the same beliefs.”⁴

It's important to note how this perspective can also alter the way a horror creator decides what is or isn't scary and what will or won't be effective with their audience. It's not only the audience that imagines their own national identity, but the creators as well. Therefore, as Boey points out “the formation of national identity can be said to be a result of the combined effort of the industry and the audience. The product of this collaboration is in turn facilitated by the mass media.”⁵

With the recent rise in popularity for Eastern media, as well as a renewal of the Western Horror Film formula, it has become more pertinent than ever to analyze works from these cultures as their popularity means that they are now more widespread than ever. The now widespread attention given to the horror genre, leads to pertinent interrogations: is it possible to level fear as a similar reaction all over the world? Or do these works provide an experience that is more tailor-made to certain cultures?

The first and second chapters of this dissertation will focus on the Eastern and Western case studies, respectively, and, as mentioned before, in these chapters there will not only be an analysis of the works chosen, but also an explanation of the evolution of Eastern and Western Horror, as well as an introduction to the work's creators and their body of work, and also highlight relevant elements of their personal lives, information that adds pertinent views into their cultural interpretations. The case studies chosen will be the Japanese manga *Uzumaki* and the American film *The VVitch*. Finally, the third chapter will mostly deal with a more in-depth comparison between the two works and their respective cultures. There will be a special emphasis on cultural translation, what both cultures might have in common, as well as the most differentiating aspects of each one. There will also be an attempt to determine whether or not each work can be as easily understood by members of a different culture.

⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

The methodology in analyzing *Uzumaki* consisted in researching informative and theoretical works about eastern horror, its main differences when compared to western horror, the main themes present in eastern horror works and its evolution, as well as many of the theoretical concepts present in Ito's work. The works of Colette Balmain and Danny Boey were particularly relevant to the study of eastern horror, and the specific works used as a reference offer a great insight into the origins and themes of eastern horror, as well as the specificity of Japanese horror when compared to the horror in other eastern cultures.

Besides these academic writers, content creators who have made videos analyzing Junji Ito's work, his methods, and even the *Uzumaki* manga in greater detail were also researched and used as a reference. These creators were particularly helpful in offering a more specific insight into Junji Ito himself and his work, information that is useful in providing a clearer context for the creation of this specific case study and the author himself. Research was also made to find interviews with the manga's author, both related and unrelated to *Uzumaki*, as a way to confirm many of the points made about him throughout the dissertation. Finally, several articles and accounts about, or from people who are members of, Japanese society were also used as a way to better illustrate the societal aspects that Ito touches upon or directly criticizes in the selected chapters of the manga that were used as a case study.

The methodology for analyzing *The VVitch* was very similar to that of the analysis of *Uzumaki*. Research was made regarding the common themes, characteristics, and the evolution of western horror and more specifically those of American horror. Saige Walton wrote an in-depth analysis of the cinematographic elements of the film, and her work was very relevant when it comes to presenting the uniqueness and the historical accuracy of many of these elements. Besides her works, other content creators were also used as a reference, who make videos that analyze the themes and characters of *The VVitch* in greater detail and in an academic reading.

Besides these sources many different interviews with the director were also very relevant to the analysis of the film, as in them he often explains his intentions, methods, and inspirations for making *The VVitch*. To conclude, research was also made in regards of many of the seemingly supernatural events of the film, as a way to showcase how many of them have a scientific or reasonable real-life explanation and might not be demonic influence at all.

Danny Boey's point of view, despite focusing more on films, is particularly pertinent to this dissertation:

“The question raised regarding the degree to which the elements of genre cinemas can be nationally-specific is an important one in a production context that is increasingly globalized. More audiences across the world are now more aware of the production of other [...] countries than has ever been the case. [...] [I]t is now easier than ever for genre films to be made and viewed from anywhere in the world. But what are the implications of such changes for the national specificity of films?”⁶

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

CHAPTER I – *UZUMAKI* – JAPANESE HORROR MANGA

As an example of eastern horror, I have decided to analyze the horror manga *Uzumaki*, by Junji Ito. This manga was originally released in a Japanese magazine, called Big Comic Spirits, between 1998 and 1999 and consists of 20 chapters, one of which is a bonus chapter, unrelated to the rest of the manga. The manga has undergone many re-editions and has been compiled into a full book and the most recent hardcover omnibus edition was published in October 2013. In this section There will be a brief explanation of the peculiarities of Asian horror, and more specifically of Japanese horror, as well as a short summary of the manga's story, before discussing it in further detail in the following sections.

1 Defining Horror – Asian and Japanese Horror

Although object of a long and detailed analysis, there was a lack of literary sources for Eastern and Japanese horror literature. In researching literary sources that analyze and provide a theoretical framework for works of eastern horror, most of the sources found focus greatly on films, mentioning literature only as a source for many of the themes used in films while barely mentioning specific works (and even when they are mentioned, it is only in passing and as a means to exemplify the use of certain tropes). However, the fact that so many tropes are used both in literature and in film led to the decision of using sources that focus more on horror films, such as works by Colette Balmain and Danny Boey, as well as other content creators that analyze specific works in great detail and in an academic perspective. Since the specificities of horror in the Japanese culture will be discussed, we can take into account Danny Boey's statement that highlights that, in most Asian countries, the production of horror films is based on local, regional or national specific myths and literature⁷ and Colette Balmain also highlights that early Japanese cinema was heavily inspired by traditional Japanese forms of theatre which later inspired many methods used in creating films.⁸ With this foundation we can assume that the themes used in cinema are similar to those used in literature and manga.

So, let's begin with the opening question: how does one define Asian Horror? According to Danny Boey, in his thesis *The National Specificities of Horror Sources in Asian Horror*

⁷ Danny Boey, op. cit., p. 19.

⁸ Colette Balmain (2009), "Laying the Foundations", in *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, Edinburgh University Press Ltd, p. 15.

Cinema: “Contemporary academics, [...] have, however, realized that it is impractical to attempt to define the horror genre because the horror film is gradually evolving to cater to the taste of popular culture. Therefore, changes in the genre are inevitable⁹.”

Because of these gradual changes in horror, some authors such as Jonathan Crane and Mark Jancovich state that it is impossible to define the Horror genre as a general concept¹⁰. Rather, one can only define the Horror genre according to a certain historical, social, geographical, and cultural context. This can help to bring to light the main differences between Japanese Horror and Western Horror. As Danny Boey points out: “[...] I found it difficult, if not impossible, to scrutinize Asian texts, such as *Ringu*, within the framework of the Hollywood horror genre, where there are no blood-sucking vampires, transforming werewolves or flesh-eating zombies.¹¹”

From this quote, we can infer that both Horror genres are inherently different due to the use of diverse monsters and how those monsters can be culturally symbolic to the audience¹². Rasmussen also pointed out that the monster is perhaps the only similarity that can be found in all horror films, even transcending nationalities¹³. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between Asian and Western Horror, even in the representation of monsters, that should be accounted for. Boey explains that Asian Horror downplays the significance of male antagonists or monsters and there is a larger tendency for antagonists to be portrayed as women or female figures (usually ghosts, witches or demons) which are nevertheless represented as equally deadly and powerful as their Western counterparts¹⁴. **This negative representation of women can be connected to the marginalization of women in Asian societies.**

One final major difference between Asian Horror and Western Horror that should be highlighted, is that, in Asian Horror, there is almost never a complete closure to the narrative. As Marcia R. England explained, in her book *Public Privates – Feminist Geographies of Mediated Spaces*:

⁹ Danny Boey, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹² Ibid., p. 49.

¹³ Rasmussen, Randy Loren (1998), *Children of the Night: The Six Archetypal Characters of Classic Horror Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, p. 194.

¹⁴ Danny Boey, op. cit., p. 57.

“In America and Europe most horror movies tell the story of the extermination of evil spirits. Japanese horror movies end with a suggestion that the spirit still remains at large. The Japanese don’t regard spirits only as enemies, but as beings that coexist with our world.¹⁵”

There are many popular themes in Japanese horror and some of the most prevalent reflect common national fears. Many of these themes have originated from religious and folk tales, as well as the Japanese Kabuki theatre. According to Colette Balmain: “Kabuki, one of the foremost traditional Japanese theatrical forms, would provide rich material for the burgeoning art of the visual image and would become the template for many Japanese horror films since¹⁶”

A few examples of popular themes in Japanese Horror center around the fear of the nuclear bomb and its repercussions (a common theme during and after World War Two, more specifically during the late 40s and early 50s). Important pillars of Japanese society, such as the importance of tradition, how the good of society must be strived for over the good of individuals, and the importance of restraint, are often completely destroyed. There are also many displays of commodification and materialism, the figure of the “salaryman” and the absent father (a prominent problem in many Japanese families, where fathers are expected to work themselves almost to death to provide for their families and end up becoming completely absent from their families¹⁷), and the internet and mobile technologies walling in individuals, “isolating and killing them”¹⁸.

Besides these themes there are also many representations of the rise of domestic violence in Japan as a result of the recession. “[a]bsent mothers, bad fathers, and abused children seem to be all too present in Japanese horror films such as *The Ring* and *Carved: A Slit-Mouthed Woman*.¹⁹” In addition, much of Japanese horror has been concerned with sexual violence, issues around gender representation and the theme of rape as a major trope in Japanese culture. This can be seen in certain traditional archetypes from cultural mythology and folktales that are still used in horror today, such as “the tragic lovers”, the

¹⁵ England, Marcia R. (2018), “Scared to Death – Spaces of J-Horror”, in *Public Privates – Feminist Geographies of Mediated Spaces*, University of Nebraska Press, p. 66.

¹⁶ Colette Balmain, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁷ Kaori Shoji, March 23rd 2015, “Where did all the Japanese fathers go?”, in *The Japan Times* [<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2015/03/23/language/japanese-fathers-go/>]. Accessed on June 28th 2019.

¹⁸ Colette Balmain, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid.

“wronged woman” and the “vengeful ghost”²⁰. From the 1960s to the 1980s Japanese Horror films also featured a lot of soft-core and hard-core sexual content. These films were known as Pink film (Pinku eiga) and their popularity is attributed to the rapid modernization of Japanese society²¹.

From these examples of the subversion of tradition and societal expectations, as well as the spiritual and paranormal nature of horror in Japan, it’s safe to conclude that Japanese horror is more spiritual than Western horror and deals with societal fears, rather than individualistic ones. Although Western horror does also represent societal fears, it tends to focus more greatly on individual threats that are often metaphors for those fears.

There are more specificities that distinguish Japanese Horror from American Horror, but I will have the opportunity to detail my analysis of the American Horror as I present the study of the film *The VVitch*, in chapter 3 of this dissertation. In this present chapter there will be an emphasis on the analysis of *Uzumaki* and its author, Junji Ito.

2 The author and his work

Uzumaki follows a high-school teenager, Kirie Goshima, her boyfriend, Shuichi Saito, and the citizens of the small, fictional Japanese town of Kurōzu-cho, which is being affected by supernatural events involving a mysterious and ancient curse, which is based on the abstract concept of spirals. As the story progresses, Kirie and Shuichi witness how the spiral affects the people around them. These supernatural events begin in relatively unobtrusive ways but, as the story progresses, we see “[...] increasingly menacing forms of the curse begin to infect and gradually blight the village.”²²

The spiral manifests itself in many different ways, however, maybe because of its episodic nature, the chapters of the manga are relatively independent from each other, with few minor exceptions. While reading the manga from beginning to end, “[...] we witness how each chapter is part of a larger chain of events,²³” starting as earthly phenomena and evolving into natural disasters. Eventually, even the town itself and its inhabitants become

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Danny Boey, op. cit., p. 91.

²² RagnarRox, September 3rd 2016, “Junij Ito - Spiral into Horror | Monsters of the Week”, in *Youtube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwA-eVV4zk4]. Accessed on April 24, 2019

²³ Ibid.

perverted half-human abominations, until the eventual collapse of society. But before we dive into this work in greater detail, it's important to contextualize the author and his work.

In the video *Junji Ito - Spiral into Horror / Monsters of the Week*, we can emphasize a great example of how Junji Ito is perceived by the general public. “This notion of insanity lurking beneath mundane everyday life is a popular theme in the horror genre, but no one captures this existential angst quite as artfully and elegantly as the famous Japanese manga artist Junji Ito.²⁴”

Junji Ito was born in the Gifu prefecture of Japan in 1963. He grew up in an old house where, to use the restroom, he had to go through a dark underground hallway. That was his first exposure to fear. His childhood home was even used as the model for one of his stories²⁵, as the author himself stated:

“In the middle of the tunnel, the door would always be wide open, and I would always have to look into that dark, terrifying space inside. I would get scared and couldn't go alone. I wonder if people who tend to get scared have a part of them that is drawn to horror because of it.²⁶”

Despite being easily scared, Junji Ito started reading horror manga when he was five years old and it was during this time that he started reading manga by the authors that would become his greatest sources of inspiration: Kazuo Umezu, Shinichi Koga, and Hideshi Hino²⁷. He was always particularly enchanted by the works of Kazuo Umezu, due to his representation of the occult²⁸. Ito first began writing and drawing manga at a young age and continued to do so as a hobby while working as a dental technician in the early 1990s. His first published work was a chapter of *Tomie*, an ongoing series he would later become famous for, which was selected by the Umezu Award (a manga award attributed to promising new artists, spanning all genres) by a panel of manga professionals which

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Urasawa Naoki, 2016, “Urasawa Naoki no Manben Manga Documentary S4E2 2016 - Ito Junji [720] English”, in *Dailymotion* [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x65w5fu>]. Accessed on April 24th 2019.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

included Kazuo Umezu himself²⁹. He won an honorable mention for it and made his debut³⁰.

Ito's background as a dental technician is one aspect that helps him come up with some of the most disturbing body horror images we can observe in his work. Ito often uses medical diagrams and illustrations of anatomy to keep his depictions as realistic as possible, which gives even his most absurd and exaggerated representations of gore a certain plausibility³¹. As Ito, in his interview with Urasawa Naoki, puts it: "To me, visual imagery is very important, and if I can present that in a form that [is] believable to the reader while also presenting completely unique imagery, then I feel like I've done a great job."

There is one particular short-story, called *Layers of Fear*, in which there is a scene of a woman who went insane and tore off her own face. Although difficult to imagine or even believe to be true, the detail and care with which Ito draws his panels makes the scene so realistic, that it may easily lead the reader to create an emotional connection and envision it as real. This demonstrates how powerful Ito's imagery can be.

²⁹ Akiko Iwane, 1998, "The Junji Ito Interview: A conversation with the creator of Uzumaki", in *Davinch magazine*, translation by Andy Nakatani [<https://vagabondedlife.tumblr.com/post/19759189727/the-junji-ito-interview-a-conversation-with-the>]. Accessed on April 24th 2019.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.



Image 1: Panel from *Layers of Fear*³²

Junji Ito approaches horror in a very peculiar way. He finds inspiration for his stories in everyday life and in some aspects of Japanese society. For example, in the short-story *Army of One*, Ito used his medium to comment on issues like widespread social isolation in Japan, and in his two-part series *Gyo*, he commented on the government's use of biological warfare in World War Two³³. In an interview with Akiko Iwane, Ito claimed that he doesn't really know what's considered scary, and explained:

“I just come up with ideas from my daily life. An idea could come from something I hear on the radio. It's interesting to take things and look at them from a backwards perspective. I don't specifically try to depict horror, or to come up with ideas that will be horrific,

³² Junji Ito, “Layers of Fear”, in *Nemuki*, 2017

³³ Ragnar Rox, *op. cit.*

specifically. If I think of something interesting, I'll go with it and maybe add the horror part in later.³⁴

Ito usually works with extremes, the extremely beautiful and the extremely horrific. The women and young girls he draws in his work are always very beautiful and usually contrast with the horror being presented, like in *Tomie* where the main character is presented as being a very beautiful woman who always meets with terrible and gruesome fates. He also has a tendency to insert characters into his stories that end up looking like him, such as Shuichi from *Uzumaki*. This is similar to the works of Stephen King, who also frequently transforms his main characters into writers, as it is easier for him to attribute a feeling of authenticity to them.³⁵



Image 2: Detail of a panel from *Tomie*³⁶

³⁴ Akiko Iwane, op. it.

³⁵ Ragnar Rox, op. cit.

³⁶ Junji Ito, "Top Model", in *Tomie: Complete Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC, 2016, p. 594.

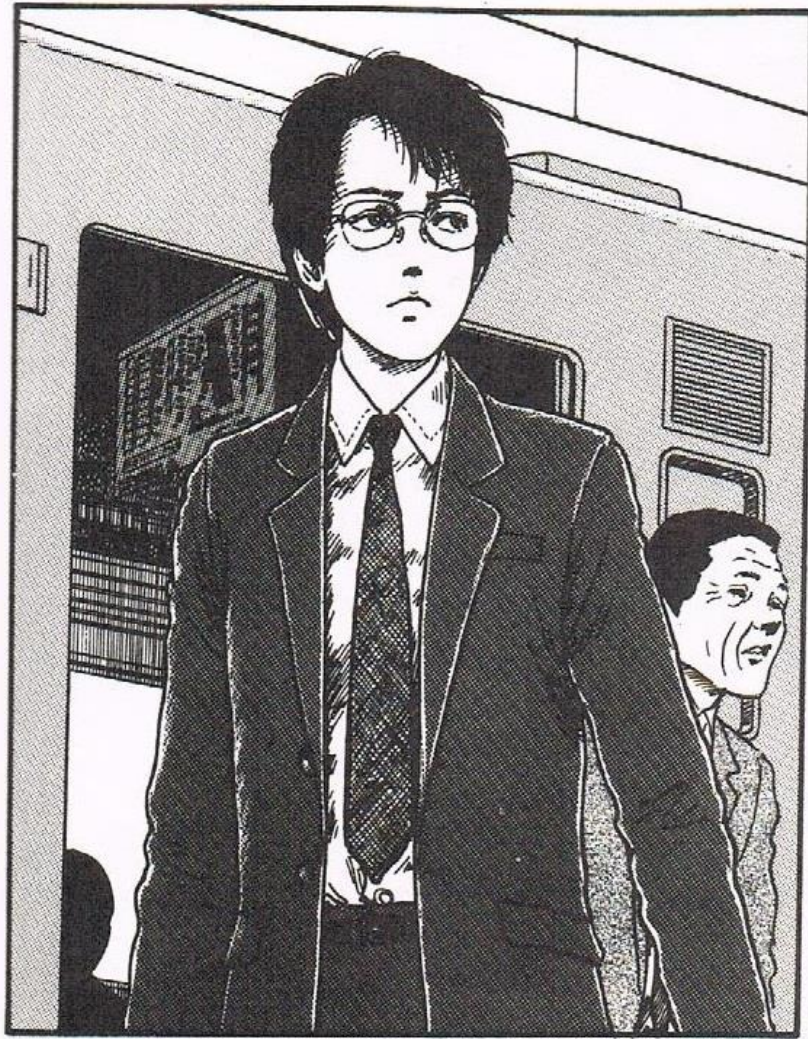


Image 3: Detail of Shuichi, a character drawn to resemble Juji Ito³⁷.

Regarding the aesthetics of Ito's work, it's relevant to point out that, even with Ito's most disturbing and grotesque imagery, there's always a certain allure to his art. Ito's scariest drawings are made with such care and detail that one can't help but keep looking at them. This plays with the paradox of horror, where something becomes more alluring due to the fact that it's so repulsive. As explained in the video *Do Junji Ito's Characters Actually Matter? – Junji Ito Series*, we know that in his book, *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noel Carroll states that the paradox of horror is that things which are horrific and unsightly are, for that very reason spectacles unto themselves³⁸.

³⁷ Junji Ito, "The Spiral Obsession", in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013, p. 12.

³⁸ The Tale Foundry, May 18th 2017, "Do Junji Ito's Characters Actually Matter? – Junji Ito Series", in *Youtube* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VekSnrkVo0w>]. Accessed on April 29th 2019.



Image 4: Detail from *The Window Next Door*³⁹.

Junji Ito's work is scary mostly due to his use of three different types of horror: body horror, psychological horror, and the uncanny valley. We should, of course, keep in mind that horror is subjective and affects different people in different ways, but these three types of horror seem to be the foundation of Ito's work.⁴⁰

2.1 Body Horror

³⁹ Junji Ito, "The Window Next Door", in *Horror World of Junji Ito Collection*, Japan, 1997, p. 101.

⁴⁰ The Tale Foundry, May 31st 2017, "3 Ways Junji Ito Disturbs Us – Junji Ito Series", in *Youtube* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63-SxK2ItS4>]. Accessed on April 30th 2019.

Body horror is usually depicted through gore and violence, but the two terms are not necessarily synonymous. As explained in a video by the Tale Foundry: “Body horror is the art of destabilizing that pillar. It derives its effect from damaging the human body, thereby instilling in the audience a profound sense of fragility. The feeling that what makes you you could be taken away.⁴¹”

Ito uses body horror in many of his works, usually through the depiction of gruesome bodily harm and impossible deformations⁴². The image number 1 on page 12 of his dissertation, from *Layers of Fear*, is one good example, but an even better example of body horror in Ito’s work comes from the chapter “The Scar”, from *Uzumaki*. In this example one of the secondary characters of the manga has become physically affected by the spiral. This started as a small scar on her forehead that began to slowly grow and transform more clearly into a spiral, which eventually became a vortex that sucked in parts of her face and, eventually, her entire body, killing her in the process.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

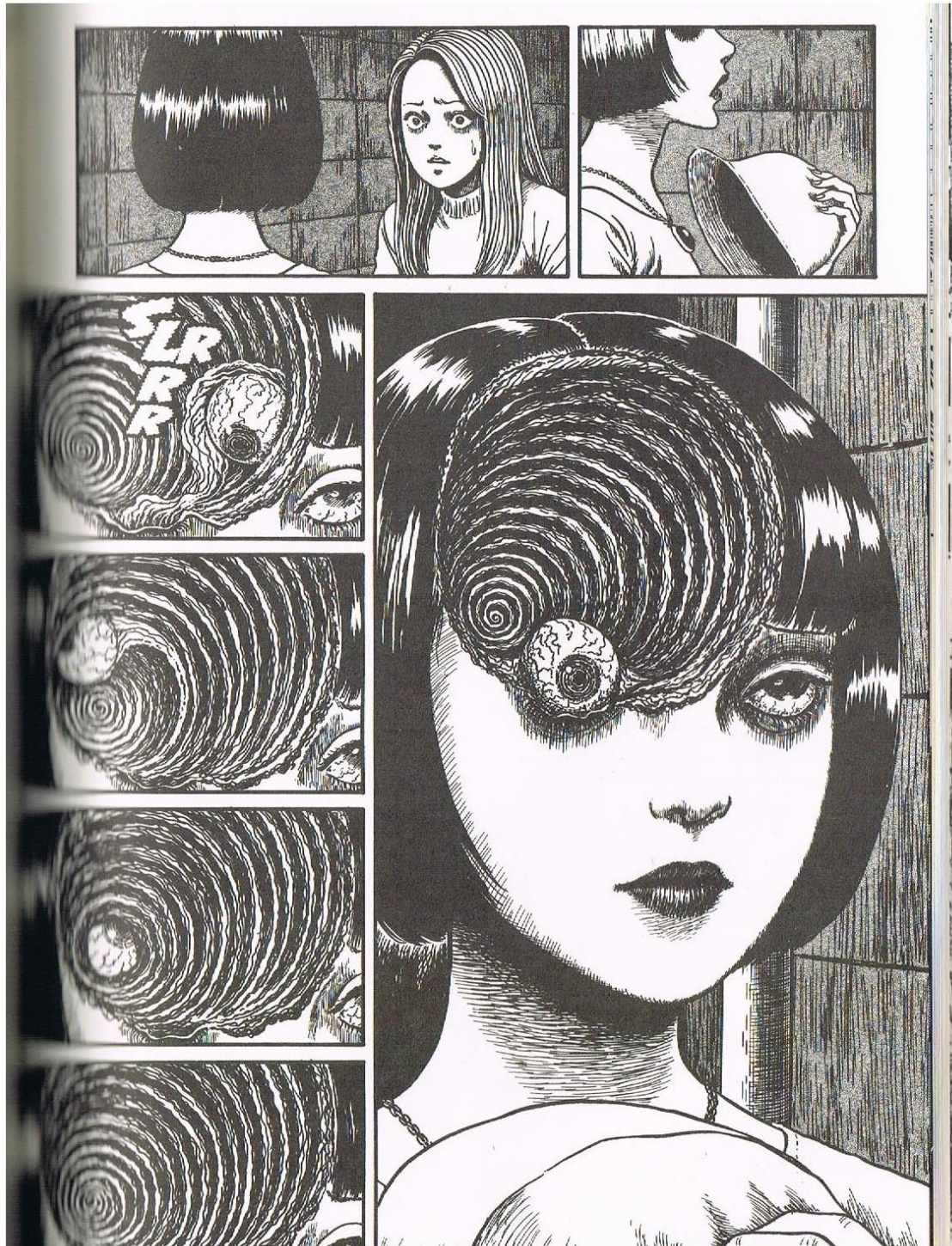


Image 5: Page from "The Scar"⁴³

In this example we also see how body horror can be different from gore. The deformation presented may not be as visceral as other examples of body horror, but it doesn't need to

⁴³ Junji Ito, "The Scar", in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013, p. 100.

be. “With his work, Ito often goes a step beyond damaging or deforming the human frame. He perverts it entirely, undermining what it means to be human⁴⁴.”

2.2 Psychological Horror

When it comes to psychological horror, Ito’s use of it is somewhat similar to his use of body horror, in a sense that he puts his characters through intense mental damage and degeneration in the same way he puts them through bodily harm. With his use of psychological horror, Ito succeeds in “[...] troubling the audience with the fear that their minds, the thing they expect to have the most control over, could be harmed⁴⁵” just like their bodies can. In many of his stories Ito throws his characters into an all-consuming obsession or an irrational mania, and this is usually the go-to catalyst for his conflicts⁴⁶. Once again, a great example of this comes from *Uzumaki*. In the very first chapter, “The Spiral Obsession”, the father of one of the characters becomes obsessed with spirals. It starts in a relatively unobtrusive way, as he begins to collect items with spirals on them and only eats food with spirals, but soon his obsession grows and he begins to contort his own body into spiral shapes. He eventually dies because of his obsession, having contorted his body so horribly as to kill himself.

⁴⁴ The Tale Foundry, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*



Image 6: Detail of a page from “The Spiral Obsession”⁴⁷

Ito’s use of psychological horror is also reflected in his use of cosmic horror and thus, brings to light another one of his sources of inspiration: the horror writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, also known as H. P. Lovecraft, was an American writer who achieved posthumous fame through his influential works of horror fiction. He is famous for developing the literary philosophy known as Cosmicism, the idea that, given the vastness of the universe, the human race is of complete inconsequence⁴⁸. He conveyed this concept through his philosophically intense horror stories that involve occult phenomena like astral possession and alien miscegenation. We can, once again, see this more clearly in *Uzumaki*, as Ito cited H. P. Lovecraft as one of his main sources of inspiration when writing it, but the concept of cosmicism can be found in many of Ito’s stories. Cosmicism, is, as explained in the video *Here’s What Happens To Your Brain On Junji Ito | Darkology #29*:

⁴⁷ Junji Ito, “The Spiral Obsession”, in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 34.

⁴⁸ Joshi, S. T. (1997). "Introduction". *The Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*. New York, NY: Dell, p. 12.

“[...] basically the idea that we, our actions, and everything we hold sacred or dear to our hearts, they're ultimately insignificant in the greater aspect of the universe and time and space. [...] It's the idea that people are powerless against what lies beyond our understanding of reality.⁴⁹”

Besides this concept, in many of Ito's stories we get the idea that nothing that the characters do actually matters, and they are just vessels through which we can watch the horror unravel, more than they are active agents in the story. This reflects how Lovecraft also treated his characters. The universe Ito depicts is cruel, but often unfeeling and, in it, the concepts of good and evil don't actually exist. This absence of good and evil is also echoed in the Shinto ideology, and while there are characters in Ito's stories that might be considered villains, there's rarely any real malevolence in the larger horrific spectacle that we witness. The video *Here's What Happens To Your Brain On Junji Ito* provides a comparison demonstrates perfectly the nature of the horror in Ito's work that is inspired by H.P. Lovecraft:

“These monstrosities, as we might call them, are, for lack of a better phrasing, simply a thoughtless result of accident and nature. Similar to how there's no conscious thought behind when you trip and fall down the stairs, or when a shark comes to eat you if you're lost at sea. It's not personal. There's no malevolent force at work, you're not specially chosen, that's just what happens.⁵⁰”

One of the best examples of cosmic horror in Junji Ito's work comes from *Hellstar Remina*. The story is about a newly discovered planet in a distant galaxy which moves in an irregular path through space, but the astronomers watching it soon make a troubling discovery: other celestial bodies around it are disappearing. This new planet is eating them, and it's coming towards Earth. The story is about the ensuing chaos, as the newly discovered planet devours ours.

⁴⁹ Bluelavasix, May 20th 2018, “Here's What Happens To Your Brain on Junji Ito | Darkology #29”, in *Youtube* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_-TJ7jMyAY&t=443s]. Accessed on April 30th 2019.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

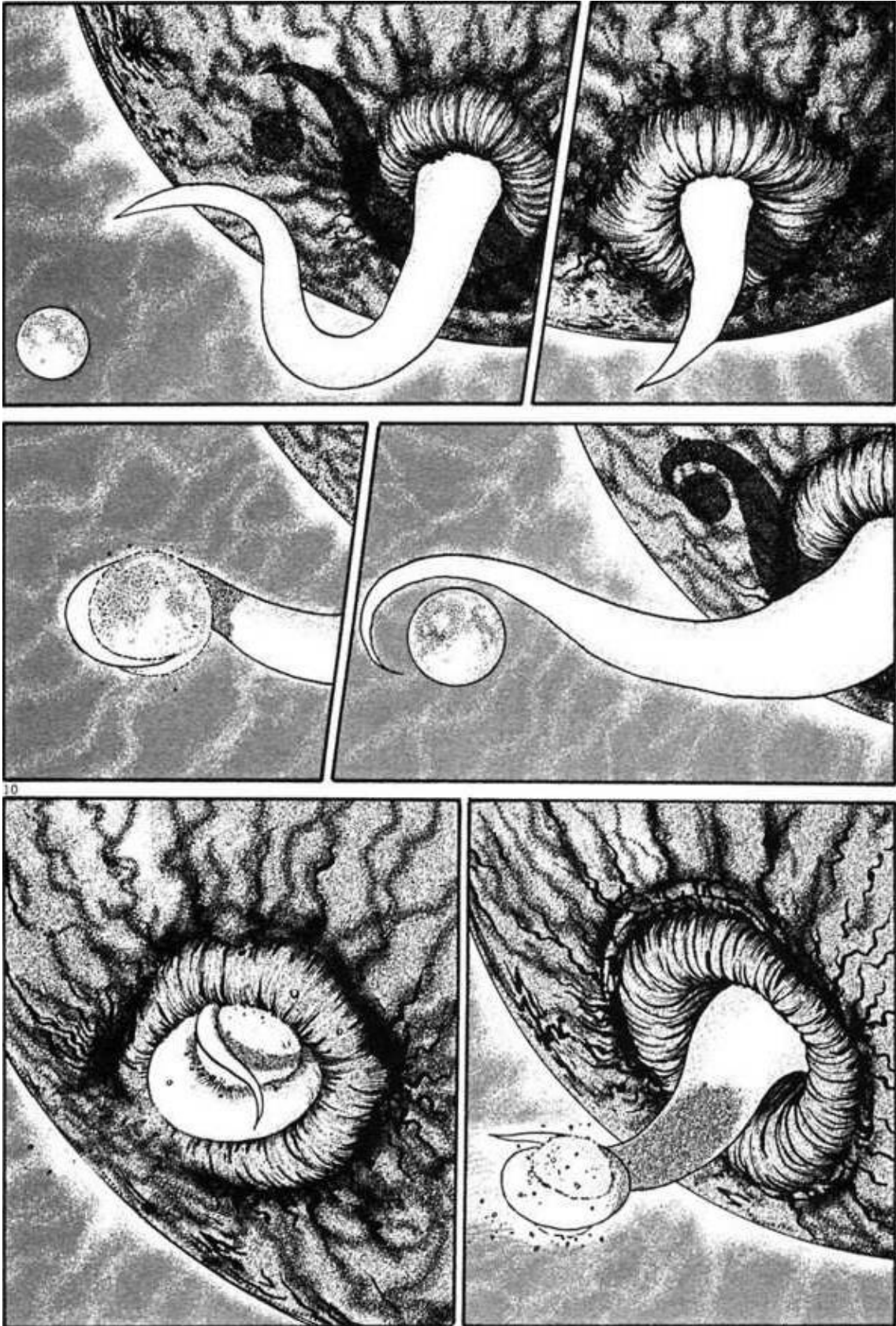


Image 7: Detail from *Hellstar Remina* of the planet Remina eating the Moon.⁵¹

⁵¹ Junji Ito, "Plaguebringer", in *Hellstar Remina*, Shogakukan, 2005, p. 94.

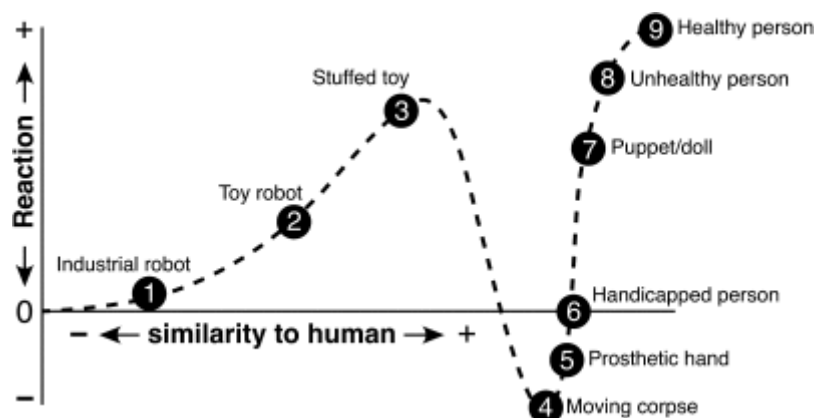
The horror Junji Ito creates is about conceptual shifts, “a move from human to inhuman, sane to morbidly obsessed, self to other⁵²” Due to this, Ito also makes great use of the uncanny valley.

2.3 The Uncanny Valley

The uncanny valley is a hypothesized relationship between the degree of an object's resemblance to a human being and the emotional response to such an object. Put more simply, it shows that the more similarity something shares with its audience, the more comfortable they tend to be with it⁵³.

“[...] there comes a point in this climbing likeness where the thing in question enters a sort of aesthetic limbo, no longer different enough to be other but still not quite close enough to be self. This is the uncanny valley, a place where one has no choice but to doubt the nature of their identity⁵⁴.”

There is a graphical representation of the uncanny valley effect that can be very helpful in understanding it better. In this graph (shown below) we can see different examples numbered from 1 to 9 in different stages of the valley itself. The example that sits at the lowest part of the valley is a moving corpse. In this case, the moving corpse is considered the uncanniest example, as it is familiar enough to a viewer to be identified as a corpse, but it's different enough in the fact that it's moving. This mixture of familiarity and difference is what creates a feeling of unease and doubt that can be so effectively used in horror works in general.



⁵² The Tale Foundry, *op. cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Image 8: A graphical representation of the uncanny valley.⁵⁵

Many other creators have used the uncanny valley to their advantage, but what's especially different about the way Junji Ito uses it, is the fact that he starts at the opposite end of the graph. In other words, his stories begin in a familiar place and slowly draw us into the valley through his disturbing employment of body horror and psychological horror⁵⁶. As already mentioned, *Hellstar Remina* is an example of Ito's use of cosmic horror, but the story is also a good example of how Ito approaches the uncanny. The Tale Foundry explains it perfectly:

“It begins with something as familiar as the basic human understanding of the cosmos, and then pushes it into a place of relative unfamiliarity, where the very planets have eyes and tongues and appetites. It plays with the metrics humans use to evaluate themselves, forcing them to reconsider their purpose, their significance, ultimately, who they are.”⁵⁷

Junji Ito's work becomes the most effective when the horror presented is given little to no explanation. This lets the readers' minds wander and can even contribute to the plausibility of the horrors presented. This can also be related to Ito's use of psychological horror, as he knows that any explanation he could give pales in comparison to what our own human minds could conjure up when faced with the unknown. To use *Hellstar Remina* as an example once again, who can say with certainty that there isn't an unknown celestial body that eats planets and stars heading towards us right now? When Ito tries to provide an explanation for the horror he presents, his stories can become more silly than horrific. A good example of this is *Gyo*. In *Gyo* we see that the earth has become overrun with strange fish with mechanical legs. When it is explained in the story that the legs were part of a government experiment for biological warfare in World War Two, one of the characters goes insane and tries to use the machines to his advantage. He does so by turning himself into a blimp, which then transforms into a kind of glider when he is attacked by a circus crew with a canon. When reading *Gyo* for the first time, it induces little to no fear during this part, the emphasis falls in the ridiculousness of the situation.

⁵⁵ Maya B.Mathura & David B.Reichlingb, January 2016, “Navigating a social world with robot partners: A quantitative cartography of the Uncanny Valley”, in *Science Direct*, [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0010027715300640?via%3Dihub#f0015]. Accessed on April 30th 2019.

⁵⁶ The Tale Foundry, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*



Image 9: A panel from *Gyo* in which the scientist who turned himself into a blimp now turns himself into a glider.⁵⁸

Ito's stories can end up losing focus when they start to become very large. Ito gets tired of things very quickly⁵⁹ which can lead to the conclusion that that is why he tends to write short stories more than he writes full volumes. With more volumes comes the need to escalate and increase the horror presented, which can also contribute to the occasional silliness of Ito's work.

2.4 Ito's Use of Medium and Characters

Before moving on to the analysis of *Uzumaki*, there are two other aspects of Ito's work that should be analyzed and highlighted: his use of characters, and his use of his medium.

When it comes to the way Junji Ito uses characters, the simplest conclusion is that his characters don't matter. But what does this actually mean? Firstly, there are rarely protagonists in Junji Ito's stories. This doesn't mean that there aren't any main characters or point-of-view characters, but it means that none of the characters presented actively move the plot toward its goal. There are no protagonists in the majority of Ito's stories because they aren't character-driven, they're spectacle-driven. Of course, the characters presented have their own arcs and emotions, and the author even presents them in a certain way as to pretend that the characters matter in the story, but they are ultimately irrelevant. This can be explained by the fact that Junji Ito's narratives are often disclosure narratives, a story whose plot revolves around the disclosure of information about an enigmatic subject. This is also another similarity that Junji Ito shares with H. P. Lovecraft, as his stories were also often disclosure narratives as well⁶⁰.

This peculiar way with which Ito uses his characters is also one of the reasons that lead me to select *Uzumaki* as a case study. In the manga, while all the strange and terrifying repercussions of the spiral curse are taking place, our prospective characters, Shuichi and Kirie, simply watch.

⁵⁸ Junji Ito, "The Death Stench World", in *Gyo 2-in-1 Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC, 2015, p. 157.

⁵⁹ Urasawa Naoki, op. cit.

⁶⁰ The Tale Foundry, op. cit. (2017), "Do Junji Ito's Characters Actually Matter? – Junji Ito Series" [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VekSnrkVo0w>]. Accessed on April 30th 2019.

“They don't really do anything at all to resolve the conflict or propel the plot, which in this case is actually incredibly effective. It allows the spectacle to take the wheel, driving us through the disclosure narrative, while we ride backseat with our tour guides, the perspective characters. This is a unique and important piece of Ito's style, but it's also just that, a piece”⁶¹.

There are two main factors that showcase how Junji Ito's use of characters differs from mainstream horror. The first one is that Ito's work is inherently engaging due to its mysterious nature. For example, in *Tomie* he establishes that the pieces of Tomie's corpse are capable of gruesome regeneration, but offers no explanation as to why and how. Because of this, the audience becomes hungry for some sort of disclosure. We want to know how Tomie is capable of this and what that will mean for her murderers. This removes the need for a sympathetic link between the protagonist and the audience, which is what would normally create engagement in a story⁶². The audience keeps on reading for the investigation of the horror presented, not for the characters. For this reason, an engaging perspective character could actually damage the story overall, because they would move the narrative focus away from the spectacle, which is the most important part of a Junji Ito story.

The second factor that differentiates Junji Ito's characters from those of mainstream horror is the fact that his characters are, more often than not, completely generic, unassuming, and unremarkable. Occasionally it's possible to encounter characters portrayed as unrelatable and unremarkable in a few American slasher films, however they seem to be portrayed as such to make them unlikable. It seemed to be a tactic used by the director to make the viewers feel some sort of satisfaction when they are ultimately killed, and that is not the case with Junji Ito's characters. In a Junji Ito story, the reader will probably not find himself rooting for the characters to survive or escape the situation they find themselves in. “[m]ost of the time you'll just kind of passively appreciate that they're still alive because it means you get to continue your investigation of the horror⁶³”. In most cases, unrelatable characters are a source of catharsis, but in this case, they end up becoming a mercy that the author bestows upon the reader, because it makes it easier to read through the horror when the characters are difficult to get attached to.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

In Junji Ito's body of work it's possible to identify that he makes use of his medium of choice in a very peculiar way. There's no denying that visual novels like comics and Japanese manga are not an easy medium to work with when it comes to horror. In films there's the advantage of sound and dynamic camera angles, but one advantage visual novels have is that new information is immediately delivered to the reader with each page. The use of effective visuals is something Junji Ito is very good at, as it has been demonstrated in previous examples, but there's another characteristic Ito takes advantage of that is exclusive to comics and manga: the turning of the page. One might correctly remark that books also benefit from the turning of the page, but I would argue that turning the pages of a book is a very different experience from turning the pages of a comic. If one were to open a book, without looking too closely at its contents, the amount of information that can be immediately absorbed is much less than one would get from doing the same thing with a comic or visual novel.

Junji Ito manages to use his medium in such a way as to create suspense, with a technique that goes beyond his use of imagery. He does this by placing a panel of the characters reacting to something unseen right at the very end of a page. This gives the reader an active role in their experience, because it's now up to them to turn the page and see what horror awaits them. It's mandatory to compare this role to that of playing a horror videogame. It might be a strange comparison, but the two experiences can be similar. In a horror videogame, the experience might become too scary for the player, in which case they can simply turn the game off. However, there's no escaping the player's active role in bringing the story to its conclusion, and if the player wants to experience the story until the end, it's up to them to open a door or face a monster and make it to the end. The same happens in visual novels, but particularly so in a Junji Ito Manga. In other comics or manga, artists might place their scary imagery in such unexpected places to surprise the reader, but Junji Ito places it in a way that the reader knows something scary is coming.

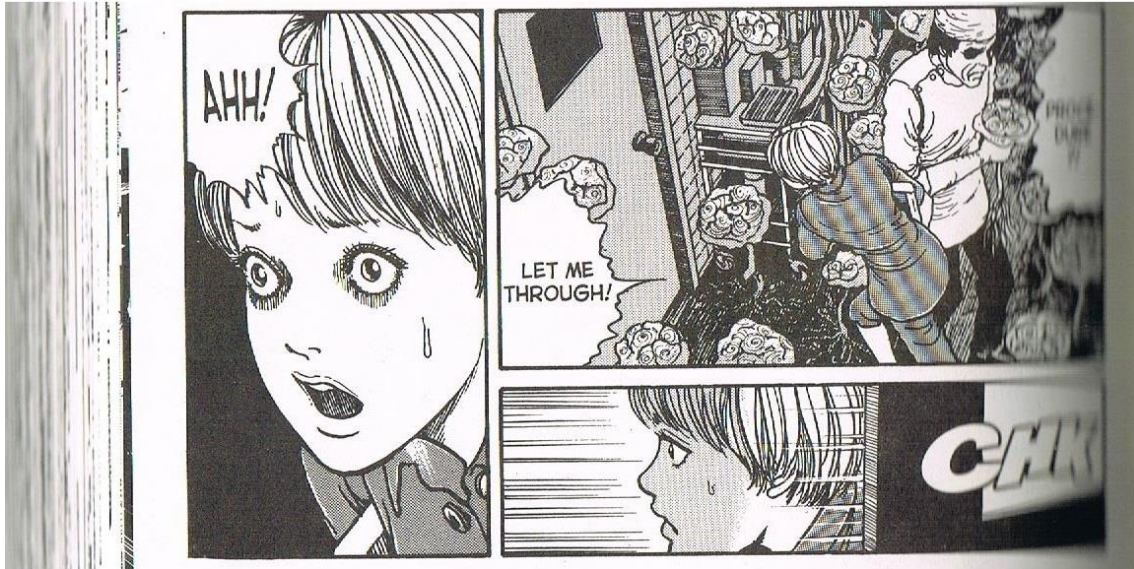


Image 10: Part of a page from *Uzumaki* showing the main character reacting to an unseen horror.⁶⁴

It is then up to the reader to turn the page. Granted, the reader can stop reading the manga if the experience proves too scary, but like the player of a videogame, they are the ones who play an active role in exposing themselves to the horror and bringing the story to its conclusion.

⁶⁴ Junji Ito, "The Umbilical Cord", in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 355

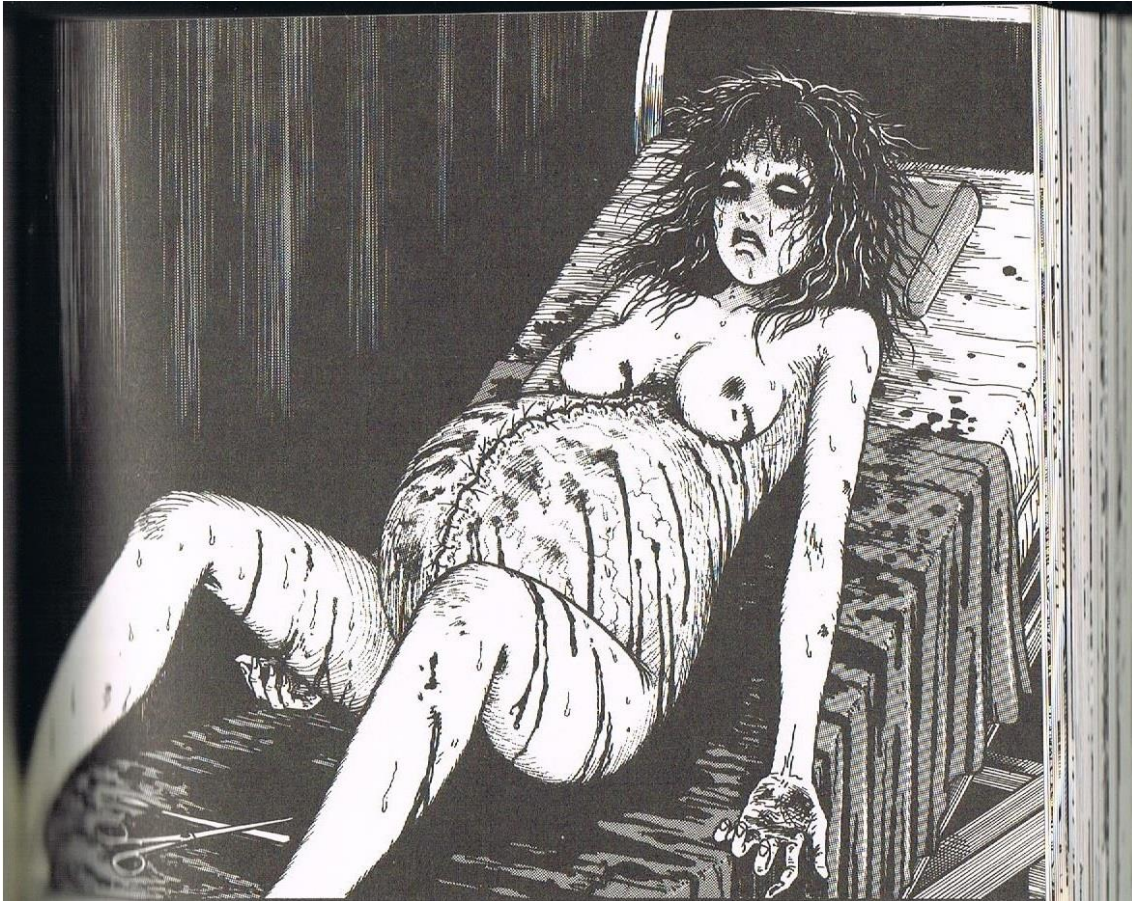


Image 11: Part of the following page, showing the horror the character was reacting to.⁶⁵

3 Case Study - *Uzumaki*

In the previous chapter a brief description of *Uzumaki*'s plot was given, but now it will be analyzed in greater detail.

The manga's overall length makes it impossible to analyze all of it in detail, as it would render this dissertation endless. However, the mostly disconnected nature of each chapter, making them more separate stories than an entire narrative, is an advantage, as it allows to conduct an analysis of **the chapters without much loss of context or quality for each one.**

As mentioned previously, Ito often draws inspiration from everyday life and from his own society for his horror stories. With that in mind, it would be best to cover chapters from *Uzumaki* that touch on particular aspects of Japanese society. These chapters will be:

⁶⁵ Junji Ito, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

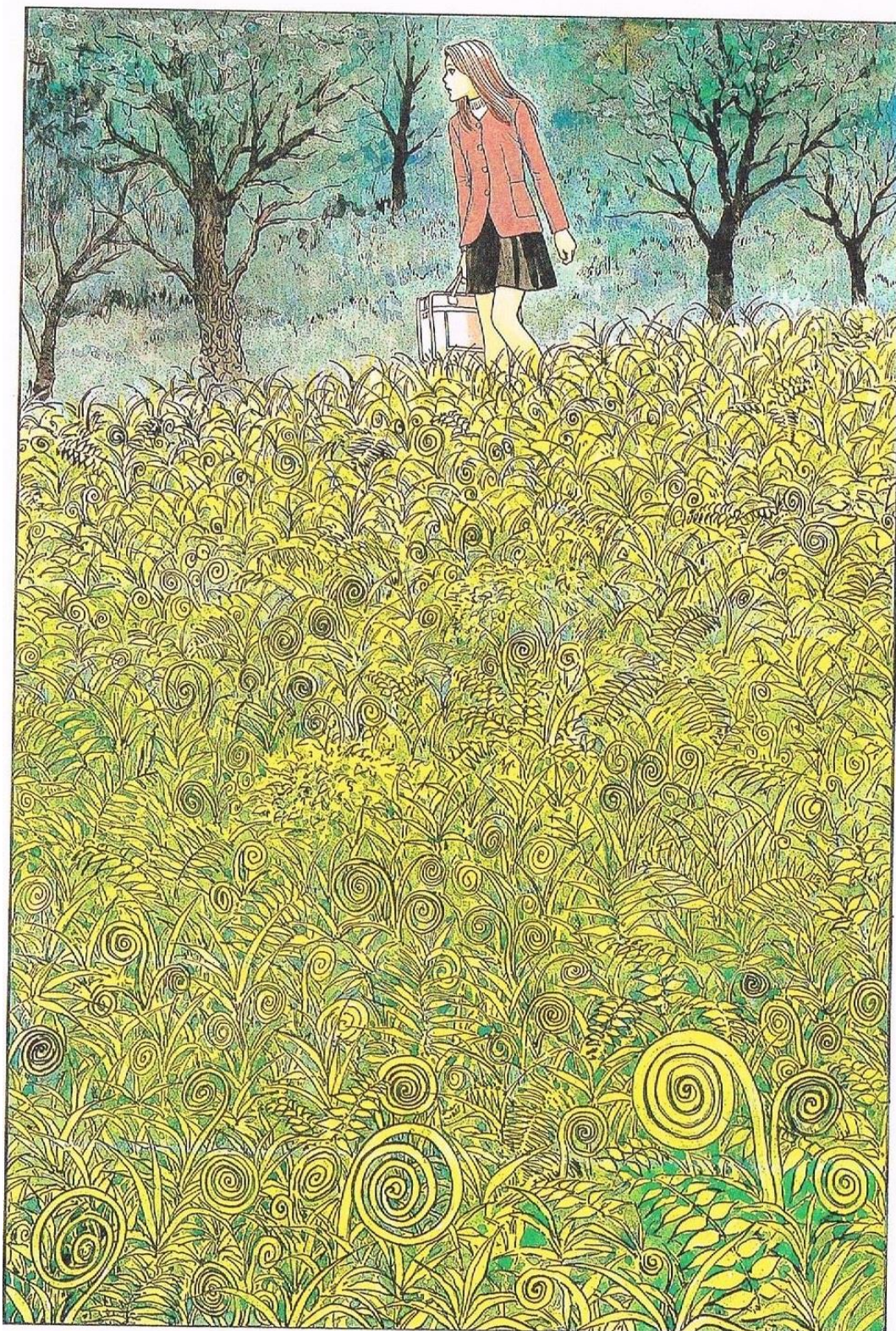
“Medusa” (chapter 6), “The Snail” (chapter 8), “Mosquitoes” (chapter 10), and “The Umbilical Cord” (chapter 11). However, before analyzing these chapters individually, it is important to provide a brief summary of the manga’s story and main theme.

What first inspired Junji Ito to write a horror manga about spirals was their positive representation in Japanese media, which inspired Ito to subvert them to create horror. As Ito himself explained in an interview with 78 Magazine:

“The ‘spiral pattern’ is not normally associated with horror fiction. Usually spiral patterns mark character’s cheeks in Japanese comedy cartoons, representing an effect of warmth. However, I thought it could be used in horror if I drew it a different way. Spirals are one of the popular Japanese patterns from long ago, but I don’t know what the symbol represents”.⁶⁶

The manga follows Kirie Goshima and her boyfriend Shuichi Saito as they uncover a strange curse that has struck their home town of Kurôzu-cho. The curse that affects the small seaside town is based on the abstract concept of spirals. On one of the very first pages of the manga we can already see how the spiral is infecting the town.

⁶⁶ Mira Bai Winsby, 2006, “Into the Spiral – A Conversation with Japanese Horror Maestro Junji Ito”, in *78 Magazine*, translated by Miyako Takano [<http://www.78magazine.com/issues/03-01/arts/junji.shtml>]. Accessed on April 30th 2019.



6

Image 12: One of the first pages of *Uzumaki* showing spiral-shaped plants.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Junji Ito, "The Spiral Obsession", in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 6.

The first signs of the curse are subtle and can almost be attributed to unusual, but natural causes. Small whirlwinds occasionally pass through the streets, streams will occasionally have a few whirlpools, but nothing too unusual. It doesn't take long for the curse to begin affecting the people who live in Kurôzu-cho.

In the second chapter, "The Spiral Obsession Part 2", after the death of Shuichi's father, his mother develops a tremendous phobia of spirals. So far this seems like a relatively plausible occurrence, considering that spirals were the cause of her husband's death, but she takes her phobia into truly psychotic lengths. Her own hair and fingerprints remind her of spirals, so she decides to cut them off.

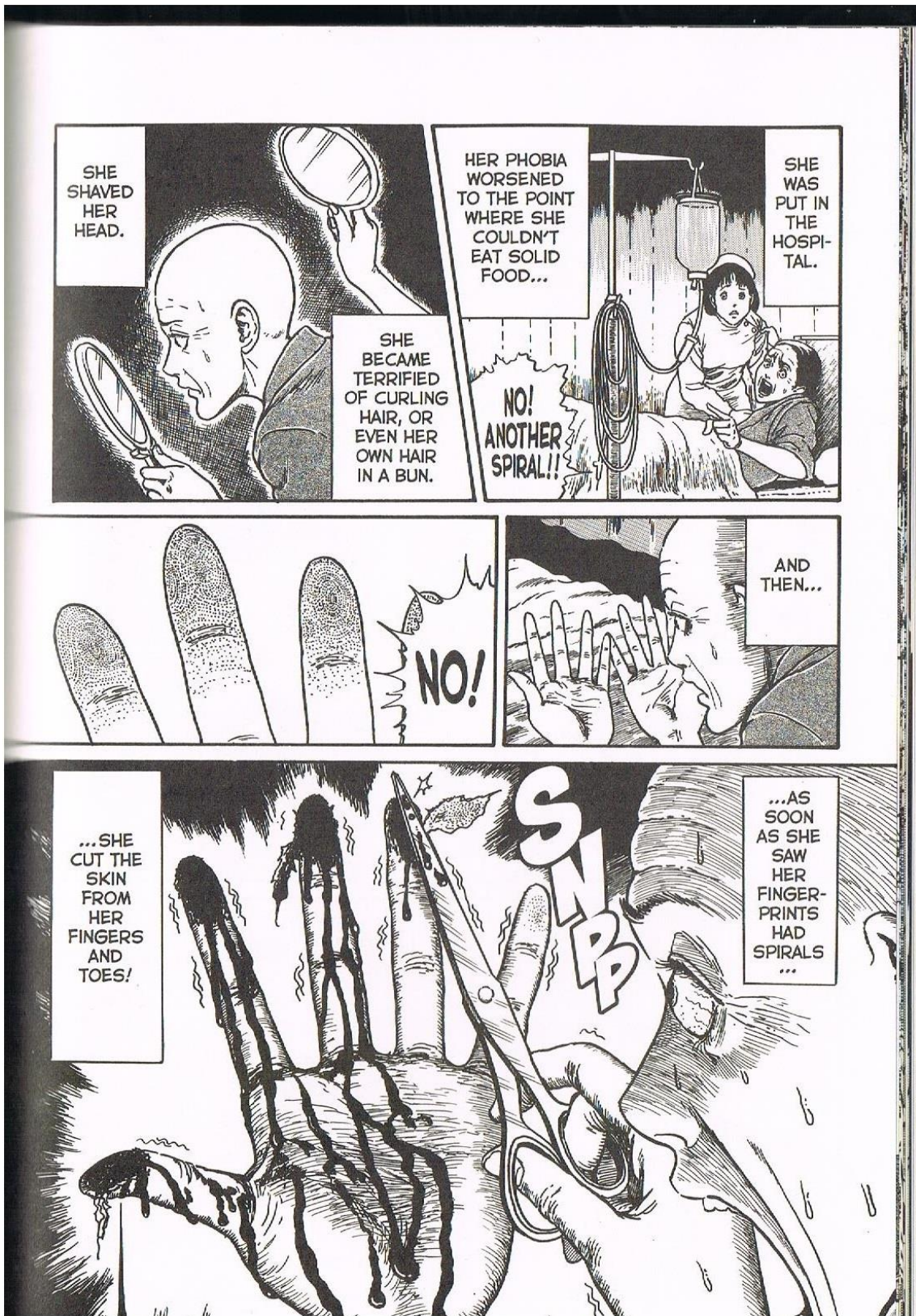


Image 13: A page from “The Spiral Obsessions Part 2” detailing the consequences of the character’s phobia of spirals.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Junji Ito, “The Spiral Obsession Part 2”, in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 52.

As explained in the video *Junji Ito - Spiral Into Horror | Monsters of the Week*:

“Step by step, chapter by chapter, increasingly menacing forms of the curse begin to infect and gradually blight the village. At first, nothing seems to connect these horrific incidents, aside from one common factor, the spiral. But as the story evolves, we witness how each chapter is part of a larger chain of events [...]”.⁶⁹

3.1 Chapter analysis and contextualization

The structure selected will provide a summary of the events of each chapter, continued with an explanation for their possible symbolism. Ito often uses his medium to satirize or comment on certain aspects of Japanese society, and in the following description it's going to be highlighted the several ways that the author uses to accomplish this task.

3.1.1 Chapter 6: “Medusa”

The chapter begins after a student fell to his death from the roof of the school. “[h]e’d been doing acrobatics on the handrail when he slipped.” The student was apparently showing off, trying to get people’s attention. Kirie is talking to her friend Sekino, saying how horrible it is for someone to die for something so crazy. Sekino, on the other hand, claims to understand how he must have felt. This presents the contrast between these two characters: Kirie doesn’t like to stand out while Sekino craves the attention of others.

⁶⁹ Ragnar Rox, *op. cit.*

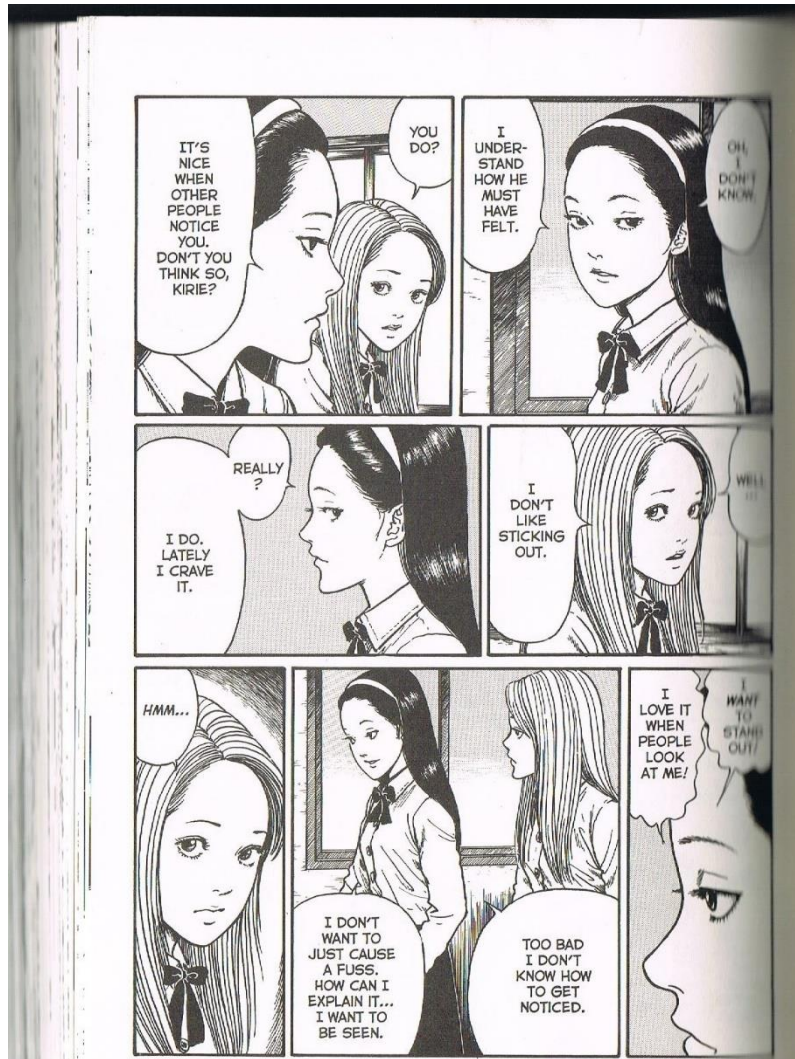


Image 14: Detail of a page from “Medusa”, showing the conversation between Kirie and Sekino.⁷⁰

Kirie tells her boyfriend Shuichi about what happened and he explains that people’s desire to attract attention is due to the influence of the spiral. “[i]t’s about Mesmerism. They both have the power to attract people.” Shuichi also remarks that Kirie’s hair is getting long, a seemingly off-hand comment that foreshadows the events of this chapter.

The following day Kirie sees that everyone is looking at her and her friend Sekino comments on her hair. It’s at this moment that Kirie notices her hair has not only grown, but has become curled. Any attempts to control the curls is futile, as the hair untangles itself when braided and attacks anyone who attempts to cut it, even Kirie herself.

⁷⁰ Junji Ito, “Medusa”, in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 173.



Image 15: Page from “Medusa” showing how Kirie’s hair attacks anyone who attempts to control it.⁷¹

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 180.

Kirie's hair has now begun to continuously grow and move, "[i]t swirled in place displaying its curls." The hair itself seems to crave the attention of crowds and has the power to mesmerize those who look at it. Sekino in particular takes notice of Kirie's hair and grows envious of it, taking it as a challenge to see who can get the most attention out of people. Kirie's hair also seems to control some of Kirie's actions, actively taking her to crowded places where it can be seen by more and more people. In the meantime, Kirie herself seems to also be affected by her own hair. She is drawn as being constantly sweating and tired, as if her hair is slowly draining her life as it grows.

The following day Sekino's hair has also become possessed by the spiral and now looks like Kirie's hair. It's unclear if Sekino actively sought to be possessed by the spiral or if the spiral was drawn to Sekino and her need for attention. The hairs of both girls seem to snarl menacingly at each other, fighting to become bigger and attract more attention. "[f]rom that day on the school was a battlefield. Neither her hair nor mine would budge, and the curls just displayed themselves more fiercely. Students and teachers left their classes and stared vacantly at the sight."



Image 16: Detail of a page from “Medusa”, showing the girls’ hairs battling for attention.⁷²

Both girls have now become visibly skinnier and more tired from the ordeal, though Sekino seems to have been more affected. This is not only because her face seems skinnier than Kirie’s, but also because she seems to have become consumed by rage and her own need to win this battle for attention. When Sekino reaches her breaking point she uses her hair to attack and strangle Kirie but her own hair lashes out in self-defense. At this moment Shuichi rushes in with a pair of scissors and cuts Kirie’s hair, releasing her from the spiral’s influence.

Victorious, Sekino walks away to attract the biggest crowd she can, but her hair continues to grow and drain her energy. She is now much more tired, skinnier and even starts to

⁷² Ibid., p. 190.

look ill. However, this doesn't stop her quest for more and more attention and, as her hair continues to grow into more spectacular shapes, Sekino eventually collapses and dies.

“Her hair remained on the telephone pole... Displaying itself for several hours.”

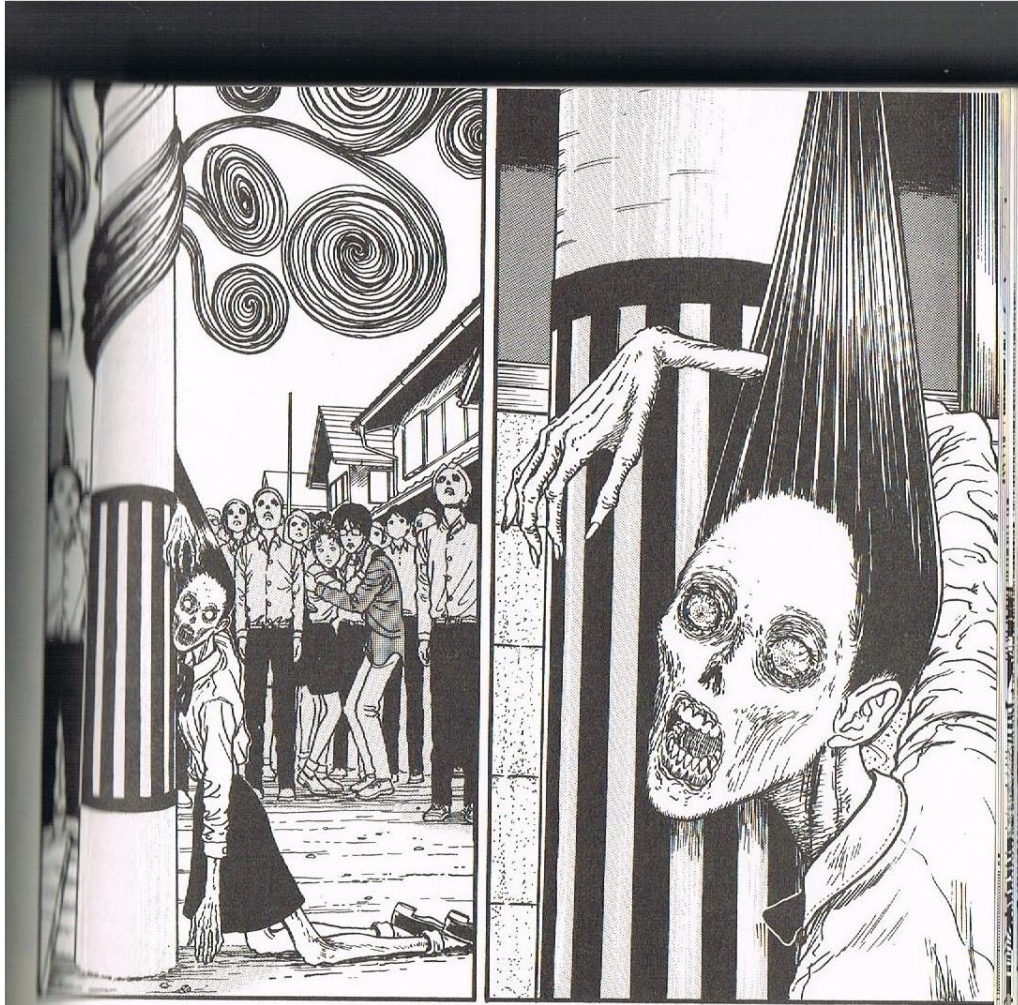


Image 17: Detail of a page from “Medusa”, showing Sekino’s death.⁷³

From the title of this chapter alone, we can see how the author often draws inspiration from western sources and myths, as Medusa is a Greek myth that is fairly well-known. An article from VICE provides a good summary of the myth of Medusa:

“Medusa was once a beautiful young maiden, the only mortal of three sisters known as the Gorgons. Her beauty caught the eye of the sea god Poseidon, who proceeded to rape her in the sacred temple of Athena. Furious at the desecration of her temple, Athena

⁷³ Ibid., p. 202.

transformed Medusa into a monster with the deadly capacity to turn whoever looked upon her face to stone.”⁷⁴

While the theme of the demonization of a beautiful woman, who fell victim to an atrocity she had no control over, can be a pertinent one for this chapter, it doesn't seem to be Ito's focus for it. Rather, the concept and themes of the myth of Medusa are present in this chapter only in the girls' hair, while the focus of the chapter lies in a completely different theme.

This chapter stands out because it seems to be a critique of the mentality of many teenage girls. While the fault lies more with the media aimed at young girls than the girls themselves, many teenage girls seem very focused on their appearance and on attracting attention from their peers.

This chapter showcases how harmful it can be for someone to focus too much on appearances and the opinions of others. This lust for attention that Sekino seems to have could stem from her own insecurities, although it could be argued that she may simply be egocentric. Since the reader is not given much information about Sekino's personality or life, either option could be correct. A parallel can be drawn between this chapter and modern life, mainly through the importance of appearances in modern social media culture. Some young girls have even been injured by modern fads, as occurred with what is known as the Kylie Jenner Challenge, in which girls, often younger than 17, would try to artificially plump their lips using a shot glass to look more like the reality television star Kylie Jenner.⁷⁵ The main problem with this challenge is that, “[n]ot only can significant pain, swelling, and bruising result from these suction techniques, but there is potential risk for scarring and permanent disfigurement with repeated attempts.”⁷⁶

The transformation of the hair and how it drains the girl's life can also be a metaphor for many real-life traumas young girls can go through. Particularly in Japanese culture, young girls are under a lot of pressure to be skinny and the beauty standards of Japan are very strict. The hair can be a metaphor for pretty clothes, makeup, the way young girls are

⁷⁴ Christobel Hastings, April 9th 2018, “The Timeless Myth of Medusa, a Rape Victim Turned Into a Monster”, in *VICE* [https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qvxwax/medusa-greek-myth-rape-victim-turned-into-a-monster]. Accessed on August 10th 2019.

⁷⁵ Justin Wm. Moyer, April 21st 2015, “Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge: The dangers of ‘plumping that pout’”, in *The Washington Post* [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/04/21/kylie-jenner-challenge-the-dangers-of-plumping-that-pout/>]. Accessed on July 25th 2019.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

expected to act, etc. But the way the hair slowly kills Sekino, as well as her appearance when she dies, can lead to believe the hair might be a more direct metaphor for anorexia. Nevertheless, in Ito's work many things are left to the reader's imagination.

“Although much of the world aspires towards a slender ideal of femininity, the pressure to be thin in Japan is uniquely strong,”⁷⁷ so much so, that in 2008 the Japanese government passed the controversial "Metabo law," which requires all people aged 40–75 to stay within certain waist measurements⁷⁸. This Japanese obsession with being thin comes from many socio-cultural aspects:

“Beginning in the 1980s, the number of patients with EDs has increased dramatically in Japan. According to acute inflation of AN in particular, several hypotheses from various fields, even the mass media, have emerged. Psychological, anecdotal, and social concerns have included ‘anorexigenic mothers’, mother/daughter connectivity over maternal culture in Japan, ‘Westernization of lifestyle,’ ‘satiation or engorgement,’ ‘feminist perspective such as male-dominated distortions,’ and ‘societal pressure for girls to be thin from fashion magazines, TV stars, idols, celebrities, etc.’”⁷⁹

Anorexia is a very prominent problem for Japanese women and girls. Uehara claims that “[t]he estimated point prevalence of AN was 4.79 per 100,000 females. Specifically, for the 15–29-year age group, the prevalence of AN was 17.1.”⁸⁰ While this seems like a relatively small number, it's important to note that these results come from a survey made to several hospitals. However, most anorexia sufferers visit clinics rather than hospitals and also, because Japanese society actively discourages people from discussing their problems, they are much less likely to try to get help. Therefore, the real percentage of anorexia sufferers in Japan is probably much higher⁸¹.

Because anorexia has become such a widespread problem in Japan, it's possible to believe that Junji Ito used this chapter as a way to criticize Japanese society's obsession with being thin and how harmful that obsession is for women and particularly for young girls.

⁷⁷ Sirin Kale, April 26th 2016, “Why Eating Disorders Are on the Rise in Japan”, in *VICE* [https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4xkjm3/why-eating-disorders-are-on-the-rise-in-japan]. Accessed on May 4th 2019.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Toru Uehara, November 16th 2016, “Past, Current and Future of Anorexia Nervosa in Japan”, in *Acta Psychopathologica* [<http://psychopathology.imedpub.com/past-current-and-future-of-anorexia-nervosa-in-japan.php?aid=7534>]. Accessed on May 4th 2019.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

3.1.2 Chapter 8: “The Snail”

The chapter begins with heavy rain. Kirie and her friend Shiho remark on how it hasn't rained in a while and whether or not a student named Katayama will come to class. Apparently, Katayama only comes to class when it's raining, but seems to be always late. We also see that Kirie now wears her hair short. After the events of Medusa Kirie never seems to let her hair grow back, as she is probably fearful that if she does the spiral will possess her hair again. Eventually Katayama shows up to class, soaking wet and very late. As the teacher scolds Katayama, he excuses himself saying he got up early for class but took a long time to arrive. At this point we see another student, a bully named Tsumura, making fun of Katayama.

As the day progresses and the students have other classes and activities, we are shown more examples of Katayama's slowness and physical ineptitude, as Tsumura continues to bully him. After gym class Tsumura and his friends go as far as to strip Katayama and drag him into the school's hallway, naked. It's here that we see that Katayama has a spiral shape forming on his back.



Image 18: A page from “The Snail” detailing Katayama’s slowness and the bullying he suffers.⁸²

As the days pass Katayama arrives progressively later to class, always soaking wet, but his back looks like it’s begun to swell up, forming a bigger and bigger spiral shape. Shiho

⁸² Junji Ito, “The Snail”, in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 240.

comments that the sight is very creepy and that Katayama looks like a snail. One day Katayama arrives to class by dragging himself on the floor, at this point we can see that a snail's shell has completely formed on his back. As the mutation progresses Katayama starts to be able to climb on walls like a snail and his eyes start to grow out of his head, like a snail's eyes. When the school attempts to contact Katayama's family we find out that he hasn't been home for several days and his parents refuse to believe the giant snail on the wall is their son.



Image 19: A page from “The Snail” showing a more advanced stage of Katayama’s metamorphosis.⁸³

Eventually the school builds a cage for the snail and begins to take care of him. The bully Tsumura continues to bully Katayama, poking the defenseless snail with a stick. “[h]e’s just a slug now! He’s not human anymore!”

⁸³ Ibid., p. 246.

As days go by Tsumura becomes consumed by an uncontrollable thirst and starts to become slower. More time passes and on another rainy day the teacher remarks that Tsumura has not been going to school for several days, it's here that we see him, fully turned into a snail, dragging himself up the school's walls. The school puts him in the same cage as Katayama, and Shiho remarks on the irony of the situation. "Tsumura was such a bully. But now... now they're getting along fine."

Much to the students' horror the snails begin to mate and, several days later, end up escaping from their cage. As Kirie, Shiho, and another male student follow the trail into the hills we see that the snails have laid eggs the size of tennis balls. The male student smashes the eggs and they try to find the escaped snails, with no success.

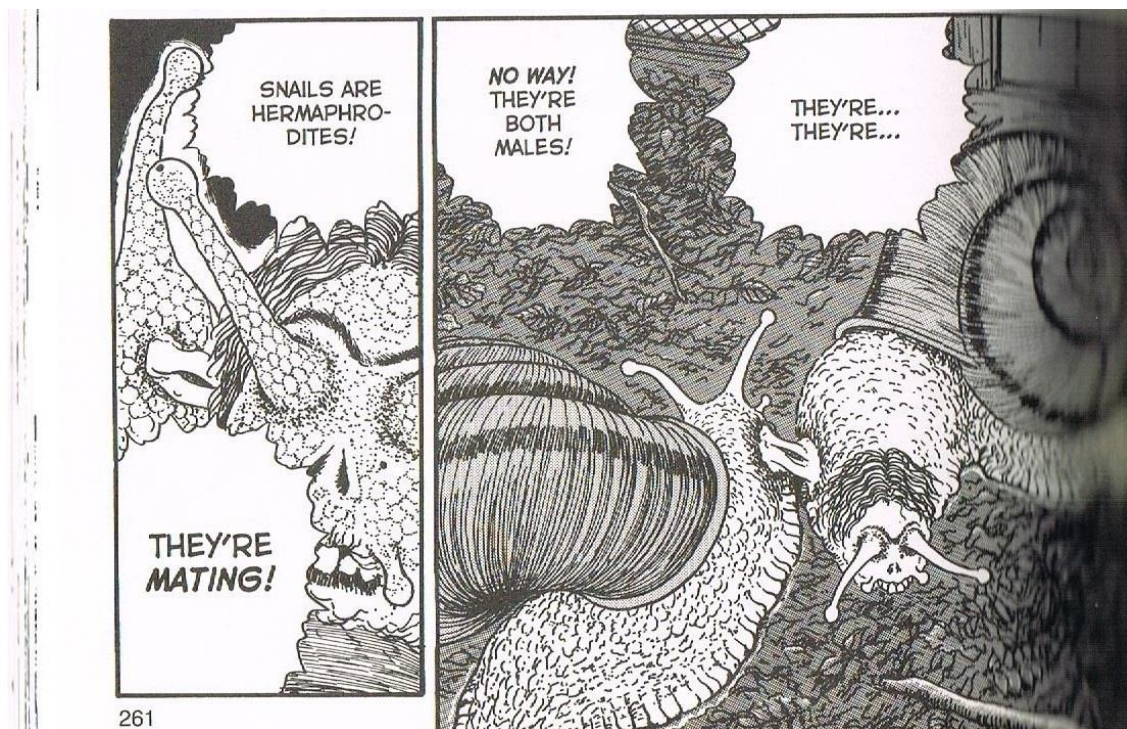


Image 20: Detail of a page from "The Snail" showing the two snails mating.⁸⁴

Several more days pass and, on another rainy day, the students look in horror at their teacher, who has himself also been turned into a snail. It's clear that this chapter is more abstract than Medusa, which can make it harder to interpret. It's interesting to note that this chapter shares some similarities with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, due to both works representing a character slowly turning into an animal, which in itself has inspired many works of horror. A comparison can also be made regarding the way that, both this

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 261.

chapter and the book, tackle how society regards and treats individuals who, despite not being guilty of doing anything particularly wrong, are ostracized and considered different. This differentiation is highlighted in both works through the physical transformation of the characters. This creates a certain connection between Eastern and Western cultures, considering that two cultures that can be so different have created works that share so many similarities. Nevertheless, Ito's intentions for this chapter were likely different from Kafka's intentions when writing *Metamorphosis*.

In the Japanese culture, punctuality is a very important thing. According to the Telegraph, this particular aspect of Japanese society is "embodied by the nation's entire transport system, which is so punctual you can normally tell the time by its arrivals and departures"⁸⁵. This helps us see one of the first "sins" Katayama is guilty of. He also seems to be guilty of laziness. Japanese schools seem to take great care in making sure that students are in good physical condition from a young age, and many Japanese people partake in *Rajio Taiso*⁸⁶, which are collective exercise routines that usually take place in the morning. Through this perspective it might seem that the author is punishing Katayama for not keeping up with what's expected of him as a student, but Ito's intentions go further than that.

We can see that the bully becomes a victim of the same fate as his victim, which places them on equal ground. Ito might have been trying to make a point about bullies when writing this chapter, more specifically that they also have their own flaws and insecurities, often picking on others for displaying the same characteristics they are so ashamed of, or to try to cope with their own shortcomings. In many works of fiction, and even in real life, there's the stereotype of the bully who torments a gay person as a way to try to hide or cope with their own homosexuality. Even though Tsumura never seems to bully Katayama for being a homosexual, and even taking into account that LGBT rights in Japan are relatively progressive by Asian standards (although LGBT people lack full legal equality)⁸⁷, that trope can still be applied to the scene where the snails are seen mating.

⁸⁵ Danielle Demetriou, May 16th 2018, "Why is Japan so obsessed with punctuality?", in *The Telegraph* [<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/articles/why-japan-so-obsessed-with-punctuality/>]. Accessed on May 4th 2019.

⁸⁶ Sanny Soedjatmiko Hartanto, December 23rd 2015, "Morning Exercise", in *Taiken Japan* [<https://taiken.co/single/morning-exercise/>]. Accessed on May 6th 2019.

⁸⁷ No author, July 7th 2016, "Japan's conservative ruling party cites 'gay rights' in manifesto in bid to burnish image overseas", in *South China Morning Post* [<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/1986665/japans-conservative-ruling-party-cites-gay-rights-manifesto-bid>]. Accessed on May 8th 2019.

It's possible that this particular trope was not placed in the chapter intentionally, especially considering Japan's surprisingly accepting views on homosexuality.

There is one aspect of Japanese society that is particularly relevant to this chapter. In 2013, Hideko Nagashima wrote an article that intended to raise awareness about a social phenomenon in Japan known as *ijime*.

“*Ijime* is a form of psychological abuse that makes victims feel trapped, anxious, threatened, inadequate, and excluded by the people around them (...). These victims receive a series of negative messages and actions of collaborative effort by a group of people, while no one else dares to defend them.”⁸⁸

Hideko details some of the actions that *ijime* consists of, such as physical and verbal violence, and many of them match Tsumura's actions. *Ijime* has become a very large problem in Japan, with many sufferers committing suicide and authority figures either not noticing *ijime* or doing nothing to stop it from happening⁸⁹. With this in mind, Ito might have been showcasing a case of *ijime* in the school, and punishing Tsumura for being the instigator, as well as the teacher for his inaction.

3.1.3 Chapter 10: “Mosquitoes”

The chapter begins in summertime, as the town seems to have been swarmed with mosquitoes. The mosquitoes in the town seem to be different from regular mosquitoes. “[t]hey would fly in drowsy spirals. Just watching them made you sleepy, and the next thing you knew, you were stung.”

⁸⁸ Hideko Nagashima, August 1st 2016, “Why is it difficult to stand up and voice opinions in Japan?”, in *World Pulse* [<https://www.worldpulse.com/community/users/hideko-n/posts/27682>]. Accessed on May 6th 2019.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*



Image 21: A page from “Mosquitoes” showing how mosquitoes make their victims sleep with spirals.⁹⁰

Kirie is in the hospital due to a burn accident from a previous chapter. We then see Kirie with Shiho they remark on what appears to be a whirlwind, but is in fact a “mosquito column”, which is a phenomenon that has begun to occur with male mosquitoes waiting to mate. On their way back to Kirie’s room, she spots a dead body of a woman with small holes all over her body.

⁹⁰ Junji Ito, “Mosquitoes”, in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 301.



Image 22: Detail of a page from “Mosquitoes”, showing the corpse Kirie finds.⁹¹

We then see a woman being brought to the hospital, as apparently many pregnant women have been victims of mosquito swarm attacks. This woman is Kirie’s cousin Keiko, who is also pregnant and has been attacked in a similar fashion. As Kirie helps unpack her cousin’s belongings she finds a strange object wrapped in cloth.

The next morning two more people were found dead, men this time. They were also covered in holes and all the blood seems to have been drained from their bodies, but nobody seems to have heard anything happening. Shuichi visits Kirie in the hospital and tells her to leave, as there’s something wrong with the hospital. In the meantime, Kirie’s cousin will be sharing the same room as her and Shuichi tells Kirie that she can’t allow that to happen but Kirie, of course objects to it. Shuichi then becomes so frightened by a mosquito that he douses the room in bug spray which deeply affects Keiko. Before being shoved out of the room, Shuichi remarks that only female mosquitoes drink blood.

That night Kirie notices a mosquito in the room and wonders if it’ll bother Keiko, who tells her that she doesn’t mind mosquitoes. In fact, she loves them. During the night Kirie hear a loud buzzing sound coming from the hallway and as she goes to investigate, she finds a large group of pregnant women who are staying in the hospital wandering the hallways in what seems to be a trance. They have all been visibly bitten by mosquitoes

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 304.

many times and are all carrying hand drills. The women go into different rooms and Kirie sees one of them drilling a man's throat to drink his blood.



Image 23: A page from “Mosquitoes” showing how the pregnant women attack their victims.⁹²

The woman sees Kirie and chases her, trying to kill her so she wouldn't tell anyone of what she saw. Another male patient wakes up and the pregnant women turn their attention towards him, one of them tracing a spiral in the air with her finger to make him fall asleep, much like the mosquito made Kirie fall asleep in the beginning of the chapter.

As all the women are attacking and drinking the man's blood, another woman who appears to be a nurse shows up, but she is also attacked and killed by the bloodthirsty group of pregnant women. This attack on the nurse, as well as the dead woman in the beginning, and the women's willingness to attack Kirie, makes it clear that the pregnant women won't exclusively attack men. Nevertheless, men appear to be the women's main target, as they seem to only kill women to avoid leaving behind any witnesses to their actions.

After the attack the women seem satisfied and return to their rooms. “[t]hat should be enough for tonight.” However, as they are about to leave the woman who was spotted by Kirie tells the group that she saw them and the group chase Kirie again. Kirie manages to barricade herself in her room, calling to her cousin for help. It's here that we see that Keiko has also been consumed by the same bloodlust as the other pregnant women, the object that Kirie saw wrapped in cloth before was a hand drill.

As the women break through the door and are about to attack, Kirie manages to grab a can of bug spray that Shuichi left behind. She sprays the group and manages to make them run away. The following morning all the carnage left behind had disappeared. It can be assumed that Kirie didn't mention the incident to anyone as she remarks “[w]ho would believe it was committed by pregnant women?”

The chapter ends with an ominous phrase: “[i]n several days, these babies nourished by human blood were about to be born!”

In this chapter the spiral curse was becoming more and more active in the town, therefore it might be more related to the way the curse manifests itself rather than offering any kind of significant social commentary. One might argue that this chapter is a critique on women, comparing them to mosquitoes who suck the life out of men. While this

⁹² Ibid., p. 319.

interpretation can be valid, it doesn't seem likely because Ito's stories are not character-centric.

This chapter seems to serve more as a way to present a scary idea, one of Ito's ever-captivating spectacles, in the context of the whole book. Unlike other chapters in *Uzumaki*, *Mosquitoes* doesn't seem to focus on a peculiarity of Japanese culture, or any other culture for that matter.

This chapter raises some interesting possibilities for one of the following chapters of the book, and the idea of mosquitoes being able to purposefully put people to sleep so they can sting them, as well as being able to change people into cannibalistic murderers who feed on human blood (almost like a new interpretation of the vampire mythos, through the representation of humans who feed on human blood, and which would create a connection between the two cultures that are being studied in this dissertation) is absolutely terrifying.

3.1.4 Chapter 11: "The Umbilical Cord"

This chapter begins at a time shortly after the previous chapter ended, which makes it one of the very few chapters in this manga that is directly related with the chapter that came before it.

In the beginning we see Kirie spying on her cousin, who has just gone into labor. Most of the pregnant women at the hospital were approaching the last month of their term and Kirie is understandably concerned about the fact that the babies had fed on human blood. Kirie had already tried to tell the hospital's director, among many other people, about the massacre, but nobody believed her. Despite the fact that no more murders took place, we find that the pregnant women were still drinking from blood packs in secret, including Kirie's cousin. Kirie wonders what "the baby gorged with human blood" looks like, but when she goes to see him, we find out that him, and all the babies born afterwards, are incredibly cute and sweet.

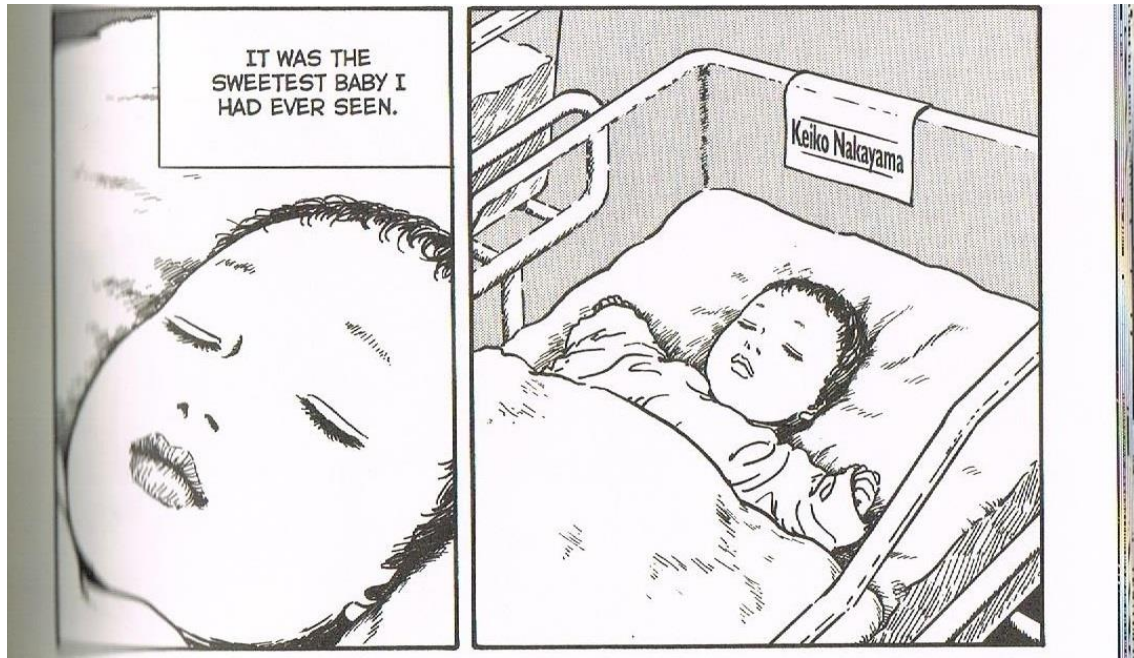


Image 24: Detail of a panel from “The Umbilical Cord” showing how sweet the babies look.⁹³

In the meantime, Kirie has been discharged from the hospital. She goes to say goodbye to her cousin Keiko who acts completely normal, as if the massacre at the hospital never happened. It’s unclear whether or not she remembers ever having killed anyone but, if she does remember, she doesn’t acknowledge it. It’s here that we also see that the baby’s belly is abnormally swollen and when Kirie remarks about this fact all the pregnant women suddenly look panicked, and we see that all the babies’ bellies are similarly swollen. The doctor tries to dismiss Kirie’s concern, telling her that they are simply wearing belly bands, but suddenly all of the babies start to cry. The sound pierces through Kirie’s ears and she runs away. As she does so, Kirie falls down a flight of stairs and has to stay in the hospital for another week.

Later the hospital staff brings food to Kirie’s room, telling her to try the mushrooms as they are delicious. The mushrooms have spiral shapes on them and Kirie says they taste like meat. Kirie never ate the mushrooms, but they soon became very popular, with everyone in the hospital slowly becoming addicted to them. As Kirie wanders the hospital she hears someone talking. She soon finds all the new-born babies, talking to each other about how they want to go back to “the warm place”. One of the babies says that Dr. Kawamoto can put them back in their mothers’ wombs and that Keiko’s baby will be the

⁹³ Junji Ito, “The Umbilical Cord”, in *Uzumaki Deluxe Edition*, VIZ Media LLC; 2013 p. 336.

first to be returned. The belly of one of the babies begins to swell and we see that the mysterious mushrooms are sprouting out of the babies themselves.

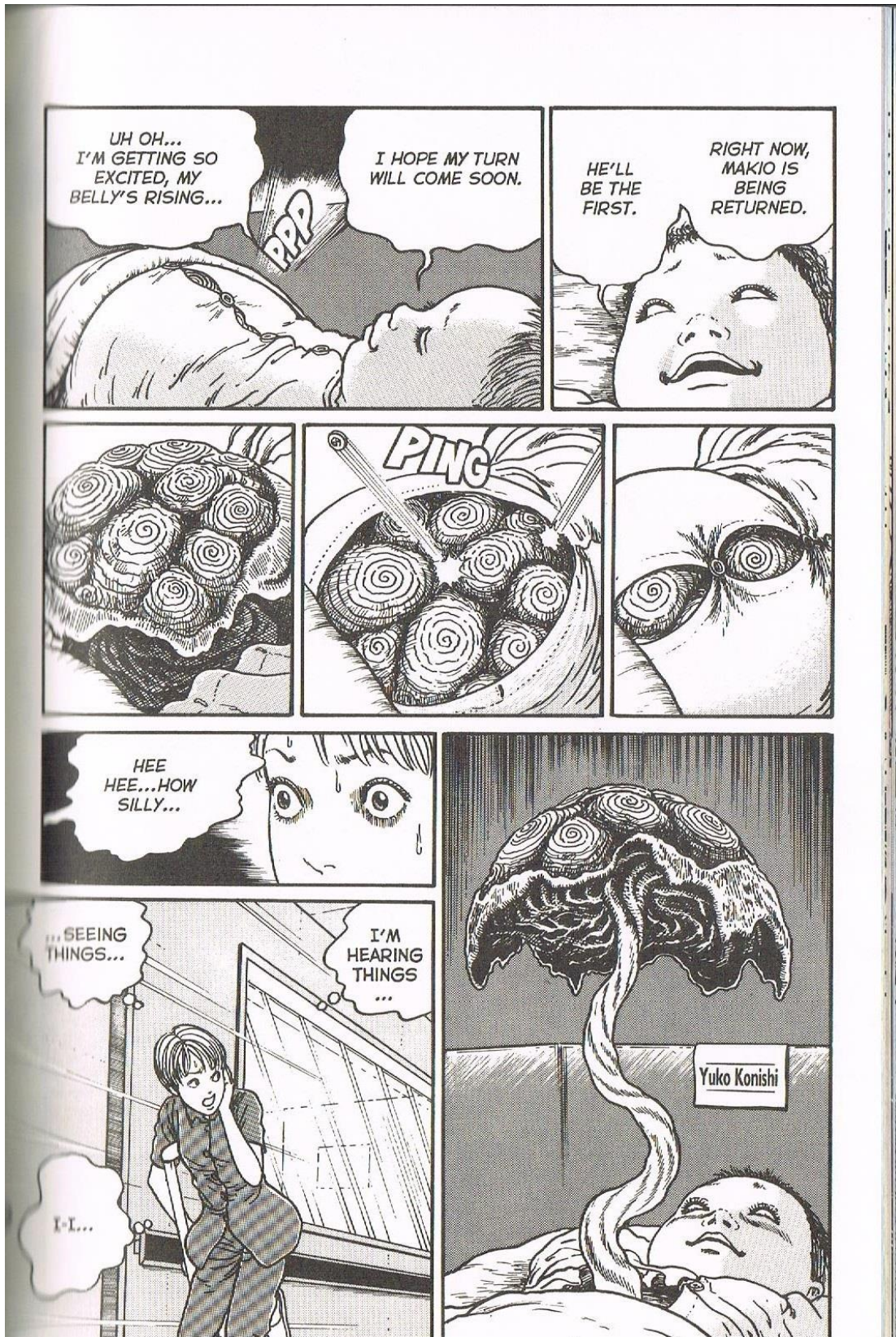


Image 25: A page from “The Umbilical Cord” showing the mushrooms growing from the baby’s belly.⁹⁴

Kirie hears her cousin’s screams through the hallways and while trying to find her she enters a room that has become infested with the spiral-covered mushrooms. We see Dr. Kawamoto exit an adjacent room, he seems to not be mentally well as he explains that cuteness is a weapon used to all baby mammals to get attention from adults, as they need them to survive, but the recently born babies want to remain fetuses forever. He goes on to explain that the “mushrooms” that are growing from the babies are in fact their umbilical cords that keep growing back to the point where they start to regrow the placenta. “[t]he placentas took root where we dropped them. Every bit of tissue started to grow.” Dr. Kawamoto explains that he ate one of the mushrooms and felt revitalized, so he started to feed them to the patients in the hospital so they would feel better too. He tells Kirie that her cousin and her child are in the adjacent room and that the operation was successful. When Kirie enters the room, she sees that her cousin has been operated on, her baby put back into her womb and the wound stitched shut. The doctor grabs Kirie, explaining that the mother will once again have to provide the baby with nutrition and for that she needs blood. Keiko’s tongue is now twisted into a large, hollow spiral and has thorns all over it.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 348.

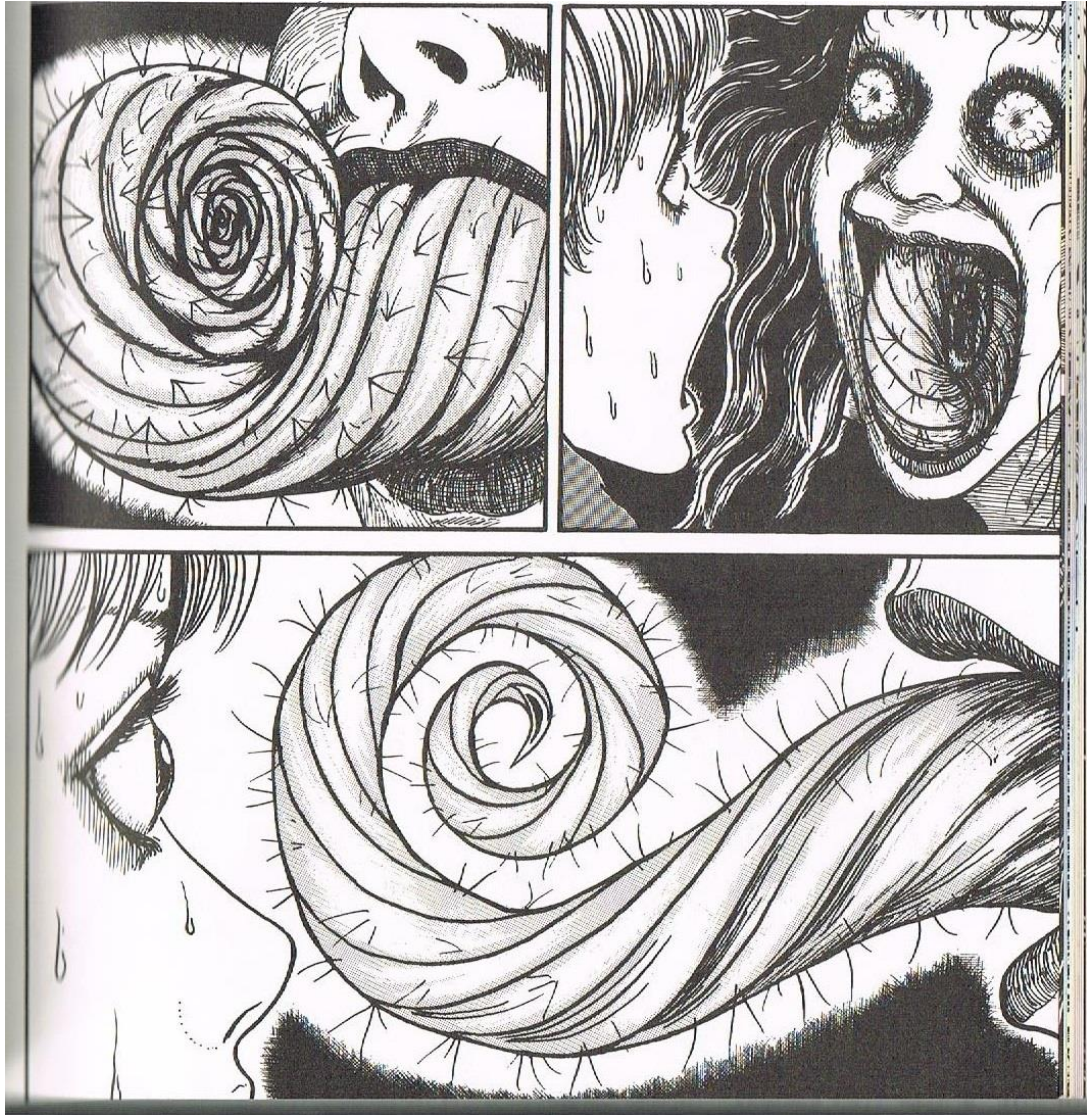


Image 26: Detail of a page from “The Umbilical Cord” detailing Keiko’s monstrous transformation.⁹⁵

Instead of striking Kirie, she strikes the doctor’s throat, sucking his blood and killing him instantly as Kirie escapes. As Keiko tries to pursue Kirie, two more patients enter the mushroom-infested room. They become too distracted eating the mushrooms to even bother trying to escape from Keiko. In the meantime, Kirie escaped the hospital. “I have no idea what happened there. I wasn’t about to go back to find out.”

This chapter establishes a connection with the previous one. It’s interesting to see that the mothers who fed on human blood gave birth to such strange babies. It’s important to note that the babies themselves are not particularly malicious, they simply want to go back into their mothers’ wombs and don’t seem to understand the harm in doing so.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 358.

The main criticism in this chapter seems to be directed towards the mothers and the doctor, for being active participants in allowing for such a thing to happen. It's possible that the author might have been trying to make some sort of statement about overbearing mothers and about children who rely too much on their mothers. However, in Japanese culture, when it comes to newborn babies and toddlers, it's normal, and indeed expected, that mothers maintain as much physical proximity to their children as possible (a practice that originated the term "skinship") in order to maintain a close nurturing bond between mother and child⁹⁶.

When children become a bit older, Japanese parents tend to place a particular emphasis on the importance of developing interpersonal relationships and teach their children how to interact with others⁹⁷. This is achieved primarily through their mothers, who teach and nurture qualities such as kindness (*yasashisa*), empathy (*omoiyari*), sensitivity (*sensai*), and politeness (*reigi tadashii*) in their children, as well as help them learn to avoid bothering others (*meiwaku kakenai youni*) and to fit into society⁹⁸.

With all of this in mind, it can be considered very strange that Ito would try to directly criticize motherhood and children in the Japanese society. Much like the previous chapter, it's more likely that the author is simply exploring a scary idea and letting his imagination flow, rather than trying to provide any concrete form of criticism. Ito simply wished to explore the repercussions that would arise from the babies that have been fed with human blood in the previous chapter. It is also interesting that Keiko became even more like a mosquito after her baby was placed back inside her wound, which is showcased by her tongue that has become hollow, like a mosquito's stinger.

There's no denying that the spectacle of horror is becoming more prevalent at this point in the manga, much like in the previous chapter, here the author seems more focused on showing us creative and gruesome imagery, than necessarily making any grand statements about his own society or culture.

⁹⁶ Caudill, W., & Plath, D. (1966), "Who sleeps by whom? Parent-child involvement in urban Japanese families", in *Psychiatry*, 29, p. 344–366.

⁹⁷ Hess, R. D., Kashiwagi, K., Azuma, H., Price, G. G., & Dickson, W. P. (1980), "Maternal expectations for mastery of developmental tasks in Japan and the United States", in *International Journal of Psychology*, 15, p. 259–271.

⁹⁸ Helaine Selin (2014), *Parenting Across Cultures Childrearing, Motherhood and Fatherhood in Non-Western Cultures*, Springer Netherlands, p. 66.

From the analysis of this work we can see examples of most tropes Junji Ito uses in his work. From his gruesome representations of body horror, to his constant representations of the uncanny and the psychological torture he puts his characters through. The author is not afraid to criticize aspects of his own culture, but doesn't rely solely on them for inspiration. In *Uzumaki* we can see an interesting mixture of eastern and western sources of inspiration that were used by the author, such as in Medusa where Ito was inspired by a western myth to critique Japan's strict beauty standards.

The variety of themes Junji Ito approaches, his peculiar way of drawing and writing horror, as well as his unique use of his medium, bring a sense of fascination to all of his works, as well as a unique perspective on eastern and western horror tropes, even if, as is the case with many works by many authors, his work can come with its own shortcomings.

CHAPTER II – *THE WITCH* – AMERICAN HORROR FILM

For Western Horror the selection fell over *The VVitch: A New England Folk Tale* as a case study. *The VVitch* was one of the first films to be made in the subtle style that would become the staple of modern horror films, while still showcasing a theme that is, and has always been, relevant and common in western cultures, witchcraft. *The VVitch* is one of the films that has paved the way for many groundbreaking horror films that have come out in the last decade, and this is one of the main reasons why it was chosen as a case study for this dissertation.

The VVitch was released in 2015, directed by Robert Eggers and is about a Puritan family in 17th century New England that is expelled from their plantation and the supernatural malevolent forces they encounter while trying to rebuild their life on a farm. On Rotten Tomatoes (a website that provides ratings for films based on official critical reviews, as well as reviews from fans) the film has a critical approval rating of 90%, but the audience score is only 57%. The film's IMDB page also shows that the film's overall score is 6,8 out of 10. The film's mixed reviews showcase the mentality of the audience of the time. *The VVitch* came out at a time when a different type of modern horror movies were just starting to be released. Most audiences were not used to that kind of film. Because of that, some of the film's most subtle details went unnoticed. Another reason why the film got so many negative and neutral reviews is due to the fact that most people will post reviews after watching a film for the first time. However, *The VVitch* is the kind of film that has to be watched at least twice, because when watching it a second time, the information the viewer already has about what happens allows them to pay attention to different details and find new information and nuances that previously went unnoticed.

Before going into more details about the film, it will be presented a brief definition and history of Western Horror, and American Horror more specifically, as well as more information about the director and his work. This structure will help provide a better understanding of the evolution of horror in Western and American cultures and hopefully it will show the origins of some of the most popular trends in Western Horror, the origin of said trends, and how horror films have evolved to become what they are today.

1 Defining Western and American Horror

In the beginning of this dissertation, it was established that horror cannot truly be defined, and attempting to define Western Horror can be much more difficult than defining Eastern

Horror due to its familiarity. Often that which is more familiar can seem more obvious, which leaves most people with a feeling that it doesn't require an explanation.

As is the case with any culture, the horror presented in American works has changed over time to reflect the fears and anxieties of the American society in different time periods, but American Horror has always presented a few tropes that are common to many different works, especially in more recent films. According to Patton Sullivan, Western Horror, while being more realistic than Eastern horror, is a lot more direct about scaring the audience, but the films often lack subtlety and count on jump scares or fast-paced orchestra scores to scare the audience⁹⁹. Another technique popularized by Western horror is "shock horror", which uses polarizing imagery or scenes to disgust and surprise the audience¹⁰⁰. There are many examples of American Horror films that use these tropes, including, but not limited to, slasher films that first became popular in the 80s but whose tropes have continued to be used in many modern horror films, such as *Friday the 13th*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. To be more specific, the trope that is most common to these films and that has been reused repeatedly, is the figure of a large, often supernatural, killer, who is also exclusively male and seemingly invincible. Once again, Patton Sullivan explained it better: "To sum up, Western horror has a tradition of counting on gruesome deaths or more direct means to scare the audience. Of course, that is not to say that all Western horror is like that."¹⁰¹

Just like Japanese Horror, American Horror has evolved through the years and has gone through many different phases. Its popularity began in the early 1930s, during the Great Depression and after World War I (from 1929 to 1939). In this time period American audiences were looking for an outlet for catharsis and a source of distraction¹⁰². It was during this time that some of the most popular and effective horror tropes were first used, mostly for budgetary reasons. As explained by Wisecrack:

"Some of the most groundbreaking horror films were those that found cheap ways to effectively generate thrills. In the early 1930s, many long-lasting elements of the horror

⁹⁹ Patton Sullivan, August 17th 2018, "Cultural Differences: Eastern Vs Western Horror", in *Morbidly Beautiful* [<https://morbidlybeautiful.com/eastern-vs-western-horror/>]. Accessed on May 28th 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Wisecrack, February 23rd 2019, "How HORROR Movies Changed – Wisecrack Edition", in *Youtube* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqW_ElEnLGI]. Accessed on May 28th 2019.

aesthetic were born, and were a product of financial limitations - spooky shadows required fewer lights and relatively sparse use of sound kept budgets down.”¹⁰³

There were many different central themes represented in horror films over the years, each representing the American society’s most central fears. In the 50s, for example, the most central themes in horror films represented the fear of the atomic bomb and outer space, mixing sci-fi with already established horror conventions.¹⁰⁴ The 1960s were also a very important time for American Horror. During this decade the focus of horror was in relatable villains, as showcased in films like *Psycho*, and societal commentary, such as *Rosemary’s Baby* which was about women’s subordination to their husbands’ will, and *Night of the Living Dead* which used zombies to comment on everything from the relentless conformity of consumerism, to the violence of the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁵ During this decade audiences also had their first taste of real gore in horror films, with the creation of the first Splatter Films.¹⁰⁶ The 60s were a time of great social changes, which inspired the new types of horror films that came out during the decade. “[...] this year witnessed the height of the counterculture, as backlash against Vietnam, sexism, and racism fused to destabilize everything society had taken for granted.”¹⁰⁷

In the 80s we saw the rise of the “slasher film” with many different franchises. These films were more violent than anything made before and were often used as moralistic warnings¹⁰⁸. Once again, Wisecrack explains it better: “These films had a familiar formula, hot teenagers in isolated locations being targeted by psycho-killers. The carefree teens would be engaged in recreational drug use or premarital sex only to be killed by the slasher for failing to just say no.”¹⁰⁹ The 90s didn’t change the Horror Film formula that was popularized in the 80s in any significant way, but many films of this time satirized said formula, and the self-referential nature of many of the horror films of this decade would help dub it as “postmodernism.”¹¹⁰

Finally, in the early 2000s we saw the rise of “found footage” and “torture porn” horror films. Examples include *The Blair Witch Project*, which was considered the first found

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

footage film that exploited the novelty of technological changes of the time, and the *Saw* franchise, a series of torture porn films that were created because of the United States' increased fear of terrorism, as well as its complicated and mixed reaction to the military's enhanced interrogation, or torture, and increased government surveillance.¹¹¹ There were also many zombie films made during this time. These themes mirrored many of the greatest fears of the American society of the time, such as “the growing unease in a world that was increasingly taking place on camera”, the horrors of 9/11, and terrorism in general.¹¹²

The VVitch was released in 2016, and as such, fits into the same category as many recent horror films.

“Lately, horror has been catering to a generation of adults living in great financial and social instability, as if predicting that the Great Recession generation will have plenty of “unknown” to scream at as they face down the barrel of stagnating wages, student loan debts, and shitty health care.”¹¹³

Horror today is becoming very explicit about the horrors that can be present in family relationships (such as *The Babadook*, *Goodnight Mommy*, and *Hereditary*, all of which explore the horrors of motherhood), female sexuality and misogyny (such as *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, which confronts both Iranian and American brands of misogyny, and *Raw*, which uses themes of cannibalism to address female sexuality,) and racism (such as *Get Out*, which depicted a black man appropriately frightened by a brain-swapping white family, and *The First Purge*, which directly addresses the United States' history of scientific experimentation on people of color).¹¹⁴

Many modern horror films are using the same tropes as many of the horror movies of the past. The main difference is that they are presenting these tropes in a completely different and more clever way. As a result, when these kinds of films first appeared many members of the audience were not used to the way these films were made. Some films and TV shows are also tapping into the horrors of mental illness, showing seemingly paranormal events that may or may not be taking place only the characters' heads. This is the case in the film *Oculus* and in the TV show *The Haunting of Hill House* (which make use of the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

characters' own mental illnesses to give the audience a feeling of doubt), as well as the film *Last Shift* (which uses isolation and its effects on the human mind as a source of horror). *The Haunting of Hill House* is particularly of note, since it does show events that are completely paranormal, but it does so in a way that gives off a feeling of uncertainty over whether or not certain events are paranormal or psychological in nature.

This analysis of horror film history and tropes will help understand how *The VVitch* differs from the horror films that were mostly still being made at the time of its release, and before moving on to the analysis of the film, it's important to also provide some details about the director of the film.

2 The Director and His Work

Robert Eggers was born in New England, in 1983, and from a young age the historical past of New England was very much a part of his consciousness. "[...] it's easy to see that New England's past is kind of everywhere. There's dilapidated colonial farmhouses and graveyards out in the middle of the woods".¹¹⁵ Much like Junji Ito, Eggers was also easily scared as a child, however he always felt attracted to some horror films and certain aspects of horror. As a child he would also create his own stories with his friends about the witches and the houses in their neighborhood.¹¹⁶ In his interview with *Vice*, Eggers explains that he was always attracted to witches and they were the source of his earliest nightmares as a child, especially the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*¹¹⁷. He would also often visit a school library in Lee, New Hampshire to look at a series of books about supernatural monsters, such as vampires, ghosts, and werewolves¹¹⁸.

The VVitch: A New England Folk Tale was Robert Eggers' directorial debut. This makes it hard to truly be able to understand and explain his style of directing and the way he works with his medium. However, Eggers did direct two other short films before working

¹¹⁵ *Vice*, February 20th 2016, "Robert Eggers on 'The Witch', Familial Trauma, and the Supernatural", in *Youtube* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGNrHzCXpTM>]. Accessed on June 3rd 2019.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

on *The VVitch: an adaptation of Hansel and Gretel* in 2007¹¹⁹, and an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* in 2008¹²⁰.

From his previous work it's possible to conclude that Eggers seems to enjoy working with stories that can be considered classics of horror and with fairy-tales. This can also be inferred from watching and reading his interviews, as he has claimed to be "as much influenced by Ingmar Bergman as by H. P. Lovecraft and *The Exorcist*"¹²¹ and he also claimed to want to explore the complicated family dynamics that help make fairy tales scary¹²².

When making *The VVitch*, Eggers' main goal was to create a Puritan's nightmare and tell an archetypal New England horror story¹²³. In order to achieve that, it seems he wanted to make the film as authentic and historically accurate as possible. As he explained in his interview with TimeOut: "If I couldn't really transport audiences into that world, then I couldn't transport audiences into that mindset, and then the witch isn't real and the movie's not worth doing".

To achieve this goal, Eggers didn't rely only on his own knowledge of his hometown and its history. He used many accounts of how the Puritans would have lived in that time period, such as European paintings, English woodcuts, children's fairytales, literature and other key historic sources¹²⁴. For example, the typography and spelling of the film's title design was adapted from a Jacobean witchcraft pamphlet and the flowing lettering of the film's subtitle was modelled on the first printed publications of English poet, John Milton.¹²⁵ This also explains why the film's title is spelled "The VVitch", instead of "The Witch", as it is pertinent to stay true to the director's intention.

¹¹⁹ No author, no date, "Hansel and Gretel (2007)", in *IMDb* [<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1482859/>] accessed on June 3rd 2019.

¹²⁰ No author, no date, "The Tell-Tale Heart (2008)", in *IMDb* [<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1330057/>]. Accessed on June 3rd 2019.

¹²¹ No author, March 21st 2016, "Robert Eggers on The Witch", in *TimeOut* [<https://www.timeout.com/sydney/film/robert-eggers-on-the-witch>]. Accessed on June 3rd 2019.

¹²² Vice, op. cit.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Saige Walton (2018), "Air, Atmosphere, Environment: Film Mood, Folk Horror and *The VVitch*", in *Academia.edu* [https://www.academia.edu/36349052/_Air_Atmosphere_Environment_Film_Mood_Folk_Horror_and_The_VVitch_], p. 2. Accessed on June 3rd 2019.

¹²⁵ Jessica Bloom, March 15th 2016, "Designer-Turned-Director Robert Eggers Discusses his Horror Film *The Witch*", in *Format Magazine* [<https://www.format.com/magazine/features/design/the-witch-robert-eggers-movie-interview>]. Accessed on June 3rd 2019.

WINNER
BEST DIRECTOR
sundance

THE VVITCH

A New-England Folktale

EVIL TAKES MANY FORMS



2016 THEWITCH-MOVIE.COM

R

Image 27: An official poster for the film, showing the spelling and lettering of the title.¹²⁶

Eggers also recreated how the Puritan characters would have talked, going as far as to write the script in a dialect of Old English.¹²⁷ In his interview with VICE, Eggers explained:

“I researched the grammar and the vocabulary. I had various books about how to do the structure but then it was mainly going through primary source materials and writing down sentences, phrases that worked, and I sort of catalogued them in different modes of emotional states or situations or actions [...].”¹²⁸

He also mentioned in that same interview that many of the things that the children say when they're possessed are things that children were reported to have said when they were possessed¹²⁹. Saige Walton explains these historically accurate aspects of the film in greater detail in her dissertation *Air, Atmosphere, Environment: Film Mood, Folk Horror and The VVitch*. In it, she explains:

“While the film itself was shot on location in Canada, the family’s thatched farmhouse was reconstructed from surviving plans of one of the oldest timber houses in New England. Even the film’s handheld lanterns are designed to emulate the antique effect of light refracted through translucent animal horn”¹³⁰

From these examples, it’s easy to see Eggers’ fondness for the project and the history of his hometown. There are more examples of his thorough attention to detail, but that will be discussed further in this chapter as they appear in the analysis of the film.

Now that the director’s style and inspirations have been established, the next section will focus on the analysis of the film, its characters, and the main themes presented in it. There will also be an emphasis on supposed paranormal events that take place in the film, and how many of them can be rationally explained by real world phenomena and how their being interpreted as demonic influence can stem from the hysteria that was prevalent in Puritans at the time because of the strictness of their beliefs.

¹²⁶ No author, no date, “The VVitch (2015)”, in *IMDb* [<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4263482/>]. Accessed on July 30th 2019.

¹²⁷ Vice, op. cit.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Saige Walton, op. cit.

3 Case Study – *The VVitch*

While also analyzing the film's more subtle aspects and the different ways the director's own culture and background shaped the final product, this chapter will also be commenting on different aspects of the film that make it stand out from what was considered the norm in horror films at the time. Before moving on to the analysis of the film itself however, it's important to provide some context about the people and the time period that the film portrays.

As mentioned previously, *The VVitch* follows a Puritan family in 17th century New England. During that time and in that location, accusations of witchcraft were common. Over 150 men and women (mostly women) were killed during the Salem witch trials and many historians view witch hunting as something that led to paranoia and mass hysteria.¹³¹ At this time religion held a very powerful control over society and Puritans in particular lived by a very strict set of beliefs and code of conduct, which came from the Old Testament.¹³² Throughout the film it's possible to see some of these beliefs and it also becomes clear that many of the characters are sinful. These instances will be pointed out as they appear in the film.

The film begins with a close-up of the main character Thomasin. Her family is being judged for an unspecified transgression committed by her father William, which ends up leading to the whole family being banished from their plantation. The family is made up of seven members: the father and patriarch William, his wife Katherine, their eldest daughter Thomasin (who is also the oldest of all their children), their son Caleb, fraternal twins Jonas and Mercy, and the baby Samuel.

In the first minutes of the film we can already see the sin William is guilty of, and even his judges accuse him of it: prideful conceit. William is defiant towards the unnamed authority figures who are judging him, despite being fully aware of the consequences. He seems to believe himself superior and more knowledgeable of the word of God than his judges, stating "I cannot be judged by false Christians, for I have done nothing save

¹³¹ Ryan Hollinger, March 17th 2016, "The Witch (2016) - Explained", in *Youtube* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86mDPE1le9E>]. Accessed on June 15th 2019.

¹³² *Ibid.*

preach Christ's true gospel"¹³³, and even responding with "I would be glad on it"¹³⁴ when his family is sentenced to banishment. William is ultimately responsible for all the terrible things that happen to him and his family, all because of his pride. William's reaction in the trial is contrasted by his daughter's, who looks up at the judges with a scared, pleading expression.



Image 28: Close-up of Thomasin at the trial.¹³⁵

There are other instances in the film where William's pride becomes clear. For example, in one scene we see the family praying before a meal, with William in the middle of the frame with the fireplace burning behind him. As Ryan Hollinger explained in his analysis of the film: "The image of [William] praying to God, while looking very much like our depiction of Jesus, goes as far as to perpetuate his sinful pride and vanity even further, as if he himself has become his own false idol."¹³⁶

¹³³ *The Witch*. 2016. [Film]. Robert Eggers. dir. Canada: Parts and Labor, RT Features, Maiden Voyage Pictures, Mott Street Pictures, Rooks Nest Entertainment.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.



Image 29: William and his family praying.¹³⁷

After their banishment, the family finds a clearing outside a forest where they settle and begin to build a farm. Despite being an apparently happy moment for the family, the music that accompanies this scene is sharp and ominous, the type of crescendo that would come before a jumpscare in other horror films of the time. However, in *The VVitch*, whenever music like this is used it's usually to create a tense atmosphere and there is never a jumpscare after it. In fact, *The VVitch* is one of the few horror films that doesn't have any jumpscares at all.

The film cuts to Thomasin praying to God for forgiveness, as she believes herself to be guilty of many sins. She says:

“I confess I’ve lived in sin. I’ve been idle with *me* work, disobedient of *me* parents, neglectful of *me* prayer. I have, in secret, played upon thy Sabbath, broken every one of thy commandments in thought, followed the desires of mine own will and not the Holy Spirit. I know I deserve all shame and misery in this life and everlasting hellfire. But I beg thee, for the sake of thy Son, forgive me. Show me mercy.”¹³⁸

This prayer shows a lot about Thomasin and her personality. She claims to be guilty of many things that are considered sins in Puritan beliefs, sins so severe that she deserves eternal damnation for them. However, her actions and thoughts seem to be quite normal

¹³⁷ *The VVitch*, op. cit.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

for a teenage girl such as Thomasin. From this prayer it's possible to conclude that Thomasin is struggling with her own identity and everything she has been taught by her parents. This internal struggle and Thomasin's own strong personality will become apparent in other occasions throughout the film.

It is at this point in the film that the first great tragedy, of which there are many, falls upon the family. Thomasin is asked to look after her baby brother Samuel and plays a game of peek-a-boo with him. As she uncovers her eyes while playing with the baby, we see her facial expression slowly and subtly change as she realises the baby has simply vanished. The family never sees the baby again, but the audience is shown a figure in a red cloak carrying the baby away through the forest. This figure turns out to be the witch that lives in the forest. The following scene is better explained by Saige Walton, who wrote: "This time the witch takes the form of a naked crone, pounding out flesh against a block of wood. Rather than making the violence fully visible, it is the mater of sound that brings horror to the fore."¹³⁹

This scene shows one of the many things people believed witches did at the time, grind up the flesh and bones of innocents to concoct ointments for her flight to the Sabbath¹⁴⁰. It's also important to note that "Sam was not baptised and all babies are born with sin, hence Samuel's kidnaping by the witch."¹⁴¹ This is ultimately William's fault, since the family's banishment meant that Samuel was not able to receive any sacraments.

Katherine is devastated with her son's disappearance, having been crying and praying since the baby vanished. The family seems to have blamed Samuel's disappearance on a wolf and has looked for him for about a week, but ended up giving up the search. As William explains to Caleb while talking to him in the family's corn field: "If not a wolf, then hunger would have takin him yet."¹⁴² It's also here that we see for the first time that the corn the family has been planting is dying, as William holds a cob that is covered in black kernels. This is supposed to be taken as a sign of demonic forces slowly taking over the farm. Because of this, William takes Caleb hunting to provide food for his family, as is a man's duty in a Puritan household. While hunting we see that William is trying to teach Caleb to be a proper man and an authority figure in the household, presumably for

¹³⁹ Saige Walton, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Brenda S. Gardenour Walter, *Our Old Monsters: Witches, Werewolves and Vampires from Medieval Theology to Horror Cinema*, Jefferson: McFarland Press, 2015, p. 92.

¹⁴¹ Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.

¹⁴² *The VVitch*, op. cit.

when he is older and will have to provide for the family. William is teaching Caleb religious passages that claim he was born in sin and that he has a corrupt nature because of Adam's sin. This lesson makes Caleb concerned that Samuel was also born a sinner and, being unbaptised, will burn in hell for all eternity. Caleb is also concerned for his own salvation as, according to his Puritan beliefs, he holds evil in his heart, and fears God might not hear his prayers. William tries to reassure Caleb, telling him that they must have faith in God and that they will pray for his brother's salvation.

In this scene we also see another one of the film's recurring themes, which is the questioning of William's masculinity and ability to provide for his family. As they traverse the forest, they spot a hare and when William tries to kill it, his gun backfires and the gunpowder burns his eyes. William is not severely injured, but was unable to catch any food for his family. This scene is of particular interest because, in western European folklore, the hare is known as one of the witch's animal familiars or else the witch herself, metamorphosed.¹⁴³ Thomasin will also see this same hare in a later scene of the film.

The film cuts back to the farm, where we see the twins Jonas and Mercy are playing with the farm's goat instead of helping with the chores. They are chasing the goat around, calling him Black Phillip, and singing a song about him. This song will end up being an important omen and a sign that the devil is beginning to influence the twins and possess them. Black Phillip is a particularly important character in the film, as Ryan Hollinger explains: "[m]any people may assume that it's the witch that's influencing the family, causing the crops to die and making the animals act weird. In reality it isn't. It's actually the work of Black Phillip, who is in fact the real antagonist of the film."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Saige Walton, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Ryan Hollinger, *op. cit.*



Image 30: The twins and Black Phillip.¹⁴⁵

William and Caleb arrive back at the farm and William tries to push the goat away from the children, as it was becoming nervous and could potentially hurt them. Katherine is angry that William and Caleb disappeared to the forest during the morning and ends up lashing out at Thomasin for not watching the twins. She attempts to defend herself, but there is ultimately nothing she can do as a young woman. Katherine seems to be projecting her grief towards her daughter and being overly protective of her remaining children after Samuel's disappearance. To try to calm her down, Caleb lies to her and tells her they went looking for apples to surprise her, as he thought he had seen an apple tree, and that they took the rifle as a means of precaution in case they saw the wolf who supposedly took Samuel.

There are other instances where we see Katherine be very hostile towards Thomasin. On the aforementioned scene where the family is praying before a meal, Katherine accuses Thomasin of stealing or losing a silver cup that belonged to Katherine's father. The cup has been missing for some time and the audience knows from a previous scene that it was William who took the cup and sold it, but he remains silent as he is too proud to admit his actions, only revealing them to Katherine much later and after letting Thomasin be blamed for it for what seems to be days.

¹⁴⁵ *The VVitch*, op. cit.

The film then cuts to a scene of Thomasin and Caleb by a brook near the farm. Thomasin is washing clothes while Caleb gathers water in a bucket and the camera lingers for a moment on Thomasin's breasts, showcasing Caleb's viewpoint. This is not the first scene in the film where this has happened and it's used to symbolize that Caleb is guilty of the sin of lust, a sin that will ultimately kill him. It can be said that Caleb might also be guilty of having incestuous thoughts for his sister, but it could be argued that Caleb's apparent attraction for his sister is not so simple. It's safe to say that Caleb, being a young boy, would be reaching puberty and discovering his sexual desires for women in general. With the farm being so far away from civilization, Thomasin is the only young woman that Caleb interacts with, hence his apparent desire for her. It's not that Caleb feels specifically attracted to his sister, but he has no other young women around him that could be an alternative.

After the two siblings talk about their old life in England Mercy shows up claiming to be the witch of the wood and pretending to fly on a stick like, much like a witch would fly on a broom. We can see some signs of Black Phillip's influence on the twins in this scene because, when Thomasin threatens to tell her parents that Mercy left the farm alone she says "Black Phillip says I can do what I like"¹⁴⁶ and blames her sister for letting the witch take Samuel. Thomasin is frustrated by her sibling's misbehaviour and her mother's harsh words, and even Mercy is aware of the hostile way in which Katherine addresses her, so Thomasin seems to decide to take revenge and pretends to be a witch herself, successfully frightening Mercy. Thomasin describes her supposed activities as a witch in great detail, with claims such as "When I sleep my spirit slips from my body and dances naked with the Devil"¹⁴⁷ and "Perchance I'll boil and bake thee since we are lack of food"¹⁴⁸.

Later in the film William and Katherine discuss selling Thomasin to another family to be married as a way to bring the family some respite from the hardship they've endured. This was a common practice in Puritan households, as Puritan belief stated that separating a child from her parents during adolescence would bring her closer to God.¹⁴⁹ The notion of leaving her family, however, frightens Caleb and Thomasin, and the two decide to leave in the middle of the night to find food for the family. Caleb had originally decided

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ryan Hollinger, *op. cit.*

to leave on his own, but Thomasin insisted on accompanying him, once again showing the strong personality that would be uncharacteristic of a young Puritan girl.

When the two siblings venture into the woods Caleb eventually meets his end. We see the same hare from earlier show up once again, prompting Caleb to follow it and scaring their horse. In the confusion, Thomasin falls from the horse, hitting her head and fainting. While Thomasin eventually manages to find her way back to her parents, Caleb gets lost in the forest and comes across a small hut. We see a beautiful woman in a red cape come out of the hut who seduces Caleb and kisses him. This woman is the witch, now taking on a very different form than what we've seen before to curse Caleb by taking advantage of his sin of lust.



Image 31: A comparison of the witch's appearance when she steals Samuel (left) and when she curses Caleb (right).¹⁵⁰

Katherine is furious at Thomasin for what happened to Caleb and William is preparing to go look for him. Thomasin now seems to want nothing more than for her mother to not be mad at her anymore, pleading “Let me find favour in your eyes.”¹⁵¹ She was about to tell her mother why her and Caleb went into the forest, even though she had promised Caleb to keep it a secret, when William finally puts his pride aside and tells Katherine

¹⁵⁰ *The Witches*, op. cit.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

about the secrets he's been keeping from her and for forcing his children to lie for him and be blamed for his secrets. After an argument the family seems to calm down and Katherine shows genuine motherly affection towards Thomasin for the first time in the film, speaking more softly to her and kissing her on the forehead before Thomasin volunteers to go bed the goats. As Thomasin is doing so she sees Caleb.

Caleb is naked and seems to have stumbled back to the farm unconsciously. It's possible that he managed to find his own way back, but it's likely that the audience is meant to assume that it was the witch who directed him there with her magic, possibly to torment the family further with Caleb's now cursed and possessed state. Caleb's nudity is also symbolic in this moment. Nudity is used to symbolize sin in the film, especially considering that the only other characters we see naked are the witch and Thomasin, after she makes a deal with Black Phillip. In his analysis of the film, Ryan Hollinger explains that nudity is a symbol of the witches' sinful life, using Adam and Eve as an example, as they were represented as being naked, but didn't realise it until after their sin.¹⁵²

Caleb seems to be unconscious and the family put him in a bed. Katherine is seen praying besides him, as she suspects that Caleb has fallen victim to Indian magic or witchcraft. William dismisses her claims, but Katherine feels that Caleb's illness is unnatural. William intends to go back to the plantation to find a family that will take Thomasin and a doctor for Caleb. Later we see Mercy with Katherine and Thomasin, and she is singing another song about Black Phillip. The camera zooms in behind Mercy, possibly symbolizing Black Phillip's growing influence on her. As she is singing, we hear a piercing scream coming from Caleb's room, he has awoken and seems to be in horrible pain. Caleb seems delusional and begins to rave and convulse, shouting about horrible demonic things he seems to be hallucinating.

“A toad. A cat. A crow. A raven. A great black dog. A wolf. She desires of my blood. She sends *em* upon me. They feed upon her teats. Her nether parts! She sends *em* upon me! My Lord, My Jesus! Save me! She sends her Devils [...] I am thine enemy, wallowing in the blood and filth of my sins”¹⁵³

Caleb's jaw locks shut at a certain point and when Katherine and William attempt to pry it open, Caleb coughs out an apple. With this scene and with Caleb's lie about the apple tree, we see that apples are very significant to Caleb's character. Apples symbolize the

¹⁵² Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.

¹⁵³ *The VVitch*, op. Cit.

forbidden fruit that saw Adam and Eve break God's command, which in that context was a metaphor for indulgence and pleasure in illegal and immoral acts¹⁵⁴. In this context, the apple might symbolize Caleb's indulgence and immoral acts, such as his lust and supposed incestuous desires for his sister.

The family tries to bring Caleb back from his possessed state, bleeding his head to try to alleviate his suffering and, when that doesn't work, resorting to kneeling around him and praying incessantly. The twins initially accuse Thomasin of being the one who bewitched Caleb, as well as being the one who stole Samuel and being guilty of other acts of witchcraft. William seems to not believe it, as he tests Thomasin by asking her questions such as "Dost thou love the word of God? Love you the Bible? Love you prayer?"¹⁵⁵, to which Thomasin always answers yes. It's here that we see that the twins seem to also be affected by Caleb's possession, possibly because of Black Phillip's influence on them. They fall to the ground convulsing in pain, unable to remember their prayers and also start to repeat "She desires of my blood"¹⁵⁶ alongside Caleb's ravings.

Caleb seems to come to his senses with the family's prayers and enters a euphoric state. It seems that he now sees Jesus and becomes ecstatic, speaking of Jesus in such a loving and devote way that it almost becomes erotic. This might indicate that Caleb is still possessed, despite not appearing to be, but this is never made clear in the film. After this moment of ecstasy, Caleb dies. The twins also pass out and remain like that for a long time.

"Cast the light of thy Countenance upon me. [...] Wholly thine I am, my sweet Lord Jesus. My Lord, my love! Kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth. How lovely art thou! Thy embrace! My Lord! My Lord! My Love! My soul's salvation, take me to thy lap!"¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.

¹⁵⁵ *The VVitch*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.



Image 32: Caleb in his ecstatic state, after his possession.¹⁵⁸

Thomasin runs outside, crying, after being shouted at by Katherine. William follows her and attempts to comfort her by talking about how lovely the farm will be when spring comes and the family is able to finish building it. This is also the only moment, as far as I can recall, where William shows affection towards Thomasin, but the moment is cut short when William accuses Thomasin of witchcraft. William takes small coincidences and even events that have little to do with Thomasin as proof. More specifically, he mentions that Thomasin stopped the twins from praying and that Caleb disappeared with her. Thomasin attempts to defend herself by accusing the twins of being the ones who bewitched the family and the farm with the help and influence of Black Phillip, even referring back to the moment when Mercy said “I be the witch of the wood”¹⁵⁹. Thomasin calls out William for his lies and for the hypocrite he is, and it’s also through Thomasin that we see William’s masculinity questioned once again: “You took of Mothers cup and let her rail at me. You confessed not ‘till it was too late. [...] You took Caleb to the Wood and let me take the blame of that too. [...] You cannot bring the crops to yield! You cannot hunt! [...] Thou canst do nothing save cut wood!”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

In the film there are many scenes of William cutting wood which are supposed to symbolize his duties as a man, as well as his inability to fulfil them. Once again, Ryan Hollinger explains it better:

“The constant motif of him chopping wood refers to his responsibility as the man of the house. He is eventually buried under the wood itself, a metaphor for his masculine pride. But his perceived failures as a man are evident, considering he lacks the ability to hunt and gather for his family, again furthering his delusions of vanity, despite being bad at most things.”¹⁶¹

William takes Thomasin’s defiance as demonic influence: “Must I hear the Devil wag his tongue in thy mouth?”¹⁶². This is another factor that shows how Thomasin’s personality is so uncharacteristic of a Puritan girl. However, as mentioned before, this kind of behaviour seems normal for a teenager, but it doesn’t stop the family from making Thomasin an outcast for it.

Despite his actions and behaviour in the following scenes, William seems to believe Thomasin’s accusation of the twins. He attempts to wake up the twins by threatening them and, when they do wake up after he threatens severe physical harm and death, he takes it as confirmation. However, he also seems to change his mind about Thomasin once again and, when faced with the decision of which of his children are witches, he locks them all in the goat pen with Black Phillip and the rest of the goats, with the intention of freeing them in the following morning to settle this matter back at the plantation. These last few scenes are indicative of William’s grief. Faced with the death of his elder son, the only child to whom he had shown any kind of fatherly affection, he might be looking for someone, or something, to blame, and so projects this onto his remaining children. It’s also very interesting that, when Thomasin asks the twins if they are witches, neither of them answers the question directly, but when Mercy asks Thomasin the same thing, she very clearly answers that she is not. This could be a sign of Black Phillip’s influence on the twins, and that they are indeed witched by him. There are many instances in the film where there is a reasonable explanation for many of the events that are attributed to the witch or the devil, but those instances will be analysed in greater detail the next section of this dissertation.

¹⁶¹ Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.

¹⁶² *The VVitch*, op. cit.

During the night, in yet another scene where we see William chopping wood, he comes to a moment of repentance and confession. He ultimately admits to God that he is the one to blame for the family's misfortune because he is "infected with the filth of pride"¹⁶³. William prays for the salvation of his children, but not his own, which reveals true regret on his part. We also see that the twins seemed to be asleep, but wake up at the same time. This detail is important to show even more signs of demonic influence on the family as Katherine receives a visit of her own.

For unknown reasons, Katherine wakes up in the middle of the night and sees Caleb holding Samuel. Both are now dressed in white, possibly to deceive Katherine by transmitting an image of purity to her. In her grief, Katherine doesn't question what she sees and talks about how much she has missed her sons. Caleb speaks to her as well, always in a whisper and mentions that he brought a book for her to read with him (details that will be important for a later scene), in exchange Caleb says he and Samuel will visit her often. Katherine wants to breastfeed Samuel before reading the book with Caleb, and, as she does so, it is revealed to the audience that Caleb and Samuel were not real. In reality, there is only a crow, pecking at Katherine's breast, wounding her terribly, all the while Katherine never stops laughing.



¹⁶³ Ibid.

While the previous scene with Katherine takes place, we see that something has entered the goat pen. The twins notice it first and it's revealed that the witch, now back in the form of an old woman, has broken into the pen to feed on the goats' blood. The twins scream, which wakes up Thomasin, and in the following morning William wakes up to find the goats slaughtered, the twins missing, and only Thomasin was apparently left unharmed. We also find that Katherine was not killed by her injuries from the previous night, but is still bleeding from them. While looking incredulously at the display before him, William is struck by Black Phillip's horns, which puncture his abdomen creating a fatal injury. William picks up an axe with the intention of fighting Black Phillip, but ultimately resigns and lets himself be struck by him one more time. This causes an enormous pile of wood that was by the side of the house to collapse over William, killing him. Ryan Hollinger, in his analysis, describes the wood as a metaphor for William's masculine pride, so it is especially relevant to William's character that his pride is what ends up killing him¹⁶⁵. He also explains the reason why William chose to not fight the goat: "By killing the goat it only further reinforces his prideful conceit. He knows very well that it's a punishment for his sins, and thus submits to his fate chosen by God, which, unknowingly to him, turns out to be the work of the devil."¹⁶⁶

This scene also marks a very important moment in Thomasin's journey towards becoming a witch. For her to truly be able to become a witch all male dominance and figures of authority must be removed from her life, leaving only the Devil, or Black Phillip, as the only remaining male figure. Katherine also suddenly attacks Thomasin, blaming her for all of the family's misfortunes, again accusing her of being a witch. Thomasin's transition into becoming a witch was a self-fulfilling prophecy: there were many times when the family outcasts and accuses Thomasin as a possible witch and, after so much time being caught up in the drama, she eventually accepts her label and becomes what others think she is¹⁶⁷. Katherine attacks Thomasin, who all the while is crying and still pleading to her mother, saying that she loves her. To defend herself from her mother's attacks, Thomasin

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ryan Hollinger, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

reaches for a knife and ends up having to kill Katherine in self-defence, thus completely removing all authority figures left in her life.

When night falls Thomasin accepts her label as a possible witch and, still covered in her mother's blood, speaks to Black Phillip in the goat's pen. Black Phillip eventually answers and Saige Walton highlights one particular detail in this scene: "'What dost thou want?' the Devil asks, inviting Thomasin to speak (the only instance in the film where she is invited to do so)¹⁶⁸". Black Phillip tempts Thomasin with promises of freedom and a pleasurable life in return for her soul, in a scene that spawned one of the most famous lines in the film: "Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?"¹⁶⁹



Image 34: Thomasin with Black Phillip.¹⁷⁰

Black Phillip now takes the shape of a man, although he is barely visible in the frame, and speaks in the same whispering tone that we heard Caleb speak to Katherine in her scene with the crow. This way of talking, as well as the book Black Phillip asks Thomasin to sign, are both call-backs to that same scene, which are meant to help the audience come to the conclusion that Black Phillip has been the one responsible for most, if not all, of the terrible events that the family has gone through. Black Phillip asks Thomasin to

¹⁶⁸ Saige Walton, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁶⁹ *The VVitch*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

remove her clothes and sign the book he has placed before her, even offering to help her write her name when she remarks that she doesn't know how to do so. The fact that Thomasin doesn't know how to write her name is very odd considering that Puritans tended to be literate. As Eggers explained in his interview with VICE:

“This whole period of time was really cool because England was actually the most literate part of the Western world [...] [R]eading the Word of God in English was super crucial because in earlier parts of Tudor England, in the previous century, people were being burned at the stake for that kind of thing. [...] And so, you have people, even common people, like in this farm, who have interesting vocabularies, interesting ways of speech. Language was kind of the only art form that was appreciated by Puritans.”

While it's true that Eggers is only referring to Puritans being able to read, and not necessarily write, it's still odd that Thomasin would not be able to do both.

The film reaches its climax in the following scene, where we see Thomasin, now naked, wander into the forest and eventually coming across a coven of witches who are all naked around a fire. They seem to be chanting in a strange language and in an ecstatic trance when they begin to float. Thomasin also enters this state of ecstasy, but seems to try to fight it briefly, as we see that her facial expression transmits a mixture of pain and pleasure and she is also crying a bit. However, it's also possible that her misleading facial expression is a result of the harsh contrasts of light in the scene and that her tears are only of joy. The film ends on a shot of Thomasin with her arms stretched out, floating just like the other witches, who have effectively become her new family.



Image 35: Thomasin floating in the last shot of the film.¹⁷¹

In making *The VVitch*, Eggers intended to make an archetypal New England horror story and recreate an inherited Puritan's nightmare.¹⁷² In his interview with TimeOut he explained:

“Whether or not the witch exists in the minds of these English settlers or whether she physically exists, she has tremendous power over them. [...] In the Early Modern period, a witch was just a given. She wasn't something you just believed in. A witch was a witch like a tree is a tree and a rock is a rock. That's the world I was trying to recreate.”¹⁷³

Eggers considers that witches are essentially a representation of the dark side of women, and that is an idea that he wanted to explore¹⁷⁴. He also explains that some of the accusations of witchcraft in the early modern period would often stem from men's fear of feminine power and mental illnesses.¹⁷⁵

“[T]he idea that evil witches existed in the mass cultural mind of the early modern period is really interesting, so I would find stories about young women that I really feel like they thought that they were evil witches. Because we might say something was a mental illness today, but they had no other answer other than ‘I'm a witch’”

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² No author, op. cit.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ VICE, op. cit.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Regarding the misogynous nature of witchcraft accusations of the time, it's interesting to note that, in the fifteenth-century, there were many documents known as witchcraft treatises. In these treatises, male authors were particularly concerned with the witch's vanishing powers, detailing the witch's stealing away of young children and male genitalia.¹⁷⁶ With all this in mind, it's relevant to analyse some of the events of the film that are attributed to supernatural occurrences, and show how many of them can very well have a logical and even scientific explanation.

3.1 Reality or hysteria? – The nature of the demonic influence as shown in the film

The film presents the audience with many different occurrences that are supposed to be a sign of demonic influence on the family and the farm, but most of these occurrences have a logical explanation. Sometimes these events can occur from natural causes, mental and psychological distress, or even simple coincidences and misunderstandings. This section will highlight some of those occurrences and present the most logical explanation for them. It's also worth noting that some of these events are very hard to explain logically in the way that they are presented to the audience, but it should be taken into account that *The VVitch* is still only a film and, as such, portrays its events in a stylistic way. If the film were to present these occurrences to the audience in the way that they would have actually happened, it would make for a relatively disinteresting narrative.

The first occurrence is Samuel's disappearance. Granted, this is probably the hardest one to explain, considering that in the film we are shown that Samuel simply vanishes before Thomasin's eyes. It seems impossible that Samuel could have been taken by a wolf or some other wild animal. Katherine mentions in the film that Thomasin has "begat the sing of her womanhood"¹⁷⁷, which would mean that Thomasin is a young teenager (the actress who plays her, Anya Taylor-Joy, is in her early twenties¹⁷⁸, but it's not uncommon for actors to play younger characters).

¹⁷⁶ Saige Walton, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁷⁷ *The VVitch*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁸ No author, no date, "Anya Taylor-Joy Biography", in *IMDB* [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5896355/?ref_=tt_ov_st_sm]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

The audience is only shown Thomasin's perspective of the events that took place. Her young age, alongside the general feeling of dread and unease that surrounds the family and the farm, might have skewed her notion of reality. It's possible that Thomasin simply got distracted from her duty of watching Sam, which led to him indeed being taken away by a wild animal, but in her mind, Samuel vanished before her eyes. Something similar might have happened in one scene towards the end of the film, where Thomasin is in the goat's pen with the twins and they are attacked by the witch. The "witch" in the scene might have been a wild animal attacking the goats, and the childrens' fear and anxiety led them to believe it was the witch.

In the film we are also shown that the corn that the family is planting in their farm is turning black. It's implied that the devil or the witch who lives in the forest is somehow infecting their crops, making it impossible for the family to have a successful harvest.



Image 36: The diseased corn as shown in the film.¹⁷⁹

There are, however, many fungi or corn diseases that could make a crop fail in the way that we are shown in the film. More specifically, the corn the family is growing seems to be suffering from a mixture of a fungus called Nigrospora Ear Rot and incomplete kernel sets. Nigrospora Ear Rot is a fungal disease caused by *Nigrospora oryzae* and usually

¹⁷⁹ *The VVitch*, op. cit.

forms because of a drought, poor soil, frost, insects, or other diseases¹⁸⁰, and incomplete kernel sets can occur from poor pollination of ears, as well as multiple factors including severe drought and high temperatures, inadequate pollen supply, and insect feeding.¹⁸¹ Both these problems have relatively simple solutions which include reducing crop stress and maintaining proper fertilization, so it's plausible that the crops are simply infected by the *Nigrospora* fungus.



Image 37: Examples of ears or corn suffering from *Nigrospora* Ear Rot (left) and incomplete kernel sets (right).¹⁸²

At several points in the film we see Jonas and Mercy playing with the family's goat, Black Phillip, and singing a song about him. In the context of the film Black Phillip himself has been influencing the children, whispering to them and slowly possessing them. It can be argued that the song is too ominous and complex for the twins to have come up with it themselves, but it's important to note that Puritans considered the written word an art form, as was mentioned before, so it's not implausible that Jonas and Mercy would have a relatively well developed vocabulary at such a young age. Moreover, they would have likely been taught about witches and the things they supposedly did, which would explain how Mercy knows that witches are supposed to fly on brooms and kidnap babies. It's very likely that the twins' interactions with Black Phillip are nothing more than a result of their imagination and all the things they have been taught as Puritans.

Caleb's disappearance and apparent possession, as well as Katherine's encounter with the crow, are also occurrences of note. In Caleb's case, as mentioned before, many accounts of witchcraft were attributed to mass hysteria, a condition that can distort people's

¹⁸⁰ No author, no date, "Troubleshooting Abnormal Corn Ears; *Nigrospora* Ear Rot", in *The Ohio State University* [<http://u.osu.edu/mastercorn/nigrospora-ear-rot/>]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

¹⁸¹ No author, no date, "Troubleshooting Abnormal Corn Ears; Incomplete Kernel Set – Whole Ear", in *The Ohio State University* [<http://u.osu.edu/mastercorn/nigrospora-ear-rot/>]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

¹⁸² No author, no date, "Troubleshooting Abnormal Corn Ears", in *The Ohio State University* [<http://u.osu.edu/mastercorn/>]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

perception of reality. What the family perceived as a possession might have been a case of delirium. This does not explain the appearance of the witch or the apple that Caleb spits out, but that can be attributed to narrative stylization and the historical accounts of possessions that Eggers consulted to make the film.

Caleb suffers from agitation, confusion, not responding to usual soothing (in this case, prayer), talking in a way that doesn't make sense, and seeing and hearing things that aren't real; all symptoms of delirium.¹⁸³ Some of the causes for delirium include an underlying illness or infection, high fever, head injury, disruption of the sleep-wake cycle, not enough oxygen to the brain, and poisoning¹⁸⁴, many of which might have been sustained by Caleb while he was lost in the forest, which would explain his death and his apparent possessed state.

What happened with Katherine might be a bit simpler to explain. It's not at all uncommon for people in grief to experience hallucinations of their lost loved ones. According to an article from the *Scientific American*, a study by Agneta Grimby at the University of Goteborg found that over 80 percent of elderly people experience hallucinations associated with their dead partner one month after bereavement, and almost a third of the people in the study reported that they spoke in response to their experiences.¹⁸⁵ This can very well explain why Katherine saw Caleb and Samuel so clearly. The appearance of the crow is harder to explain, but it's possible that a hungry crow found its way into the house and simply found an opportunity to feed.

There are two more occurrences that should be pointed out, but these are more natural in nature, much like the death of the family's props. One of them is a dead chick inside an egg that Thomasin steps on, and the other is blood coming out of a goat's udders when Thomasin attempts to milk it. Both occurrences are fairly easy to explain. The dead chick could be what is known as dead-in-shell, which can happen due to nutritional deficiencies of the embryo, a bacterial or viral infection, or inappropriate hatching conditions. Considering the egg Thomasin steps on was outside the chicken coup, the

¹⁸³ No author, January 2016, "Delirium in Children and Adolescents, No 120", in *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* [https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Delirium-in-Children-and-Adolescents-120.aspx]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Vaughan Bell, December 2nd 2008, "Ghost Stories: Visits from the Deceased", in *Scientific American* [<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/ghost-stories-visits-from-the-deceased/>]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

later cause might be what killed the chicken embryo. The blood on the goat's milk might be a sign that the goat has Mastitis, considering that a common symptom is watery or bloody milk.¹⁸⁶

It's easy to see how the perspective of the characters can be so different from the perspective anyone would have in modern times. The advancement of fields such as psychology, medicine, biology, as well as the diminishing of religion's influence in people's lives, have allowed us to explain many things much more clearly than it would have been possible in the 17th century. It's interesting that the director would allow the audience to get a better glimpse of people's mentality at the time by mostly using events that can be rationally explained, unlike in other horror films where it's made more clear that the events taking place are completely paranormal and supernatural in nature.

3.2 Character Analysis

In the analysis of the film, an analysis of the most important characters in the narrative was already provided. Nevertheless, it's important to reframe this analysis in its own section due to the complexity of the characters' roles and the symbolism they're associated with. This section's purpose is not necessarily to repeat what was already mentioned about the characters, but provide further detail and identify the reasons why these characters are so important to the narrative. The characters that will be the focus of this section will be William, Caleb, and Thomasin, as the role of the remaining characters (more specifically Katherine, the twins, Samuel, the witch, and Black Phillip) is mostly secondary to the story in general.

William is the character with probably the most complete arc in the film. He begins as a prideful man who is dismissive towards the highest authority figures of the time, in this case the church, and who is in denial about his ineptitude as the patriarch of the family. William's prideful conceit refers to taking pride in one's own vanity and possessions, which goes against the word of God because it's seen as worshiping false idols¹⁸⁷. This highlights William's hypocrisy, as he considers himself a higher authority on God than even the church that condemns him, a fact made evident when he refers to them as "false

¹⁸⁶ Terry C. Gerros, no date, "Mastitis", in *UVMA - Utah Veterinari Clinics* [<http://www.uvma.org/mastitis-in-goats.htm>]. Accessed on July 3rd 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.

Christians.”¹⁸⁸ However, William seems to realize his own hypocrisy and ineptitude towards the end of the film. After burying Caleb the motif of William chopping wood is seen once again, only this time he stops and admits to himself “[t]his is my fault. I confess it!”. He prays to God to save his children, effectively putting them and their needs ahead of his own for. He ultimately fails to save his family when he lets himself be killed by black Phillip, but even in that moment he only does so because he sees his death as God’s punishment for his sins and is accepting his fate.¹⁸⁹

Caleb’s character arc is not as complete as William’s, considering that he never truly learns anything, nor does he redeem himself for his sin of lust. However, Caleb’s character is given many similarities to William’s character, which makes him more important to the narrative. As Ryan Hollinger explains, “[b]oth the father and the son give in to selfish temptations, which sinfully taint their Puritan beliefs further than before they were exiled.”¹⁹⁰ Both characters are also given very profound similarities in their personal ordeals. In Puritan households, the male members of the family had to maintain the dominant authority figure¹⁹¹. As was mentioned before, the hunting scene with William and Caleb sets up the father's intentions of making his son into an authority figure, passing on the breadwinner ideal.¹⁹²

Finally, we have Thomasin, who is the main character of the film and who can arguably be considered the titular witch of the film. Thomasin’s transformation into a witch is completely justifiable, given how she is almost tricked into accepting her fate by her family’s accusations and Black Phillip’s influence on them. Thomasin’s struggles can be quickly summarized in a quote by Ryan Hollinger:

“Thomasin attempts to hold dearly to her beliefs, but eventually gives in to temptation when no other option of hope is available. Her parents are prepared to sell her off when she hits puberty, and eventually the entire family seemed to conspire against her. She is the last person to see the baby, the twins, and even the son before they go missing, placing her as the suspect to their disappearance. Thomasin also jokingly calls herself a witch to scare off her sister, but this eventually leads to false delusions that she is actually a witch.”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ The VVitch, op. cit.

¹⁸⁹ Ryan Hollinger, op. cit.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

As mentioned before, because the family outcasts Thomasin as a possible witch, she eventually accepts her label and becomes what others think she is. Thomasin also evolved very little as a character throughout the film, with her character arc being mostly about her accepting herself the way she is and even embracing it when she chooses to become a witch after having all ties to her family severed. Through this perspective, Thomasin becoming a witch can almost become a positive metaphor, especially considering that many women today are taking the label of witch as being empowering and positive. As Holly Cassell explained in her Metro article, “[m]y mother taught me that when someone calls you a witch, whether they mean it as a compliment or not, you must thank them, because it means they see your power.”¹⁹⁴

Through these characters we can see how the family dynamics of Puritan households would have functioned, as well as all the different ways the film plays of the family’s mindset of religion. The analysis of these three characters in particular stems from the fact that they seem to be the most central to the story because of the role they would have played in the family, according to Puritan beliefs. Because of this, they also play different roles in the film that the other characters don’t, instead becoming accessories to the struggles and events taking place around the three more central characters.

¹⁹⁴ Holly Cassell, February 7th 2019, “My Label and Me: I am privileged to be able to call myself a witch”, in *Metro.co.uk* [<https://metro.co.uk/2019/02/07/my-label-and-me-i-am-privileged-to-be-able-to-call-myself-a-witch-8289562/>]. Accessed on July 12th 2019.

CHAPTER III – COMPARISON OF THE TWO CASE STUDIES AND THEIR RESPECTIVE CULTURES

Comparing the two case studies is not a simple and straightforward task. The two works share some similarities, considering that they are both a visual medium, but they are also very different in many aspects. Some of these differences can create difficulties for the audience of one culture, when exposed to the work of the other. For example, a Japanese manga is supposed to be read from right to left. This can lead to problems for a western reader of *Uzumaki*, since their native alphabet is usually supposed to be read from left to right. On the other hand, a Japanese viewer might have some difficulty understanding the situations and the symbolism of *The Witch*, considering that Christian beliefs and the persecution of witches are more traditionally Western. In this chapter there will be a greater emphasis on comparing the two case studies, as well as their respective cultures, in a cultural translation framework.

According to Burke, “[t]he term ‘cultural translation’ was originally coined by anthropologists in the circle of Edward Evans-Pritchard” where it was used “to describe what happened in cultural encounters when each side tries to make sense of the action of the other”¹⁹⁵. Sarah Maitland, in her book *What is Cultural Translation*, describes how interlingual translation is very insightful as a site of intercultural encounter, expressing that “all translation is cultural translation”.¹⁹⁶ In this book, Maitland attempted to define cultural translation as “the means for exploring the sociocultural phenomena of the world around us and, in turn, as a route to understanding the world”¹⁹⁷ as well as a process of “understanding between different ideologies, different modes of being and different modes of living and acting in the world, where ‘translation’ serves as the means both to advance *and* to contest meaning.”¹⁹⁸

She argues that “it is through ‘text’ in its broadest understanding – through the traditions, inscriptions and institutions of culture and society – that we communicate out being to the world”¹⁹⁹ and explains:

“[T]o ‘read’ the world as if it were a text is to understand something of how our being is constructed and what this implies about being alive. By looking to the practice of interlingual translation, as the purposeful means by which a text written originally in one

¹⁹⁵ P. Burke (2007), “Cultures of Translation in Early Modern Europe”, in *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

¹⁹⁶ Sarah Maitland (2017) “Conclusion”, in *What is Cultural Translation*, Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 159-160.

¹⁹⁷ Sarah Maitland, op. cit., “Preface”.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

language is made meaningful in a new time and place to an audience that speaks another, we discover complementary attitudes of explanation and understanding, interpretation and transformation analogous to the act of reading.”²⁰⁰

With Maitland’s point-of-view in mind, in this dissertation, cultural translation will be regarded as a form of translation whose main priority is to provide the translator’s culture with a better understanding of the culture of the original through processes of interpretation, translation, and adaptation.

Before comparing the two works, it’s important to first summarize the characteristics of each individual one, as a form of reminder, as well as a means to compare the case studies and their cultures more effectively. It’s also important to compare the cultures in which they were created in greater detail. This is a task made easier by comparing many elements of Japanese culture to their American counterparts.

Uzumaki is an episodic Japanese manga, which uses a single paranormal event, that gradually becomes more active and severe, to tackle different themes and perspectives in Japanese society. It combines elements found in both eastern and western works with a heavy emphasis on detailed and visceral imagery to convey an atmosphere of dread, suspense, and anticipation. As mentioned before, the author is a master in using his medium to his advantage, taking advantage of the fact that his medium comes in the form of a book to give the readers an almost active role in exposing themselves to the horror of the story.

The chapters that were specifically studied in this dissertation use the curse of the spiral to comment on the Japanese standards of beauty and the phenomenon of *ijime*, as well as present interesting and horrific imagery and concepts. The horror in *Uzumaki* comes, not only from the effective images Junji Ito draws, but also from his use of the unknown and the incomprehensible as a source of fear, as well as his mastery of body horror, psychological horror, and the uncanny valley.

The VVitch: A New England Folk Tale is an American film whose primary objective was to present horror through a Puritan’s perspective and essentially create their worst nightmare. Detailed research was made by the director to make the film as historically accurate as possible, and the acting (for the most part), lighting, pacing, and music work together to create an atmosphere of almost constant unease and suspense. The film’s

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

historical accuracy grants it a degree of realism that helps the horror become much more effective. The themes Eggers presented in the film also touch upon the hazards of religious fanaticism, which was often the source of the hysteria and fear that lead so many people to accuse others of witchcraft so quickly.

The VVitch is a film that is heavily inspired by religion, with its Puritan characters and depictions of witchcraft and satanic themes, and it's easy to see how religion and mythology can be used to inspire horror in all cultures. Danny Boey explained that, although religion provides spiritual comfort for its followers, the restraints it dictates and imposes on them creates anxiety. “[F]ollowers are encouraged to fear the wrath of gods and demons, retribution, Armageddon and Judgement Day.”²⁰¹ The theme of religion is less prevalent in Japanese films, with its elements more often being present as moralistic tones and in rigid classifications of all things into two contrasting groups such as good/evil, yin/yang, form/formless,²⁰² themes that are very prevalent in eastern religions such as Buddhism and Taoism.

On the other hand, religion is a much more prevalent theme in American horror films, with many depictions of Christian and Catholic themes such as demonic possession and exorcisms, satanic cults, witchcraft, and evil supernatural forces. While it can be argued that many aspects of *Uzumaki* might be moralistic in nature (with its critique of bullying and strict beauty standards, for example) the theme of religion itself is almost completely absent from the manga.

Considering that, in the process of cultural translation, “the translator should be aware of the knowledge that their readers [...] possess”²⁰³, Junji Ito has the advantage in this case. The fact that *Uzumaki* has no references to anything that is specific to eastern religions (even the duality of good and evil is a common theme in western religions) makes it easier to adapt to a western audience. On the other hand, Eggers’ reliance on Christian imagery and themes for *The VVitch* might alienate a Japanese viewer, especially considering that only about one to two million Japanese are Christians (about one percent of Japan's population).²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Danny Boey, op. cit., p. 54.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ No author, January 1st 2016, “Cultural Translation: an approach”, in *Signewords* [https://www.signewords.com/blog-en/cultural-translation_an-approach/]. Accessed on July 30th 2019.

²⁰⁴ No author, May 7th 2018, “Christianity”, in *Japan-Guide* [<https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2298.html>]. Accessed on July 15th 2019.

In literature, many of the concepts present in horror are adapted from religion and mythology. This is true for both eastern and western works. For the case studies in this dissertation, the influence of literary works is very clear in the case of *Uzumaki*. Junji Ito, once again, has the advantage, as *Uzumaki* was heavily inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft (a western writer) and the author used many western, or even universal, concepts of horror, such as cosmicism, body horror, and psychological horror. Once again, if a translator were to adapt *Uzumaki* for a western audience, their familiarity with these themes would make the adaptation much easier.

Both creators have also made great use of sociological phenomena in their respective works. In Junji Ito's case, he tackles themes that are not exclusive to the Japanese culture, such as bullying and the beauty standards for girls and young women. Yet again, this gives him an advantage from a cultural translation point of view, as it would be easier for a western reader to find familiarity in Ito's work and the horror becomes more effective. Even in the cases where the horror presented in *Uzumaki* might be less familiar to the reader, the effectiveness with which Ito is able to convey disturbing and unsettling imagery helps make his works more universally horrific, even if only for the visceral reaction his readers feel.

In Eggers' case, his representation the persecution of women might resonate with Japanese viewers, considering that this theme is also prevalent in many Japanese horror films. However, this theme in Japanese horror mostly comes in the form of female antagonists, a theme whose origins also come from religion and mythology, more specifically from poor views on women present in Buddhism. According to Danny Boey "[i]t is provocative to claim that Buddhism intentionally advocates the marginalization of women, but it is a fact that women were discouraged from practicing Buddhism until recently."²⁰⁵

In the case of *The Witch*, the representation of the persecution of women comes has a more social origin, as Puritan societies were patriarchal and women were more easily marginalized. It's also important to note that, although it didn't happen as often, men were not completely safe from being accused of being witches as well.

While it can be argued that this theme also appears in some chapters of *Uzumaki*, the fact that the manga's focus isn't on the characters stops this from becoming a central theme,

²⁰⁵ Danny Boey, op. cit., p. 59.

like it does in *The VVitch*. As mentioned before, the focus of Ito's stories is not the characters, which makes their struggles somewhat irrelevant to the narrative as a whole, while in Eggers' film, the characters and their struggles are the most important aspect of the narrative.

Other similarities in the case studies used for this dissertation are mostly superficial. They both have women as main characters, they both deal with spiritual or paranormal events, and both works are excellent at conveying a foreboding atmosphere and suspense, albeit in completely different ways. It's very difficult to find any more similarities in both works considering that, despite both being visual mediums, they are inherently different in their presentation. On one hand, *Uzumaki* doesn't have the advantage of sound and movement and sound, like *The VVitch* does. On the other hand, *The VVitch* is a more passive medium, where the viewer doesn't take an active role in progressing the story, which can harm overall quality of the horror presented.

From the analysis of these two works, it can be concluded that, while both works have their own flaws, advantages and shortcomings, *Uzumaki* might be easier for audiences in western cultures to understand, than *The VVitch* is for eastern cultures. This can be due to the fact that *Uzumaki* is less specifically Japanese (despite being influenced by many aspects of Japanese society), while *The VVitch* is very specifically western and American. Through this perspective, *The VVitch* can also be harder to understand by viewers from other western cultures other than the American one, but its religious and social themes end up being more common for many western cultures, which makes it more familiar for western viewers in general, and less so for eastern viewers.

In examining two case studies for Japanese Horror and American Horror, this dissertation was able to come to a few interesting conclusions.

In the context of cultural translation, we can see how adapting or translating these case studies from their original culture into another can be quite a challenging, yet important task. Sarah Maitland's point of view, regarding cultural translation as a way to understand "different ideologies, different modes of being and different modes of living and acting in the world" as well as "a route to understanding the world", is particularly relevant in explaining the importance of cultural translation in general, but in this case it shows how translating these works from their original language into another one would allow for the target audience to better understand the source culture through understanding what is considered scary to them.

In this case *Uzumaki* might be at a disadvantage considering that, as was explained in the previous chapter, the author of the manga took great inspiration from Western tropes and themes which make the horror more universal and less specific to the Japanese culture. This could mean that *Uzumaki* might not be as illustrative of its culture as *The VVitch* is of the American culture. Nevertheless, both works still contain plenty of influences from their native cultures, which provide a great insight into the mentality and the sociocultural phenomena of each one.

It's very interesting to see how two horror creators that were so easily scared as children were able to create such effective works of horror. Junji Ito claimed that he has always been drawn to horror, but in Eggers' case, his distaste for conventional horror films might be what inspired him to create a horror film that is so effective, yet so different from other mainstream works that were being released at the time.

With *Uzumaki* we can see a fascinating visual novel, whose intention is to delve into an impossible scenario where the abstract concept of a spiral gradually corrupts and consumes an entire town. The characters we follow are not important to the narrative, which is a mercy bestowed upon the reader by the author, as it allows for a more thorough investigation of the spectacle being presented. Junji Ito combines his expert use of intense imagery with body horror, psychological horror, and the uncanny valley, to provide his readers with a truly intense horror experience. Despite presenting many situations and events based on phenomena that is much more specific to the Japanese culture, the surreal nature of the spectacle and the fact that Ito also drew inspiration from Western sources

(more specifically from H. P. Lovecraft) stops this work from being too focused on Japanese cultural aspects that might alienate readers from other cultures. As a result, *Uzumaki* is a more universal horror experience, that can mostly be easily understood by international readers, but in turn becomes more distanced from its author's culture.

In *The VVitch: A New England Folk Tale* we essentially see a story about witches. Despite its more simplistic nature, the director handles lighting, music, framing and many other aspects masterfully, to create an atmosphere that constantly gives the audience a feeling of suspense, dread, and tension. The film explores not only the supernatural nature of witches and the demonic forces many people believed to exist at the time (and some still do today), but also the all too real family relationships that many people live through every day. The film also explores how religious fundamentalism and hysteria can make people act in irrational and cruel ways, all because they cannot, or will not, try to find a more natural explanation for certain events. While, in *The VVitch*, Eggers presented his viewers with many complex themes (such as masculinity, family dynamics, and the role of women in a traditionally patriarchal household) that can be more easily understood by international audiences, the film's focus of Christian themes and beliefs can alienate many people from cultures whose main religion is not Christianity. As a result, many references, themes, and events from the film, might go completely unnoticed or be completely misunderstood by viewers from other cultures, but the film becomes much more illustrative of the director's culture.

The works that were chosen as case studies for this dissertation fall heavily outside what can be considered mainstream horror. Despite this, it's interesting to see that, even when the creators' goal was to create something different, there were still many elements from their own culture that inspired them and that are even present in the final product. This shows that we can never truly escape our own national identity. Not everything is going to be scary to everyone in the same way, but despite this, we can always find themes and tropes that can be considered more universally scary, even in cultures that are seemingly so different from each other. Many other works can be developed from this study. In the future, similar comparisons can be made with other works and with works from other cultures and other more in-depth developments can be made with this theme. Besides this, more works can even be translated, adapted, or subtitled, in a more practical exercise in cultural translation that would allow for a greater insight into a different culture and the way its members see the world.

Despite the many differences between cultures there is one inescapable fact: we are all capable of feeling fear. Fear is a universal experience, despite the many different ways in which it can be presented. In fact, as H. P. Lovecraft famously wrote, “[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear” so what better way is there to determine what we all have in common, as well as what differentiates us, than to study that which makes us afraid?

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Appendix I – Glossary of Japanese Terms

Japanese words	Meaning in English
Kabuki	One of the earliest forms of Japanese theatre.
Pinku eiga	A subgenre of Japanese horror films that was popular from the 60s to the 80s.
Metabo law	A controversial law passed by the Japanese government in 2008, which requires all people aged 40–75 to stay within certain waist measurement.
Raijo taiso	Collective exercise routines that many Japanese people participate in and that usually take place in the morning.
Ijime	A form of psychological abuse in Japan that has led many people to suicide.
Yasashisa	Kindness.
Omoiyari	Empathy.
Sensai	Sensitivity.
Reigi tadashii	Politeness.
Meiwaku kakenai youni	To avoid bothering others.
Manga	A Japanese comic that is made mostly in black and white and is read from right to left.

Appendix II – *Uzumaki* chapters and characters

Chapter	Summary	Characters
Medusa (p. 171-202)	<p>The hair of two characters, Kirie and Sekino, becomes affected by the curse of the spiral. The chapter explores the hypnotizing properties of spirals and how Sekino uses those properties to get as much attention as she can, an obsession that ends up killing her.</p>	<p>Kirie – The point-of-view character of the manga. She serves as the catalyst for the way the spiral manifests itself in this chapter, and it's through her that we see one of the ways of how the spiral can be physically harmful to the people of Kurōzuchō.</p> <p>Sekino – The most pertinent secondary character of this chapter. Sekino showcases how harmful the spiral's influence can truly become, and serves as the antagonist of this chapter.</p>
The Snail (p. 235-266)	<p>A student who is bullied for being late to class and lazy transforms into a snail, which is how the spiral curse manifests itself in this chapter. His bully, Katayama, also transforms into a snail, and the two snails end up mating and disappearing at the end of the chapter.</p>	<p>Kirie – The main point-of-view character of this chapter and of the manga in general.</p> <p>Shiho – A secondary point-of-view character for this chapter.</p> <p>Katayama – The main victim of this chapter and the first one to be turned into a snail.</p> <p>Tsumura – The bully who victimizes Katayama and who eventually is also turned into a snail.</p>
Mosquitoes (p. 299-330)	<p>Pregnant women all over the town are being attacked by swarms of mosquitoes. Because of</p>	<p>Kirie – The main point-of-view character of this chapter. She is in the hospital due to an accident from a previous chapter.</p>

	<p>this, they begin to attack other patients and staff in the hospital and feeding on their blood, much like female mosquitoes feed on human blood to reproduce.</p>	<p>Keiko – Kirie’s cousin. She is pregnant and was admitted to the hospital after being attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes.</p> <p>Shuichi - Kirie’s boyfriend and the other point-of-view character of the manga. In this chapter he has the role of a secondary character, visiting Kirie in the hospital and providing exposition about the behavior of female mosquitoes.</p>
<p>The Umbilical Cord (p. 331-362)</p>	<p>This chapter tackles the aftermath of the Mosquitoes chapters. In it, we see how the babies who were nourished by human blood are born and the result of this nourishment and how it led to the spreading of mysterious addicting mushrooms.</p>	<p>Kirie – The main point-of-view character of this chapter and the manga in general.</p> <p>Keiko – Kirie’s cousin and the mother of one of the babies that was nourished by human blood.</p> <p>Dr. Kawamoto – The doctor responsible for the addicting mushrooms and for delivering the babies of all the pregnant women who fed on human blood.</p>