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THE TELEVISUALLY COMPROMISED SPACES IN *RINGU* AND "TV PEOPLE"

Masaki Mori

The University of Georgia, Department of Comparative Literature and Intercultural Studies,
219 Joseph Brown Hall, Athens, Georgia 30602-6204, U.S.A.

The short story "TV People" by Murakami Haruki and a pair of horror movies "Ringu" by Nakata Hideo came out in the last decade of the twentieth century and addresses the nineties' situation of televisual permeation in the form of non-human figures coming out of the TV screen. Nakata's films typify an updated version of a conventional ghost story, while Murakami's text assumes unreality of another sort in the midst of ordinary life. As paranormal phenomena in J. Hillis Miller's definition, the intruders of the space adjacent to the TV set in both cases affect not only TV watchers in the fictional plane but also film viewers and text readers outside of it in the threefold spatial dynamics. Although they differ in terms of the kind of fear they inspire or covertly insinuate, the works of two different modes foreshadow in tandem human dependency on information technology in the Internet age.

Key words: *Murakami Haruki, Nakata Hideo, paranormal, Ringu, TV People, televisual*

The televisual media significantly affected human life for decades since the proliferation of TV, even before the arrival of the cyberspace that has drastically expanded its reach. In this current situation, it is meaningful to go back to the precise moment in recent history when TV thoroughly integrated itself into human life prior to the full advent of digitized technology and communication in order to examine the nature of contact between people and televisual media, because how we live our current life has evolved as an extension from that near past. Of particular interest here is the triple spatial dynamics that involves the televisual field proper to TV, the fictional plane inhabited by the character watching TV, and the space of the film spectator or the text reader outside the fictional plane, demonstrated by two pieces from Japan at the end of the twentieth century.[1]

"TV pīpuru TV ピープル [TV People]" (1989),[2] one of the early short stories by Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (1949-), shares the same pre-digitized technological setting with a pair of popular Japanese horror films, *Ringu* リング [Ring] (1998, 1999)[3], directed by Nakata Hideo 中田秀夫 (1961-). For the subject matter, they both center on the analog, non-flat TV set that needs an antenna for its one-directional radio reception with channel options severely limited in today's standard. In the case of *Ringu*, the setting is doubly outdated with the videocassette system that, combined with analog TV, plays a pivotal role and yet has long given place to more efficient, powerful forms of visual reproduction when DVD that replaced it is becoming obsolescent. Both featuring agents of paranormal nature in J. Hillis Miller's definition, the short story and the films offer intriguing points of convergence and difference. And one simple, related question pertains to them with regard to why, in spite of the same technological settings and a similar motif, *Ringu* the films remain globally recognizable through the horror they

[1] This article is based on the presentation that I made at *the 6th Annual International Conference on Language, Literature & Linguistics* in Singapore, 2017. See Mori 135-137.

[2] The original Japanese text was published in 1989, followed by an English translation in 1994.

[3] I refer to the two immediately sequential movies by Nakata, *Ringu* (1998) and *Ringu 2* (1999), as *Ringu* for my argument, not considering other *Ringu*-related works.

inspire while "TV People" does not necessarily enjoy such reception for the same reason.

As often the case with Murakami's stories before the turn of the millennium, the narrating protagonist of "TV People" is an unnamed man of about thirty years old. Married with no children to an editor of a niche magazine, he lives a busy life as an office worker for a major electronics company. One Sunday afternoon during a crepuscular hour, a group of three workers, uninvited and proportionally somewhat shrunk in size, bring in a TV set into the living room of his apartment when he is alone. Spellbound in a way, he cannot do anything about their installing the apparatus although he has chosen not to own one. The following day, these technicians carry again a TV set of a rival corporation into an ongoing office meeting at his company that also manufactures TVs along with other electronic products. Curiously, his wife, who is meticulous about the arrangement of the home interior, does not acknowledge either the presence of the newly arrived TV or the disorganized aftermath of the intrusion. All his colleagues at work totally ignore the intruders and the set they carry around. Only the narrator-protagonist does notice their presence. By the end of the second day, he finds himself preoccupied with the TV set in his living room that remains static even when turned on. Then, one of the *TV People* appears on it, gradually grows larger, and finally comes out of the screen.

This disorienting scene, in particular, recalls *Ringu* in which Sadako, the ghostly female figure, similarly pulls herself out of a TV frame on her trudging advance to the target. In the mid-twentieth century, afraid of her fatal cursing power, the teenager's adoptive father threw her alive into a solitary, abandoned well to her slow, gruesome death, decades before she emerges as part of a short, edited film on a videotape that surfaces in a rental villa complex built on the old well. People who watch the VHS tape usually receive an immediate telephone call that announces their impending death to occur a week later. Then, seven days later as foretold, the ghost unfailingly visits them from a TV set, leaving traces of victims who appear unnaturally shocked to death one after another as if struck by a pernicious, communicative disease. To avoid death, the haunted individual must make a copy of the videotape and show its content to another person before one week expires.

The same visual motif of a non-human figure coming out of TV offers a point of convergence between the works of two different formats. *Ringu* differs from the literary counterpart in two respects, however. First, the ghost needs the videotape to be passed around by others. In contrast, the short story's shrunk people do not rely on any devices for their actions of carrying a TV set and forcing it upon an unsuspecting, targeted individual, especially on someone like the narrator-protagonist who does not want to own one. Second, the ghost does not fail to prey upon her intended victims to death exactly one week after their video viewing as announced via telephone. Meanwhile, unlike her, *TV People* impose themselves on the narrator-protagonist at any moments of their choice during his daily routine without giving him any leeway, such as a prior notice, a grace period, and a way to get out of his tightening quandary.

To a large extent, with a videotape as a new prop for the conduit of spectral transmission, *Ringu* the films constitute a refurbished update of a traditional ghost story with Sadako as "a prime example as a version of the Gothic ghost of a picture" as Jerrold E. Hogle puts it.[4] Typically, someone under predetermined circumstances, such as presence at a wrong location and time, comes to contact with a supernatural being, often to his/her great fright or even demise as a result. The ghastly visitation that befalls the TV viewer precisely one week after the videotape playing, for instance, shows a reinvented version of an inauspicious situation approximated to the strict video rental terms, reinforced here with a punctual phone call immediately after the viewing, of a period beyond which a certain penalty is imposed.

In sharp contrast, this standard model of a ghost story obviously does not apply to the literary text, for *TV People* do not horrify the protagonist in the slightest when they appear in the circumstances most familiar and ordinary to him. Given the ending in which their repeated, uncalled-for visits drive him to the brink of collapsed existence, however, we have to inquire into the nonsensical content of "TV People", if the story does not merely concern an isolated anomaly of a mental disorder like paranoia. More specifically, as Matsuoka Kazuko 松岡和子 calls the book *TV People* (1990), which includes the short story in question as its eponymous piece, "a collection of ghost stories by Murakami Haruki,"[5] the text needs to be examined as a new kind of ghost story in terms of the different kind of predicament and fear that it entails.

[4] Hogle 174.
[5] Matsuoka 285.

In fact, despite of shared analog TV technology, another major difference that sets the text apart from the films resides between fear and the apparent lack thereof. With *Ringu*, it is the visceral fear that, akin to an animal survival instinct, arises from an ancient part of the psyche against the rationalizing superstratum that attempts to place it under control. A good ghost story or film is expected to stir up this existential fear in the victim as well as in the reader/spectator for whom the victim functions vicariously. Thus, the effect is straightforward. Sadako emerges from an old, abandoned well, into which she was thrown alive to her slow death decades ago, before she proceeds to climb out of the TV screen. Her oneiric emergence deep from the dark underground symbolically suggests her close affinity with the unconscious regarding the impulsive fear she causes. In this respect, it might be coincidentally relevant to note that the Japanese word for a well, *ido* 井戸, is pronounced the same as the Freudian "id" in the language's transliteration.

In contrast, the narrator-protagonist in Murakami's short story neither feels horrified at the encounter with *TV People* nor regards them as a threat to his being, for, apart from the intrusive nature of their visits, they remain discreetly inconspicuous in behavior and appearance, including the proportional reduction of their physique. Suggestive of a situation of gradual encroachment on an individual's private and public life with his or her full awareness, this alludes to the effect of unobtrusively ubiquitous electronic media, particularly TV in this case, on people's life. Willingly embracing media's spread everywhere around human activities, people unreservedly incorporate media influences for the sake of ease and comfort in acquiring information and entertainment. The televisual media are so well integrated into every aspect of the social fabric that they can even affect the people, like the narrator-protagonist, who elect not to possess a TV set at home. He also cannot avoid contact with the device due to the nature of his occupation. As a result, people are reduced to automaton-like beings that accept media-fed information unreflectively, becoming short of intellectual depth and diversity and scarcely distinguishable among one another like *TV People*, as it happens to him in the end. This almost willing surrender of intellectual integrity is designed not to evoke a strong fear that would jeopardize the process. Accordingly, the narrator-protagonist does not feel terrified at any moment.

This televisual colonization of the human interiority does not mean, however, that electronic media can mold people's thought without any resistance, indicated by the fact that the narrator-protagonist questions the intrusive nature of *TV People*'s visits from the beginning, although he cannot halt their infiltration. Unlike other people around him, he senses their appearance, behavior, and presence amiss and somewhat alien. These different responses to the shrunk intruders' maneuver signify most people's thorough familiarity with electronic media to the point of unconditional, unquestioning submission in contrast to a few others' attempt to keep a conscious distance albeit to little avail. The story "TV People" thus implies a kind of uneasiness shared and thinly felt, yet almost unrecognized by people who have undergone the "ubiquitous technological mediation" of "contemporary cultural life."[6] While immersing themselves in "the comforting banality of today's technology" that has become "perhaps too familiar" just as they desire,[7] people might sense, however vaguely and slightly in the very regular way they spend their quotidian hours exposed to television, an unarticulated anxiety about the state in which they have forfeited their autonomy as critically thinking beings.

To discuss more in detail "TV People" and the *Ringu* films as different kinds of ghost stories, let us return to the initial question raised earlier with regard to why the films retain their lingering circulation on a global scale while, in spite of the avid readership of his novels in many parts of the world, Murakami's short story has stayed relatively obscure. Upon their release, the films gained popularity in Japan, the United States, and elsewhere because they struck the right vein of underlying fear in the viewer's mind to resonate on both sides of the Pacific and beyond in conjunction with the nineties' overflowing videocassette proliferation. If "[h]orror films have always been credited with articulating the dominant fears and concerns of their respective periods" as Valerie Wee states,[8] what is the essential nature of this fear in *Ringu*, if not simply about an archaically haunting ghost? Does the short story partake of that contemporary fear in spite of its apparent lack thereof? If that is the case, how does the text differentiate itself from the films? Finally, why did the works of

[6] White 41. See also Yu 117.
[7] Phu 49.
[8] Wee 57-58.

two different modes come out with the same motif of a disfigured humanlike figure coming out of TV in the last decade of the twentieth century when the televisual system thoroughly infused society with its operation even before the permeation of the Internet?

In both cases, a basic anxiety stems from the seemingly innocuous device of visual transmission that furnishes virtually every household. Placed at a room corner, the television, "which many people consider almost a friend," might as well operate as a monitor to watch over our private life and keep us vulnerable as "the ultimate act of technological betrayal."[9] Recent technological developments in certain Internet-connected TVs actually prove that such electronic surveillance is no longer a mere speculation but a likely reality. On a more fundamental level, whether TV transmits information digitally or analogically, and even if the TV is off, the constant presence of an unclosed electronic window can imperceptibly stir up, once the fleeting idea of such a possibility comes across the mind, an irrational, yet persistent, unsettled feeling that the device might be taking in every minute aspect of our life with a steady, unblinking gaze devoid of empathy.

Furthermore, with overflowing, unstoppable televisual influx all around them, people might feel, without realizing or acknowledging it, even an invasive force coming from behind the TV screen. This unclaimed sensation over constant surveillance and informational aggression takes the anthropomorphic form of a ghost and shrunk *TV People* in the two pieces. They are *para*normal phenomena, rather than supernatural ones, as J. Hillis Miller explains:

> A thing in "para" is…not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary…[but] also the boundary itself, the screen which is…a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside… dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other.[10]

Neither the ghost nor *TV People* stay very far away from the osmotic TV screen, because the screen itself constitutes what they essentially are as paranormal figures.

It is important to notice here that the spatial scheme of the films and the story is not just dichotomically opposed between subject (videotape viewers, narrator-protagonist) and object (ghost, *TV People*) but structured threefold, implicitly involving the film spectators and the textual readers who stand outside the films and the text. A central issue concerns the visualized other that, originally confined within TV, moves out to take over the proximate space around the viewing fictional subject on the other side of the screen as a newly acquired domain of its agency, then extending the effect of spatial appropriation to the external sphere of the actual subjects that watch the films or read the text as consumable artifacts.

In *Ringu*, the uneasy feeling turns into a direct, unmitigated fear of an image that forcibly violates the border between electronic simulacrum and assumed reality. The frightening ghost that infringes on the field immediately external of TV and affects people there straight to their demise embodies the unconsciously constant sense that a certain, perhaps malign influence emanates from the confines of television. The fear is shared almost universally as TV saturates societies. Unlike traditional ghost stories in which the supernatural targets a select, unlucky few at a fixed locale, *Ringu* reveals its postmodern contemporaneity by hinting at an apocalyptic outcome of the epidemic that might affect the entire humanity through "a self-perpetuating chain" of metaphorical viral contagion of video copies uncontrollably multiplied "from an always already lost original" as Sadako becomes "a potentially *global* presence."[11] Thus, theoretically, anyone in the world can sense vulnerability as a potential target of her attack, which lays the foundation for *Ringu*'s worldwide reception because people anywhere, fictional or otherwise, live cognizant of TV's excessive influences.

The intense fear induced by Sadako directly reaches the film spectators outside the fictional zone via the vicarious victims who inadvertently watch her video clip in the *Ringu* films. The ghost threatens to transgress by the sheer force of terror not only the spatial divide between TV and its exterior but also the one that separates the fictional plane from where the film spectators are. The threat is doubly effective when the spectators also watch the films on television rather than in a theater. In a metaphorical sense, people's heavy dependence on the electronic media, which are the ghost's proper domain, enables her to roam through the threefold spatial dynamics at will until she finally poses to impose herself on the film spectators. With *Ringu*, however, the actual spectators outside the unfolding movie ultimately hold onto the practical assurance about the impene-

[9] Parris 5.
[10] Miller 441.
[11] Rojas 417, White 41, and Yu 115. See also Hogle 171 and Phu 45.

trable divide between two sides of the TV screen so that they can rationally discredit televisual trespassing, and they choose to seek and consume at will a nightmarish vision of transgression in the contained realm of fiction for aesthetic pleasure and the release of suppressed fear. In other words, for all the intense fear that they undergo, the film spectators can rest assured of their integrity as humans extrinsic to the films.

Murakami's short story, in contrast, addresses the very covert way TV gradually transmutes the viewers' mind while they do not even think of the need to resist televisual encroachment despite of the underlying, yet unnoticed angst. Precisely because the story does not bring forth intense fear, the text "TV People" does not force the text readers to get sensitized to the conterminous divide between fictional character's reality and TV's contained sphere, rather leaving them in muffled confusion over the textual meaning of unreal occurrences set in familiar settings. The bewilderment, in turn, helps to blur the demarcation between readers' world and textual plane because their life's reality might unsuspectedly appear as a continuum of electronic media saturation from fictional representation. Murakami's intentionally easy style to read helps to dilute further the supposedly inviolable boundary of fictionality and the readers' actuality. They thus get disarmed of apotropaic defensive rationalizing unlike *Ringu*'s film spectators. Suggestively, unlike Sadako's laborious crawling out of TV, the TV person steps out of the electronic screen easily without much physical exertion, entailing no sense of violation.

The paranormal *TV People* take over the adjacent space across a TV screen unassumingly without giving a warning or telltale signs of emerging monstrosity to the readers as well as to the narrator-protagonist. In the case of his workplace, the televisual field fills the entire office building where meetings take place to discuss the design of a new TV model, which accounts for his unexpected encounter with one of them walking down the stairs. In this sense, "TV People" can be called a ghost story of a new kind specific to our contemporary reality, in which the unlikely spectral figures affect all the members of society, including those who wish to avert the general outcome, without causing a sense of fear either to the story's TV viewer or to the text reader who is also exposed to TV's overreaching influence. A ghost story that leaves its readers baffled in this manner rather than straightforwardly terrifies them exerts, if any, only a limited range of appeal for fright although it concerns everyone in postindustrial society.

Ringu, the ghostly horror films, and "TV People" as an expression of Murakami's creative mind seem to negotiate totally different kinds of apprehension in accessing analog TV technology for remotely receiving visual information. In fact, originating in the identical situation of TV saturation as a socially coordinated reality in the last decade of the twentieth century, both pieces center on the non-human, televisual image that approaches and strikes the defenseless human viewers through the screen. The imagination results from the spatial reality of TV's proximity that is already technologically compromised. The televisual figures have metaphorically gained the freedom and ability to move around TV and affect humans, fictional as well as actual, at their will. Symptomatic of what undermines society, the two works address in tandem, yet in different modes, the same predicament that befell humanity at the end of the millennium.

A few decades since, the televisual appropriation of space has exponentially accelerated with the further proliferation of electronic screens, especially small, lightweight, portable devices for accessing the cyberspace that is at once eclipsing and absorbing the TV system in electronically transmitting audiovisuals. In 1999, the same year when *Ringu 2* premiered, Kuritsubo Yoshiki 栗坪良樹 already pointed out the "legally" established residence of non-intrusive, soft-trodden "Internet People" among humans in the footsteps of Murakami's *TV People*.[12] And the ghost has inevitably found the Internet system much more congenial to her electronically viral copying and migration than the cumbersome physicality of videotapes, roaming the cyberspace in the film *Sadako 3D* 貞子 3D (2012). The paranormal intruders might not advance far away from electronic screens, but there is little doubt that the ubiquitous accessibility to the worldwide web via portable devices greatly facilitates their process of taking over the users' entire reality.

[12] Kuritsubo 284.

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About the author:

Masaki Mori – Ph.D., is an Associate professor of Japanese and Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia, Georgia, U.S.A. His publications include, but not limited to, *Epic Grandeur: Toward the Comparative Poetics of the Epic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) and a number of journal articles on Kawabata Yasunari and Murakami Haruki. E-mail: mamo@uga.edu/

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