

# Haunted tapes, killer copies — cinematic ghosts in *Ringu* and *The Ring*

*Cassetes assombradas, cópias assassinas  
— fantasmas cinematográficos em  
Ringu e The Ring*

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## Abstract

In 2002, Gore Verbinski's remake of Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ringu* was released, under the name of *The Ring*. The film is based on a successful Japanese novel about a ghost that kills all those who dare to watch a cursed video tape. Narratively, as well as aesthetically, both films struck a chord with their intended audiences, and were extremely successful. The western remake of the Asian movie also seems to have started a trend, which in addition fueled an interest in Japanese horror. In this paper we set out to analyze how these films deal with their respective ghosts. Our focus will be on how the management of the cinematic specters in these two cases relates to tradition and, particularly, how the killer ghost who haunts the tape is rooted in Japanese tradition — not only in film, but also in folklore and traditional forms of Japanese theatre, like *kabuki* and *bunraku*. While avoiding to dwell excessively on inputs marked by a psychoanalytical matrix, we argue that the ambiguity of the ghostly in the Japanese culture enhances the uncanny feeling these representations are infused with, and that due to the filmic and viral nature of this *onryō* and its curse, we are facing an innovative and enticing version of the ghostly.

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**Keywords***Ringu* | *The Ring* | *onryō* | ghost | horror

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**Resumo**

Foi lançado em 2002, com o nome *The Ring*, o *remake* de Gore Verbinski do filme de 1998 de Hideo Nakata, *Ringu*. O filme é baseado num popular romance japonês sobre um fantasma que mata todos aqueles que se atreverem a ver uma cassete de vídeo assombrada. Ambos os filmes obtiveram favor junto das suas audiências, e tiveram muito sucesso. O *remake* ocidental do filme asiático parece também ter começado uma vaga de *remakes*, o que veio a alimentar um interesse por parte do público no filme de terror japonês. Neste artigo analisamos o tratamento que cada um destes filmes faz dos respectivos fantasmas. O foco será colocado na forma como a gestão dos espectros cinematográficos nestes dois casos se relaciona com a tradição e, especificamente, como o fantasma assassino que assombra a cassete tem as suas raízes na tradição japonesa — não só no cinema, mas também no folclore, e em formas tradicionais de teatro japonês, como o *kabuki* e o *bunraku*. Evitando recorrer demasiadamente a contributos marcados por uma matriz psicanalítica, argumentamos que a ambiguidade do fantasmático na cultura japonesa potencia a sensação de *unheimlich* que habita estas representações e que, muito em função da natureza fílmica e viral deste *onryō* e da sua maldição, estamos perante uma inovadora e estimulante versão do fantasmático.

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**Palavras-chave***Ringu* | *The Ring* | *onryō* | fantasma | terror

Over the last two decades, a specter has been haunting the production of horror cinema around the globe. That specter is the figure of the *onryō*, or the avenging spirit of Japanese folklore. (McRoy 2015, 199)

**Introduction**

If cinema started out as a chemical pinning down of moving images onto a strip of film, thus allowing to encapsulate ghosts in a tin can, it has grown to be, first, less alchemical, as research made the emulsions more stable and the films less flammable, and then,

less material, as film gave way to the digital. If cinema is, as Derrida puts it, “the art of allowing ghosts to come back” (Ken McMullen, *Ghost Dance* 1983), the summoning depends more and more on zeros and ones, and less on physical support. In other words, the ghost is, increasingly, either in the machine, or the machine itself.

Back in the days in which analog was still a thing, while VHS was preparing its slow but steady stage exit and DVD was arduously but decisively creeping its way up to the home video market, a curious change was to come over one of the genres that depended the most on that market: horror. After the wear and tear of the slasher, there were a few whiffs of fresh air; these included experiments with pretense found footage, and a franchise with a kind of irony derived from self-awareness, in a metafictional loop that soon became weary. The horror scene was indeed in need of a twist, when *Ringu* (1998) came along. This movie about a haunted video tape ended up contaminating the way horror was operating as a genre, and helped provide the tools and concepts to rethink the genre at the turning of the millennium.

The fact that this particular movie has fulfilled this role owes much to chance. However, the storyline has some very powerful elements which were dealt with effectively both by the Japanese director of the original and the American director of the remake: each in their own way skillfully *translated* the material they had been given, and the result proved extremely suitable for both of their audiences. We chose to refer to *translation* in this case, as we find it particularly fitting, since we are facing an American remake of a Japanese film — each rooted in their own film and folklore tradition — which is, in turn, an adaptation (and not the first one) of a novel. The knot is quite entangled, and sometimes it becomes difficult to pinpoint what is *original* (Cf. Phillips and Stringer 2008, 299).

### ***Ringu* and *The Ring***

*Ringu* (1998) is a Japanese film directed by Hideo Nakata. Based on the 1991 novel of the same name by Kôji Suzuki, it changes a few details in the plot while basically using the same material, which has solid roots in the Japanese tradition. It was released simultaneously with its sequel *Rasen* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), but while the latter was quickly dismissed, *Ringu* was a box office and critical success. Such was its success, that in the following year, there was a South Korean remake directed by Kim Dong-bin, which became known under the name of *The Ring Virus* (1999), and a TV series, more closely based on the novel, was aired in Japan<sup>1</sup>.

The success of Nakata’s 1999 *Ringu* film made it travel the world, namely in bootleg VHS tapes. Legend has it (Lacefield 2010, 6) that one of these landed in Gore

<sup>1</sup> The first adaptation of Suzuki’s novel was actually a television film, *Ringu* (*Ring: Kanzenban* in its home video release), released in Japan in 1995. In 1999, the Japanese television showed a 12 episode series named *Ring: The Final Chapter*; arguably in preparation for some time, it is apparently not connected in any way to the films or the previous television adaptation. That same year, a sequel television miniseries of 13 episodes and titled *Rasen* was also made.

Verbinski's hands; the poor quality of the copy made its mystique all the more powerful (Lacefield 2010, 6). And hence the overseas adventure began: in October 2002, Verbinski's remake, *The Ring*, is released, after a suitable marketing campaign, and is met with very positive reviews. The success of the film quickly built up to a small cult, aided by the fact that "when DreamWorks bought the remake rights to *Ringu*, it also purchased its distribution rights for the U.S. theatrical and video markets" (Herbert 2010, 167). And this is how a Japanese ghost story which had gotten into the public's heads in a peculiar way was appropriated by the mainstream. A feature film about a cursed videotape travels from Japan to the U.S., and from there to the world, after being advertised on TV, and via a series of promotional websites, until it makes its way to the DVD circuit. Along the way, a franchise was born. As we write, the *Ring* novels have had three new volumes, in addition to the original three<sup>2</sup>, it has given origin to at least six *manga*, three American films and seven Japanese ones<sup>3</sup>, including the 2016 crossover with the *Ju-On* series *Sadako vs Kayako*, directed by Kōji Shiraishi.

Not only has it caused these follow-ups, but it also set a trend, by triggering a number of Western remakes of Asian movies: after the example of *Ringu/The Ring*, several Japanese films were remade with relative success, including *Dark Water* (based on *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*), *One Missed Call* (based on *Chakushin ari*), *Pulse* (a remake of *Kairo*), and *Ju-On* gave way to *The Grudge* — this last case is particularly interesting, since Takashi Shimizu directed both versions<sup>4</sup>; it did not stop with Japan (or with horror, even in this case we are limiting our analysis to this genre), since *Mirrors* (Alexandre Aja 2008) and *The Uninvited* (Guard Brothers 2009) are remakes of South Korean films, and *The Eye* (David Moreau and Xavier Palud 2008) is based on a 2002 Hong-Kong-Singaporean production.

Much has been written on this craze of remakes (Wee 2014), the alleged drift towards an Asian aesthetics (Balanategui 2018; Martin 2015) and the differences and similarities between the two perceived poles. Specifically on *Ringu* and *The Ring*, there are countless studies comparing both movies' intake on horror, gender, and the ghostly, with different strategies and outcomes (Wee 2011; Benson-Allott 2013; Walker 2017; Lacefield 2010). In this paper, we want to analyze their treatment of ghosts and images, focussing on the way these ghosts and images relate to tradition.

### Phantom children and vengeful tapes

Let us consider the word "ghost" in its most common meaning, that of the presence of something absent, hence with a quality of juncture, insofar as it embodies the very threshold between worlds which are, by their nature, mutually exclusive. In a sense, the ghost is the impossible, the glitch in the otherwise smooth surface of sense in

<sup>2</sup> It had started out as a trilogy, including *Ring* (1991), *Spiral* (1995) and *Loop* (1998).

<sup>3</sup> And here we leave out the Korean version we have mentioned before, as well as a few Chinese productions.

<sup>4</sup> The remake is set in Japan as well, but many of the characters were changed so they would be Americans.

a given system of meaning. Whatever the context, the “ghost” depends on a bending of the laws that rule the environment in question: we say “ghost image” to refer to an unwanted duplicate of another image which is considered to be original or genuine, in the context of a malfunctioning device; “phantom limb pain” describes a very real, perceivable pain which afflicts a removed body part. Either way, the phantom, ghost or specter is, as Derrida puts it, a *revenant* (Derrida 1993, 32), something which was no longer there and then came back, an entity that travels between dimensions.

And this is precisely what we find in *Ringu* and *The Ring*: an *onryō* (vengeful spirit) which inhabits a cursed tape but, as the viewer will find out in what is arguably the crux of the plot, can move out of the TV set and into the real world. While Wes Craven’s Freddy Krueger (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984) could only get you while you were asleep, Sadako (or Samara in *The Ring*) has found the way to get into your world — first, through a film in a VHS tape and then, precisely seven days later, somehow leaving the magnetic field of the tape and materializing wherever you may be: “an upgraded version of supernatural malice, compatible with the requirements of the digital age” (Ancuta 2007, 24).

The opening scene of both movies may be summarized as follows: it starts out with two teenage friends giggling while brushing up on contemporary folklore<sup>5</sup>; they mention an urban legend about a cursed tape, which kills all those who watch it within a week. One of them, Tomoko (Katie, in the American remake), confesses how she has seen the tape, exactly a week before; when she is left alone, her TV turns on by itself; she turns it off, and tries to downplay the incident, but is perceivably anxious; and then something, which the viewer does not see, scares the life out of her. Literally: we learn in the next scene that Tomoko/Katie is dead, as are the friends with whom she had watched the tape; all of them died inexplicably. The autopsies only tell that their hearts stopped; the contorted, disfigured looks of fear in their faces explain the rest.

### Ghosts and the uncanny

That is the premise. So far, the content of the tape is unknown to the viewer. Whatever killed Tomoko and Katie remained unseen. And this became fodder for commentary, fueling the debate on how the seen versus the unseen infuses feelings of terror, or horror, accompanied by extensive musings on the difference between the two. Daniel Martin (2015, 22-40) reflects profusely on the matter and, while compiling existing criticism on the subject, he takes sides with Gregory Waller — and so would we: “Waller is clearly uncomfortable with the adversarial tone of much of the writing on the restrained tradition and modern horror, and he claims that the opposition between the two is misleading” (Martin 2015, 25). It is, among other things, simplistic:

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5 The reference to the American tradition of slasher films has been noted, for instance by Benson-Allott (2013, 105).

This approach to the genre unjustly serves the past as well as the present. We would do better, I think, to pay attention to films . . . which prove that the relationship between contemporary and golden age horror involves much more than simply the distinction between the graphically direct and the atmospherically suggestive. (Waller *apud* Martin 2015, 25)

Aesthetic and narrative issues aside, this discussion seems to overlook the fact that the budgetary constraints of *Ringu* and other B-movies are part of the reason they rely on atmosphere rather than special effects: the choice between “graphic” and “suggestive” is often not as free as some readings see them. This kind of dualism is but one of the risks that lurk over the analysis at hand. Also, at the heart of every essay on the ghostly lies the danger of circumventing the considerations made on the subject by Freud, in his 1919 text “The Uncanny” (Freud 1953); another hazard, and not a less ominous one, is that of hyperbolizing their functionalities, and forcing his categories into the analysis — or, even worse, forcing the analysis to fit the categories. Sorting out such trials is no easy task.

Freud’s essay deals with a E.T.A. Hoffmann tale (“Der Sandmann”, 1816) in which the theme of eyes, and that of doubles are of particular importance. Since *Ringu* and *The Ring* deal with doubles and gazes, and are films in which the eye has a very strong symbolism, it seemed suitable to resort to this piece. In it, Freud undertakes an analysis of the uncanny feeling one experiences reading Hoffmann’s story. He attributes the arising of this feeling to the return of repressed infantile material. Within the context of the story, he equates the fear of losing one’s eyes with the fear of castration; but another leitmotiv of Hoffmann’s Sandman is that of the double (*doppelgänger*), whose source is the primary narcissism of the child. In freudian terms, thus, this experiencing of the uncanny stems from the return of something long forgotten in our psychosexual history. Lacan (2014) takes it one step further, placing the uncanny at the core of his theory of anxiety.

What is productive for the analysis at hand is this idea of the uncanny as a result of an encounter with something uncomfortably familiar; foreign, but still relatable, though in an unexplained or unexplainable way. Also, the idea of the double as a paradigm of the uncanny is interesting to us, insofar as it represents a dense psychic node. We want to suggest that the storyline behind *Ringu* (1999) and *The Ring* (2002) taps into that kind of psychological material, long forgotten, with which the viewer is faced and cannot escape the kind of uneasiness these authors are writing about when they explore the field of the uncanny: the repressed complex revived, according to Freud, or taking the unhomely home, in lacanian terms, is what is at stake in this tale of ghosts and gazes, films and copies, wells and shutters.

In other words, when in these films one is faced with the impossible, one is already willing to embrace it as not only possible but as starkly real. Right from the beginning of the film, this is made obvious by the girls’ uneasiness: they try to reassure themselves

(one states the story of the cursed tape is but a rumor, the other claims she was joking about having seen a strange tape), but they are terrified by the ringing of the phone. For the viewer, the anxiety obviously stems from the agreement that, in a horror movie, things are not as innocent as they seem, and that something uncanny will happen. As Lowenstein mentions

The relief the two girls feel when they learn the caller's identity does not entirely reassure the viewer, because we already feel caught in a claustrophobic media web. Is the game on television the same one Tomoko's mother attends? Is the legend of the cursed videotape told by Masami the same one experienced by Tomoko? Can the phone that carries Tomoko's mother's voice also carry the power of the curse? In each case a technological medium (television, videotape, telephone) offers the promise of shared experience while simultaneously conveying the threat of suffocation and infection. (Lowenstein 2015, 82)

One of the reasons behind the success of *Ringu* (and its western *doppelgänger*) has to do with this revisiting of extremely and often effectively repressed terrors and, mostly, with the way it is done. The plot puts us before a ghost — and this is not new, nor particularly disturbing. But while the orthodoxy of haunting stories makes one afraid they will *see* a ghost, in this case it works the other way around. Even if one does not know it at the start, it is the ghost's own gaze that is to be feared.

The Japanese film's storyline and aesthetics are set in such a way as to create anxiety and uneasiness in the viewer, and its American remake, tinted as it is with its own tics, builds on that. This is aided by the fact that it is the ghost of a child who has been wronged (and, on top of that, by those she should be able to trust and depend upon — the mother in the Japanese film, the father in the American one); and this is sadly and utterly relatable; moreover, from the point of view of the ghost's victims, we have people who have watched a bootleg — and, again, (unlike the perspective of running into a chainsaw brandishing maniac, or accidentally building a house over a sacred burying ground) it does feel like it could happen to you.

### Japanese ghosts

Therefore the way the spectator relates to the film strongly contributes to the psychological effect of the narrative: you may call it terror or horror, or evoke the category of the uncanny, with all its psychoanalytical weight, but one fact that stands is that this story has a set of details which speak to the viewers' sensibilities, disparate as they may be. In that sense, the bringing forth of the *onryō* folklore is indeed an innovation and one which bears the mark of Japanese culture: it is a leitmotif of the *kaidan* (ghost story) tradition, and a staple of the *kabuki* repertoire, but it was not, at least until the late 1990s,

a regular feature of Japanese horror. Just think of the *kaijū eiga*<sup>6</sup>, which gave us *Godzilla* (Ishirō Honda 1954) and the like, and may be considered a genre in its own right; consider the psychedelic hallucinations of Nobuhiko Obayashi's 1977 *House (Hausu)*, or the exploitation fantasies directed by Teruo Ishii. Even if you recall more recent films, like the cyberpunk body-horror of *Tetsuo* (Shin'ya Tsukamoto 1989), you still do not have anything like the *onryō* in *Ringu* — and, later, in *Ju-On* (Takashi Shimizu 2002). A whole different product, as well, is Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999), whose influence can be seen in movies like *Hostel* and the *Saw* franchise.

For that purpose, one would have to go back to the 1950's and 60's, and to films like Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953), Nakagawa's *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* (1959), or Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1965). These bear features which are very close to the *kabuki* tradition of stories about *yurei* (female ghosts), and *onryō* (vengeful spirits): *Ugetsu monogatari* is the story of a potter who is seduced by the spirit of a noble woman; *Kwaidan* is a portmanteau of ghost stories; and *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* is an adaptation of what is probably the most popular *onryō* play in the *kabuki* repertoire. The depictions of ghosts in these films, and in *Ringu* as well, owe much to the *kabuki* aesthetics, whose roots can be traced back to the Edo period's ghost stories.

Compared to western representations, these ghosts are more like Alejandro Amenábar's Grace and her children (*The Others*, 2001), or M. Night Shyamalan's ghosts (*The Sixth Sense*, 1999): they do not *look* dead, they may not even know they are dead, "they walk around like regular people". They may even marry the living — like in the medieval tale of "The Chrysanthemum Spirit"<sup>7</sup>, in which a young woman has a love affair with the spirit of a flower, until it is plucked and killed (McCormick 2013); in *Ugetsu*, Lady Wakasa seduces the potter; in *Kwaidan*, Yurionna (a vengeful spirit) kills Mosaku but spares Minokichi, because she finds him handsome; so much so that years later she goes on to marry him and have his children. In Japanese lore, one can live for years with a ghost without realizing it. The alterity is not so radical as it is in the western tradition.

The characterization of the ghost of Sadako in the Japanese *Ringu* film is very different from that of Samara in the American *The Ring*, and reflects this tradition: pale face and long black hair is as classical a ghost look in *kabuki* as the zombie make-up has grown to be in the West. Masks for ghost characters in classical Japanese theatre vary, but Sadako is immediately recognizable as an *onryō*: the lonely wronged female who, having met her untimely and violent end, roams the Earth unleashing upon others — usually men, in traditional tales — her often unquenchable thirst for revenge. In both movies, the ghost of Sadako/Samara is seen in a long white attire — reminiscent of the traditionally white burial kimono worn by *kabuki onryō* — and long black unruly hair. In Japan, hair is very important as a symbol — traditionally, hairdos signaled their bearer's

<sup>6</sup> *Eiga* is "film" and *kaiju* means "strange creature".

<sup>7</sup> It is entirely unrelated to Mizoguchi's *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (1939).



social (even marital) status and the grooming of one's hair has always been very strongly associated with one's social and moral position: "People with loose hair had loose morals and were outside the proper order of things", writes Sarah M. Nelson (Hiltebeitel and Miller 1998, 111) in her piece on Japanese influence in Korea.

Hair is also a very relevant and recognizable feature of *Yotsuya Kaidan*'s Oiwa, probably the best-known Kabuki ghost. Oiwa is depicted with the usual white burial kimono, the long ragged hair, and the white and blue face that signals her spectral nature. Moreover, having been poisoned by her husband, she has a severely injured, drooping eye, which matches the kind of horror *kabuki* fans expect to see; also as a consequence of the poisoning, her hair starts to fall off in one famous scene in which she combs her hair in front of a mirror. It is hard not to bring these images to mind when confronted with the woman combing her hair before the mirror in *Ringu*'s (and *The Ring*'s) cursed tape, or not to see a clear mention of Oiwa's in Sadako's distorted eye. As it is hard not to recall the well into which Sadako is thrown as an echo of the well into which Okiku (the character from a *bunraku* play called *Banchō Sarayashiki*) is thrown into by her lover (or the well into which the husband's body is thrown in Nagisa Ōshima's *Ai no Bōrei*<sup>8</sup>, for that matter). It is also worth mentioning how, in *Kwaidan*'s first story, "Kurokami", the swordsman is killed by his ex-wife's long black hair.

However, in spite of the very quotational apparitions of Sadako in the Japanese movie, they are not what makes it so weary — this dialogue with a folklore and cinematic tradition no doubt contributes to create the mood, but *Ringu*'s horror depends more on what you are not shown, than on the visual footholds that help tell the story (it is arguably less so in the American version): characters fear what they know more than they fear what they see, because, other than the very short film of the cursed tape, they do not see much — nor does the viewer.

### What you do not see is what you get

In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, what you do see is a young female journalist (in the book, the journalist is a man), Reiko/Rachel, investigating into the story of the haunted tape. Being the aunt of the teenager who died at the beginning of the film, she is personally involved as well. A set of photographs her niece and her friends had taken allows her to start the quest, and she quickly retraces their steps to the cabin in the woods in which Tomoko/Katie and her friends had seen the tape. She watches it too, and thus becomes fated to die within a week. At this point, she decides to enlist the help of her ex-husband Ryuji/Nathan, shows him the tape and leaves him a copy of it. Further investigations allow them to piece together the story of Sadako/Samara, the "author" of the tape and the avenging spirit that haunts through it. Meanwhile, their son Yoichi/Aidan had gotten

<sup>8</sup> In English *Empire of Passion*, 1978.

hold of the tape and watched it too, so they have extra motivation to lift the curse. They manage to find her remains right before Reiko's/Rachel's seven days expire and, with that, they think they are safe. But then something happens: when Ryuji's/Nathan's time is up, his TV turns on by itself and, in a sequence that earned its way into the annals of horror, Sadako/Samara climbs out of the TV set into his living room, and kills him — apparently, he dies out of sheer terror, as she lays eye(s) on him.

Only at the climax, near the very end of the film, with the sudden twist of the plot (they thought they had lifted the curse), we get to see the first death — or the first complete death sequence. Five people die in the storyline of the movie: at the very beginning, Tomoko/Katie and her friends; and, by the very end, Ryuji/Nathan<sup>9</sup>. In the first case, we see little of Tomoko's/Katie's death and nothing of her friends'; we merely learn at her funeral that she is not the only victim; we see her nervous behavior while talking to her friend, her anxiety building up as they are discussing the subject and her seven days are running out; we see her uneasiness when she is left alone in the kitchen and nothing peculiar is happening, and then her alarm when the TV turns itself on. We then see her from behind, and when she turns to face the camera she reacts with a look of utmost fear. And that is it: no gore, no pain, no visible wound.

In that first scene of Tomoko's/Katie's death, and this is true for both filmic renditions of the story, we do not see the ghost nor the actual death (while in the book the process of dying is described). Just that frozen mask of horror which, in the Japanese version, becomes a still shot, with its colors inverted, as if in a negative film — and therein lies a telling difference. This may be a rather naïve effect, but it speaks volumes: in the specific case of this movie, a comment was being made not so much on technology as such, but on the act, the meaning, and the power of gazing. In *Ringu*, Sadako's face is never revealed until the climax scene in which she claims Ryuji and, at that point, what we see of her is just an eye, the one, distorted eye, gaping between pitch-black, unkempt bangs of hair — and when life abandons his body, the same negative film effect is given to the still shot of his fear-ridden, terror-contorted face.

Like Vertov's kino-eye, Sadako's eye works like a shutter. Being a vengeful spirit, she drains life out of her subjects; her gaze embodies the rage that drives her apparitions, and updates the *kaidan* tradition with just that hint of technology: Sadako does not just haunt you, she manages to impress a film with her *message*; after one has seen the tape, they receive a phone call (in the American version, a voice tells Rachel “seven days”; in the Japanese one, Reiko simply hears mysterious noises which seem to echo the tape she has just watched). And when Sadako finally gets to her intended victim, as we learn from Ryuji's death, what she does is look at them. And, with that — and this is the supernatural twist of it all — not only does she see them, as she captures the victim

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<sup>9</sup> Actually, there is one more death in *The Ring*: Samara's father commits suicide by electrocuting himself.

with her photographic eye, but they *see* her: “the machine that reveals the world to you as only the machine can see it” (Vertov 1923, 62). The fact that the transit is carried out both ways is at the core of the uneasiness conveyed by the *Ringu* movie.

This is not quite the take of the American version. The negative-image effect is absent and the general treatment of the ghost is different. Sarah McKay Ball is one of the authors who dwells on the disparity of the approach both films adopt towards the ghost and their behavior: Sadako is portrayed as wronged and, thus, vengeful; but the story of Samara is very different, and she is characterized, while in life, as dangerously deranged and — with a manichaeism which has been noted to be very American and little Japanese — *evil* (Cf. Ball 2006, 21). But regarding the visual choices made, it is striking how much more *neutral* the ghost of Sadako is.

### Comparing ghosts

We have mentioned how the depiction of Sadako is solidly rooted in Japanese traditions of folklore and representations of the ghostly; the way this translates into the movie is by presenting us with a very natural-looking Sadako: although pale and in a white attire, she is not corpse-like, and her apparitions do not carry the same shock value as Samara’s do in Verbinski’s film. Nor do actual corpses, for that matter: in *Ringu*, you see the retrieving of Sadako’s remains, and a flashback revealing Tomoko’s body inside a closet, where her mother found her; Tomoko’s face is contorted in horror but, aside from that, she looks almost alive (which makes sense, as she had been dead for a few hours at most); when her corpse is found by Reiko, Sadako is little more than a skeleton covered in that all-encompassing hair that is such a staple of her image as a ghost. *The Ring*, on the other hand, shows you an absurdly decayed body in the flashback of Katie inside the closet, and does not resist resorting to special effects for the scene of the reclaiming of Samara’s mortal remains: when Rachel pulls her out of the water, her body is corpse-like but basically incorrupt — and then it decomposes before our eyes, within seconds. What we here refer to as “corpse-like” is not so much a description invested with forensic rigor, as it is a cinematic one; dead bodies in *The Ring* have that kind of make-up that was made popular by *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), and so does the ghost of Samara.

Samara, in *The Ring*, is presented as pale and long-haired, in a long white nightgown, but she is also dirty, ragged, and angry: we do see her face, and her expression is threatening. In the Japanese film, we hardly ever see the ghost’s face — we see her in flashbacks of her life, and she looks more like a normal little girl; in her ghostly persona, she shows little more than a distorted eye framed by long black hair; her skin (we do not see her face, but her arms and legs are partly visible) is pale but not torn or bruised, her clothes are intact. Samara’s ghost, on the other hand, displays signs of decay, both on herself and on her clothes, with visible cuts and bruises, and what seems to be rotting flesh, wherever she is not covered by her dirty and ragged nightgown.

One of the differences between the American film and the Japanese one is the inclusion of lines of dialogue for Samara: in Verbinski's film, the ghost's story is pieced together with a whole set of details, and it includes flashbacks in which Samara not only has a face, but also a voice. Regarding Nakata's Sadako, the mystery is more complete, and it is underlined by the fact that we not only never see her face, but we never hear her voice either.

The ghosts also move differently: in that harrowing scene in which the ghost in the tape begins emerging from the well and then out of the TV set, even if both directors used the same technique in order to show an unnaturally moving Sadako and Samara, the fact is that, as in every other detail of "monster" depicting, their choices are not exactly the same. When Ryuji's/Nathan's TV turns itself on, we see the figure of the long-haired ghost in the white gown, first slowly and eerily climbing out of the well, still onscreen; shortly after, she crawls head (actually, *hair*) first out of the television, gets up on her feet, and walks toward her victim. It is interesting to note that "[t]his scene was not present in Suzuki's original novel, and Nakata acknowledges that he was inspired by a similar scene in David Cronenberg's classic sci-fi film *Videodrome* (1983)" (Rojas 2014, 422). We have therefore a trait, and a very powerful one, which is common to both renditions, even if it was not suggested by the novel. This illustrates how the Japanese movie is indebted to a western filmic tradition as well.

For this scene, both Nakata and Verbinski filmed the actress playing the ghost walking backwards toward the television, and then played the film backwards, in order to get that awkwardness of movements that is distinctive of their apparitions. But the parallel ends here. As in everything else, Sadako is more natural, or neutral, if you prefer: she moves very, very slowly, hesitantly, both onscreen and once she is out in the real world; her hair is dry, even after coming out of the well and, all in all, the impression this ghost gives you is that it is very *physical*. Lowenstein notes how

Sadako's ghost, which becomes more and more corporeal as the film unfolds, moves in twisted, erratic spasms that unmistakably evoke the grotesque body movements made famous by *ankoku butoh* (dance of utter darkness), an avant-garde Japanese dance form originating with Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo. Indeed, Nakata cast an actress trained in this dance form to play Sadako. (Lowenstein 2015, 98)

Samara, on the other hand, is presented to us in this scene as she had been throughout the whole movie: with a very strong halo of wrongness and wrongdoing, and inklings of her nature. The water she sheds all around her is both an omen and a token of her supernatural character. Aside from the decaying flesh and the angry face we have already mentioned, the Samara that climbs out of the television is visibly more aggressive than Nakata's Sadako; she moves jerkily as well, but far less slowly and much more resolutely. The unnatural quality of her presence owes less to the artifice of playing the

film in reverse, than to the choice of including visual effects which give away her earnestly filmic nature. She hunts down Noah with no hesitations in her body language, but her movement is disrupted by static outbursts and what we can only describe as a jump-cut editing, as she is progressing towards her prey. She may be out of the tape, but she still is *film*.

### **The ghost goes viral**

But the terror, in this story, does not stem so much from the presence of the ghost as such. The bootleg vehicle of the haunting hints at that. What is most disturbing, both for the characters and for the viewer, is the filmic quality of this ghost (a quality which translates visually, as we have seen, in the case of Verbinski's rendition): in either interpretation, it is a vengeful spirit who can get herself on tape and, through that medium, not only reach her victims (and the pervasiveness of VHS tapes and their bootleg copies make it a frightening possibility), but kill them. This brings an innovation to the horror tradition. Typically, the haunting belongs to its own space: "In ghost films, *space remembers*. The haunted house refers to a space of recollection charged with affect: alternately fearsome, thrilling, or tragic" (Lim 2009, 206). Once you would have to be inside the haunted house/castle/dream to be under the killer ghost's reach. Not in this case: once you have seen their tape, Sadako and Samara will haunt you like certain frames in horror movies tend to do — but they will also hunt you down and kill you, and they will do so in spite of your virtue, courage, or wit. This ghost has a peculiarity (which we will see later on, in *Ju-On*), which is the fact that the curse is — or becomes — *personal*: once you run into its space, it sticks with you. You do not have to somehow aggravate the spirit in order to unleash its wrath: coming into contact with it will be enough. Once under the spell of its curse, you can pass it on, but you cannot escape it. Or, at least, not in the traditional ways of the genre. The only thing that makes a difference is self-referential and metafictional enough to tie a knot in your brain.

When Reiko/Rachel finds out that Ryuji/Nathan has died, even though they both have found and recovered Sadako's/Samara's remains — which they had though would bring her closure — she begins to fear for their son's life and to question why she has been spared; after all, her seven days had ran out before her ex's did. She then realizes — with the help of a flashback from the haunted tape in *Ringu* and a revealing montage in *The Ring* — that she had made a copy, and had shown it to someone. She concludes that, because she had contributed to keep the curse going, she had been exempted. She then proceeds to help Yoichi/Aidan make his own copy. In the Japanese film, we learn she is planning to make him show it to his grandfather, her father; the American film is more vague, and ends with the unanswered question: Aidan wants to know what will happen to whoever will watch the tape; Rachel shrugs it off.

This question, not explicitly formulated but also implied in *Ringu*, encloses the *meaning* of the curse: it is its viral nature that makes it so effective — and so disturbing.

Suzuki (Ball 2006, 40) recalls how he got the idea of “Ring” for the title<sup>10</sup>, toying with its double meaning of form and sound — the ring corresponded to the rim of light Sadako/Samara saw when the well she had been thrown into was covered by its lid, but also to the tone of the phone call one got after watching the tape. But the idea of the ring also has the reverberation of circularity which applies to the curse’s *modus operandi*: since to escape entails to pass it on, it can never end. This is particularly poignant in the Japanese version, which underlines the need to pass on the curse with Reiko’s determination to show her son’s copy of the tape to her own father; in that sense, the emphasis is on the viral nature of the whole process<sup>11</sup>.

Verbinski’s version, on the other hand, downplays this relentlessness of the curse, both by the way it presents Samara as a troubled child — thus providing an explanation for her behavior — and by the movie’s insistence on the filmic, more than the viral, quality of the ghost. Aside from the features we have already discussed, there is a telling detail in the American film, in the scene in which Rachel takes the cursed tape into the video reproduction booth. With this, she has the technological means to access information otherwise unknown to the viewer: “she notices that the master track’s timer displays not numbers, but random gibberish (...) When Rachel gives Noah the copy to study in his video lab, these tiny digital blots immediately unsettle him” (Benson-Allott 2013, 115). Noah’s interpretation is that such a tape would be impossible (in his view, it should not have any images, since it has no proper control track), but his explanation is more metaphorical: he compares it to being born without fingerprints. Inaccurate as it is, his explanation helps to deliver the message. As Cætlín Benson-Allott puts it:

In point of fact, a control track (or time code) really just informs a VCR how fast to scan the tape, but Noah’s anthropomorphic mischaracterization of video technology actually tells the spectator how *The Ring* reads its videotape. For Noah, Samara’s tape either has no origins (was never recorded, does not exist) or is capable of obscuring its origins. The latter is particularly unsettling to Noah and the spectator because it reduces the viewer’s agency within the video apparatus. It suggests that the VCR subjects the spectator to its technology rather than affirming her as the subject of its technology.” (Benson-Allott 2013, 116)

In a way, the Japanese film, providing little or no explanation for the ghost’s behavior, underscores its viral nature, its irrational need to be reproduced and its relentless pressing for contagion. *The Ring*, on the other hand, explores in more detail the physical

<sup>10</sup> The title of the original novel is a Japanese transliteration of the English word “ring”; this kind of use of loan words is a very common practice in Japan: Japanese uses several sets of writing symbols, and one of them is to be used exclusively to write foreign words; after the Meiji restoration, Japanese society is more open to contact with the outside and, after World War II, particularly prone to American influence.

<sup>11</sup> *Virality* is, in fact, very much present in the novel, and also in the film sequel, whose plot is based on an attempt to find out how the curse’s contagion actually takes place.

presence of the tape itself, and of its material existence. Both renditions play with our natural distrust of technology, but they present us with slightly distinct *translations* of the ghost. We would say that *Ringu*, through that effect which evokes a negative still of the victims, has a stronger claim on the power of the gaze (and thus invites more lacanian readings: Cf. Benson-Allott 2013, 119)

Wee (2014) has a very interesting and rather detailed analysis of the contents of both cursed tapes. In Suzuki's novel the tape is never described. An understandable and probably very adequate choice, considering the medium. But, by the same token, *seeing* the cursed tape is an unavoidable requirement of the film version: it would be harder in film to sustain the narrative tension about a cursed tape with an embedded countdown to extinction without revealing its content; at the same time, the degree of metafictionality and self-referentialness attained by the fact that the film shows you the tape, helps to build the impression of ambiguity which is at the very root of the premise for the story; such ambiguity is confirmed by the fact that, even though you *see* the content of the tape, you are not cursed.

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