Anamorphic allegory in *The Ring*, or, seven ways of looking at a horror video

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Any point on a ring is both before and after any other point, depending on the arbitrary choice of the starting point.

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (1)

Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring* (2002) begins *in media res*. In a suburban bedroom, two teenage girls discuss a cursed videotape:

‘Becca: Have you heard about this videotape that kills you when you watch it? You start to play it and it's like somebody's nightmare... and as soon as it's over your phone rings. Someone knows you've watched it and what they say is: ‘You will die in seven days’. And exactly seven days later...

Katy: Who told you that? I’ve watched it! (2)

In terms of Genette’s narratology, this exposition offers both a completing analepsis (a flashback that tells us what has just happened) and a repeating prolepsis (advance notice of what is just about to happen). (3) It is not certain how many victims the video has already claimed, but shortly after her confession Katy is murdered and ‘Becca severely traumatized. The video kills again at the film’s climax and denouement is deferred by a proleptic promise that it will kill again (a pledge delivered in the sequel, *The Ring Two* (2005)). The opening point of *The Ring* simultaneously narrates what has happened and what will happen and is thus both before and after. Whilst recycling the *mise-en-scène* of teen horror, the prologue also permits a fast-forward subliminal glimpse of key images from the cursed video (a well, a barn, a horse’s eye, a burning tree) that will be replayed and reviewed repeatedly in the scenes that follow. And where do these rotary movements begin? The genealogy of the tape is traced to an originary trauma. Anna Morgan pushes her eleven-year old daughter, Samara, into a well which she then covers. The young girl survives the fall and spends seven days looking up at a ring of light before dying. After her death, Samara’s spirit is transferred to video tape. Should someone watch this video they will receive a telephone call and the cryptic message ‘seven days’. Exactly seven days later Samara returns as an electric ghost that emerges first from the image of the well onscreen and then from the television itself. Samara’s victims are petrified. The shock of seeing this spectre is so intense that the spectator’s face is transfigured into its own grisly death mask.(4)

In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), Walter Benjamin contended that film, by virtue of its continual and sudden changes, produced a ‘physical shock effect’ in the spectator.(5) For Benjamin, cinema was a privileged medium that crystallized the phenomenology of a traumatic modernity. Whilst cinema constituted a key component in the technological infrastructure, allegory embodied the aesthetic logic of modernity. Benjamin intuited a deep structural affinity between film, allegory and the historical crises of modernity. In *The Arcades Project* he asserted that ‘allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century’. (6) The allegorical mode appeared to mirror the fragmentation and fetishisation promoted both by commodity capitalism and cinema. However, in a deft dialectical manoeuvre, Benjamin insisted that allegory’s flaws might
themselves be redemptive. As a discontinuous montage of historical fragments torn from their normal setting and thrust into violent collisions, allegory might spark defamiliarising jolts that illuminated social and spiritual relations. Rather than simply reflecting alienated experience, allegory possessed the potential for critique by forging, in a flash, previously unseen and unsuspected connections. In The Origin of German Tragic Drama, writing in that characteristically condensed and evocative style which Susan Sontag described as ‘freeze-frame baroque’, Benjamin juxtaposed the illusory unities and transcendence of the romantic symbol and the transparent failings of allegories which are enmeshed, eternally, in the contingencies of history and ruin: whereas in the Symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the factes hippocratica [death mask] of history, as a petrified, primordial landscape.(7)

The observer of The Ring is confronted with death masks, petrification and primordial landscapes. Might these be seen, in Benjaminian terms, as dialectical images haunted by historical allegory? This essay will suggest they can. The Ring will be read as an anamorphic allegory which manufactures a charged circuit of connections between ghosts, young women and numinous optical technologies. Rather than being petrified by the image of an image crawling from underground and across the screen, the observer can unearth the death masks of history here: the history of a necrophile genre, the history of ghosts emerging from various machines, the post-war history of technological exchange between the US and Japan and at ground zero in The Ring, the tale of a little girl and Little Boy.

**GHOST MACHINES**

First suggestion: haunting is historical, to be sure.

Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (8)

Perhaps the least speculative but most circular allegorical interpretation of Verbinski’s The Ring would read it as a horror film that encompasses the history of horror film itself. Since it revolves around a scary video, The Ring is an auto-reflexive text which is haunted by its own ghost. In this regard the content is an allegory of the form, or, to be more exact, the content is an allegory of the viewer’s consumption of the film. This qualification seems necessary since the production of images in The Ring is purely of secondary significance. Although Samara is clearly the source of the video, the means of its manufacture is shrouded in mystery and this ellipsis is itself allegorical of a postindustrial age in which, for some, production has become an increasingly remote, invisible and even spectral activity. Whilst the means of the video’s production are vague, the consequences of visual consumption are clear and devastating. Here, looks really can kill. Since its birth, horror film has been the subject of urban legends and conservative censure insisting on the moral, psychological and on occasion physical threats posed by the genre. Screenings of The Blair Witch Project (1999), for example, were allegedly attended by nausea, vomiting and fainting. Sanchez and Myrick’s cult film, like The Ring, circles around mysterious video footage, a young woman and televisual technology whilst threatening to confuse the borders between image and reality. Reports of the damage caused by The Blair Witch themselves replayed folklore surrounding an earlier film that also centred on a young woman: The Exorcist (1973). Even before it reached the cinema, William Friedkin’s film was associated with supernatural violence that included set fires and the deaths of nine members of the cast, crew and production team. Once it was released at the cinema, according to
media mythology, *The Exorcist* elicited so many instances of retching, hysteria and heart attacks that paramedics were routinely stationed in cinemas. A San Francisco newspaper headline proclaimed: ‘*The Exorcist* nearly killed me!’ In accidental anticipation of *The Ring*, the evangelist Billy Graham proposed that a demon had entered the very film stock of *The Exorcist*. The British Board of Film Censors may not have been persuaded that the film was cursed or possessed, but it refused to grant a certificate thus effectively banning the video version of *The Exorcist* from circulation for seventeen years (from 1981 to 1998).

Horror videos have also habitually been linked to violent crime. In the UK, for example, *Child’s Play 3* (1991) was cited by the media as the inspiration for the murder of a three-year old boy, Jamie Bulger. Between 1996 and 2001 there were over twenty cases of murder and serious assault involving the iconic mask from the *Scream* trilogy.(9) The horror genre, of course, has been plagued by allegations of malign influence since long before films about copycat murder were being blamed for copycat murder. In the late eighteenth century an explosive proliferation in gothic novels, ‘bluebooks’, ‘chapbooks’ and ‘shilling shockers’ was met by accusations of threats to the social, political and religious order. Gothic fiction was charged with promoting superstition and Satanism, heresy and revolution. Young women were considered especially vulnerable to the threats posed by this deviant genre. Self-appointed guardians of female virtue warned that this imperilled cohort might swoon in terror, or, worse still, experience dangerous arousal. The critique of gothic literature and horror film, as has often been noted, typically indulges in hysterical tropes that are pivotal to the genre itself. These tropes can be found dead centre in *The Ring*: possession, infection, curse and the crossing of boundaries between fantasy and reality.

In the late eighteenth century, the boundaries between phantasmatic image and reality were being jeopardised not only by gothic fiction, but also by an array of new optical technologies. The roots of this development lay in seventeenth century ‘natural magic’ (*magiae naturalis*) and in particular the development of the magic lantern. In *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (1646), the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher documented the design of a ‘catastrophic lamp’ that could be used to project images onto a wall in a darkened room. Following Kircher’s pioneering work, a number of priests, scientists and performers used magic lanterns and camera obscura to project images of spirits, demons and devils. The period that saw the rise of gothic literature also witnessed a dramatic upsurge in these ‘ghost shows’. In Leipzig, in the late 1760s, Johann Schropfer converted the billiards room in his struggling coffee shop into a venue for gothic spectacles that soon acquired a cult audience. In addition to projecting images of ghosts and demons, Schropfer utilised eerie music, sound effects, electricity and incense in a sensory extravaganza. Commercial success encouraged Schropfer to take his ghost show to other European cities, but, whilst touring, he became increasingly unstable and started to believe his ghosts were real. Schropfer committed suicide in 1774, but his work lived on to inspire and influence performers and scientists at expositions and stage shows. In particular, Schropfer’s ghost haunted the popular horror shows known as ‘phantasmagoria’.

The phantasmagoria differed from the magic lantern ghost show in two key respects: the technology became more sophisticated and at the same time increasingly invisible to the audience. Whilst the traditional lanternist made his optical device a centerpiece of the spectacle, in the phantasmagoria the technical apparatus was concealed. The most successful ghost showman of the early phantasmagoria was Étienne-Gaspard Robertson. In post-revolutionary Paris, this Belgian professor of physics and accomplished magician staged hauntings in Capuchin crypts, crumbling catacombs and derelict convents.
Robertson’s publicity proclaimed that the audience would see the dead raised from their graves and his shows caused such a sensation that the Parisian police temporarily closed them down due to rumours that the ‘fantasmagorie’ risked resurrecting Louis XVI. Robertson’s intention was not merely to entertain, but to terrify by convincing the audience that his images were real: ‘I am only satisfied if my spectators, shivering and shuddering, raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them’. (10) To achieve this aim, Robertson positioned the projection technology, his ‘Phantascope’, behind a screen and placed it on brass rails. Incorporating state-of-the-art optical lenses, the Phantascope could be moved towards and away from the screen to produce a ‘looming effect’: sharply focused and apparently three-dimensional figures, distant ancestors of Samara Morgan, lunged towards a terrified spectator. Robertson’s repertoire of ‘ambulant phantoms’ incorporated gothic tropes which Verbinski recycles in The Ring: female spirits, mad women in white and a Medusa’s head which, according to contemporary newspapers, resulted in a petrification almost as potent as its classical source. Publicity for Robertson’s ghost shows proclaimed that women fainted and men leapt from their seats to wave their canes and ward off the approaching phantom. In the course of the nineteenth century, the phantasmagoria employed progressively more intricate combinations of mobile lanterns and projectors, screens and glass, smoke and mirrors to produce effects that anticipated the camerawork and editing of twentieth century cinema: fades, dissolves, cuts, zooms and superimposed images. (11) The phenomenal success and lasting influence of the phantasmagoria, alongside its signature splicing of the specular with the spectral, encouraged Walter Benjamin to adopt it as his master trope for modernity.

Although spectators of the phantasmagoria might have felt as though a ghost was crossing the screen towards them, they knew rationally, at least in retrospect, that the phantom was merely an optical illusion. The mid-nineteenth century in the US, however, witnessed the rise of a movement which claimed to traverse the boundaries between natural and supernatural. American Spiritualism was founded on the same triad which appears in The Ring: girls, ghosts and electrical technology. The birthplace of the movement was a family home in Hydesville, New York, where, in March 1848, two girls claimed to be communicating with the dead. Kate and Margaretta Fox, aged ten and twelve, confirmed (like the eleven-year old Samara in The Ring) the mythology which associates girls on the brink of puberty with sensitivity to psychic phenomena. (12) The Fox sisters deciphered a series of tapping and knocking sounds heard around their home as messages from ‘Mr Split Foot’. Word spread of the ‘Rochester Rappings’ and hundreds of people flocked to Hydesville to see and hear the messages delivered by these prodigious young women. At precisely this moment, just twenty-six miles away in Seneca Falls, thousands more flocked to see and hear the messages delivered at the first ever women’s rights convention. Spiritualism and US feminism were interlaced. Women typically took centre stage at séances and in psychic circles where they were permitted to say things that would have been deemed unorthodox or even unacceptable in different social contexts. The spirit world often seemed keen to draw the attention of the living to social injustice: the plight of slaves and prostitutes, the evils of liquor, the sufferings of the oppressed and abused.

Following the ‘Rochester Rappings’, the Fox sisters became celebrities. Whilst touring America and Europe, they received extensive support from those involved in women’s rights, abolitionism, Quakerism and the temperance movement. Alongside these connections to contemporary progressive movements, US spiritualism sought legitimisation by association with cutting edge developments in science and communications technology. A synergy sprang up between mediumship and emerging media. In newspaper articles, pamphlets, books and speeches regarding the exploits of Kate Fox and other mediums,
it was claimed that a ‘spiritual telegraph line’ had been connected to the ‘beyond’. Jeffrey Sconce notes pertinently that the tappings at Rochester took place just four years after the first public demonstration of the electromagnetic telegraph by Samuel Morse.(13) Soon after this event, ghosts began to communicate in Morse code and some spirit circles incorporated telegraphic technology into their séances. Whilst Morse’s telecommunications device offered an uncanny abolition of geographical distance, psychic telegraphy claimed to cross the metaphysical divide between the living and the dead.

In The Ring Samara utilises a different medium – television - to traverse these spheres, but her manifestation as an electric ghost resonates with Spiritualist philosophy. In the nineteenth century, electricity was the main connector between ghosts and communications technology. Spiritualism sought to explain phantoms as paranormal electrical phenomena and saw the medium as a ‘spirit battery’. At some séances the medium would attempt to improve her connection to the spirit world by asking each member of the circle to hold a rope whose ends were coiled in copper or zinc buckets of water. The vast majority of mediums were women in part because the female form was deemed more suited to the task of being entered by spectral-electrical energy. Victorian science sought to explicate this phenomenon. For example, in 1839, the German chemist Baron Karl von Reichenbach began experimenting with predominantly young female subjects to explore the links between neurasthenia, psychosomatic illnesses (including somnambulism, hysteria and night terrors), sensitivity to psychic phenomena and electromagnetism. A large battery was positioned on the roof of Castle Reichenbach and connected by wires to a darkroom below. In this makeshift laboratory, young female sensitives sat at a round table which could be rotated to place a variety of objects before them. The sensitives, positioned like Samara in pitch darkness, detected different types of aura surrounding these objects. Reichenbach proposed that his subjects were able to perceive a vital electromagnetic force, the ‘Od’, not within the spectrum of normal vision. Some branches of Victorian science sought to explain the particular sensitivity of young women to these unseen forces by linking them to electrical menstruums and pulses emanating from the womb. It is perhaps worth noting, in this regard, that the electrical ghost in The Ring is associated with birth imagery: after a symbolic water-breaking, Samara emerges from the uterine darkness of the well through a tunnel into the light and then, coated in a slimy decidua, slips through the aperture of the television.

In the early stages of Spiritualism, sensitives and mediums were conductors for intangible electrical energies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, ectoplasm started to emerge from mouths, ears, noses and vaginas. The imagery of ectoplasmic strings is conspicuous in The Ring. In one scene the heroine, Rachel Keller, retches a long cord of black hair that has an electrode attached to it.(14) Ectoplasmic events were often captured on camera and these visual records can be read as a sub-genre in the field of ‘spirit photography’. The practice of capturing phantoms on film started in the US in the early 1860s and became an important part of the Spiritualist movement.(15) Some spirit photographs were revealed as hoaxes whilst others were accidents made almost inevitable by the rudimentary nature of the technology. Exposure times required sitters to remain immobile for protracted periods and even a slight movement could transform the subject into a wraith. In addition, for some, the term ‘spirit photography’ was practically tautological since images of ghosts merely offered a purified instance of the medium’s inherent ghostliness. As Tom Gunning has observed, photography was initially experienced ‘as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a world of phantasmatic doubles’.(16) The photograph, like the phantom, confronts the spectator with the presence of absence.(17) Verbinski’s film is haunted by this uncanny conjunction in images that recall spirit photography. Those who have seen
Samara’s image have their own image stolen and discover their face distorted on film. Samara transfers her image to film from the dark water of the well and this act might recall the process of photographic development itself: a virtual image emerging from a latent image in liquid darkness. The image of the ghostly Samara crawling through the screen towards a terrified spectator is itself ghosted by the image of the audience at the Lumière brothers inaugural moving picture presentation. In 1896, at the Grand Café in Paris, terrified spectators froze in horror believing that a train was coming through the screen towards them. Cinema is the heir to the phantasmagoria and spirit photography.

Moving pictures represented both an evolution in nineteenth-century optical technologies and an amplification of the ghostly decorporealization associated with sonic media such as telegraph, telephone, wireless radio, phonograph and gramophone. At approximately the same time that the Lumière brothers were exhibiting short films across Europe, Guglielmo Marconi was demonstrating the possibilities of wireless telegraphy. Marconi’s wireless, along with the experiments of Tesla, Popov and Bose, established the technical infrastructure for the evolution of radio. Even more so than Morse’s telegraph, radio produced an astounding and unsettling dislocation of body, thought and voice across time and space. The invention of radio was accompanied by a significant increase in reports of paranormal phenomenon. Houses began to be haunted not by spectral tapping but by weird electrical signals. The Spiritualist’s assertion that ghosts were electromagnetic phenomena was thus sustained by twentieth-century technological advances. Ghosts were discovered in radio waves and captured on recording devices and since the 1950s, EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) has been a burgeoning field in parapsychology.

The invention of television, like radio and the telegraph, was the catalyst to new varieties of electrical haunting. Television transposed cinema’s uncanny dematerialization to a domestic setting and since its inception, as Jeffrey Sconce has shown, this medium has repeatedly been experienced as a ‘haunted apparatus’. (18) In the pre-digital era all televisions were haunted, at least in technical terms, by ghosting: eerie double images produced by distorted analogue signals. Alongside these technical issues, urban legends abound of sets that turn themselves on or refuse to be switched off and of voices and faces in the static. In 1954, the _Television Digest_ reported that the Travers family were being haunted by the image of Mrs Travers’ dead grandfather which refused to leave their television screen. Long Island police took the set into custody and over 500 people visited the station to witness this televisual phantom. (19) The concept of the dead communicating through television has subsequently been fictionalised in several horror films including _Poltergeist_ (1982), _Videodrome_ (1983), _Static_ (1986) and _White Noise_ (2005). Samara is part of this sub-genre which connects television to the spirit world, but she also belongs to a longer history, sketched above, of haunted machines. _The Ring_ initiates a reverse projection which takes us back through television, cinema and radio, photographs and phantasmagoria, to nineteenth century relays between telegraphic communications, spiritualism and the electrification of ghosts and on into the cinematic pre-history of magic lanterns and camera obscura. At the same time, as we shall see in the next section, Samara looks forwards as well as backwards.

**DIGITAL FEMME FATALE: IN HER BOLD GAZE HIS RUIN IS WRIT LARGE**

Hands that can grasp, eyes
That can dilate, hair that can rise…
‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’.
Marianne Moore, ‘Poetry’ (20)
When crowds gathered at the Long Island police station to see Mrs Travers’ dead grandfather, television was still a relative novelty. In 1954 there were approximately thirty-five million TVs in the US. By the time that The Ring was released in 2002 that figure had increased almost tenfold. The same period also witnessed a massive increase in other types of screen and gadget. According to a recent survey, in the average US household one would automatically find around three television sets, a VCR, a DVD player and a video game console.

Derrida has proposed that although ghosts are traditionally associated with the past, the spectral is in fact more pervasive within the contemporary telecommunications global network:

the experience of ghosts is not tied to a bygone historical period, like the landscape of Scottish manors […] but, on the contrary, is accentuated, accelerated by modern technologies like film, television, the telephone. The technologies inhabit, as it were, a phantom structure […] When the very first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms.

This realm of phantoms finds its allegorical incarnation in The Ring and an occult video that demands to be endlessly reproduced. In the postmodern era, perhaps as never before, the image appears to have a life of its own. Samara is the spectre of the electronic image as a magically self-referential and self-replicating phenomenon: the phantasmagoria of modernity embodied in the disembodied form of a ghost. As an allegorical sign, Samara signifies the power and apparent autonomy of the free-floating image. After Debord, it has become routine to ascribe unrivalled supremacy to the visual in the sensorium of late capitalism and to contend that the political economy of postmodernism revolves around the circulation and exchange of increasingly globalised visual signs, icons, logos, media spectacles and virtual imagery. Whilst the material practices associated with image-making technology (which, lest we forget, require phenomenal levels of production, distribution and maintenance) become increasingly spectral, the image undergoes transubstantiation. No longer the apparitional trace of an original object, the image has acquired its own heft and substance. According to a by now familiar postmodern sci-fi horror story, the dividing screen between reality and image has been crossed so that life is ‘spectralised […] the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV’. Rather than a ghostly imitation of an a priori reality, the copy has usurped the original and replaced it with, in Baudrillard’s phrase, the reign of simulacra. Whilst the modern era saw the conversion of land into private property, the postmodern era witnesses the refashioning of the very ground of the real as spectacle and simulation. History is replayed, we might say, ‘the first time as tragedy, the second as farce’.

The act of watching actors watching in The Ring underscores the incestuous circle of simulation and recalls Debord’s critical distinction that the society of the spectacle is ‘not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images’. Trapped inside the Möbius strip of the postmodern gaze, the subject looks less at images themselves so much as the practice of others’ looking. The focal point of the horror in The Ring is Samara’s stare. The visual exchange that takes place between the mobile image and her petrified subject confirms Baudrillard’s gothic pronouncements on ‘the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real’. Samara may be dead, but the ‘evil demon of images’ is mobile and murderous and like the cult of dead celebrity, her ghost insists from beyond the grave that she be endlessly reproduced. The title of W.J.T Mitchell’s recent What Do Pictures Want? (2005) reflects a trend in visual studies towards greater recognition of the apparent agency and autonomy of the image. In this context, Samara represents an allegorical personification of the image’s
evolution from relatively inert object to animated subject possessed of its own desires and a drive towards viral self-replication.

Postmodern phantasmagoria appear as a ghost in Von Neumann’s machine and it is crucial to recognize the extent to which this ghost is gendered. In contemporary critiques and celebrations of postmodern visual culture the image belongs to the world of fashion and consumerism, it is typically described as ‘sensual’ and ‘seductive’, ‘narcissistic’ and ‘depthless’, ‘promiscuous’ and ‘chaotic’ as it undermines the hegemony of reason and the printed word.(29) The image, in other words, is the feminine and Samara can be read as its allegorical embodiment. Samara, as the unbridled femme fatale of postmodern visuality, constitutes a high-tech upgrade of the monstrous feminine. According to Barbara Creed, cultural representations of the monstrous feminine from classical mythology to contemporary horror film are underpinned by gynophobia.(30) The concern with reproduction in The Ring is pronounced and assumes two distinct though interwoven forms. Firstly, as mentioned above, Samara is associated with extravagant birth imagery.(31) The channel for her spectral parturition is a television set and in The Ring’s climactic scene, Samara crawls from the virtual sphere and squeezes through the screen to murder Noah Clay. The victim’s name alludes to creation myth and the film’s water motif, but his profession is more apposite here. Clay works with but cannot control electronic technology. Alongside his failings as a father, Clay is shown struggling with cameras, television and VCRs. Samara’s murder of this enfeebled patriarch underlines The Ring’s anxiety about and feminisation of those reproductive technologies which give birth to infinite serial images and sounds.

Just before Richard Morgan, Samara’s foster father and the film’s other enfeebled patriarch, commits suicide in a bathtub connected to a TV and VCR, he offers the following warning: ‘those pictures… the things she’d show you… she’ll never stop… she never sleeps’. Samara is the indefatigable image which demands to be copied and looked at over and over again. The auto-reflexive allegory in The Ring extends to the fact that this film about filmic mimesis is itself both the product and the source of extensive copying. Verbinski’s film is a remake of Hideo Nakata’s Ringu (1998) which was an adaptation of Koji Suzuki’s cult novel of the same name. Following the success of Ringu (1990), Suzuki wrote three sequels - Spiral (1995), Loop (1998) and The Birthday (2000) – which inspired the Japanese films Rasen (1998), Ringu 2 (1999) and Ring O: Birthday (2000). In addition, there has been a Japanese TV series and TV film, a Korean remake of Ringu and numerous cross-media spin-offs such as a Manga comic, a video game and mobile phone accessories. The Hollywood remake of The Ring started a cycle of J-Horror and Hong Kong horror adaptations that includes Feardotcom (2002), The Grudge (2004) and The Grudge 2 (2006), Dark Water (2005), The Pulse (2006) and The Eye (2008). Hideo Nakata went to Hollywood to remake The Ring 2 in 2005 and will also direct The Ring 3 which is scheduled for release in 2008. In this context Samara appears as the shimmering spectre of seriality.

Seriality followed Samara from the cinema when The Ring was released for the home entertainment market. Film has been jointly marketed in analogue and digital format since 1997, but in 2002 sales of DVD players overtook sales of VCRs for the first time in the US. In that year, over two million DVD copies of The Ring were purchased in the first twenty-four hours of its release. Significantly, sales of the video version of this horror film about a video lagged behind. Indeed, watching The Ring just a few years after its initial release there is already something rather dated about this bulky video beset by tracking problems. The Ring was shot on celluloid but, in post-production, frame after frame was digitally enhanced. The key sequence - when Samara emerges from an analogue video tape - has been produced
with CGI software. Samara has been read as an allegorical emblem for the history of ghost machines and for contemporary optical technologies, but she also appears as a gothic premonition of an imminent digital zeitgeist: a sibylline spectre from the post-celluloid future. As this digital wraith crawls through the screen we could be witnessing the allegorical death of analogue, video and celluloid film alongside the figurative birth of next generation Virtual Reality (CGI, holography, cyberspace, multispectral sensors, telepresence technologies and haptics). The ghost is attended by an uncanny suturing of opposites: here and not here, past and present, dead and alive. Similarly, Samara splices together incongruent components. Postindustrial devices (TV, VCR and cameras) are linked to pre-industrial folklore (an ancient curse). Samara controls advanced electronic technology but her appearance is somewhat anachronistic in a costume which approximates that most outmoded item of spectral attire (the white sheet). The FX team on The Ring employ state-of-the-art digital design to simulate low definition analogue graphics. The video ghost is silent, practically black-and-white and her image is fuzzy, granulated and prone to interference.

Samara’s synthesis of residual and emergent technologies produces a temporal indeterminacy that is itself characteristic of the digital revolution. According to Virilio, the past, present and future have been replaced by rewind, play and fast-forward. Virilio is surely right to highlight the extent to which VCR profoundly altered the viewing experience and promoted a sense of chronological mutability. However, in the post-video age of integrated media (TVs wired to DVD players and gaming systems and laptops and the Internet), temporal instability has been dramatically accelerated. The structural logic of video, which is still basically sequential (since the tape must be wound backwards and forwards), is now being superseded by the digital rhizomatics of chapter selection and hypertext links. For the DVD viewer ‘any point on [The Ring can be almost instantly] before and after any other point’. The digital image is even more mobile, malleable and potentially ghostly than its predecessors. Photographs and video tape capture rays of light with chemicals, paper and celluloid. In this respect a material bond still exists between the object and its reproduction. Conversely, digital technology converts the visual into abstract electronic data. All that is solid melts into binary code. We have come full circle from the dashes and dots of Morse code on the telegraph, to the abstract ones and zeroes of digital telecommunications.

Part of the ghostly contradiction which Samara embodies is that the digital image is both de-realising and at the same time more immediately present. Postmodern optics acquire greater phenomenological tenuity even as their distance from material reality increases. Samara’s entry into the spectator’s world thus offers an allegory of the spectator’s immersion in an image world that has and will become more substantial with advances in the technologies of telepresence and virtual reality. In contrast to the diaphanous ephemerality of analogue, Samara threatens the spectator with digital immanence and the cyberpunk prophecy of the image that looks back. Armed with Medusean hair and Gorgon’s gaze, Samara is the moving image that observes and immobilises the viewer. In this regard, Samara might recall Benjamin’s definition of aura:

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return […] In dreams […] there is an equation. The things I see, see me just as much as I see them.

In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin declared that contemporary technology jeopardised the aura of the art object – its ability to look back - by detaching it from its context and tradition and replacing a unique identity with endless copies. The consequent withering of
aura was described in spatial terms. For Benjamin, aura involves the ‘unique phenomenon of a distance’ or clear separation of subject and object which is decimated by the mechanical reproduction involved in film and photography. (35) In film, the spectator loses contact with the ‘whole living person’ and their presence in time and space’. (36) Immersion in the physical experience bridges the essential gap between observer and observed: ‘the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of aura in the experience of shock’. (37) As a result, the ‘sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology’. (38) In The Ring, however, Samara’s blossoming in the land of technology is no *fata morgana* in the desert of the real. As a ‘real toad’ emerges from an ‘imaginary garden’ the spectator experiences a traumatic return of aura. Ironically, by coming closer, Samara restores the distance between observer and observed and thus also restores the etymological roots of ‘tele-vision’ (in the Greek for ‘seeing at a distance’). The Ring might then prophesise a traumatic return of aura through digital colonization and the re-enchantment of technology. (39) Nor is this merely a matter of advanced technical fakery. For Benjamin, aura is always rooted in the history of the object and its embeddedness in a network of social relations. In the next and final section we will examine the roots of Samara’s aura in a buried history of transnational relations and trauma.

**THE RING AT GROUND ZERO**

She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated [...] Part of every child’s brain noise, the substantive regions too deep to probe.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (40)

The bomb was a new medium, like television.

Klaus Theweleit, ‘The Bomb’s Womb and the Genders of War’ (41)

Writing in 1991, Fredric Jameson proposed that video, which he dubbed ‘surrealism without the unconscious’, was the key medium for a postmodern era in which spirituality had been practically extinguished and ‘the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day’. (42) Sixty years earlier, at a time when he was also engaged in analysing surrealism, Walter Benjamin published ‘A Little History of Photography’ (1931). Here, Benjamin proposed that electronic image technologies permitted insights into a vastly expanded territory of unconscious forces:

For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking [...] we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually steps out. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (43)

In The Ring, Samara rises ‘dripping and convulsive into the light of day’, stepping out of a surrealist montage as a material spirit who, it will be argued, personifies the political unconscious of optical technology. (44)
An analysis of the political unconscious in *The Ring* should begin with the question of origins and this requires a return to the subject of reproduction. *Where does Samara come from?* A genealogy of ghosts in *The Ring* would head east. Not simply because Verbinski’s film is an adaptation of Nakata’s *Ringu*, but because Samara is adopted and the spectator catches a fleeting glimpse of Oriental characters on her birth certificate. This child from the east displays a dualism that is central to western colonial mappings of Japan: Samara is both ‘the chrysanthemum and the sword’. (45) Since Samara is inseparable from the reproductive gadgetry which gives birth to her, technology in *The Ring* is not only gendered female, but orientalised as well. After she watches Samara’s tape, Rachel is sensitised to the omnipresence of television and from her balcony engages in paranoid surveillance of the sets switched on in every apartment in an adjacent building. Subsequently, Rachel finds that TV is also inescapable beyond the city limits when she encounters sets in the cabins of isolated motels and the loft of a barn on a small island (Samara’s bedroom). *The Ring* does not inquire directly as to the source of this ubiquitous device, but the orientalisation of the ghost who is fused with television points the way. The production of televisions, VCRs and cameras is dominated by Asian manufacturing industry and corporate capital. The Zaibatsu - Sony, Mitsubishi, Hitachi, Yamaha, JVC and other vertically-integrated high tech entertainment conglomerates – often design the cameras which record films, own significant shares in the companies that air them and manufacture the audiovisual equipment on which they are watched. The domination of consumer technology markets by Japan reached its peak in the 80s and early 90s. (46) Although flagship corporations continue to flourish (Sony, for example, achieved record sales in the year of *The Ring*’s release), the Japanese economy has lost its supremacy and been outstripped by the four tigers (Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong) and now China. (47) Despite the ups and downs of its economic fortunes, Japan has managed to retain much of its mythological status as the empire of the gadget and the spiritual home of screens, cybernetics, miniaturisation, robotics, computers, video games and virtuality. In the cyberpunk imaginary, from Gibson to Manga, Japan, technology and the future are virtual syllogisms. In this context, *The Ring* articulates an orientalised technophobia. Samara is the allegorical spectre of Sonyism: a phantasmal yellow peril encrypted in semi-conductors that invade US homes to deliver deadly messages. Imperialist anxieties regarding Asian technology and trade relations thus manifest in a paranoid allegory of reverse colonisation. As Elizabeth Edwards has argued, there is a long history of complicity between colonial power and reproductive technology:

[i]n many ways those people who fear the camera would steal their souls, would peel their faces were right. The camera was one of those instruments of appropriation, which recorded culture at the colonial periphery and removed it for analysis […] in the metropolitan centres. (48)

In *The Ring*, this technology is now deployed against the metropolitan centre as a dark-haired girl from the East arrives in a US city to steal the souls and peel the faces of her American victims.

That this ghost should assume the form of an orientalised young woman resonates with the global reconfiguration of relations of production and the industrial working class. As Gayatri Spivak argues in ‘Ghostwriting’: ‘The subaltern woman is now to a rather large extent the support of production’. (49) Although Samara’s body is trapped underground, across water and at the margins far from the postindustrial core, her spectral labours return to haunt the western city. The ‘ghosts’ of dead industrial labour performed by the subaltern woman can never be entirely exorcised from the postindustrial landscape since
the proliferation of phenomena of reproduction (fashion, media, publicity, information and communication networks) requires a vast expansion of material production; the greater circulation of images depends upon a variety of physical products - television sets, video recorders, satellite discs and the like.(50)

Samara’s emergence from these machines signifies a terrifying materialisation of all that which lies buried and unseen beneath the postmodern image: the vast infrastructure of production, distribution and maintenance which sustains postindustrial networks of reproduction. In place of reified relations with things – a TV, a VCR, a phone – the consumer is suddenly confronted with the painful return of a human presence. As the spectre of social relations emerges from a technological commodity she materialises all those forces which, like the butterfly effect in reverse, lie behind the apparently simple gesture of pressing a button.

In The Ring’s climactic scene, as the ghost of subaltern labour crawls towards her western prey, it is clear that Samara’s motive is revenge, but perhaps it is less obvious that her weapon is radiation. Radiation initially appears in the film’s opening dialogue between ‘Becca and Katy concerning the dangers of technology and in particular the ‘magnetic waves’ and ‘electro-rays’ transmitted by television and telephones. Subsequently, it is noticeable that exposure to Samara’s video produces symptoms synonymous with acute radiation poisoning: nose bleeds, vomiting, skin discolouration and a 100% fatality rate after seven days. For patients afflicted by acute radiation poisoning, the seven-day period before death is referred to as the ‘walking ghost’ phase. Through contamination the walking ghost in The Ring aims to transform her victims into copies of herself. But Samara herself is a copy, or clone of Sadako in Nakata’s Ringu.

Aidan: What happened to the girl?

Rachel: Samara?

Aidan: Is that her name?

According to Derrida there is always ‘a crypt within a crypt, a name within a name, a body within the body’. (51) In The Ring the little girl whose body is encrypted in a well has a name that hides another name. For Japanese readers and film-goers, the name ‘Sadako’ would recall Sadako Sasaki, a young girl who, in 1945, lived in Hiroshima around one-mile from ground zero. Sadako survived the blast, but several years later she developed leukaemia, known locally as ‘the atom bomb disease’. Whilst Sadako was in hospital she started folding origami cranes having been inspired by a Japanese proverb which teaches that the maker of 1000 cranes will be granted a wish. She died in 1955, aged twelve. (52) A memorial was dedicated to Sadako Sasaki in Hiroshima as a symbol of all the children killed by the atom bomb and in the US a Sadako statue was built at the Seattle Peace Park. In The Ring, Seattle is the city that Samara terrorises. Inside Verbinski’s film we can thus detect the allegorical ruins of another story: the little girl dropped down a well is ghosted by the Little Boy dropped on a city. (53) The Ring resonates with nuclear symbolism: the film’s key image, the eclipsed ring of light, recalls the dark sun that rose over Hiroshima; a burning tree is shaped like a mushroom cloud; and Seattle is subjected to the fall-out of endless black rain. The Little Boy was carried inside the B-29 bomber Enola Gay. In The Ring, the little girl is experimented on at the Eola Psychiatric Institute. Is there a name within the name? (54)
pervasive combination of birth imagery and violent death in *The Ring* was also conspicuous at Hiroshima. In ‘The Bomb’s Womb and the Genders of War’, Klaus Theweleit notes that the ‘first hydrogen bomb was saluted as a newly born baby boy’. (55) Theweleit goes on to cite Carol Cohn’s observation that ‘[t]he entire history of the bomb project, in fact, seems permeated with imagery that confounds man’s overwhelming technological power to destroy nature with the power to create’. (56)

In *The Shell and the Kernel*, their gothic revision of classical psychoanalysis, Abraham and Torok propose that the source of a crypt might not even be a trauma experienced directly by the subject. Traumatic experience that is not properly buried can be inherited and ‘travel’ as a ‘transgenerational phantom’. (57) In his introduction to Abraham and Torok’s work, Nicholas Rand speculates that the hauntings of ancestral spectres might not only be a family affair, but could involve ‘the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of […] the community, and possibly even entire nations’. (58) In *The Ring* we witness, in allegory, the phantomatic return of shameful secrets. Samara is a transgenerational phantom who travels from Hiroshima to Seattle. For Abraham and Torok,

[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objective correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person. (59)

Samara is buried alive in a secret tomb and the psychic telegraphy she performs from the crypt offers screen memories in a double sense: memories projected onto a screen that screens other memories. Words, vestigial scenes and affects are screened, encrypted and buried alive in *The Ring*: terror and guilt, revenge and radiation, Sadako and Hiroshima. In the immediate aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, an American eyewitness, Father P. Siemes, reported ‘[n]one of us in those days heard a single outburst against the Americans on the part of the Japanese, nor was there any evidence of a vengeful spirit’. (60) In Samara, however, the vengeful spirit appears as an allegorical emblem. For Benjamin, such an emblem was the result of a failure to work through mourning. That which is not properly buried, that which has not been mourned, must return to haunt. The allegorical readings of *The Ring* offered here are intended to underline the extent to which history haunts even the most spectral of postmodern images. As the power and pervasiveness of contemporary phantasmagoria increases, so too does the urgency with which we should heed Benjamin’s injunction to ‘educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows’. (61)

2. Gore Verbinski (dir.), *The Ring* (DreamWorks SKG: 2002).


4. It is worth noting that ‘spectator’ and ‘spectre’ share their etymological origin in the Latin *spectare* (‘to see’).


9. For one of the most notorious instances see Andrew Osborn, ‘Scream movies are blamed by teenage girl’s copycat killer’, in *The Observer*, November 18 2001. Accessed online at [http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Observer/0,,596971,00.html](http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Observer/0,,596971,00.html).


11. One of the most celebrated proto-cinematic innovations was ‘Pepper’s Ghost’, invented by Henry Dircks and presented by John Henry pepper in 1862 at the Royal Polytechnic Institute in London. This illusion employed plate glass and lighting effects to conjure transparent phantoms in midair.

12. As Kate Fox grew older she retained this connection to the pre-teen cohort since the centrepiece of her psychic repertoire was the ghost of a young girl called ‘Katie King’ who, like Samara, was dressed wholly in white.


14. It might be worth noting that whilst Rachel is retching a long black cord she is holding a cordless phone. Despite the insistent emphasis on her visuality, Samara’s initial contact with her victim is sonic rather than optic and involves another haunted machine. Like the telegraph and the camera, the telephone astounded and at times unsettled Victorians with its radical dislocation of body and voice across space.
was quickly adopted by the Spiritualist movement and became associated with a range of paranormal phenomena.

15. The origins of spirit photography are the subject of some controversy, but William Mumler is most frequently credited with producing the inaugural ghost image in 1861. The popularity of these images was substantial, particularly in the wake of the Civil War when the ranks of the Spiritualist movement swelled to over ten million believers and there was a concomitant upsurge in attempts to contact the dead.


17. Susan Sontag has refined this conjunction as follows: ‘A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’. See On Photography (London: Penguin, 2002), 16.


21. From the Pew Internet & American Life Project at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_ICT_Typology.pdf. In addition, the majority of Americans own cell phones (73%), desktop computers (68%) and digital cameras (55%), whilst an increasing number also possess video cameras (43%), MP3 players (20%) PDAs (11%), and GPS (7%).


29. Amongst male critics on the left there can be a tendency to characterize postmodernism as a gendered ‘fall’ in which the loss of an authoritative masculinity (associated with modernity and muscular manufacturing industry) is counterpointed with the emergence of an anarchic femininity (associated with soft postindustrial technologies). David Harvey’s hostility towards a visual field described as ‘frothy’ and ‘titillating’ in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 63) would be a case in point here. More recently, in *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), Jonathan Beller remonstrates with the ‘rampant visuality, overwhelming, indeed emasculating analytical thought’ (224) in postmodern society. Jameson’s at times anxious repudiation of the ‘essentially pornographic’ (1) nature of the visual in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and elsewhere might also merit scrutiny in this regard. At the other end of the spectrum, gender inflection is similarly conspicuous in the rhetoric of cyberspace gurus who ecstatically embrace virtual reality as an imminent return to a high-tech womb.


36. Ibid. 223.


39. Benjamin stressed that ‘epochs which tend towards allegorical expression will have experienced a crisis of the aura’. See *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) 365. Samara’s appearance might also underline the efficacy of Jonathan Beller’s formula: ‘The spectre of the visible (aura) has become the substance of the visual (simulation)’. See *The Cinematic Mode of*
Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 214.


42. Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991), 67.

43. Walter Benjamin, ‘A Little History of Photography’ in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.2 1927-34 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 352. Benjamin does not mention here, but was almost certainly aware that Freud’s first published use of the term ‘psychoanalysis’ (in 1896) coincided with Kodak’s introduction of the pocket camera, the Lumière brothers inaugural moving pictures presentation and Roentgen’s production of the first ever X-ray photograph (of his wife’s hand).

44. This possibility might be underscored by reference to the work of Jonathan Beller. In The Cinematic Mode of Production and elsewhere, Beller has argued that political economy is the unconscious of the object world and that in postindustrial societies that object world is increasingly saturated by images and scopic machinery.


46. Simultaneously, in the 1980s and early 90s, Japanaphobia swelled as Japanese corporate capital invested heavily in the US entertainment industry (buying out CBS, Columbia Pictures and MCA-Universal) as well as purchasing symbolic sites such as the Rockefeller building.

47. Sony’s continued success in the twenty-first century is in part attributable to a successful gamble that the 9/11 attacks would encourage US consumers to spend more time at home thus increasing demand for its video, audio and gaming equipment.


52. Coincidentally, the same age as Daveigh Chase, the actress who plays Samara in The Ring.
53. ‘Little Boy’ was the codename given to the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima on the 6th of August, 1945.

54. If ‘Eola’ is haunted by ‘Enola’ it may be significant that the elided letter, ‘n’, is the symbol for neutron in nuclear physics.


58. Ibid. 169.

59. Ibid. 130.


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