

## ABSTRACT

BALL, SARAH KELLY VIRGINIA MCKAY. *The Uncanny in Japanese and American Horror Film: Hideo Nakata's Ringu and Gore Verbinski's Ring*. (Under the direction of Maria Pramaggiore.)

In the last few decades, interest in the uncanny in the body of literary theory has surged. The uncanny is a ubiquitous presence 21<sup>st</sup> century American and abroad, and it provides a useful metaphor for understanding the implications of some of the conventions of post-modernism. This thesis explores a contemporary definition of the uncanny as manifested through two film interpretations (*Ringu* and *Ring*) of the same source material, a novel titled *Ringu* by Koji Suzuki.

Through a brief exploration of the historical evolution of the idea of the uncanny and the various critical cruxes surrounding it, I have developed six working characteristics of the uncanny as a base for my analysis of *Ringu* and *Ring*. Furthermore, I have explored the social, historical, and cultural underpinnings of Suzuki's original novel and its path to Japanese and eventually American theatres. Within the narrative of both films, the uncanny is manifested through extended use of the doppelganger and repetition. There is no significant difference in the films' rendering of the uncanny through narrative. The films differ slightly in their presentation of uncanny sound and visual elements: *Ringu* relies primarily on sound and characters' internal experience to produce the uncanny, whereas *Ring* focuses on the visual and characters' external experience. The films unify their internal rendering of the uncanny with their metatextual (and commercial) behavior with the gaze, an aspect of both films that implicates the viewer in their propagation of the uncanny and the film franchise.

Overall, there is not a significant difference in the rendering of the uncanny in *Ring* and *Ringu*. An analysis of both films, however, does illuminate the pervasive, yet complex, presence of the uncanny in contemporary pop culture.

**THE UNCANNY IN JAPANESE AND AMERICAN HORROR FILM:  
HIDEO NAKATA'S *RINGU* AND GORE VERBINSKI'S *RING***

by

**SARAH MCKAY BALL**

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Chair of Advisory Committee

## BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Ball was born in Cameron, North Carolina. She attended the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill as an Undergraduate where she majored in International Studies and minored in Chinese and Asian Studies. At North Carolina State University, her studies concentrated in World Literature with a focus on Post-Colonialism.

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## Chapter One *INTRODUCTION*

While in Munich a few years back I encountered an exhibit entitled *Kopperwelten* or “Body Worlds,” where real human remains had been subjected to a new kind of plasticization process that rendered them permanently preserved and essentially turned human tissue into “plastic.” Posters of skinless men and women, with their muscles flayed from the limbs in what I assume to be an artistic fashion, haunted every subway stop in the city. The photos of the bodies were essentially non-threatening. They reminded me of little more than my high school biology class, where a (real) plastic man sat unnoticed in a corner attempting to illustrate the intricacies of our circulatory system. But a week later, the posters were updated, and I encountered something highly disturbing: a face. It wasn’t a recognizable human face, nor was it your common run-of-the-mill skull. It was a muscled skull, possessing enough form and shape to resemble an identifiable person, but lacking the distinguishing characteristic (skin) to render him (it?) “alive,” or even “once alive.”

So what made the unidentified German artwork so disturbing? And why was a face-less body so much less threatening than one with protruding eyebrows? Part of the answer probably lies in the fact that the face reminded me that this piece of artwork had once been a real, living being. But there also exists an element to the image that was disturbing, even removed from my knowledge of its creation. The face, by itself, was uncanny—it was living tissue made inanimate, muscles, blood, veins and even eyes frozen in motion. It was also that part of all biology textbooks, the identifying human face, that usually remains respectfully cut off at the top of the page, now subject to a strange type of exhibitionism.

“Body Worlds” provides a good example of not only the aesthetic uncanny (a muscled face with eyebrows, looking concurrently dead and alive), but of what Freud considers the most powerful and moving type of uncanny: the uncanny derived from my own personal experience, as opposed to the uncanny derived through another. Perhaps had I not found myself compelled to study biology at such a young age, I would have been able to withstand a potentially enlightening (or disturbing) visit to the exhibit. But it

had been impressed upon my mind in my youth that diagrams of the circulatory system never included a face. And if, by random chance, they did, it was merely a “half-face” that courteously did not attempt to mix the very specific boundaries of living tissue and corpse: one side looked like a bland smiling man, while the other was a skull. It certainly did not contain *both* muscles and eyebrows. It was an aberration to the senses, both frightening and fascinating, and I was not alone in my opinion. My fellow travelers seemed to have a similar reaction: interest, staring, and a strange shudder at the image before them.

A few years later, I found myself sitting in a movie theatre very late at night, having a similar reaction to various images of disproportional ladders, close-ups of horses eyes, and giant centipedes (which I hate, anyway, but that is another story). The entire experience of Ring seemed to manufacture the shudder-inducing effect of “Body Worlds,” but with a difference: the *characters* within the film were experiencing the uncanny. My experience was merely, at that point, derivative of theirs. Traumas alluded to in their youth or personal history were returning, strange and altered and with a vengeance. It wasn’t until the film’s conclusion that this effect—a kind of second-hand uncanny, and what Freud he considers of lesser power than the personal uncanny—was doubled by a strangely digital ghost/demon/thing crawling out of a television and looking right at me. It was a pointedly uncanny experience: the strange synthesis of life and death that was aesthetically present at the “Body Worlds” exhibit grew from the screen (literally), escaped from the already-uncanny experience of the narrative, and implicated me as its target and potential convert.

A few background details are useful. First of all, Ring was a remake, based on a novel published in 1991 by Koji Suzuki titled Ringu.<sup>1</sup> Suzuki quickly began attaining cult status in Japan as sales of Ringu reached approximately 500,000 in its first seven years in publication. Ringu’s success led to three sequel novels, Rasen (1996), Loop (1998), and Birthday (2004).<sup>2</sup> After ten years of sales the first novel in the series was

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<sup>1</sup> The literal English translation of Suzuki’s novel is “ring,” but in order to avoid confusion with the American version of the film (Ring), I have left it as “ringu.”

<sup>2</sup> Suzuki also wrote Dark Water, The God’s Promenade, and various children’s books during this time period. A fourth installment of the novel, Birthday, was released in November 2004, but is currently not available in English translation,

brought to Hideo Nakata and production on the feature-length film adaptation of Ringu began in January of 1998. On a budget of 1.5 million and only five weeks in production, the film opened to rave reviews and was quickly followed by a film adaptation of Rasen the same summer and Loop (titled Ring 2) in 1999. The films' success invigorated Ringu's sales, and by 1999 over 1.5 million copies had been sold. In 2002, Ringu was imported to the United States, and Gore Verbinski directed an American adaptation of the film (Ring). By 2004, Ringu had been translated into Chinese, Korean, and English, and the novel is currently gaining momentum in the international market. The novels' and films' success have earned Koji Suzuki the title "the Japanese Stephen King" (Honjo).<sup>3</sup>

The success of Suzuki's franchise has led to a variety of additional Japanese imports. The import of Ring in 2002 prompted the release of Ring 2 in 2005. Later that year, another film adaptation of one of Suzuki's novels, Dark Water was released to moderate success. A variety of Japanese imports followed (The Grudge, The Grudge Two (2006), Last Scene, The Entity, et. al) earning the films their very own (although admittedly simplistic) genre: "J-Horror."

The influx of Japanese Horror is by no means an isolated phenomenon. Hollywood has been importing and remaking film as long as it has existed. But this particular influx of remakes does present some commercial and artistic opportunities. Many of the American "adaptations" of Japanese Horror films differ only in the fact that their actors and actresses are American, they speak English, and the events of the film take place in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Ring was rebuked by some and loved by others, but it was not as unanimously celebrated in the United States as Ringu was in Japan. Its success was more moderate than Ringu's, and it only came after the film had been released for at least a few weeks.

The deviation in response raised the question: Was Ringu's audience somehow more primed for the commercial consumption of the film? More pointedly, are there elements within the films that can account for the (initial) deviation in responses? Or was Ringu simply a better film? The uncanny provides an excellent springboard for analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> Apparently, Stephen King is extremely popular in Japan. Suzuki noted that it was refreshing to have a Japanese author read abroad instead of the opposite!

<sup>4</sup> The Grudge actually presents an exception—the only difference between the American and Japanese version of this film are the handful of American actors picked to revise the main characters!

The presence of the uncanny is one of the most salient features of both films, but each film manifests it differently. How striking is this difference? Is it a minor question of aesthetic representation, or does it represent a fundamentally different rendering of the uncanny? A comparison of the two films can help to illuminate how the uncanny is rendered across cultures and hopefully provide a deeper understanding of the concept itself and how it functions in cultures other than the “West.”

The uncanny is also extremely relevant to the study of World Literature today, a category through which Suzuki’s novel can be considered. Many contemporary critics<sup>5</sup> have highlighted the close relationship that the uncanny has to post-modern literary theory. Cooppan is especially articulate in his analysis of the uncanny’s relationship to the study of transnational texts, which he initially defines with Goethe: “a conversation conducted between nations through their most representative and greatest works of literature, a vision that at once overflows national boundaries and reconfirms them” (Cooppan 15). Although it would be difficult to present Ringu as one of Japan’s “greatest works,” it is certainly one of the most popular in recent times, and it has certainly “overflowed” national boundaries (the novel has been translated into numerous languages and the films have been released world wide). Cooppan, additionally, builds on Goethe’s ideas of transnational text to incorporate a broader spectrum: in a global society, texts that exist across national and cultural borders are *necessarily* transnational texts.

Goethe’s transnational text, for Cooppan, not only prefigures Stuart Hall’s idea of “the global post-modern” (Hall 33). It reiterates the fact that the transnational text—and the study of world literature itself—engages the uncanny. Cooppan further explores the relationship between the uncanny and transnational text:

The transnational [work of literature], like the larger “global” whose contours it sketches, can equally be understood as the return in ever more powerful and penetrating forms of certain long-standing aspirations, once familiar but since forgotten, towards cross-cultural exchange (Cooppan 15).

In other words, not only do Ring and Ringu represent the uncanny within the texts, they figuratively represent the uncanny on a metatextual level. This adds an additional facet

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<sup>5</sup> Arnzen, Cixous, Bernstein, Bresnick, Coates, Hassan, Kristeva, Lydenberg, Newman, (etc.) for starters.

to a comparison between the rendering of the uncanny in the two films: How does the uncanny function outside of the films? What is the relationship between the film and the viewer, and how is it connected to the uncanny? In the course of this analysis, it is also useful to briefly address genre issues. Does Ringu's and/or Ring's metatextual behavior connect it to the post-modern horror aesthetic, or deviate from it?

Ring and Ringu present a rich opportunity to explore two different interpretations of the same narrative, prepared for consumption in two very distinct social arenas. Each director presents his own vision of an original text through subtle plot variation, imagery, sound elements, and various cinematic techniques. Through an analysis of these choices, their differences and similarities, I hope to identify similarities and/or differences in the rendering of the uncanny in American and Japanese popular media culture. (explicate what these similarities and/or differences are...)

To properly analyze the role of the uncanny in Ring and Ringu, its first necessary to explore the roots of the term “uncanny” and come up with a working definition for further analysis. This will be the topic of Chapter Two. Chapter Three will explicate the rise of the Ringu phenomenon. I will first explore the novel's roots in Japanese popular culture, and its metamorphosis from page to television to film and eventually to Hollywood. In this chapter, I will also address the films' status as “remake,” and how this is in and of itself a representation of an uncanny world text. In Chapter Four, I would like to explore the similarities in the rendering of the uncanny in Ring and Ringu. These similarities are most salient through the directors' presentation of narrative, and manifest themselves through two key components: the doppelganger and repetition. Chapter Five explores the deviations in the films' execution of the uncanny, which are most evident in the two directors' differing choices in terms of sound and visual elements. Chapter Six returns to the initial question of the films' metatextual engagement with the uncanny. However, instead of exploring how the films' status as remakes produces this effect, I would like to integrate my analysis of the presentation of the uncanny within the films with their behavior in the world market. Toward this end, I have explored the role that the gaze plays in exhibiting, creating, and replicating the uncanny within and outside of the context of the films and how this connects to post-modern horror. Finally, I would

like to assess the value of my analysis and whether or not it provided additional insight into the term “uncanny.”

## Chapter Two

### *THE UNCANNY*

[The uncanny] walks to announce itself before being present; its walking interrupts our understanding to show its temporal and spatial distention, the absorption of a content or concept in the narrative spasms that allow the uncanny to come forth, over time, never whole. To reiterate, the uncanny cannot be properly understood, since it signifies the disruption of the proper and the instability of understanding. (Bernstein 1117)

To fully analyze the role of the uncanny within Ring and Ringu, it is first necessary to come up with a working definition of the uncanny—a project that is problematic in itself. Since its critical inception by Ernst Jentsch’s article “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” in 1906 and Freud’s pivotal revision of the term in 1919, the uncanny has been a hotly contested topic. The definition of the uncanny has undergone revision upon revision (upon revision), culminating in a resurgence of critical debate in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, one which regularly equates the uncanny with the consumption of literature, film, and media in general in post-modern, global culture. Today the uncanny is a ubiquitous presence in critical scholarship (a simple search for “the uncanny” on the Modern Language Association Database will reveal well over three thousand articles). It is not only a popular topic in literary journals, but also a common presence in philosophical, medical, aesthetic, musical, architectural, and even scientific journals. The uncanny has moved beyond its humble origins in psychology and what would come to be psychoanalysis and has expertly been traversing genres for at least one hundred years of scholarship.

But what, precisely, is the uncanny? Why has it become such a pervasive presence in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Part of the answer can be found among the very first definitions of the uncanny. Jentsch describes the uncanny as an experience; “it is better not to ask what it is, but rather to investigate... how the psychical condition must be constituted so that the “uncanny” sensation emerges” (Jentsch 8). This experience is subjectively defined, and is first and foremost created by a situation of intellectual uncertainty as to an object’s or perception’s origins. The experience of the uncanny, for Jentsch, is most clearly articulated through the example of uncertainty as to whether “an

apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may in fact be animate” (Jentsch 11).

In his brief discussion of E.T.A. Hoffman’s The Sandman, Jentsch uses the example of the doll-like Olympia to illustrate this pivotal point. In The Sandman, Olympia is a wooden doll, an automaton, created by a mysterious occultist named Copolla. The story’s main character, Nathanael, falls in love with Olympia, believing that she is human. It is only after her eyes are removed that her true nature is revealed (to both Nathaniel and the reader).<sup>6</sup> For Jentsch, this uncertainty as to her ambiguous status—as human or automaton—is the source of her uncanniness. This situation is replicated outside of literature, as well, through “wax figures, panopticons and panoramas” (Jentsch 12), basically any situation that almost (but not quite) replicates a separate reality. The closer this replication comes to the original experience, the uncannier the replication is.

Jentsch’s article touches on the importance of movement or motion in creating an experience of the uncanny. Uncanny movement, or movement which belies previous knowledge of that movement’s status as living or dead, is commonly manifested through epileptic seizures of speaking in tongues. Of course, Jentsch claims that the effects of uncanny movement in others can be reduced by regular exposure or “becoming otherwise used to such incidents” (15).

Jentsch’s most compelling examples all share a common factor: death. As a complete unknowable in of itself (one that all of humanity shares), uncertainty as to whether something is dead or alive represents the “highest” experience of the uncanny. This experience is most commonly manifested through the ghost or specter: “The Ghost is the fiction of our relationship to death, concretized by the specter in literature. The relationship to death is the highest degree of the *Unheimlich*” (Cixous 542). Other experiences of the uncanny, although subjectively experienced in terms of impact, are generally less compelling than Jentsch’s prime examples. But Jentsch’s observations are merely a starting point for the exploration of the uncanny: intellectual uncertainty is certainly not the only characteristic of the uncanny linking it to post-modern pop culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Todd interprets this scene as the “social castration” of Olympia: “Olympia’s “castration” signifies nothing other than [the] social oppression of women” (Todd 525).

For Freud, intellectual uncertainty marks the major point of divergence between his and Jentsch's definition of the uncanny. In Freud's "The Uncanny," intellectual uncertainty is a potential byproduct of the experience of uncanniness, but not its cause. Using the same literary work as Jentsch as a springboard for his analysis, Freud derives the term "uncanny" from the German *unheimlich*, which most literally means *unhomely*. He explores the linguistic roots of the *unheimlich*, how it is conveyed in various languages, and ultimately concludes with some key points: the uncanny is part of a set of terms (binaries) that are mutually dependent. The *unheimlich* cannot exist without the *Heimlich*, and despite their literal opposition, they interact with and affect one another.

Freud's linguistic analysis is especially relevant today. His exploration of the uncanny as a part of a linguistic (and therefore cultural and socio-political) binary, and the two terms' mutual dependence upon each other anticipates some of the later works of Lacan, Cixous, and even Derrida. Cixous, in a very close literary reading of Freud's work, presents the uncanny as "something absolutely new" (Cixous 531). Instead of being on one side of a *heimlich/unheimlich* binary, as Freud's linguistic analysis seems to imply,<sup>7</sup> she argues that it exists at an intersection.<sup>8</sup> The uncanny exists within a binary system of language (and we can only talk about it within this system, which is part of the difficulty inherent in talking about it) but is incapable of inhabiting either term. As such, for Cixous the uncanny exists at the nebulous, constantly shifting, intersection between binaries. It is entirely relationally defined, and as such is irreducible, and essentially origin-less.<sup>9</sup> This characteristic of the uncanny is so inevitable that Freud himself could not escape it in his narrative, and ends up exemplifying the very process: "[The Uncanny] proceeds as its own metaphor... as if one of Freud's repressions acted as the motor re-presenting at each moment the analysis of the repression which Freud was analyzing" (Cixous 526).

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<sup>7</sup> Imply, but not explicitly say. Even though Freud is limited by language, he makes constant attempts to address the uncanny's constant "shifting" and "movement" from one binary term to the other.

<sup>8</sup> This "intersection," I would argue, is never perfect—the perfect integration of binaries would imply participating in the Hegelian model of thesis/antithesis/synthesis. If the uncanny existed within this model, it would render it reducible and relegate it to a new binary (through antithesis), and eliminate its uncanniness.

<sup>9</sup> Marx, Sterner, Newman, Bresnick, Cixous and others seem to have come to a consensus on the uncanny's characteristic irreducibility.

Freud's essay also directly addresses Jentsch's interpretation of the uncanny's role in The Sandman. Olympia, for Freud, is merely "a materialization of Nathaniel's feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy" (Freud 135). Instead of focusing on her status as a too-real doll as the source of her uncanniness, Freud focuses on the figure of Nathaniel. With the example of Nathaniel, he disputes the theory that "intellectual uncertainty as to whether something is a human or an automaton" (Freud 135) is the sole source of the uncanny. For Freud, it only can account for some of the examples of the uncanny in Hoffman's work (namely, Olympia), not all. Intellectual uncertainty is merely a *part* (or byproduct) of the uncanny, but not a definition or creator of the uncanny. Anxiety caused by an infantile castration complex, materialized through Nathaniel's fear of losing his eyes, can comprehensively explain the instances of the uncanny in The Sandman. Olympia's uncanniness, for Freud, comes from Nathaniel's direct identification with her as a castrated child. When Olympia loses her eyes, Nathaniel's double is symbolically castrated.

Contemporary scholars have taken up the crux of intellectual uncertainty, as well. Adam Bresnick, for example, makes a compelling argument that the examples of the uncanny in literature that Freud cites can all be derived from a situation of intellectual uncertainty.<sup>10</sup> Bresnick does this by addressing the relationship of the readers to the text, not just the text's character's relationships with each other. A reader can possess the additional component of intellectual uncertainty as to the sanity or veracity of the perspective he or she occupies within the text. Bresnick claims that Freud's article tacitly implies that there is a separation between art and literature and "real life" (Bresnick 116), ignoring this additional dimension of intellectual uncertainty. Bresnick's article is compelling and brings up an additional area of considerable debate regarding the uncanny: the relationship between the uncanny experienced in literature (or film) and the uncanny experience in "real" life.

In the final section of his article, Freud confronts the notion that not everything that reminds us of repressed desires is uncanny. He claims that this can be attributed to

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<sup>10</sup> Although Bresnick does not directly address what this intellectual uncertainty pertains to—or Jentsch (or Freud, for that matter), I would argue that the situation of intellectual uncertainty can be limited to uncertainty about which side of a binary opposition something lies on.

two separate kinds of uncanny—uncanny derived from personal experience, like the “Body Worlds” exhibit, and uncanny derived from second-hand experience, and more specifically, from literature. This produces advantages and disadvantages: “many things that are uncanny in real life are not uncanny in literature, and in literature there is the opportunity to achieve uncanny affects that are absent in real life” (Freud 156). For Freud, however, the uncanny that is born of personal experience is more enduring and more powerful whereas the uncanny created solely in literature is limited to the confines of text and of the imagination. But Freud’s analysis, in this respect, is a bit short sighted. As was evident in the conclusion of Ring and is explicated in more detail by Bresnick, the uncanny can be doubly present in literature and in the real world. The experience of reading, and of identification with characters within works of literature, is by no means an experience separate from the experience of “real life.”

Bresnick’s analysis, however, concludes with the assumption that intellectual uncertainty is the sole cause of all of Freud’s cited experiences of the uncanny. He assumes that the *reader* occupies a position of intellectual uncertainty with regards to Coppelius’ identity and Nathaniel’s sanity. The reader attempts to resolve this uncertainty by reading the novel figuratively: Coppelius is not really the “sandman,” but merely a madman who conveniently plays into Nathaniel’s fears and doubts. But this attempt at the [figurative] resolution of the intellectual uncertainty of the novel fails, and Coppelius ends up being, in fact, everything that Nathaniel feared. This is how, for Bresnick The Sandman produces the effect of the uncanny. It occurs through what Bresnick terms “prosopoetic compulsion.”

Bresnick defines prosopoetic compulsion as “the compulsion to enliven the dead letter of fiction by reading figuratively” (Bresnick 114). In The Sandman, an experience of the uncanny is manufactured within the context of a narrative through the reader’s identification with Nathaniel and subsequent dismissal of The Sandman as text. When the story concludes, Hoffmann reiterates the novel’s status as text (through structural irony), and effectively defamiliarizes the reader’s identification with Nathaniel. This produces what Freud would term an experience of the personal uncanny: literature has

the power to move beyond what Freud considers a subsidiary experience of the uncanny. Reading or viewing is a personal experience into itself.

But for Bresnick, “intellectual uncertainty is in fact essential to the experience of the uncanny” (Bresnick 114). The position is certainly viable, but Bresnick’s argument only addresses the literary uncanny’s creation of an experience of personal uncanny, and not the inverse. The uncanny can certainly be experienced outside of a narrative—in terms of aesthetics and sensory experiences, as well as the numerous “real life” experiences that Freud addresses. And in these instances, intellectual uncertainty is not an all-encompassing explanation for the experience of the uncanny.

For the purposes of this thesis, I would like to address the crux of intellectual uncertainty in the following way: the uncanny is characterized *by* but not *limited to* the situation of intellectual uncertainty. Intellectual uncertainty within a narrative (i.e., the ignorance that unresolved prosopoetic compulsion can create within a reader) can create an additional link between the uncanny experienced within literature and the uncanny experienced outside of literature, and the two are certainly not mutually exclusive. Intellectual uncertainty, in terms of the position of the reader/viewer or the degree of the narrative’s subjectivity, can heighten the experience of the uncanny within literature. But intellectual uncertainty is not an all-encompassing explanation for the experience of the uncanny.

Repetition and the double also play an important role in defining Freud’s uncanny. Using instances of repetition in the text, and in his own personal life, Freud analyzes how the doppelganger can function to produce the uncanny: it is something familiar that was a comforting presence to early animistic man (as reassurance that one’s legacy would continue well on after their death) that may return in the modern era, but has been rendered unnecessary. In this instance, the doppelganger is altered and corrupted as to its initial purpose. Instead of providing assurance of one’s immortality, it provides a reminder that one is mortal. From this example, Freud comes to the conclusion that the uncanny is something that was once familiar, homely (in a positive, comforting sense) that has been repressed (the *un* suffix indicates repression) and then reappears, altered.

In Paul Coate's comprehensive work on the double in post-Romantic fiction (The Double and the Other), he asserts that the very act of reading manufactures doppelgangers by "discover[ing] in the apparent foreignness of another person the lineaments of ones own aspirations and hopes" (Coates 1). For Coates, the double is a ubiquitous presence. We invoke the double by engaging in fiction, in finding romantic partnerships, through nationalism (by generating an imaginary community of citizens) and politics, and through writing and crafting narratives. The doppelganger reasserts the tenets of individualism through self-replication, but it is ultimately the (uncanny) harbinger of death (Coates 4-5).

The double embodies the uncanny. It exists as a kind of physical representation of the characteristics (and problematics) of the concept, and our relationship with the double closely duplicates the relationship between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. As such, it is an extremely useful tool for analyzing the uncanny. The doppelganger provides a metaphor for the experience of the uncanny, but is also capable of creating the uncanny through our relationship with it (the double, not the metaphor).

Jane Marie Todd explores the role of women (and most importantly, Olympia) in Freud's work to highlight a very important motif in The Uncanny: the gaze. In Todd's analysis of the The Sandman, Olympia is not merely a manifestation of Nathaniel's infantile castration complex. She is a "woman apart from Nathaniel" (Todd 523), one that Nathaniel fears because he mistakes her for a mutilated double—"he cannot understand sexual difference beyond identifying the other as 'not man'" (Todd 527). Nathaniel fears her because his *vision* of her confirms his fear of castration.<sup>11</sup> But this vision confers power as it represents penis envy: Olympia's ability to look back at Nathaniel confirms her existence as "other." And in order to control her "otherness," she is denied vision:

Olympia is a caricature of the ideal woman: silent, powerless, docile. It is only when, having lost her eyes, she is exposed as an automaton, that the "tea circle" realizes how

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<sup>11</sup> "It is women who are *unheimlich*, either because the sight of their genitals provokes the male's fear of castration, or because women's gaze reminds men of the "valuable and fragile thing" they fear to lose" (Todd 527).

this ideal is achieved. Olympia's "castration" signifies nothing other than this social oppression of women." (Todd 525)

Todd's analysis is persuasive. The role of the gaze in creating the uncanny effectively unifies Freud's work and addresses the social implications of the uncanny. The gaze confers upon Olympia power over Nathaniel and the "tea circle" that is so taken with her. With eyes, she is not fully doll or human. She is uncanny, and Nathaniel's desire for her provokes fear. When she is denied the gaze and her eyes are removed, her fully automated nature is revealed. Without eyes and without the gaze, she is nothing more than an object.

The uncanny's status as a "return" of the repressed also brings with it a variety of implications. Its initial status as a return is extremely problematic because it implies that the uncanny occupies a distinctly temporal space. The *unheimlich* is always historically situated, and it always exists, at inception, *after* the *heimlich*. And even though it necessarily follows the *heimlich*, it also necessarily reaches back towards it. There is constant movement, and within the context of this movement there exists the implication that the past and the present are persistently acting upon each other. Freud claims that the uncanny in a narrative, for example, creates a desire for the movement away from the unhomely towards the homely. But the two are by their very existence interconnected. An attempt at identification with the *heimlich* only reinforces the existence of the *unheimlich*, as the initial encounter with the *unheimlich* produced the former. And this attempt at movement is always just that—a movement. There is no certainty of place or time connected with an experience of the uncanny.

The close relationship between the past and the present within the discourse of the uncanny is an individual as well as cultural phenomenon. An uncanny experience can be the result of the altered return of something within one's personal history, or within a cultural or social history. In this manner, the uncanny's status as a return also connects to Freud's assertion that the uncanny represents the return of a "primitive" animistic worldview. Freud implicitly assumes that animism is the all-encompassing "beginning" worldview of [Western] society.<sup>12</sup> As such, instances of an animistic worldview invading

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<sup>12</sup> The assumption that society and culture has an infantile beginning assumes that history is progressive—a perspective which I would consider distinctly Western.

Freud's post-enlightenment worldview are for him necessarily a return of something the entire human race collectively surpassed, and repressed.

Since the uncanny represents a constantly shifting temporal relationship, it is intricately connected with the point in time in which it is experienced. Had I seen "Body Worlds" before I had developed my expectation of anatomy charts, perhaps it would not have been uncanny. And had I seen Samara climbing out of the well at the beginning of Ring, perhaps it would not have been quite as uncanny as it is at the film's conclusion. As a result, the narrative is a readily accessible medium for creating the experience of the uncanny. Although narratives are certainly not always chronologically arranged, they are (generally) chronologically experienced.

Freud's analysis of the uncanny, although compelling and exhaustive, certainly does not produce an immutable definition. And despite the various critical cruxes—the role of intellectual uncertainty, the relationship between the uncanny in text and in the "real" world, the role of women and the gaze—surrounding the uncanny, there does exist a degree of (muddled) consensus.

As Freud noted, the uncanny is first and foremost characterized by a return of the repressed (1). It is something once familiar that reappears, altered, and is created by repetition (2) that commonly (but not invariably) is embodied in the figure of the double. And despite the compelling efforts of Jentsch, Bresnick, Tatar, and others, I would agree with Freud and Cixous in that it is not created by intellectual uncertainty, but is usually associated with it.<sup>13</sup> The uncanny can only be defined relationally and as such always exists as a transient, imperfect integration of two opposing binaries (*Heimlich/unheimlich*, canny/uncanny, dead/alive, masculine/feminine, past/present, sanity/insanity) (3) and is as such (4) irreducible. The uncanny is also temporally situated (5) and always refers back and acts upon a particular history (and by doing so defies the idea of progressive or chronological history). This can be manifested within the framework of a narrative or a personal history, and makes the point of inception of the

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<sup>13</sup> This type of reading also puts me firmly at odds with Tatar who claims that knowledge is the transformative force that can morph the uncanny to the canny or vice versa. If the lack of intellectual uncertainty is not a defining factor of the uncanny, then the removal of intellectual uncertainty cannot negate it. Also, there may be an inverted relationship between the two. If something is no longer characterized by intellectual uncertainty, then this may be *because* it is no longer uncanny,

experience of the uncanny of paramount importance. The uncanny can be arranged hierarchically, with binaries with one completely unknown or foreign term (such as death) situated at the top, and its creation or rendering is closely associated with the gaze.

It is no wonder that the exploration of the uncanny has undergone resurgence in the last few decades. With its foundations firmly rooted in the modern era, the return of the uncanny is a figurative manifestation of the problematics of the post-modern condition. As various scholars have duly noted in their discussions of the uncanny, the term “post-modern” is uncanny in of itself. It “contains and anticipates the immanent return of the modern” (Arnzen 1). It is temporally located—specifically after the modern—and it can only be defined in reference to what it is not (modern). The “post” of “post-modern” also indicates repression in the same manner of the *un* of the *unheimlich*.<sup>14</sup> and as such an analysis of the uncanny readily incorporates many of the issues of postmodernism.

The uncanny is, like the predominant theoretical underpinnings of early 21<sup>st</sup> century literary scholarship, poised at the intersection of philosophical traditions. It exists within and because of a historical tradition, but it concurrently affects and redefines this tradition by its very existence. It is frightening, certainly, but everything that is frightening is not it. It is nebulous and difficult to define, but somehow immediately recognizable. It is part of a pervasive system of binaries, but it cannot be ascribed to a particular hierarchical role within this system. And by participating in the discourse of the uncanny, and in language itself, we are afforded the opportunity to exist within the uncanny, where the indeterminate signifier is the pregnant absence that always prefigures the movement towards meaning.

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<sup>14</sup> It’s interesting that in accordance with this type of reading, “modernity” has effectively replaced “hominess” as what is comforting, familiar, and known.

### Chapter Three

#### *THE REMAKE*

Ring's path to the American big screen was a long and convoluted one. In 1991 Koji Suzuki published Ringu<sup>15</sup> and launched what would become a cultural phenomenon. Suzuki, a relatively unknown college exam preparation school teacher turned Romance writer, quickly attained cult status in Japan as sales of Ringu grew to 500,000 in its first seven years in publication. Ringu's success led to three sequel novels, Rasen (1996), Loop (1998), and Birthday (2004).<sup>16</sup> A manga (Japanese graphic novel), a TV movie entitled Ring: Kanzenban, and two television series also followed. By 1998, Ringu had been adapted to a feature-length film, followed by Rasen, Ringu 2, and Ring 0. In 2002, Hollywood cashed in on the commercial success and created its own version of the narrative, Ring, followed in 2004 by Ring 2.

The original novel, Ringu, recounts the tale of a killer videotape, one that apparently murders its viewers precisely seven days after they view it. The novel's main character, Kazayuki Akasawa, is a reporter who explores the legend when his niece and three of her friends all die of heart failure at precisely the same time. He discovers that they all saw the videotape exactly seven days before their deaths. When he watches the videotape himself, he unhappily discovers that the instructions about how to avoid one's imminent demise have been accidentally taped over by a mosquito commercial.

Concerned by the fact that he saw the videotape and may only have seven days left to live, Akasawa contacts an old high school friend and skeptic, Ryuji Takayama, to help him investigate the origins of the tape. Akasawa makes Ryuji a copy of the videotape and the two men discover that the tape was not a recorded by standard practices, but was instead created by "psychic photography" (Suzuki 20), most likely by a telepath named Shizuko Yamamura. Shizuko, the two men later discover, had apparently obtained her powers by retrieving a statue of *En no Ozunu*, a famous mystic and ascetic who founded Shugendō, a religion that "combines Shinto folk-tales with Taoist beliefs

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<sup>15</sup> The literal English translation of Suzuki's novel is Ring, but in order to avoid confusion, I have left it as "Ringu."

<sup>16</sup> Suzuki also wrote Dark Water, The God's Promenade, and various children's books during this time period. A fourth installment of the novel, Birthday, was released in November 2004, but as of February 2006 there wasn't an English translation available.

and Chinese Yin-yang magic” (Meikle 24). Shizuko killed herself in the 1950’s by throwing herself into a volcano on Oshima Island.

During Akasawa and Takayama’s investigation, Akasawa’s wife and daughter watch the videotape, oblivious to its dangers. Now fearing for the life of his family as well, Akasawa’s desire to find the origins of the videotape intensify. After visiting Oshima Island, Akasawa and Ryuji eventually discover that Shizuko killed herself because her powers deserted her during one of her psychic demonstrations. She was ostracized and consequently debunked as a fraud. But Shizuko had a daughter, Sadako, who apparently witnessed her mother’s banishment (and possessed her mother’s powers).

Sadako left Oshima after her mother’s death and briefly joined an acting troupe. When she was eighteen, she began working at a mental institution where her father, Dr. Nagao, was a patient suffering from one of the last known cases of smallpox in Japan. In a fit of psychotic rage, Dr. Nagao raped Sadako and consequently discovered that she was a hermaphrodite. After the rape, Dr. Nagao pushed Sadako down a well to her death. Akasawa and Ryuji discover that the well is also the current site of the resort where Akasawa’s niece saw the videotape.

Believing that giving Sadako a proper burial would lift the curse, Akasawa and Ryuji travel to the Villa Log Cabin, find Sadako’s body, and give her a proper burial. Akasawa’s deadline passes without his death, and they feel the curse has been lifted. But the following day, Ryuji reaches his deadline and dies. Akasawa reasons that the videotape has indeed become a virus, like the smallpox that Sadako’s father gave her immediately before he killed her, and that the only reason he has survived is because he made a copy of the videotape and passed it on. Conflicted, Akasawa tells his wife and daughter to make copies of the videotape to show to her parents.

Suzuki’s story is grounded in a narrative that has come to be a Japanese urban legend. In the early 1900’s, a psychology professor at Tokyo University named Tomokichi Fukurai published a work entitled Clairvoyance and Thoughtography purporting the existence of nentelegraphy, or “the transference of thought to a solid medium—such as a photographic plate” (Meikle 23). Chizuko Mifune, a twenty-three year-old woman from Kyushu whom Tomokichi lauded as possessing the ability to

predict dice rolls and project images onto film, was his prize student. Dr. Tomokichi was eventually expelled from Tokyo University and regarded as a fraud. Chizuko, who was rumored to be unstable and “hold grudges,” committed suicide by ingesting poison the day after a local article publicly debunked Dr. Tomokichi’s theories. A tomb was erected in Kumamoto, the town of her birth (after her death) (Meikle 22-23).

Even though the path that Suzuki’s original novel took to get to the American multiplex was a circuitous one, it had at its roots an urban legend originating in 1903—one that Suzuki actually borrowed a name from (Chizuko). The novel, before any television or film adaptations were produced, is a kind of physical manifestation of the uncanny: an almost-forgotten urban legend brought into the forefront approximately one hundred years after the original events took place. But the legend of Chizuko, when it returned in the form of Ringu, was different. Suzuki reinvented the historical character of Chizuko as an uncanny monster. Her motivations were unclear and inexplicably evil, she was hermaphroditic, and she somehow managed to reproduce herself in the character of Sadako. Chizuko Mifune (the real woman who has a statue dedicated to her in Kyushu) gave birth to Chizuko Yamamura much in the same inexplicable way that Chizuko Yamamura gave birth to the monster, Sadako.

But the uncanny, and the Ringu franchise itself, is necessarily originless. Using Chizuko Mifune as a strategic starting point for the inspiration of the novel Ringu and the subsequent film adaptations is problematic, but it clearly highlights the uncanny nature of the novel itself. The legend is vague and historical records on Chizuko and Dr. Tomokichi are at very best spotty. They lend a kind of credibility to Suzuki’s incredible tale, but at the same time they are in constant dialogue with it. Ringu’s success has no doubt led to a closer inspection and reinterpretation of the historical events that Suzuki claims inspired them. And this reinterpretation makes the original urban legend itself uncanny: it is duplication, in history, of a story that is supposed to be relegated to the realm of fiction.

The reading public, then, was clearly primed for Sadako’s story, and four years after the novel Ringu’s modest success, the first novel in the series was brought to Fuji Television and made into a moderately-successful 95 minute Friday-night movie. Ringu:

Kanzenban begins as the novel began—with the inexplicable deaths of four high school students at precisely the same time. Akasawa and Ryuji investigate, but Ryuji's character is much darker—he is a self-confessed rapist whom Akasawa suspects has murdered his wife. In the television movie, the killer videotape more closely resembles its description in the novel (although the novel's description is, admittedly, quite vague). The television movie is also more concerned with the characters' reactions to the videotape than the videotape itself. In Ringu: Kanzenban Sadako, too, is a real, corporeal presence, played by a voluptuous actress who regularly appears nude in the television movie. She is raped by Dr. Nagao, but then proceeds to carry on an incestuous affair with him and give birth to a son. She is also pushed into a patently *square* well at the film's conclusion: the killer videotape has yet to connect the round image of the well-cover being pushed to a close with the image of an eyeball with which the novel concludes its description of the videotape.

The television movie launched the Ringu cultural phenomenon into what would become its most successful medium—film. Almost immediately after the production of Ringu: Kanzenban, production talks for a feature-length film began. Hideo Nakata was contacted as a potential director for the big-screen version of the story. At this point in his career, Nakata was just beginning to establish his reputation in Japan as a horror film director. Educated in Tokyo and in London, Nakata made his film debut in 1996 with Don't Look Up (a.k.a. Ghost Actress). The film bears an uncanny resemblance to Ringu: a strange piece of film with the figure of an unknown woman in the background keeps on appearing on a director's rushes. The film appears to be that of a “ghost actress” who died in the creation of an earlier film, and the production becomes cursed. The ghost eventually become corporeal and kills the director by “scaring him to death” (Meikle 99). Although Don't Look Up was only moderately successful—Nakata claims that he believed only about eight hundred people saw the film when it was released—many of the cinematic techniques he employed in the film were used in the production of Ringu, and the film's viewership has certainly increased since the release of the Ringu.

Production on the film adaptation of Ringu began in January of 1998 and it was released that summer. Of course, several changes took place in the translation from novel

to film and from television movie to film. First of all, Nakata switched the main character's gender. Kazayuki Akasawa became Reiko Akasawa, and Ryuji was transformed from an old high school friend (and inattentive father) to an ex-husband (and inattentive father). The protagonist (Akasawa) was modified from an overworked, under-attentive father with a wife and daughter into an over-worked, under-attentive mother (Reiko) raising a son alone (Yoichi). Ryuji's cynical regard for the supernatural is replaced with a psychic talent that renders him impenetrable to the threat of Sadako's psychic abuse. In the novel, Sadako was a (beautiful) hermaphrodite, whereas in Ringu Sadako (although in some scenes she manifests both male and female qualities) is patently female. In the novel, Sadako is also perceived as part avenging force, determined to get revenge for the torment inflicted upon her by society and her father, whereas in the film Ringu she is merely "evil," with little explanatory background as to the initial cause.

The corporeal monster Sadako that first appeared in the original television adaptation was also modified quite a bit for the big screen. She was deemed "too solid, too real, too much of a figure in the landscape" by Suzuki (Meikle 92). Suzuki approached Nakata with the intent of creating a monster that was "more enigmatic, more ethereal, more... spectral" (Meikle 92). Nakata responded to this request by attempting to make Sadako more originless, and connecting her 'birth' with the sea instead of a real, human father, which Ringu implies (but does not explicitly state) is Dr. Ikuma. Nakata claims that the sea is an affective source of Sadako's origin because it is a common cultural fear in Japan:

We Japanese still have a tradition that the sea itself, the water-like floods, or the recent tsunami, can take many people's lives... because Japan is such a small island country, people have been killed in the sea over many, many years. There is almost a subconscious level of fear towards the sea... That's what the scriptwriter [Hiroshi Takahashi] and I discussed. Sadako could be a non-human existence from the sea. (Meikle q. Nakata 92).

On a budget of 1.5 million and only five weeks in production, the film opened to rave reviews and was quickly followed by a film adaptation of Rasen, which was shot that summer and by Loop (also titled Ring 2) in 1999. The films' success invigorated

the novel's sales, and by 1999 over 1.5 million copies had been sold. By 2004, Ringu had been translated into Chinese, Korean, and English, and the novel continues to gain momentum in the international market. The novels' and films' successes have given Koji Suzuki the title "the Japanese Stephen King" (Honjo).

To date, Ringu is Japan's highest grossing horror film of all time. By the time the film was [officially] released in the United States in 2003, it had been subtitled and released in seventeen other countries in Asia, Europe, and South America. Less than five years after its opening in Japan, remakes of the film appeared in Korea (Ring Virus) and in the United States (Ring) (IMDb).

The American adaptation of the film began production in 2001, after Mark Sourian, an executive from DreamWorks, saw a poor bootleg copy of the Japanese film on VHS. Gore Verbinski was DreamWorks' choice for direction, and in October 2002 the film was released in approximately two thousand US theatres (DreamWorks). On opening weekend, Ring grossed over 15 million, to be outpaced the following weekend by box office receipts of over 34 million. The film quickly gained momentum, and by the time it completed its run in theatres in February 2003, sales exceeded 120 million (IMDb). Ring's success was followed by the release of The Grudge in 2004 (an American adaptation of the Japanese film Ju-on),<sup>17</sup> Ring Two in 2005, and Dark Water in 2006.<sup>18</sup>

Both films—Ringu and Ring—share a similar narrative structure loosely based on Suzuki's novel: a killer videotape, one that mysteriously causes the viewer's death seven days after it is watched, circulates through an urban center. In Ring, the Japanese names and characters have basically been "re-made" into Americans. The overworked, single mother of Ringu, Akasawa Reiko, becomes Rachel Keller. Akasawa's son Yoichi is reinvented in Rachel's son Aidan. And Ryuji, Reiko's ex-husband, is remade into Noah, Rachel's ex-boyfriend (although it is never entirely clear in Ring whether Noah is Rachel's ex-husband, ex-boyfriend, or just Aidan's father).

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<sup>17</sup> The Grudge was not written by or inspired by any of Suzuki's novels, nor did Nakata direct it, but it is considered part of the "J-Horror" influx. The Grudge was directed by Ju-on's director, Takashi Shimizu.

<sup>18</sup> Ring Two, although directed by Nakata and inspired by Suzuki's novel, was written primarily by Hiroshi Takahashi, who contributed to the screen adaptation of the Ringu series. The story has no basis in Suzuki's novels. Dark Water, on the other hand, is considered a screen adaptation of the novel of the same name.

The film adaptations, however, share more common elements with each other than either one shares with the original novel (even though completed with Suzuki's guidance). Both films begin with the inexplicable death of a young girl who we learn is Rachel/Reiko's niece. Rachel's/Reiko's son is close with his cousin, so at the bequest of her sister and seeing that her son is suffering, she begins an investigation of her niece's murder. The investigation leads her to a cabin in the mountains that her niece apparently visited seven days before her death. There Rachel/Reiko encounters the rumored "killer videotape" and immediately after she watches the tape she receives a phone call and a girl's voice says "seven days." Later she shows the videotape to her ex-boyfriend/ex-husband (Noah/Ryuji) and requests his help in investigating the murder. He agrees, and the two track down the woman in the videotape. Each film presents this character slightly differently, but she is most basically Samara/Sadako's mother, who committed suicide. From this information, the couple eventually learns that Samara/Sadako was murdered by one of her parents. They find her body in a well under the cabin where Rachel/Reiko's niece first saw the videotape. Rachel/Reiko exhumes her body, and, feeling the curse has been lifted, returns home relieved. The next day, however, Noah/Ryuji's seven days expires and Samara/Sadako kills him. Rachel/Reiko determines that the only thing that she did that Noah/Ryuji did not do is make a copy of the videotape and show it to some one else. Fearing for her son's life, she instructs her son to make a copy of the videotape and the two drive to her parents house to show the tape to them.

The description of the killer videotape itself is an important point of deviation for all three texts. In the novel, the tape is 120 min. long, a fact that made the tape quite difficult to incorporate into a feature length film. It contains a birth scene, a jeering crowd, a baby, a fairly specific image of a girl being tossed into a well, and instructions to watch the tape in its entirety or the viewer will be "eaten by the lost" (Suzuki 74). The novel's description does share with the Ringu videotape a few key characteristics: images of an eruption, wiggling Japanese characters, the character "Sada" flashed conspicuously, and the infamous ring of light. In Ring's videotape, the only image directly linked with the novel is that of the ring. But the remaining imagery in the

novel's videotape is highly ambiguous. The videotape is described as "the unconscious, squirming, worrying, finding an exit, spurting out—or maybe it was the throb of life" (Suzuki 76), as "images that were now concrete where they had previously been abstract" (Suzuki 77), and as "a series of concepts painted on a canvass, one over another" (Suzuki 76). The novel's videotape was even characterized by "weird camera angles" (Suzuki 78). The description of the videotape ends with a quick switch to a commercial for insect repellent, cutting out the tape's instructions on avoiding an untimely death. There is little or no description of many of the images that appear in both Ringu's and Ring's videotapes.

There is a clear deviation in the presentation of the image of "abstract" that the two films choose to employ. These differences in image-choice permeate through both films, whereas differences in plot or narrative structure are less obvious. For Ringu, this includes a few key images. The first image is that of a ring of light (the infamous "ring"), followed by a woman brushing her hair in a mirror that transfers from side to side. This image is a bit disorienting—the woman (later revealed to be Chizuko) is seen through a reflection in a mirror on the right side of the screen. The image abruptly switches to its "mirror" image on the right side of the screen. Next the mirror is shown with no reflected figure, then the image of Sadako appears directly reflected in front of it, receding into darkness. Following the image of Sadako receding, Reiko sees Japanese characters wiggling around the screen, spelling out eruption, followed by a man pointing with a white cloth covering his face. Ringu's videotape concludes with a close-up of an eyeball with the character "Sada" inscribed into it, then an outside image of the well, and finally blue static.

Ring's killer videotape is a bit more involved. It begins with an image of the ring of light, but this image is followed by static, what appears to be blood or water boiling, an oversized chair, an almost identical image of a woman brushing her hair in a mirror, a man looking out of the window of a two story house, a tree with bright red leaves, the ring again, another image of the tree (except burning), a finger going through a nail, and more.

This kind of historical duplication present in the films' killer videotapes extends to the films themselves. Ringu represents not only a specific historical moment in Japan (the summer of 1998, just a few years after the infamous sarin gas bombings), it represents the culmination of a variety of historical moments: Chizuko Mifune's suicide in 1911, the publication of Ringu in 1991, the premier of the television movie in 1995, and the subsequent television and manga series'. Ring, similarly, has a specific historical moment in the United States—the summer of 2002 (only a year after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks). But viewing Ring in the United States has the added component of connecting its viewers to an even more 'foreign' cultural past. As George Lipsitz claims of the influence of mass media on American culture:

Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place and ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have no geographic or biological connection. The capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present. (Eberwein q. Lipsitz 28)

The historical and cultural traditions that created Ringu and Ring are overdetermined; they are haunted by layers upon layers of social and cultural 'ghosts,' ones that continually inflect upon each other. The directors seemed to be infinitely familiar with this quality in their work. Ringu, for example, self-consciously references the urban legend of the killer videotape (via Reiko watching videotaped interviews with high school students) in the first few minutes of the film. Ring contains various allusions to Ringu—there is even a scene where Noah, searching for information about Anna Morgan in her patient file, encounters pages of unidentified Japanese calligraphy.

But, as Lipsitz claims of the medium itself, the overdertermination that characterizes the films also detaches them from their origins. One can demarcate the path of creation of the American film, Ring, and even track the many changes evident in the phenomenon's development over time (much as I have done in the first section of this chapter), but it is never possible to trace a specific 'point of origin.' Both Ringu and Ring, like the killer videotape itself, are uncanny creations. They are originless,

overdetermined, and defined entirely relationally: Ring is the “American version” of Ringu and Ringu is the “Japanese version” of Ring.<sup>19</sup>

The films are uncanny not only because they evolve from urban legend, to novel, to television (etc.) but also because Ring and Ringu are remakes. Conventionally, they refer back to an ‘original,’ one to which they are presumed to be subsidiary and by virtue of its status as a remake “bares its own secondariness” (Brashinsky 162). A remake, at inception, is a *re*interpretation and as such they “skip the act of meta-aesthetic transition in which, according to the widely accepted modernist prejudice, originality begins” (Brashinsky 163). But their referential nature does not necessarily have to be subsidiary. Within the context of postmodern aesthetics, the primacy of original is strictly contested.

The remake, by virtue of its assumption of reinvention, serves [initially] to highlight the *differences* between the remake and the original. “Whichever film one reads first, whichever version is taken to be the original, the heterogeneities of cinema continue to cross both ways” (Wills 159). This idea is easily transmutable to the remake(s) of Ringu: differences create a dialogue, foreground what is “original” about each text/film, and effectively remove the presupposition of originality. Brashinsky claims this is one of the most lauded characteristics of the remake: “[The remake] provides us with countless clues to the medium, the culture, and ourselves that would be eclipsed by the study of what the original material has gained or lost in passage from one medium to another” (Brashinsky 163).

The remake presents an interesting opportunity for an analysis of the uncanny. Not only does it embody some of the most prominent characteristics of the uncanny (as something that is defined relationally, that is a return of the repressed videotape or cultural history, that is located temporally), it provides insight into the precise nature of the uncanny. Where a ‘remake’ deviates from its ‘original’ (and vice versa) is a contested space. This contested space contains what (in Freud’s terms) are the defamiliarizing agents that create the repressed and reinforce their inevitable return as the uncanny. Analyzing these defamiliarizing agents can reveal both differences and similarities in what initiating repression in two separate sets of “interpretations.” One of

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<sup>19</sup> Wills, speaking on an American remake of a French film (Breathless), claims that “once it has crossed the Atlantic, in spite of the translations and inversions, there are more crossings, there is more writing.”

the most striking similarities in Hideo Nakata's and Gore Verbinski's rendering of Suzuki's novel Ringu is in their presentation of repetition and doppelgangers.

## Chapter Four

### *REPETITION AND THE DOPPELGANGER*

Freud's discussion of the double in The Uncanny concludes with his assertion that the double is frightening merely because it is "a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development, a phase that we have surmounted, in which it admittedly had a more benign significance" (Freud 143). The source of the double's terror, for Freud, is that it is an altered relic of a "primitive" animistic way of perceiving the world where duplication of one's self, whether through an immortal soul or simply the replication of one's image, was assurance of one's own immortality. The double's altered return reinforces the fact that this phase in human development has been surmounted and that the double can no longer ensure immortality.

After Freud abandons his discussion of the uncanny doppelganger in The Uncanny, he introduces the idea of repetition. Repetition is a source of uncanniness for Freud because it "transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and inescapable" (Freud 144). In other words, repetition is uncanny only if it is "irrational," or exists outside what we consider to be the bounds of probability. Freud's famous example of his own experience with the uncanny repetition of the number sixty-two would not have been uncanny if he had not internalized coincidence as an ominous portent. Ironically, Freud does not explicitly link the double and repetition in his text, but the two are clearly related. In its most obvious sense, the doppelganger is a repetition of self. The repetition that creates the doppelganger is by very nature unnatural or irrational. There is only supposed to be one self, and any more selves are beyond the realm of probability.

But the double also (for more contemporary critics) has come to represent a kind of manifestation of repressed desire. Coates' book, The Double and the Other reiterates this point by tracing the occurrence of doppelgangers in Western Literature. He claims that the double first started occurring with regularity in Western Literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> century concurrent with the spread of colonialism. There was yet another resurgence in England during the Victorian era, when social mores were among the strictest in the country's contemporary history. From Coates' historical analysis, he comes to the

conclusion that “the double can then be said to crystalize under two [social] conditions: when other people begin to be viewed as akin to ourselves, and when the self is projected into a space hitherto defined as other” (Coates 32). He qualifies this analysis by asserting that globalized, post-modern society has created a condition where doubles (the “other”) are so numerous that we have become desensitized to their uncanniness:

As the growing number of mediations in reality deepens its mystifications and the variety of experience inscribes increasingly numerous fissures within the self, the individual becomes a crowd of warring impulses no longer capable even of conceptualizing itself as its own Other. It no longer has a single Other, but a whole series of them. (Coates 35)

The media of narrative production prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> century society merely heightens this affect. Film, particularly, allows for numerous replications of the self through special affects.

Although Coates is perhaps optimistic in his assumption that the prevalence of repeated images of the self will desensitize people to the double’s uncanniness, his analysis is quite relevant to the rendering of the double in Ring and Ringu. The films are certainly rampant with multiple doubles. They present on a metatextual level because the films are remakes of each other. Beyond that, multiple doubles are created within the framework of the individual narratives. Each film has two main narratives. The first narrative is that of Rachel/Reiko, her son Aidan/Yoichi, and her ex-husband Noah/Ryuji (the “larger narrative”). This narrative is presented as the initial experience of the viewer and it is the framework through which the second, internal narrative is revealed. The internal narrative takes place inside the world of the killer videotape. It is that of Anna Morgan/Chizuko Yamamura, Dr. Ikuma/Mr. Morgan, and Samara/Sadako. Each character within the larger narrative repeats his or herself in the internal narrative. How the two narratives interact, how they recreate themselves within one another, and how this produces multiple doppelgangers reveals how the uncanny is rendered through narrative in Ring and Ringu.

In both films, the videotape’s first few seconds essentially replicates the first few seconds of the films. This device is self-referential, in that it reminds the viewer that he/she is actually watching a film of a film, but it is also in itself a kind of disfigured return to the earliest images of the film. The same images and audio of the film’s

beginning have reappeared, but they have been distorted. The tiny image of a circular, white light and the grainy video that created it that appeared at the top left corner in the film's first few seconds has grown to include the entire screen. Concurrently, the sound of the rushing surf and the torrential rain has diminished into the sound of only a few water droplets. This initial replication is subtle, but it serves as a kind of metaphor for the films' entire structure.

There is pervasive, distorted repetition—of images, sounds, camera angles, situations, and characters—that create a very “circular” narrative that concludes in almost the exactly same manner that it began. Repetition of ring imagery and water noises within the films are a figurative representation of the uncanny (and the ring) itself: the entire film represents a circular movement in time. It begins precisely where it ends, with the image of the ring and the sound of water, returning in the last few moments of the film. But within this repetition, there is also a continual movement to both contain and unleash it. Both the ring and the water noises are like the very brief glimpse we had of them in the film's first few moments, but altered. The ring has grown in size and scope, and the water has diminished.

One of the most commonly repeated images, in both films, is the face of the potential victim of the videotape's curse being reflected in a blank television screen. This image occurs more frequently in Ring than Ringu, but it is closely connected with particular characters in both films. The first appearance of the reflected face in Ring occurs as Rachel's doomed niece, Katie, sees her own image in an oversized television screen that remains illuminated even after she turns it off. Shortly thereafter, she hears another television creating the familiar dripping noise, runs upstairs to find a puddle of water escaping her bedroom, and opens the door to a fast, extreme close-up of a static-covered television screen. At this point in the film, the viewer does not actually see what kills Katie. But Katie sees herself (reflected) inside the television immediately before whatever it was that was inside the television comes out to enact its curse. Not only is Katie's image a doppelgänger—a repeated self, distorted by the curve and color of the television set—the image that is repeated manages to escape the television, the bounds of its “otherness,” and destroy its creator (Katie). The monster (Samara/Sadako)

in this case essentially functions as an unchecked doppelganger, one capable of escaping its bounds and enacting real destruction upon that which created it.

Samara and Sadako are not the only doppelgangers in the films. Both Ring and Ringu are riddled with them. The three main characters in the films: Rachel/Reiko, the working mom, Noah/Ryuji, the inattentive father, and Aidan/Yoichi, the oddly precognizant little boy, are all reproduced in the three main characters in the videotape. Rachel/Reiko is continually connected with Samara/Sadako's mother (Anna Morgan/Yamamura Shizuko), Noah/Ryuji is connected to Samara/Sadako's father (Mr. Morgan/Dr. Ikuza) and Aidan/Yoichi is connected to Samara/Sadako. This is accomplished not only through the narrative, but also through visual references.

The Aidan/Yoichi character is potentially a manifestation of Samara/Sadako, the “monster,” in its early stages. Samara/Sadako possesses supernatural powers, and has the capacity to drive others mad or kill them “just by thinking it” (Ringu). Samara possessed the power to burn images into others' minds and Sadako could kill others if they angered her. They were also both (in a sense) born outside of the traditional nuclear family unit. In Ringu, Sadako is the illegitimate child of a psychic and a married man. She is basically unwanted and ignored by both of her parents. Ring explicates Samara's background a bit more. Her mother, Anna Morgan, was constantly trying and failing to have children. One season she returned with a new baby, whom the family claims to have adopted. Later in the film it is revealed that Samara is actually Anna's biological daughter, which in itself is unusual, since the Morgans were only gone for a few months before they returned with the Samara<sup>20</sup>). Samara was not exactly illegitimate, like Sadako, but her origins certainly were not traditional, positioning her early on as a force to be excised from the film. Samara and Sadako were also both wronged by their parents. Sadako was killed by her father, Dr. Ikuma, and Samara was killed by her mother, Anna Morgan.

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<sup>20</sup> There is a bit of discontinuity regarding this point—in Ring 2, Rachel finds Samara's biological mother. But there is definitely a shot of a birth certificate naming Anna Morgan as Samara's biological mother in Ring.

Aidan and Yoichi seem to manifest most of Samara's and Sadako's qualities: they both possess supernatural powers,<sup>21</sup> they were both born into a non-traditional family unit, they both possess overwrought mothers and disinterested fathers, and they both were wronged by their parents. The only significant difference between Aidan/Yoichi and Samara/Sadako is that Aidan/Yoichi is not clearly labeled "evil" at the film's conclusion (although there is ambiguity) and the two pairs are different genders.

Carol Clover's "Her Body, Himself" provides a potential explanation for the monsters' gender switching. In her analysis of a number of American slasher films, Clover found a reoccurring figure, the "Final Girl." The Final Girl is the only surviving figure of the bloodbath of the slasher film. She is "intelligent, watchful, levelheaded; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat" (Clover 296). She is usually characterized by an androgynous name, masculine interests, and an "active, investigating gaze" (Clover 298). Clover hypothesizes that the popularity of the slasher film with male audiences derives from men's identification with the Final Girl as an adolescent male.<sup>22</sup> Through the course of the film, the Final Girl becomes more and more masculinized (enacting Freud's Oedipal stage) until at the film's conclusion she destroys the monster (usually, with a phallus) and essentially becomes the male-hero.<sup>23</sup>

Although Ring and Ringu are not slasher films, Clover's Final Girl still offers an interesting tool for analyzing the rampant doppelgangers in Ring and Ringu. The films each seem to possess three versions of the Final Girl: Aidan/Yoichi, Rachel/Reiko, and Samara/Sadako. Aidan/Yoichi, although patently male, is juvenile to such an extent that he is essentially sexless (even his name is androgynous). He is the first character to truly perceive the nature of the videotape's threat, and he does this through seeing visions of Samara/Sadako's victims or actually seeing her. In the first half of the film he is clearly situated as the "helpless victim" (Clover claims the helpless child is automatically

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<sup>21</sup> Aidan manifests this quality more patently than Yoichi, but Yoichi still possesses some form of supernatural power.

<sup>22</sup> Clover claims that "the Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male" (Clover 300).

<sup>23</sup> "The moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicized is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases. Day breaks, and the community returns to normal order" (Clover 299).

gendered feminine [299]), but he becomes more masculinized throughout the course of the films, finally asserting his masculinity by making a copy of the killer videotape to show to his grandparents.<sup>24</sup>

Rachel/Reiko is also slightly masculinized. She is introduced as mildly aggressive. She smokes, drinks, swears, and yells. She reasserts this status by making a copy of the videotape herself. Although her “masculinization” seems to occur a bit slower than Aidan/Yoichi’s (she becomes aware of the true nature of the threat after him), she is one of the three surviving characters in the film’s conclusion.

The most important difference between Ring and Ringu’s Final Girl and Carol Clover’s slasher films, however, is that all three Final Girls’ final metamorphosis into masculinity is ultimately truncated. The “victim” and “monster” category is incredibly blurred. In fact, the monster (Samara/Sadako) also manifests some of the qualities of the Final Girl. She is initially gendered feminine, but as the film progresses, she becomes more androgynous. Samara/Sadako is acutely aware of her own powers and has the precognizant ability to predict their potential for damage. Samara claims of her capacity to hurt people when she is being interviewed by a psychiatrist “it won’t stop.” In fact, Samara/Sadako kills her victims with a penetrating phallus—the gaze.

The Final Girl in Ring and Ringu is (like the many duplicate characters within the film) repeated. But she is not supposed to be many, but one, and the fact that there exist more than one identifying “selves” in the films renders the Final Girl’s existence, and her replication, uncanny. Perhaps this contributes to the overall uncanniness of the film because of the expectations of the genre. The Final Girl, if we are given one, is supposed to survive. She is supposed to assume the status of male-hero, excise the androgynous monster, and bring the narrative to an end. In the Ring and Ringu, the Final Girl(s) final phallic act serves merely to perpetuate the action. There is no excision of the monster, only repetition.

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<sup>24</sup> Numerous critics have mentioned a scene in Cronenberg’s Videodrome where the male hero is given a “vagina like” (Clover 301, et. al.) slash across the abdomen and a videotape is thrust into his wound as an extremely phallic moment. The male hero is feminized and violated by a videotape. The videotape copying scene in the conclusion of Ring is obviously not as violent, but it seems to serve the same purpose: it masculinizes Aidan/Yoichi and characterizes him as the new monster.

Ring and Ringu also possess “parental doppelgangers.” Rachel and Reiko are introduced in their first scene as the stereotypical “bad parents.” Rachel is late picking her son up from school and comes in to the classroom swearing. She then proceeds to have a conversation about Aidan with his teacher in which she is very defensive, claiming that if her son being quiet and studious was a problem then she would be “the first teacher in history to have a problem with it” (Ring). Reiko is introduced similarly. Yoichi is leaving for school, and Reiko is making him dinner for later that night, claiming that she won’t be home and he’ll have to heat up his dinner in the microwave. The film introduces the children as something of a nuisance, or an interruption in the two women’s busy lives. Noah and Ryuji’s characters are similarly linked to Mr. Morgan/Dr. Ikuma. Again, they all represent an inattentive, uninvolved parental figures, but the two films switch the gender and position of the monsters’ actual (initial) killer.

Being a busy, inattentive mother does not entirely equate Rachel/Reiko with Anna/Shizuko. In Ring, Anna actually kills her own daughter, and although one could make the argument that Rachel comes very close to being responsible for Aidan’s death (because she allowed him to see the videotape), she clearly is working to save her son, not murder him. In Ringu, it is not Shizuko who kills Sadako, it is her father, Dr. Ikuma. In Ring, Samara’s mother is the killer, and both she and Mr. Morgan commit suicide. In Ringu, Sadako’s father is the killer (although “she doesn’t hate him”), and her mother commits suicide. The absence of a direct correlation between Samara/Sadako’s killer’s gender in the two films merely reinforces the idea of androgyny: monsters, in Ring and Ringu, are not clearly gendered.

This gender switching problematizes the exact correlation of the two families in Ring and Ringu, but their actions do basically repeat themselves within their respective films. In both films, the monster is vanquished by one of its parents, and the parent that is implicated as the most directly responsible for the monster’s creation kills him or herself. In Ringu, this parent is Shizuko, who has passed on the monstrous supernatural abilities to her daughter. In Ring, this parent is Anna, as she “wanted [the child] more than anything,” and apparently had her through supernatural means. These “creators,” Shizuko and Anna, are essentially the original monsters. They must be excised from the

film in order to be replaced by the following generation of monsters, Sadako and Samara. These actions are (again) repeated within the larger narrative (outside of the videotape) of the film. Ryuji and Noah (like Shizuko and Anna) must be excised from the film in order to provide room for the subsequent generation of monsters (Yoichi and Aidan) to continue: their deaths essentially ensure Yoichi and Aidan's continued existence. If Ryuji/Noah had not been killed by Sadako/Samara, then Reiko/Rachel would have not known how to save their Yoichi/Aidan. The monsters, to continue to the cycle, must be created, duplicated by their creator, destroy their creator, duplicate themselves, and then be destroyed—just like the videotape.

This kind of narrative treatment of monsters is closely connected with the uncanny: both Ring and Ringu create uncanny monsters. Samara/Sadako are not only being reborn in a half-dead half-alive state, they are being exhumed from the dark, watery depths of the subconscious, aptly represented by a womb-like well. They are a manifestation of the previous generation's (Shizuko and Dr. Ikuma; Mr. and Mrs. Morgan) inability to successfully vanquish their own personal monstrosity, a reminder of the current generation's (Reiko and Ryuji, Rachel and Noah) own monstrosity, and a precursor to the next generation's (Yoichi and Aidan) developing monstrosity. They are the return of the repressed, manifested in the form of a terrifying doppelganger, and replicated through a repetitive process of duplication and vanquishment.

The monsters are also created by the films' narratives in the same manner that the uncanny is created within a distinctly temporal space. Neither Samara nor Sadako are fully embodied until the films' conclusions, and as Rachel/Reiko and Noah/Ryuji investigate Samara/Sadako's life and death and we learn more about them, we gradually see more of them climbing out of the well. We cannot see them until we see what they are not, for that is what defines them, and the films' last few minutes quickly reveal what the entire film has learned about the monster it has created. The repressed—in this instance, the monster—is slowly uncovered (exhumed) through the course of the film's investigation.

But this investigation, far from serving to finally “lay rest” to the monster, merely reveals it as “origin-less,” patently evil with little or no explanation as to why.

Rachel/Reiko learns that manufacturing an origin or purpose for the monster's monstrosity will ultimately fail to vanquish it, despite her expectations otherwise. Samara and Sadako are irreducible and originless, and that is part of their terror. In Ring, Samara's birth was a mystery; she essentially came from nowhere. In Ringu, her conception was not a mystery (although it was illegitimate), but her supernatural powers were. They were evil before any wrong was done to them, and the most compelling moment of "uncanniness" in the film occurs when what has been repressed (Samara/Sadako) returns, revealed as what it truly is: an inexplicable, constantly shifting mix of binary oppositions.

Samara/Sadako is not alive, but she is not dead, either. The first thing that characterizes her presence is an indeterminate white spot that resembles a hand (later to be revealed as an abject, fingernail-less one). She is female but has male characteristics. The second image to emerge from the well is that of long black hair that conveniently hides Samara/Sadako's face. She is a child, but she should be "at least forty years old by now" (Ringu)—and as she emerges from the television screen, it becomes apparent that her size is not that of a child or an adult. She is oddly proportioned, and grows in size from a speck on the television screen to a figure larger than those she is attacking. She is human, but digital, and as she moves outside of the television, she flashes forward in space a few paces as if she were a projection while concurrently covering the floor with water. And finally, she is seen, but still possesses the capacity to see: after numerous characters have watched the monster from various angles, the final moment that destroys them is the moment in which she sees them. And of the numerous oppositional characteristics she displayed in the films' conclusions, none of them can be easily privileged over the other.

Samara/Sadako's existence is also entirely dependent on time. She can only exist seven days after someone sees the videotape, and she returns at precisely seven days after the moment when the tape was first viewed. The monster is uncanny in its very inception (if it can be claimed to have a point of inception), and the development of its most uncanny features are entirely dependent on a very specific chronology. Samara/Sadako must be introduced in her full monstrosity, then recovered. Rachel/Reiko's investigation

into her mysterious death is essentially an attempt at reclaiming the repressed. But like the uncanny, the repressed (the reason for the monster's monstrosity) can never be recovered.

The two films share essentially the same plot, one that creates a universe rife with doppelgangers, characters that are relentlessly duplicated, and events and actions that are continually repeated. But those characters that reside within this repetitive universe inevitably participate in their own destruction. As soon as they duplicate themselves, through a reflection in a blank television screen, they are uncannily reminding themselves of their own mortality. This reminder, the "monster" of both films, is what eventually must claim their lives in order to exist.

The doppelgangers in Ring and Ringu effectively create the situation of the animistic universe that Freud claims is the inception point of our fear of the doppelganger. Perhaps this is a doppelganger in itself—we are presented with the return of an animistic universe, where repetition of ourselves is heimlich and ensures our immortality (as is the case with Samara/Sadako and the monster that she represents), but it has returned, perverted. This repetition of self is not achieved through any kind of immortal soul or even an image of the self, but through monstrosity. And monstrosity, in Ring and Ringu, possesses the power to replicate itself endlessly.

## Chapter Five

### *THE AUDIO AND VISUAL UNCANNY*

In addition to the uncanny rendered through Ring and Ringu's narratives, the films create an experience of the uncanny through visual and sound elements. The films share a very similar narrative structure, but each director chooses to render the uncanny aesthetically in a subtly different manner. Both directors represented the uncanny in the killer videotape as a series of disconnected, initially inexplicable images. But these images behaved in a distinctly different manner within the context of each film: Hideo Nakata's images in Ringu's killer videotape were relegated to the interior thoughts of his characters, threatening them with their potential residence inside an uncanny world, whereas Gore Verbinski's images in Ring's killer videotape seeped into the exterior landscape, threatening them with potentially making their world uncanny. Ringu also emphasizes sound elements to produce the experience of the uncanny whereas Ring relies more heavily on images.

The films are quite similar in terms of overall plot. As the films begin, a reporter's niece (Katie/Tomoko) becomes the first victim of this killer videotape. Determined to find the cause of her niece's death, Rachel/Reiko investigates the origin of the videotape, eventually seeing it herself and showing it to her ex-lover/ex-husband (Noah/Ryuji) and their son (Aidan/Yoichi). The bulk of the remainder of the films is devoted to uncovering the reason or cause behind the videotape's production, and lifting the "curse" that it creates when one sees it.

The film adaptations of the novel, however, share more in common with each other than with the original text, even though both were completed with Suzuki's guidance. The protagonist, Rachel/Reiko, has undergone a long metamorphosis from a father with a wife and child to a single mother with a son. Aidan/Yoichi plays a much larger role in both of the films than in the original novel, whereas Noah/Ryuji is the lone character who has remained relatively unchanged. There are actually many instances in which Ring and Ringu contain identical shots and takes. The first and last ten minutes of Ring and Ringu, for example, are essentially the same, as we see the videotape's first and last victims' last few moments of life. Both films contain numerous long hallway and

stairwell shots, contributing to the overall claustrophobic feel of both of the films. And of course both films utilize a water motif—in both Verbinski’s and Nakata’s worlds, it is always raining.

Even a cursory analysis reveals a much more direct path from Nakata’s film to Verbinski’s film than from Suzuki’s novel. Although the author was consulted during the production of both films, and he claims that they are both “very good” (Honjo), he also claims, “the novel is very different” (Honjo). Suzuki’s descriptions of the novel’s images, and specifically of the sounds and images present on the killer videotape, are vague enough to be interpreted in a variety of manners. The visual and sound elements in both films (especially those presented within the killer videotape) can be almost entirely attributed to the film’s directors and crew. Nakata and Verbinski’s choices reveal a functionally different representation of the aesthetic uncanny.

But before analyzing where the two directors’ interpretations diverge, it is important to explore the fundamental uncanniness in the films’ shared visual and sound elements. Verbinski’s and Nakata’s videotapes contain a few identical images. Both videotapes begin with a shot of the circle of light that is later revealed to be Sadako/Samara’s view from inside the well as her father/mother covers the well with a concrete lid. Nakata’s tape includes the image of a young Japanese woman brushing her hair in front of an oval-shaped silver mirror. The woman becomes startled, and the mirror flips sides on the wall and directly reflects a young girl floating backwards, her face obscured by hair. Verbinski’s tape contains an identical image—with the exact same mirror—except the woman and the child are not Japanese. Both videotapes contain the image of a large, black reflected eye (in Ring this image is attributed to a horse’s eye, but in Ringu there is no specific explication<sup>25</sup>), and the final cut where the well, previously viewed internally, is viewed from the outside. Although the well is clearly an important plot device, necessary for exposition, the image of the woman brushing her hair is not: it was one of those images that Verbinski felt was chilling enough to adapt to include in Ring. The images both directors chose to use on the killer videotape are basically visual representations of some of the films’ most conspicuous themes. The image of the

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<sup>25</sup> Although it looks like a horse’s eye to me.

circular ring of light is reminiscent of the films' title (Ringu and Ring), the films' narrative structure (as a "circular" narrative, as explicated in Chapter Three), and even the ominous phone "ring" that announces that a character has just seen the killer videotape and will die in "seven days." It is a happy coincidence that the same word is used for a circle (ring/ringu) and the sound a telephone makes (ring/ringu) in both English and Japanese. When Suzuki wrote Ringu, he had this very pun in mind:

I happened to be thumbing through an English-Japanese dictionary when I thought I was about time to decide [a title for the novel]. Then the word 'ring' passed my eye. I had the strong feeling that it would fit. 'Ring is usually used as a noun, but there is also a verb usage of ring, meaning 'to call someone' or 'to call out' such as an alarm clock or a phone ringing. (Meikle q. Suzuki 15)

The reflection of the woman in the mirror refers back to the numerous doppelgangers present in the narratives. There are two Chizuko's/Anna Morgan's in the videotape: the woman brushing her hair, and her reflection. Her early duplication alludes to her later duplication in Rachel/Reiko. Similarly, there are two Sadako's/Samara's in the videotape, and this alludes to her continual replication through Yoichi/Aidan and the videotape itself. The replication of the mirror images in both directors' videotapes alludes to the overall prevalence of duplication throughout the films. The image of the eye, as well, is thematically replicated in the overall context of the film through the directors' use of the gaze (explicated in Chapter Five). In addition to this, the eye connects with the 'ring' pun as it is also an image of a ring: the ring of an iris.

In terms of deviation, what Nakata chose to include in his adaptation of the novel—and what Verbinksi omitted or he adapted—is closely connected to the culture in which it was produced. Nakata's videotape contains images of a news article detailing a volcanic eruption on Izu, the island Sadako was from. The characters describing the event wiggle around the screen relentlessly, like bugs or worms, and are difficult to read. Following this image, there is a scene filled with languishing human bodies on a beach, being buried in volcanic ash. An unintelligible voice track plays in the background (later revealed to be a stretched track of an old Japanese nursery rhyme that says "Frolic in Brine, Goblins be Thine;"). As Ryuji later explains in Ringu, "If you play in the sea, the goblins will come and get you."

Volcanoes and earthquakes are certainly part of Japan's very recent past, and Izu is home to active volcanoes. In the United States, this certainly is not a unifying cultural fear, and Verbinski chose to include a few similar—but not identical—shots. The wiggling Japanese characters were transformed into what initially appear to be maggots. The scene is flashed again a few seconds later to reveal human bodies writhing around in the water, and the soundtrack contains no unclear mumbling.

Obviously, wiggling Japanese characters could not be reproduced to a similar effect in an American remake of the film. If wiggling English letters were used, they would not have the same ambiguity and richness of meaning that the Japanese characters do. Even though the Japanese alphabet is partially phonetic, it still uses classical Chinese characters (Kanji). Kanji are a mix of ancient pictograms and ideograms that are capable of conveying meanings unto themselves. The word for "explosion" is composed of two characters—the character for 'mouth' and a phonetic. The phonetic element contains (in part) the character representing (in part) Sadako's name: Sada (which is later reflected in the giant black eye in Nakata's videotape).

It would be difficult to reproduce this effect in the English language, but Verbinski still manages to convey the overall sense of disquieting transformation and layered meaning. The wiggling maggots are difficult to make out—like the article on the volcanic eruption—but they eventually reveal themselves to be something that they are not, something greater and more terrifying that eventually defamiliarizes one's initial perception. This revelation, in Nakata's videotape, turns Sadako into a figurative eruption: the term is initially a meaningless phonetic, but when it becomes the character for "eruption" and eventually the name of the monstrous figure of Sadako, it becomes something very threatening. In Verbinski's tape, it turns human beings into maggots.

Nakata's bodies languishing on the beach in the midst of a volcanic eruption become dead horses in the surf in Verbinski's tape. Verbinski replaces the violent, imminent eruption of a volcano with the slow decay of disease. Nakata's overall emphasis on the foreboding precognition of an eruption, a cultural and social explosion of repression, has been replaced with a fear that a large, geographically diverse nation such as the United States can easily recognize: death.

Other images on Verbinski's videotape (as well as within the narrative of Ring itself) insinuate the tape's connections to disease and decay whereas Nakata alludes to a sense of imminent, catastrophic destruction. In one instance on Verbinski's videotape it appears as if the video camera is traveling down an endless throat, or even as if something organic is coming out of a throat. We see a giant centipede, a finger driven through a nail, and dismembered fingers wiggling about of their own accord. The videotape produces initially ambiguous imagery that becomes more and more distorted in size or form or gradually transforms into what Julia Kristeva terms the abject.

In horror film, the abject is closely connected with the uncanny. It is "a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries [one] as radically separate, loathsome" (Kristeva 2). It is an extreme form of uncanniness, one that is completely cut off from that which it (initially) was a "return of." It is commonly manifested through corpses, decay, and bodily functions, and it is so vile and repulsive that it provokes the individual to expel it. In fact, Ring's killer videotape's image of an oddly inverted endless throat is almost the (symbolic) epitome of the abject: there appears to be some kind of tube or intestine pumping material into or out of a throat, but whether this is an expulsion or an admission of material is unclear. For Kristeva, the expulsion essentially defines the self, but at the same time highlights the fictionality of such a concept: crises of abjection (through our identification with it as "not that") reveal the truth of consciousness.

The movement towards abjection in the images present in Ring's videotape pushes the limit of the uncanny experience. Most of these images do not directly relate to the remainder of the film's references to the uncanny. But they do all share a common theme: disease. The cultural "fear" of disease and decay that seems to underlie Verbinski's videotape is something that is patently global (certainly more so than the fear of eruption). It is exemplified in more contemporary history through the Flu Epidemic of 1918, AIDS, fears about the Avian Flu, and various other pandemics. The instruments of these diseases—unclean hands and fingers that spread them (which could also be equated with phalluses if one is considering sexually transmitted diseases) are directly juxtaposed with images of dead bodies. Even removed from their owners, the fingers continue to

move and to infect: like the videotape, even death cannot stop some viruses from spreading. For Verbinski, the killer videotape derives its power (in terms of imagery) from the characteristically slow, subtle and invisible power of contagious disease. For the larger audience Ring hoped to entice, disease was a more universal fear than eruption. In fact, the fear of disease was the original impetus for Suzuki's novel:

The idea that started [the novel] was what if four men died in different places at the exact same time? Then I had to think of what these men had in common; something they had caught. A virus? Maybe a virus that kills exactly one week after someone is infected...then the problem became one of deciding what the virus was. A toxin in the food? No, it would have to be something you could see..." (Meikle q. Suzuki 15).

Nakata's killer videotape, on the other hand, includes little or no visual reference to the object, but there still is within it the distinct presence of an unseen threat. One image shows a man with his face and head covered (to protect himself from falling ash, perhaps?) pointing off the screen, as if to something outside the television. The next shot is of the giant black eyeball with the character for "sada" inscribed in it. The tape's images are more closely associated with violent, sudden catastrophe than slow decay. The also connects well with contemporary Japanese history, which in the last century has been marked by two extremely sudden and violent events—the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>i</sup> And although there are certainly volcanoes and earthquakes in the United States, this is not as much of a unifying global threat as disease.

But both Ringu and Ring manage to fully exploit the uncanny return of the culturally repressed ideas of "disease" and "eruption" in order to pull the world of the killer videotape into the larger film (and into the world of the viewers). Although each director uses specifically different techniques, the killer videotapes themselves manufacture their own uncanny within the context of the film, pulling the viewer into a monstrous universe (Nakata) or extricating the tape from this universe (Verbinski). Both directors achieve this by subjecting their characters to the "vision" of the videotape then constantly returning to this original vision. This return is present through imagery, sound, and even within the narrative framing of the films.

Nakata's videotape achieves a "return of the repressed" killer videotape primarily through sound. After the videotape is first directly shown to the audience (and the

audience is essentially initiated), distorted variations on the videotape's audio track are strategically placed throughout the film. The once-familiar water sound, present in the first few seconds of the film, has been defamiliarized by viewing the tape, and Reiko can't revert back to the sound as a non-threatening presence. Nakata builds on this defamiliarized audio track by slightly distorting sounds throughout the rest of the film. Kenji Kawai, Nakata's sound engineer for Ringu (as well as Rasen and Ringu 2), recorded over 50 water-dripping noises in order to unnaturally combine them. The infamous phone call that characters receive after watching the videotape was a combination of four different phone rings because "they did not want them to sound like Hollywood phones" (Totaro).

The sound of the ring is fundamentally uncanny. The ring of the phone no longer possesses its familiar tone, but it does possess the disquieting conglomeration of sounds that the videotape did. It is something once familiar (a normal phone ring) that has returned, altered (and mixed with numerous other phone rings). The unique sound quality of the ring is also oddly familiar, as it was produced in precisely the same manner as the (now familiar) water sounds of the videotape. Throughout the rest of the film, Nakata strove to seamlessly integrate the water sound effects present in the killer videotape with the entirety of the film's other sounds (Totaro). This produced a pervasive, underlying sense that the characters were still experiencing the noises present in the videotape, noises which are the same sounds that Sadako apparently experienced living seven days inside a well. Nakata is once again reviving the original experience of the videotape and replicating it throughout the remainder of the film.

One of Nakata's few (but most salient) visual renderings of the uncanny occurs when Reiko finds the news article present (in the form of wiggling Japanese characters) in the videotape. Reiko and Ryuji are sorting through articles in the library when Reiko comes upon a headline titled "Eruption" that is strangely familiar—she has seen it before in the killer videotape. The previously innocuous article becomes threatening; the soundtrack produces a sudden, loud, shriek and Reiko sees the original image from the videotape. The sounds and images however, are all presented as if they are occurring inside Reiko's (or Ryuji's) mind. She is the only one who sees the characters and hears

the incessant water noises. Until the conclusion of the film, the remainder of Nakata's renderings of the aesthetic uncanny rely primarily on subtle, internally perceived audio clues.

In Ring, however, Verbinski creates continual, tangible visual allusions to the videotape. The videotape's imagery reoccurs throughout the film, external to the tape and external to Rachel. Rachel sees the unnaturally high ladder of the videotape in an alleyway, and actually walks under it. Later she actually encounters the ladder of the tape in Mr. Morgan's barn, but it is distinctly different from that of the videotape. Noah finds a giant centipede while rifling through Samara's files, water comes out of Rachel's phone, and even Samara makes a "real-life" appearance and grabs Rachel and Aidan's arm leaving a mark as evidence of her tangibility. A key scene occurs when Rachel is reviewing the tape in order to locate the beach: a fly on the screen seems to emerge from the static, making Rachel's nose bleed in the process. The fly has literally come out of the tape into the real world of the film, and this transgression caused Rachel to bleed. Transgression—or movement between the world inside the killer videotape and Rachel's world—is marked by violence. When the fly of the killer videotape enters Rachel's world, she bleeds. When an image of Samara/Sadako appears before Rachel/Reiko, she is burned. And when Samara/Sadako actually escapes the world of the videotape, some one dies. In Ring, the videotape is present, in the "real" world of the film throughout the movie. It is a silent lurking threat, previously unseen but always existing. In Ringu, the videotape is not trying to emerge from an insular universe into a larger one—it is trying to pull people into it.<sup>26</sup>

Although the tapes share some very specific imagery and stylistic elements, and even function in the narrative structure of the film similarly, deviations in imagery, sound, and how these features are resurrected throughout the rest of the film are telling. Nakata's videotape is presenting those who view it with the threat of residing within a tormented, deranged mind. Verbinski's videotape warns of letting a tormented, deranged mind loose upon society. Ringu's killer videotape is insular, with frequent scenes within the film showing its characters on tape and in photographs, whereas Ring's videotape is

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<sup>26</sup> In DreamWork's Ring Two, directed by Nakata, there is a specific moment when Samara actually grabs Rachel and pulls her into the television.

more expansive, with frequent scenes portraying its characters “looking out” on the larger world.

The conclusions of *Ringu* and *Ring* incorporate both the uncanny and the abject. Sadako/Samara’s emergence from the well—arguably the most terrifying moment in both of the films—is rife with a kind of universal applicable uncanny, transgressed boundaries, and abjection. In both films, Samara emerges from the well, her hair eerily moving ahead of her on the television. She emerges from the television and moves jerkily towards Ryuji/Noah. Her movements are especially unnatural. Both Nakata and Verbinski achieved this affect in the same manner. They filmed the actress playing Samara/Sadako walking backwards toward the television then played the film backwards to create the distorted-looking movements that characterize her (IMDb). The technique the directors used to film the take is uncanny unto itself. It is a presentation of the original take (of the actress walking backwards), returned, but with a difference—it is played backwards.

The Sadako/Samara character at the end of the films, too, is unnaturally large (a gothic-like distortion) and corpse-like, either implying that she has resided all this time in the well or that the videotape has no scale in the ‘real-world’ of the film. In both films her fingers are bloody and her fingernails absent, forcing the viewer to recall the fingernails dug into the side of the well Reiko/Rachel had just recently emerged from. She is a doppelganger, but a doppelganger that is tangible: a corpse that is alive, a female that is masculine, and a human being that moves like a machine. In both films, all that is necessary to result in Ryuji/Noah’s death is for Sadako/Samara to see him. Once this occurs, Sadako pulls Ryuji into her world and Samara enters into Noah’s.

In terms of the videotapes’ audiovisual rendering of the uncanny, there are subtle differences in the two directors’ interpretations of the novel’s original description. Nakata relies more heavily on auditory devices to create the experience of the uncanny than Verbinski, who seems to focus more on the visual. Verbinski also included the abject, whereas this was patently absent in Nakata’s film,<sup>27</sup> (the only instance occurring during the film’s conclusion when there is a close-up shot of Sadako’s grossly deformed fingers). Finally, both videotapes emphasize a different kind of cultural threat. Nakata’s

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<sup>27</sup> Nakata has said of his film making style: “I persevered in the strategy of a story that doesn’t present any direct deaths” (Interview July 21, 2004).

threat was of sudden, violent destruction. Verbinski's threat was a slow, languishing decline. The harbinger of these perils was an unnaturally precognizant little girl: a latent warning that if refused to be seen emerges from a well and destroys those who contain it. Her power was manifested through a videotape, and this power is duplicated on a metatextual level as the films themselves exist as uncanny cultural productions for the audiences that received them.

## Chapter Six

### *THE GAZE*

The pivotal importance of the gaze in explicating, and controlling the uncanny is exemplified through the intersection of Ring and Ringu's internal narratives and their metatextual behavior. The gaze, within the two films, is responsible for controlling and unleashing the uncanny: Samara/Sadako is most threatening when she is able to see, and least threatening when her vision is limited. A careful use of camera angles and perspective within the two films incorporates the viewer into this threat. When the viewer is able to see what Samara/Sadako sees he/she is in a position of power. But when she reclaims the gaze, the viewer becomes yet another victim, ready to perpetuate the videotape—and by extension, the film—in order to regain control of the gaze. Ring and Ringu conclude with two very pivotal moments. Despite Rachel/Reiko and Noah/Ryuji's assumptions Samara/Sadako, manages to escape her television-prison and kill Noah/Ryuji. She brings him into her world, apparently forcing him to experience the slow-death that seven days at the bottom of a well would entail. She kills him at the precise instant that she sees him. The very last scene of Ringu is an approaching storm. Reiko has realized that for Yoichi to survive, he must also copy the videotape, and the two make their way to Reiko's father's house to show him the videotape. Ring does not expressly conclude with an image of a storm, but ends with Aidan pressing the "copy" button on a videocassette.

The two scenes are intrinsically linked, and they represent one of the ways the films explore the uncanny: the use of the gaze. Possessing the gaze 1) allows one to possess 'life' and continued existence (replication) and 2) allows one to recover the repressed, and to momentarily "freeze" the constantly shifting uncanny. Ring's conclusion, for example, the seven days that Samara spends in the well moves instantaneously for Noah when she sees him. Being a subject of the gaze has the opposite effect. Those who are the subject of the gaze die and *become* the repressed. They essentially move back in time, and are relegated to the very absolute realm of death (which Samara/Sadako has managed to transcend). Within the world of Ring and Ringu,

though, one cannot concurrently see and be seen. If you do not possess the gaze, you will necessarily become the object of it.

For Noah/Ryuji, for example, being the object of the gaze results in death. As Samara climbs out of her well in Ring's conclusion and wreaks havoc on Noah's studio, her eyes are obscured by hair. Noah's eyes are glued to the figure. In fact, he doesn't even turn around as she is approaching him—here merely falls backwards and continues looking at her. But it isn't until Samara actually looks at him does he die. And in both Ring and Ringu, this death entails essentially becoming Samara. Because Samara returned the gaze, Noah instantaneously experiences the life and death of the figure that kills him.

For Samara/Sadako, on the other hand, possessing the gaze means real, corporeal existence. Within the videotape, as a subject, she is nothing more than a collection of disturbing images that seep into the living world (Ring) or the minds of its viewers (Ringu). It isn't until she reclaims her gaze that she has any agency, and this is really the only thing that guarantees her continued existence. If those who viewed the videotape did not die, then there would be no need to make copies. And if there were no need to make copies, then there would be a definite terminus to the Samara/Sadako monster.

Samara/Sadako was also a subject of the gaze in her life, a position that ultimately resulted in her (initial) death as a 'real' (corporeal) being. Sadako's first appearance in Ringu is outside of the scene. She is merely "looked at" by her mother, Shizuko. When she does appear, her eyes are completely obscured by her hair. Even in the videotape, and what is assumed to be the memories of her youth, she is only seen reflected in a mirror behind a mass of black hair. She has no vision, and henceforth no means to attain any agency. When Dr. Ikuma kills Sadako, he pushes her in the well without her looking at him or us seeing her face. It is only from the bottom of the well, when Sadako is looking up at her murderer, that she gains the power of the gaze.

The Ring reiterates the same themes with Samara's early life, albeit a bit differently. For the first half of the film, Samara's face or eyes are not seen. She is, like Sadako, behind a mass of black hair. She appears in a vision to Rachel, but she is (again) only viewed from behind. When Rachel does finally see Samara, her gaze is controlled

by a kind of hyper-gaze. Rachel views a videotape of Samara being interviewed in a mental institution. The video is positioned from the perspective of the psychiatrist, who is looking at both Samara and a small television recording of Samara. The 'real' Samara, the one who is sitting in front of the psychiatrist, is blurry and difficult to make out. It is only on the television screen (inside of the television screen) that she is clearly seen. In order to view Samara in 'life' and survive, her image must be mediated by blurriness or an additional television.

There is an underlying critique of the uncanny in the narrative of Samara/Sadako's early life. In her early life, Samara embodies many of the characteristics of the uncanny. She is originless, disembodied, and transgressive. But in her early life, her uncanniness is controlled. This is achieved through a few key characteristics. First of all, she is controlled by strict relegation of gender roles. It is her long, black (traditionally feminine) hair that obstructs her gaze and obscures her face. In Ringu, her face is never seen until the film's conclusion, when we are supplied with an extreme close-up of her eye. In Ring, her face is also obscured by hair, but mid-way through the film we are provided with a thrice-removed image of her face in the form of a video recording of her on a television set. In Ring, the strict enforcement of femininity present in Ringu is present, but it is supplanted by a digital image. In Ringu, the uncanny monster can be controlled by adherence to one of the binaries it generally traverses whereas in Ring, this doesn't seem to suffice. As a child, Samara must be explicitly feminine, but she also must be explicitly digital.

Compulsive femininity is not enough to control Samara in Ring. This self-consciously connects to the films' status as remake. In her second reincarnation on the big screen (Ring), the monster has already been "reborn." Ringu's Sadako was not controlled by gender, as she managed to infiltrate the American big-screen. In Ring, an additional method of control was needed, one that took into account the monster's uncanny ability to persevere despite the [previous] methods of control imposed upon her. This is manifested in Ring through what Coates considered to be a method of palliating the fear induced by the uncanny—the constant duplication of the *image* of the double. Both Samara and Sadako are portrayed as children in their respective films. This

is another method of controlling the uncanny monster. As a child, Samara/Sadako is firmly placed on the bottom of the binary “parent/child.” She can’t escape this positioning, at least while her parents exist. She can’t even create the killer videotape from her tomb until at least forty years have passed after her death (rendering her approximately the same age as her mother when she died). When she appears to both Reiko and Rachel in a vision, she is a child, and the two women survive the encounter with only a burned handprint on their arms. Her adolescence enforces her position of powerlessness, but when Samara/Sadako’s parents die during her youth it disrupts the binary, and she is able to ‘escape’ this type of positioning.

Samara/Sadako are patently “uncanny” from birth. But it isn’t until the various control methods that surround the monster are disrupted that she gains the kind of supernatural power that allows her to cease merely being uncanny and begin being able to reproduce the uncanny in her environment. What disrupts these methods of control—being the subject of the gaze, femininity, and childhood—is death. Through death she is able to assume the gaze and see her murderer (from the bottom of the well) as well as relinquish the (in her instance, feminine) confines of being the object of the gaze. She is able to relinquish the role of “child.” She is reborn through death—from the womb-like well—as an androgynous, adult-sized child with the power to kill with her gaze. In her final return from the well, she embodies both an aged crone and an innocent girl. Like a parent, she is capable of creation and replication. But her maternity is corrupt. All that Samara/Sadako replicates is either death or more monsters like herself, and this is yet another form of replication: both Samara’s/Sadako’s parents ‘created’ the death of their child then followed it with their own suicides. The monster, by incorporating both parental roles, is replicating the creation process of her parents.

Samara herself addresses the power she possesses over the gaze, even in life. In the video recording of her time at the mental institution, Samara claims of the digital images she creates on the digital screens: “I don’t make them, I see them, and they just... are.” Samara is apparently creating the originless images of the uncanny on the videotape through merely seeing them. This once again alludes back to the extremely self-reflexive property of the film, and even Bresnick’s idea of prosopoetic compulsion.

If “seeing” the uncanny can create it in a real, corporeal state within the film, then the act of “seeing” the film itself can replicate this effect. The gaze functions the same way within the film as it does metatextually.

The means by which Samara/Sadako retrieved life was supernatural, but the medium of retrieval was videotape. This medium is merely indicative of the power of Samara/Sadako’s gaze. Whereas in life her gaze was contained by a thrice-removed image of her (watching an image of a television image of her), in death the television offers no such protection. She has completely broken through the barrier of object and has made everyone who intends to objectify her own subject. The ubiquitousness of her presence is exemplified in both Ring and Ringu. As Rachel shows Noah the videotape, (the first person she shows the tape and the latter means of her salvation) she walks out onto her balcony and nervously admires the huge apartment building next to hers, replete with open windows, each and every one possessing a running television set. It is only after another woman, also looking out on her balcony, sees Rachel that Noah appears behind her having seen the tape and essentially guaranteeing her survival. In Ringu, there is an almost identical scene. Reiko walks out on her balcony as Ryuji is watching the videotape, similarly looking at a tall apartment building next to her own.

The videotapes’ final emergence into the “real” world is also almost identically rendered within Ring and Ringu: Samara/Sadako emerges from the well, a digital image with an apparently real, corporeal presence, and kills Noah/Ryuji. Both directors treated this take with the same key components. The monster, Samara/Sadako, remains digital in a few key ways. She is oddly colored black and white, remains static, and possesses the capacity to flash forward like an image. But she is also “real.” She has the power to influence the world outside of her own, and her final emergence from the television screen represents the ultimate transgression—a technological image created by human beings to be just that (an image) has escaped its status as object and assumed its own agency. The image has rendered what should be dead (Samara/Sadako—the monster) alive or reborn. But what should have been able to control her “rebirth,” a replication of the image through technology, has failed. This renders the multiple images of televisions in both movies all the more threatening: within the context of the films, the idea that

technology (and more specifically, television) creates a separate, impermeable wall between object and subject is a fallacy.

The ring itself represents a kind of physical manifestation of the importance of the “eye.” On the screen, it resembles an eye itself, and whenever characters carefully look into the television screen they essentially foreshadow their own deaths by existing as a reflection within the image of the ring/eye and the manner of their own death by metaphorically inserting themselves into the “well” that will be their ultimate resting place. Again there is a strong element of repetition, as the characters are all reflected in the eye/ring (seen) immediately after they have viewed the video.

Both films use this image—the repeated eye/ring—to implicate the viewer as the killer videotape’s next victim. Immediately following Noah’s death, for example, Ring quickly repeats some of the more memorable images from the videotape for the audience. They are sped up, as the week that Noah apparently spent in the well was. But in this instance, unlike previous images of the ring, the videotape is not being shown to any particular character or being mediated through a television set. It is actually what Noah is seeing, and this image places the viewer firmly where he is, at the bottom of the well.

This framing moves the viewer from the position of the monster to that of the victim. Initially, in Ringu, for example, the viewer was placed firmly in the position of the monster. Before Tomoko is killed, there is a very close shot of the back of Tomoko’s neck. She turns around quickly to look at the viewer, who in this instance is in the position of the monster, and her face flashes into a negative. Ring begins a bit differently, but the effect is similar. Before Katie’s death, there is an extreme close-up of her screaming, originating in the direction of the television screen. As the films progress, the “monster perspective” becomes more and more disjointed and distant. By the films’ conclusions, the audience is finally “seeing” the monster, not seeing what the monster sees. She has turned her gaze on the audience, and this reiterates the circulatory logic of the film: seeing the film, like seeing the videotape is a kind of replication that “creates” new monsters in the audience. But for the next generation of monsters to exist, the monster must be vanquished and become the victim, allowing the cycle to continue.

Such framing creates also creates a kind of counter-trajectory of two ideas. The gradual relegation of the viewer to the position of victim is directly connected to the growing “vision” of the film’s monster, Samara/Sadako. Each image of the videotape following its original viewing (in both films) shows more of the monster. When Reiko takes her copy of the video to the media resources center at her workplace and rewatches it, she sees something emerging from the well where previously she had not. Similarly, when Rachel sees the end of the videotape immediately after Aidan watches it, she sees a hand coming out of the well. There is a direct relationship between the monster’s movement out of the well and characters’ and viewer’s movement into it. It is yet another reiteration on the theme of replication/vanquishment. For Samara/Sadako to exist corporeally, she has to recreate herself through vision in the ‘real’ world, then exile her doppelganger to her world.

This is especially relevant in the larger context of the film. If the films’ themselves function in the same manner of the videotape, then those who see the films are essentially becoming the monster (by seeing the first few minutes of the film) then becoming the victim (the film’s conclusion). By “seeing” the film, the viewer is essentially ensuring the survival of the monster/videotape. Only through replication of the experience in another, i.e., by showing some one else the film, does the monster continue to replicate itself.

This kind of framing also explains the role that death (of the monster, including Samara/Sadako’s parents) plays in disrupting binaries and ‘unleashing’ the uncanny from the control of the gaze. When it is employed to initiate a viewer into the perspective of the monster, it becomes uncanny: the monster is a killer (and is a monster because it is a killer). The viewer, when forced to identify with the killer, is concurrently forced to identify with the monster, which is revealed (in the case of Ring and Ringu) to not only be a monster but a half-dead half-alive [uncanny] monster. Death also represents one of the few (if any) binary terms that is uncanny in of itself. For Cixous, it represents the highest possible degree of uncanniness.

That which signifies without that which is signified... that [which] is an absolute secret, something absolutely new and which should remain hidden, because it has shown itself to me, is the fact that I am dead; only the dead know the secret of death.” (Cixous 543)

Death and the gaze behave in a relatively similar manner in relation to the uncanny: both can control or unleash the uncanny if one has power over them. The only (but substantial) difference between the gaze and death's relationship to the uncanny is that death is ultimately an unknowable. It can be controlled and manipulated within the context of a narrative, but not outside of it.

The empowerment that death provides the uncanny within the context of the film is reiterated by the way the film functions on a metatextual level. As long as the viewer possesses the monster's perspective—and is able to [in a way] control the characters' deaths—he/she is able safely reside in the (uncanny) realm of the aggressor. At the film's conclusion, when the position of the viewer shifts to that of the victim, he/she becomes the 'death' that unleashes the uncanny. The viewer is in the position of the monster-turned-victim that Samara/Sadako's parents and Noah/Ryuji were and as such their 'death' implies another disruption: the monster on the screen is no longer relegated to the fictional, digital world of film. It is now a real presence in the world, and in the real world, death cannot be controlled:

I project my desire to do harm on another and his eye returns it to me; it is thus the "evil eye" of the text looks at us furtively in the deepest recesses of our story as we defend our omnipotence, our unlimitedness against the threat of reality... (Cixous 542)

Ring and Ringu's emergence in the marketplace reiterates this theme: the narrative has increasingly grown in terms of scope of medium and audience. Ringu (the novel) was moderately successful when it was published in 1991, but by 1998 it had sold five hundred thousand copies. In 1995, the first video adaptation of the film was made, titled Ringu: Kanzenban and aired on Fuji Television as a Friday night 'movie of the week' (Meikle 30). A month later, Suzuki published Rasen, the textual sequel to Ringu, and by the early 1998 release of Nakata's film Ringu, the "notion of a death-dealing videotape had already moved beyond the confines of Suzuki's plot and taken on a life of its own" (Miekle 104).

The films continued to infiltrate Japanese cinemas, and later that year Nakata directed Ringu's textual sequel, Rasen, and later Ringu 0 and Ringu 2 were released, as well. By 2001, the killer videotape had made its way to the United States, and the American film Ring was released, followed three years later by Ring 2. Today, Suzuki

has penned four Ringu novels and they have been translated into Chinese, English, and Korean. Two additional Japanese television series' have been released, and Ringu is currently Japan's highest grossing horror film of all time. The killer videotape, in reality, has ventured forth from text to television to the Japanese multiplex to Hollywood.

Despite Ring and Ringu's pervasive representation of the uncanny, and the uncanny's symbolic relationship with post-modernism, the role of the gaze within both Ringu and Ring and the subsequent trajectory of the Ringu franchise mark an interesting departure from the conventions of post-modern horror. Although the film embodies some of the characteristics that have come to typify the genre—transgression and violation of boundaries, lack of narrative closure, questioned rationality (Pinedo 90-91)—it deviates from the model in a few key aspects.

Characteristics of post-modern horror include the exhibition of the damaged body. Post-modern horror is “fascinated with the spectacle of the mutilated body, the creative death, [and] necessitates [a] high level of explicit violence and privileges the act of showing” (Pinedo 92). One would be hard-pressed to find an image of a damaged body within Ringu.<sup>28</sup> And although Ring does contain a few select images of damaged bodies (horrified faces, wiggling disembodied fingers, Samara's fingernail-less hands), they certainly are not the focus of the film. In fact, these images are sparsely scattered throughout Ring, not so much as a spectacle of erupting violence, but as a subtle reminder of the potentials of repressed violence.

The form this violence takes is also quite divergent from the violence characteristic of post-modern horror. Samara/Sadako's slow death is alluded to, but the only direct experience of it is communicated to the characters (and/or the viewers) through the videotape (and the videotapes incarnations in the 'real' world). What is communicated is a collection of inexplicable symbols that come to relate to, as the film progresses, the repressed violence of Samara/Sadako's life and death. The killer videotape in Ringu contains an image of Sadako's mother (who killed herself) the erupting volcano (that was the method by which Chizuko killed herself and many on the island died), and the ring of the well cover (that was the method by which Sadako was

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<sup>28</sup> The following films—Rasen, Ringu 2 and Ringu 0—explicitly contain images of the damaged body. Rasen, in fact, begins with an autopsy of Ryuji's body.

killed). Clearly featured in Ringu's videotape is Sadako herself, which reinforces the idea that Sadako, in of herself, was a source of repressed violence. Ring's videotape functions similarly. Samara is featured prominently, as are images associated with her apparent neglect and abuse (the tall ladder leading to her barn room, the lone chair in front of a television), and her time in the well (a giant centipede, fingers going through nails).

The experience of violence within the film is does not neatly represent the conventions characteristic of classical or post-modern horror. There is no real exposition of what dying at the bottom of a well would entail, only the remnants of Samara/Sadako's violent death (in the form of fingernails) at the bottom of the well and a collection of images that were a part of the experience of her death. The presentation of violence in these films is therefore basically metonymic. It does not privilege the spectacle, nor does it privilege explanation. It basically presents a series of images that connect to Samara/Sadako's innate and impending violence, but do not necessarily represent it.

Ringu and Ring also deviate from post-modern (and classical) horror in the creation of the monster, Samara/Sadako. She does, as is characteristic of both classical and post-modern horror, represent a transgression of boundaries, and in both films' conclusion she embodies the abject. But she is not merely a byproduct of man's hubris or a redemptive force for a wrong she has suffered. She was 'wronged' by her parents and by society, and her murder did seem to lend her even more supernatural power, but before her mother/father killed her, she was "simply evil." There is never any clear explanation for her character, and the resolution of her complaint against society fails miserably to vanquish the monster. She integrates the two defining aspects of a classical and a post-modern monster. She is a vindicating force, but she is also innately evil.

Although the conclusion of both Ring and Ringu characteristically rejects narrative closure (typical of post-modern horror), the films certainly play with the convention. The entirety of the films lead to a sense of narrative closure—Samara/Sadako's body will be resumed, people will know of her murder, her 'spirit' will rest, and she will no longer be able to kill through the videotape. But in the films' last few minutes, this build-up is revealed to be merely pretense. The assumption

that Ring and Ringu would squarely fit into the genre of classical horror—with a neat resolution and a meaningful vanquishment of the monster—is repudiated. In this instance, Ring and Ringu present a kind of satire of the classical horror genre and firmly roots itself in the post-modern genre: the assumption of neat closure is mocked, and a lack of narrative closure is reinforced.

Ring and Ringu both straddle genres. Although the two films are more closely aligned with the conventions of post-modern horror, they are clearly more of an answer to those conventions than a representation of them. They move between the two genres of classical and post-modern horror in the same manner that the uncanny moves between binaries. There is an expectation of post-modern horror, as that is what has come to dominate popular horror in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is quickly perplexed by the initiation of a very classical narrative. This, in turn, is quickly refuted by the film's conclusion, which professes a clear allegiance to the post-modern genre.

The films' relationship with genre, or more specifically genre expectations, contributes to the overall uncanniness of the text in the same way that Bresnick claims that prosopoeitic compulsion functions within The Sandman. Only instead of “inveigling the reader into the tale, cleverly enjoining him to identify with the protagonist and to repress his awareness of the narrative's fundamental irony, only to have it return in the revisionary moment of the uncanny” (Bresnick 114-115), the films cleverly entice the viewer to identify with the monster, and the expectation of her eventual excision per the conventions of classical horror, only to reaffirm an allegiance to post-modern horror in an uncanny moment of transgression in the last few moments of the film (Samara/Sadako emerging from the well).

## Chapter Seven

### *CONCLUSIONS*

The uncanny is an almost inexhaustible topic for analysis. But it is most easily explicated through example, and Ringu and Ring provide an excellent opportunity to explore how the uncanny functions within the medium of the remake, a particular narrative, across cultures, and at the intersection of all three. These two films provide greater insight into the relationship that the gaze, death, and even technology has with the rendering of the uncanny in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ringu's path to the big screen provided it with the social and cultural background to establish it as an uncanny production at the outset. The narrative was based in an urban legend going back almost one hundred years, and by the time it hit Japanese theatres in 1998, the story of the killer videotape had made its way through text, television movie, graphic novel, and television series. Japan had already been primed for the film's release, and when the film version of Ringu hit the market, it was already a "return" of something familiar. The film's American remake's release into theatres was no different. American audiences were familiar with Ring's status as a remake (in many instances, it was actually marketed that way), and the film continually alludes back to something distinctly familiar yet "other" in its presentation: Japan, and the social and cultural conditions that produced the Ringu franchise.

Two of the most salient aspects of the uncanny are revealed within the context of the narrative of both films: repetition and the double. Not only are the films repeats in and of themselves, they each possess two distinct narratives, one within the world of the killer videotape and one outside of it. Characters within these narratives repeat themselves, in relationships, actions, and ultimately their capacity to either become the monster or be killed by it. Nakata and Verbinski, in this instance, chose the same conventions to illustrate the rampant repetition inherent each narrative: reflections, repeated images, repeated takes, and even repeated shots. The circular nature of the films is exemplified through narrative structure as well as the presentation of the "ring" symbol. Overall, the film's narrative itself is a doppelganger. It continually repeats,

within and outside of itself, but always manages to refer back to a nebulous, undefined “original” narrative that is always obscured.

Where the two films’ renderings of the uncanny diverge is in their aesthetic representations of Suzuki’s killer videotape. Although each contain a few key images in common (images of reflection and the important trope of the “ring”), each director depicts the videotape quite differently. Nakata’s videotape is much shorter than Verbinski’s. It contains fewer images, and most of these seem to focus around the theme of imminent, catastrophic destruction. Verbinski’s videotape is more involved, and its images focus on decay and disease. These differences may be derivative of the larger release expected of Ring. Within the context of the larger narrative of the film, as well, the videotapes function differently. Nakata’s videotape invades the inner minds of those who view it, whereas Verbinski’s seeps into the exterior “real” world of the film’s narrative.

Where Ringu and Ring behave most interestingly as text is where the internal rendering of the uncanny intersects with its metatextual implications. The films are both extremely self-conscious, and through a careful rendering of the gaze each director was able to successfully implicate the viewer as both monster and victim. In each film’s conclusions, the viewer is once and for all relegated to the perspective of victim, ensuring that the monster perseveres.

And the monster has, consequently, persevered. To date, the Ringu franchise has been responsible for four novels, one television movie, multiple television series’, multiple graphic novels, two American remakes and four separate DVD releases. And the phenomenon of “J-Horror” that Ringu so characteristically defined is managing to repeat itself beyond the scope of Japan and the United States. In 2002, a Chinese horror film recounting the tale of an ocular transplant gone wrong opened to rave reviews. The film has since been exported, subtitled, and is gaining a much wider audience. In Spring 2006, production is slated to begin on an American version of the film. It will contain American actors and be set in an American city, but the original screenwriter for the Chinese film, Yuet Chun Hui, will write the screenplay. Hideo Nakata will direct.

What Ring and Ringu reveal about the behavior of the uncanny is (necessarily) nothing new. The concept, as defined originally by Jentsch and Freud and modified by numerous critics and theorists thereafter, remains fairly consistent (albeit nebulous) within Japan and the United States. The uncanny is not rendered in any vastly different manner in Ringu and Ring. Differences, where they do exist, are subtle and focus on aesthetics rather than thematics.

These striking similarities, despite vastly different venues of production, could allude to a variety of conclusions. The uncanny, as it is defined today, may be a fairly universal idea: even through Freud's original article is distinctly Eurocentric, perhaps contemporary scholarship has begun to eliminate much of these tendencies and has moved towards defining a "human" phenomenon rather than a "Western" one. The similarities also could be a result of a distinctly globalized society—within the context of an international market, discrepancies between the films may have been downplayed towards homogeneity in an effort to reach the largest amount of viewers. The difference in the rendering of the uncanny within the two films also may be vastly more important than the similarities—what has survived in the wake of a culturally homogenizing marketplace represents a fundamental "difference" in culture. In any case, what is new about Ring and Ringu is the way these two films integrate the interior performance of the uncanny with the metatextual position of the films. They are uncanny throughout—as a social/cultural product, within the context of their narratives, through the directors' choice of aesthetics, and even in the way they relate to their viewers. They are a symbolic representation of the uncanny, and their very presence highlights the ubiquitousness that the concept has achieved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They do not necessarily represent a new genre of horror film, but they do underscore the import that the horror film has today: like Coppélius in Hoffman's The Sandman, these narratives keep reoccurring in society, replete with an irresistible desire to possess our eyes (our vision) that cannot be repressed.

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