Video Nasty

The Moral Apocalypse in Koji Suzuki's *Ring*

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The boom in Japanese horror's international popularity is widely recognized as beginning with *Ringu* (1998, Japan) (McRoy 91; Harper 7 and 113), the influence of which continues to resonate in remakes of J-horror successes.[1] *Ring*'s popularity is testified to by its numerous spin-offs, sequels, and adaptations.[2] Despite being at the core of this explosion, the underlying origin point—Koji Suzuki's novel *Ring* (1991)—has received virtually no scholarly attention. The basic story is retained across the novel and its adaptations. At its center is a journalist investigating a cursed video, which is rumored to cause its viewer to die mysteriously exactly seven days after watching it. On seeing the video, the journalist enlists a familiar acquaintance to help uncover the tape's origins. They unearth the history of Sadako, a psychic girl who was thrown into a well to die. The reporter exposes Sadako's murder and believes discovering her body has lifted the video-curse. When their acquaintance dies, the journalist realizes that the only means of stopping the curse is to copy the videotape and show it to someone else, thus propagating its effects.

Those consistencies are coupled with some notable differences between

Suzuki's novel and its filmic adaptations. The female-male investigative duo found in each film version of *Ring* was originally envisaged by Suzuki as a male pair composed of a journalist, Asakawa, and his closest friend, Ryuji, who asserts that he is a rapist. Although doubt is cast over his proclamation in the novel's closing stages, Ryuji's declaration shapes his relationship with Asakawa, meaning their bond is tense from the outset. Furthermore, Sadako's sexuality is emphasized in the novel, not least since she may have been raped by her doctor (Nagao) before being murdered. Moreover, Sadako's body is subject to sexual scrutiny since s=he is revealed to be hermaphroditic in the novel.

However, other striking differences arise from the social themes that drive Suzuki's novel. The film versions blame the video and Sadako's malevolence for the deaths that occur. On the surface, it appears that Suzuki's novel is also focused on Sadako as the curse's cause since lead protagonist Asakawa spends the majority of the novel investigating the video's origins and Sadako's history, seeking to discover whether the curse is biological or supernatural. His failure to find a solution indicates that this is not the novel's point. Suzuki's novel is concerned with a figurative social critique. The novel's central conceit is a moral dilemma. After watching the cursed video, one has to copy the tape and show it to someone else, condemning him or her in order to save oneself. The curse itself is not as terrifying as its antidote: Asakawa's willingness to spread the curse regardless of the potential consequences.

Asakawa envisages his decision to condemn others as leading to a literal apocalypse. He realizes that he ''can save mankind'' (366) by sacrificing his family, but chooses instead to ''let loose on the world a plague which could

destroy all mankind'' (365). Although more deaths will ensue as a result of his actions, Asakawa over-compensates in fretting that he will trigger the end of the world. Asakawa's guilt suggests that he cannot evade feeling morally responsible for intentionally dooming others. Yet this *feeling* of personal responsibility is vital since it reveals the curse's symbolic function. Moving between objective narration and subjective view-points, from the minutiae of viral infection to the ''apocalyptic'' future consequences, the narrative dramatizes the cost of engaging in systemic violence from a personalized perspective. Asakawa is an allegorical conduit, a figure through which Suzuki can explore the limits of moral obligation and intersubjectivity.

Ring is therefore a parable of social responsibility. Sadako's curse may be a catalyst, but the novel's true targets are the forms of social sickness— rape, murder, self-interest—that privilege the self at the Other's expense. Such behaviors, the narrative proposes, must be transformed or eradicated because they are causes of social instability. Suzuki's novel exposes the duties and potential frailties that underpin interdependency. *Ring*'s populace is dysfunctional precisely because its members lack moral obligation to one another. The novel's allegory points towards the inevitability of a transition from egoism to intersubjectivity. Asakawa's fear of apocalypse represents the impact this evolution would have on the self from the perspective of an egoistic self threatened by that change. The apocalypse motif illustrates the gravity of moral obligation in forming the self. Suzuki dramatizes the pressures of moral obligation and the inexorable transition into full selfhood via his protagonists.

In this sense, *Ring*'s apocalyptic overtones require dissection. Some critics have characterized Japanese horror of the last twenty years as being bleak or

nihilistic, particularly because it frequently utilizes apocalyptic imagery (see, for instance, Napier 338 and Berriman 75). However, the use of the term ''apocalyptic'' is problematic in this context. Christopher Sharrett, for example, has expressed a concern over the ''popular misuse of apocalypse not as revelation but doomsday, disaster, the end'' (4). Apocalypse correctly signifies a zero-leveling born out of an unsatisfactory or unstable present. This transformation need not be negative since the apocalypse-fantasy con-notes the opportunity to rebuild society, to make it better. *Ring*'s populace is constituted by profoundly self-interested individuals whose attitudes are closer to solipsism than intersubjectivity. *Ring*'s apocalypse warns that this state is unsustainable because it damages the self. What is at stake in Asakawa's choice is total destruction, or at least this is how he perceives it. To the reader, the solution is clear. If no one copied the tape, there would be no further harm. The novel thus implies that interdependency is a solution to the malevolence haunting the diegetic public. Sadako is not the real threat: it is self-interest that plagues *Ring*'s populace.

In order to explore these themes and Suzuki's allegorical mode, this article will employ Levinas's ethical philosophy as a point of comparison. The comparison highlights what precisely Suzuki's novel contributes to the philosophy of moral obligation by using the novel form and the apocalypse motif.

Moral Obligation, Intersubjectivity, Levinas

Philosophy has a long history of accounting for how moral codes arise, and the relationships between morality and ''rightness'' or ''wrongness.'' Levinas was interested in the former—how morality arises and defines us—more than the latter. Principally, Levinas proposed that morality underpins self-conception. He contended that moral obligation is a consequence of sociality. In fact, for Levinas, self-conception is contingent on moral obligation to Others. These emphases on morality, sociality, and obligation make Levinas's philosophy particularly apt in considering Suzuki's social critique.

For Levinas, morality arises in conjunction with the individual's development into subjectivity. In his view, we develop selfhood only when we become aware of an Other; when we recognize that other people exist and relate to the world as we do. We initially experience the world as ours. At this stage, we are, as Levinas's early philosophy phrases it, simply egoistic. It is only when we realize that the world is not ours *alone* that we develop into subjectivity. Two implications follow: first, we come to realize that our experience is preceded by and will be succeeded by the existence of other people. It is this sense of *all* other people, literally present before us or otherwise, that is connoted in capitalizing ''Other.'' Second, we develop into an ''I'' that is differentiated from the Other (''not-I''). Identity is therefore contingent on the Other since we require a ''not-I'' in order to distinguish the ''I.''[3] In that sense, we are defined as social entities since we can only define identity under the conditions of sociality. Subjectivity is always-already intersubjectivity. Both implications conjoin on the point that we are not sovereign entities. Egoistic experience of the world is a mistake that is

corrected by the Other's presence. Moreover, because self is contingent on the Other who experiences the world as ''I'' do and lays at least equal claim to the world, each person is morally obliged to the Other. In fact, because Others are a priori and a posteriori, the self is always secondary to the Other. Ethics is synonymous with this ''responsibility-of-one-person-for-the-other'' (Levinas, Outside 42) since subjectivity is contingent on the subject accepting obligations that they did not create.

Levinas is so pertinent in the context of this article because Suzuki's social critique draws out similar obligations to the Other, testing them via a series of tensions. First, *Ring* establishes that intersubjectivity is simultaneously necessary and fragile. For example, Asakawa needs Ryuji's help to lift the curse, yet Asakawa is also willing to sacrifice Ryuji in order to survive. The characters have to choose whether their short-term, immediate interests in self-preservation and their loved ones' survival take precedence over their moral obligation to Others. This is, as Varga posits, ''one of the most fundamental problems in morality: Why be moral, if being moral is not the best sort of life for me?'' (76; see also Pauley 97 and Batson et al. 1190). The answer, for Levinas, is that ethics begins with the Other, a priori ''I.'' Since Levinas was more interested in ethics relative to experience than in the practical application of morals, he skims over the emotive impact obligation has on the self. In contrast, that emotive impact is central to *Ring*.

Suzuki and Levinas share the view that moral obligation is a fundamental source of pressure. They also concur that human experience plays a crucial role in uncovering those tensions. Yet Suzuki and Levinas diverge in their approaches. Levinas's project in explaining the relationships between here-and-now experience and ethics is to debunk ontology. Levinas's com-

mitment to self-Other relations means the ''I'' is properly conceived of as an ''I-Thou of dialogue'' with the Other, not an ''I-it,'' an object in the world (Outside 35). Levinas's self is phenomenological; that is, he is focused on consciousness. Suzuki, on the other hand, uses protagonists' experiences to critique social relations.

Ring's critique of social dysfunction employs the self=Other separation at key points to question the nature of social interaction and moral obligation. In the novel's climax, and having failed to find a cure for the video-curse, Ryuji expires. At this moment, it revealed why the video's victims die of pure fright. As he looks at himself, he sees that ''[t]he face in the mirror was none other than his own, a hundred years in the future. Even Ryuji hadn't known it would be so terrifying to meet himself transformed into someone else'' (344). The exteriorization and transformation of the self into an Other is clearly designated as the ultimate unimaginable horror. In this instance, it is clear that Suzuki shares Levinas's conception of the ''I'' being defined by its difference from ''not-I.'' When Ryuji cannot orient himself as ''I,'' he perceives himself as Other. That move leads to his eradication. He dies of fright because his self-conception crumbles.

This horror is rooted in the video-curse that claims Ryuji's life. Ryuji dies because he saw the video but failed to copy it and show it to someone else. The curse's ''rules'' literalize moral obligation as a dilemma. The self can survive only by choosing to vanquish the Other. In Ryuji's case, because the instructions had been removed from the copy he was exposed to, he did not know how to resolve the curse. His death is nevertheless haunted by the interconnection of self and Other in the imagery Suzuki employs. Following Ryuji's death, Asakawa realizes what must be done to save himself.

His revelation is equally imbued with the ethos that ''the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him . . . taking upon oneself the fate of the other'' (Levinas, Entre 88). Asakawa perceives his choice to condemn an= Other as the apocalypse.[4] In parallel to the implication of Otherness in Ryuji's death, Asakawa envisages his decision to self-preserve as the destruction of *everything*. The Other's survival is pivotal to existence.

This is where Suzuki's character-led drama explores moral obligation in a manner Levinas does not. Asakawa's emotive response plays out what Levinas only hypothesizes when he states that ''if there were no order of justice, there would be no limit to my responsibility'' (Entre 90). Although everyone has the right to defend their own life and may be emotionally drawn to prioritize their loved ones' welfare over others', to do so is morally problematic since it involves intentionally condemning others to death.[5] Despite being understandable, Asakawa apprehends that his choice to dis- tribute the tape in order to preserve himself and his immediate loved ones is morally unjustifiable. The imbalance between saving his family and con- demning humankind is overwhelming for Asakawa. That disproportion is reflected in the apocalypse that he perceives as resulting from his decision. The apocalypse Asakawa envisions is thus not the erasure of the Other that would divest him of obligation. Rather, destroying the Other also means eradicating the self. His decision to condemn another dooms him, too, since he is always-already someone else's Other. Suzuki's apocalypse is thus sys- temic in nature, calling into question the relationship and balance between self and Other.

The apocalypse is not a purely destructive in the novel, however. Suzuki uses apocalyptic threat to productively question social relations, pointing

towards the possibility of something more. Since the apocalypse is rooted in conflict between self and Other—the negation of responsibility for the Other—it could be resolved by embracing full, ethical obligation to the Other. It is not the apocalypse but rather the protagonists' flawed attitudes towards moral obligation that threaten to destroy the world. As Suzuki demonstrates, it is not only Asakawa who exhibits this flaw. His attitude is representative, resonating in all of *Ring*'s social interactions. Understanding Suzuki's social critique allows us to further grasp *Ring*'s value as a philosophical project.

The Horror of Social Commitment

Ring's social critique is founded on its allegorical protagonist. Asakawa's perspective dominates the novel, yet his morally flawed choices are indicative of much broader problems, all of which are implicated as contributing to the potential ''apocalypse.'' While Levinas dismisses the possibility of solipsistic human existence since subjectivity is contingent on sociality, Suzuki portrays a society constituted by emotionally divorced individuals. Despite their evidently differing approaches, Suzuki shares Levinas's apprehension that this situation is untenable. Suzuki's portrayal of social alienation illustrates the horrifying consequences of people negating their obligation to one another.

The video-curse relies on the individual forsaking Others in favor of his or her personal well-being. Rather than causing people to become asocial, however, this curse arises out of, and therefore is indicative of, social flaws that pre-exist the video. To that end, the novel revels in its populace's

self-interested attitudes since they provide much of the text's horror. Incidental characters such as Kimura, who only makes a brief appearance in the opening, are present to demonstrate that self-interestedness is pervasive. When a motorcyclist collapses onto Kimura's taxi, Kimura is initially only concerned about the scratch on his vehicle, not the rider's spasms (12). Presenting such flagrant disregard for another's suffering so early in the novel establishes that self-interest is a diegetic social norm.

At its most extreme points, the novel presents interaction as outright disconnection. This is most profoundly manifested in Suzuki's sexual imagery. For example, the instance of two teen victims ''getting ready to do it'' (41) is reversed by the curse. They are found ''pressed up against the doors, as if they were trying to get as far away from each other as they could'' (42). Their assignation—which should signal their intimate connection—becomes a moment of terrifying separation. Elsewhere, the violence of such a reversal is explicitly connected to the looming apocalypse. Ryuji conceives of Sadako's curse as a kind of anti-birth. He realizes that Sadako ''wanted to have a child,'' but because her hermaphroditic ''body couldn't bear one,'' the victims of her curse become her ''children'' instead (343). The curse is characterized as a form of auto-propagation that detracts from rather than ensures the populace's growth. Ryuji's own misanthropic ''dreams for the future'' further connect the looming apocalypse with sexualized asociality: ''[w]hile viewing the extinction of the human race from the top of a hill, I would dig a hole in the earth and ejaculate into it over and over'' (117). Ryuji's sexual revelry—which clearly connotes ''fuck the Earth''—is markedly solitary. These powerful sexual images have a significant impact on *Ring*'s tone. They are spread across the novel, meaning comparisons are regularly

drawn between social disconnection and the apocalyptic violence it signals.

Given his apocalypse-masturbation fantasy, it is unsurprising that Ryuji is the novel's misanthropic mouthpiece, concretizing the populace's pervasive problems. His attitude is summated in his declaration that ''all those idiots who prattle on about world peace and the survival of humanity make me puke'' (117). This sentiment—which marks him as ''highly individualistic'' (119)—leads Asakawa to underestimate their social bond: ''[h]e suddenly felt himself wondering, like he always did, just why he was friends with this guy'' (121). Asakawa then uses that position to justify showing Ryuji the tape, rationalizing, ''[w]hat do I care if Ryuji ends up dead? Someone who says he wants to watch the extinction of mankind doesn't deserve to live a long life'' (122–23). Although deeply unsound, Asakawa and Ryuji's friendship is the strongest social bond that the novel offers. Despite Asakawa's apparent devotion to his family—for whom he would risk humanity's future whom—he cannot relate to them. He instead defers to an outsider, characterizing Ryuji as ''the outlet for all the emotions he couldn't breakdown and show his wife'' (185). It is only after Ryuji is dead that Asakawa comprehends that his friend gave up everything to help him (356). Asakawa's relationships indicate that even the most pivotal points of interconnection—family and friends—do not provide the social connectivity they ought to here. Indeed, they are ultimately associated with destruction.

Despite Asakawa's flawed relationships, his worldview is far less overtly asocial than Ryuji's. However, it is just as terrifying. Early in the novel, Asakawa reflects that it ''felt like it had been a long time since he'd seen another human being, and something within him wanted to talk'' (78). After watching the video, his instincts are immediately social in intent; ''peering

around the room in every direction. . . he didn't realize that he was trying to look pathetic, to draw sympathy,'' even though he was alone (109). His desire for social contact highlights the interdependence on which subjectivity is founded. However, his social experiences contrast with that desire. For example, when Asakawa's daughter throws a tantrum in public, it is stated that ''the accusing stares of the other passengers always made [Asakawa] feel like he was choking'' (53). This insight demonstrates the horrific pressure sociality represents within the novel. Even minor social infringements such as failing to control one's child are hyperbolized, becoming life-threatening. That same terror is later augmented via one of the cursed videotape's images, which portrays ''a hundred human faces. Each one displayed hatred and animosity .... All that criticism, directed right at him'' (102–3). This amplification eventually escalates into Asakawa's certainty that apocalypse looms. Characterized in this way, obligation is a pressure that becomes increasingly horrific as the novel progresses.

Fetish and Dis-Connection

Asakawa's feeling of distance in intimacy recurs in various guises throughout *Ring*. In the novel's earliest stages, the city environment is described as an isolating space: ''[n]early a hundred dwellings were crammed into each building, but most of the inhabitants had never even seen the faces of their neighbors. The only proof that people lived here came at night, when windows lit up'' (3). Despite depicting a confluence of individuals, the city's residents are divorced from one another. Their presence is evidenced only by the lights that speak of their existence, but which are also profoundly anonymizing.

Moreover, Asakawa's desire for companionship in this asocial sphere is ech-oed in the guest-book he reads. As he observes, ''when couples stayed. . . their entries showed it, while when single people stayed, they wrote about how much they wanted a companion'' (90). Like the cityscape lights, these entries are little more than markers of presence that forge an impression of and desire for connectivity between the scribe and the guest-book's reader. Yet those markers most aptly highlight the distance between the two parties.

These examples raise two important points. First, Asakawa's feelings of isolation are representative rather than unique. That is, he is not alone in feeling alone. The second point impacts the former. Both the cityscape lights and the guest book are fetishistic, standing in for personal interaction and exacerbating the distanced feeling that characterizes sociality here. More importantly, that fetishism is paralleled in the novel's pivotal moral dilemma. Distributing the cursed video involves distance between participants inasmuch as one may issue the video without meeting the victim thereby condemned. The video is thus a fetishistic object. Rather than being a direct interaction between two people—the distributor and the receiver of the tape—the video acts as a bridge. Those two parties only directly interact with the tape, not with each other.

It may appear that this distance would ease the moral burden for the person disseminating the tape, since it permits the victim to remain faceless. As Chen et al. observe, ''exchanges with distant others (e.g., a stranger) are likely to provoke a 'transactional' mindset that focuses on exchanges of immediate and tangible benefits and costs'' (25). Condemning one's loved ones (or oneself) instinctually seems like the most ''immediate

and tangible'' cost that can be avoided by copying the tape. However, as Asakawa's torment reveals, the tape-copier cannot escape the knowledge that the process will cause another's death. Obligation to the distant Other, the novel proposes, is too great to evade.

The video thus fails as a separating object, as is corroborated by descriptions of the video, which intertwine engaging with the video and bodily incursion. The protagonists theorize that the ''video hadn't been recorded by a machine. A human being's eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin—all five senses had been used to make this video'' (190). Watching the video is also characterized as an immersive experience, presenting the viewer with an ''incredible sense of immediacy, as if you are actually a participating in the scene'' (189). It is said to stimulate the viewer's ''senses. . . sounds and visions appeared as if [the viewer were] suddenly recalling them'' (104). Accordingly, Asakawa ''couldn't shake the feeling that something had climbed into his body'' after watching the video (190). The seamless blending of exterior description with interior monologue here attests to the connectivity necessitated by the video-curse. Since making and watching the video are perceived as being somehow corporeal, the individual who copies the tape cannot for-get the Other thus condemned. The video itself refuses to let participants think of distribution as anything other than an intimate social interaction because watching the tape is so personally intrusive. Rather than assuaging moral guilt by creating a physical distance between the watcher and the copier, the video stands in for the moral obligation that exists between these two parties, signaling that the tape-distributor has contravened their obligations.

Becoming Intersubjective

The personal, subjective fear that characters express when watching the tape is externalized and reified in the act of copying the tape and willingly killing an=other. This is *Ring*'s central horror, one that echoes Levinas's vision of intersubjectivity. For Levinas, moral obligation is founded on murder prohibition since the ''I'' is contingent on the Other's a priori existence (Entre 145). Entering into (inter)subjectivity involves a shift in how one engages with the world. The egoistic self is consumptive in nature, integrating all it encounters into itself, since self is everything to the egoistic ''I.'' The Other disrupts such consumption because the Other cannot be assimilated into the egoistic self (Levinas, Otherwise 102). This disturbance is a kind of world-altering violence. Suzuki's description of watching the video is akin to that disruption, involving a negation of the watcher's ''I.'' Asakawa's phenomenal experience of watching the tape entails perceiving events from Sadako's sensorial perspective. The self=Other gap is bridged, but at cost to the watcher who is displaced. *Ring*'s interactions are undergirded by a culmination of such anxieties, ultimately suggesting that entering into intersubjectivity is a violent upheaval. The apocalypse Asakawa predicts in the novel's climax is the logical conclusion to that disturbance. The novel's allegory is focused on this transition.

As Levinas has it, the Other's presence ''breaks the [egoistic] system'' (Entre 38). This breakage is aptly apocalyptic, involving a total remapping of the world for the subject. From the ego's perspective, obligation to the Other is the end of the world since it is the end of perceiving the world as solely belonging to oneself. This realization is a productive rather than purely destructive process. Prior to recognizing the Other's existence, the egoistic

self is divorced from the world, being defined by its own ''protestation against totality'' (Levinas, Totality 26). The egoistic self exists in an illusory state of denial, then. The egoistic self may be abnegated in becoming inter-subjective, but this is necessary in order to recreate the ''I'' as a full subject. It is exactly that kind of necessary cataclysm that *Ring* depicts.

Suzuki's social critique and fetishistic relations portray the populace as clinging to solipsistic, egoistic existence that cannot be sustained. Indeed, the novel's fetishistic motifs demonstrate that even apparently and intentionally distanced engagements are nevertheless inescapably interactive. The egoistic populace cannot resist the apocalypse that is their movement into full (inter)subjectivity.

Thus, Suzuki presents the apocalypse as inexorable. One of the novel's earliest subjective statements—''Tomoko.. . resented the clear sky'' (5)—finds its completion in the final image of ''[b]lack clouds mov[ing] eerily across the skies. . . unleashing some apocalyptic evil'' (367). This bookending lends an air of inevitability to the novel's tale of societal collapse. Sadako's life-story—which causes the curse—is revealed as a history and thus is irreversible. The video recording is a fixed echo of Sadako's past which reso-nates in the future, meaning the consequences seem unavoidable. Simul-taneously, a great deal of the novel's mystery plot is constituted by unraveling her life, driving *Ring* forward towards an apparently unpreventa-ble cessation. The same is true of Asakawa's self-assessment prior to even watching the video. Looking at his reflection he saw ''the face of a sick man . . . Maybe he'd *already* caught the virus'' (89, emphasis added). The audio snippets he then hears on the tape resound with this sense of inescapability, taunting ''your health. . . bound to get you'' (101, ellipsis in the original).

Obligation to the Other thus haunts Asakawa throughout the novel. When he encounters that pressure, he responds by seeking to preserve his egoistic self-world relation. Sadako epitomizes the Other for Asakawa. He characterizes Otherness—and the obligation it implies—as a malevolent disease that threatens to annihilate. What Asakawa seeks to evade, but cannot escape, is his world being rebuilt around his obligation to the Other. His decision to condemn others is not therefore an outright rejection of obligation, since he cannot avoid what ensues. Although Asakawa can decide to copy the video and thus kill others, he cannot choose whether or not he is morally obliged to the Other he dooms. Ethics is the groundwork of sociality for Suzuki, as it is for Levinas. Ethics pre-exists and is essential to the formation of the subject qua subject. Resultantly, Asakawa's choice to condemn the Other is his first step into becoming a subject. His apocalyptic vision implies that he understands he is violating the Other's right to exist. His guilt articulates his obligation to the Other. The apocalypse thus signifies his transformation into intersubjectivity.

The Purposes of Allegory

Suzuki encourages the reader to think figuratively about *Ring*'s events by thwarting his characters' narrow, inflexible viewpoints. The characters' attempts to understand their situation fail because they look for causal, linear meanings rather than broader, macroscopic explanations. Asakawa's quest to find a cure for the video-curse is doomed because he takes the curse too literally. From the outset the characters incorrectly refer to the curse as a biological virus, yet the epidemiological explanation underlines the broader

meaning: that *Ring*'s horror is principally social. The curse is presented as a zymotic disease. That is, it is a virus that requires a populace in close contact in order to spread (see Karlen 48). The characters offer comparisons between the video-curse and infections—such as AIDS (49, 162, 276), bubonic plague (276), tuberculosis (284, 255, 270), and smallpox (284, 287, 292)—that spread via contact. However, they fail to spot that interaction is the real concern. Moreover, diseases, as Nancy Cero Hollander observes, typically result in the erosion of community links, and lead citizens to seek ''self-preservation in isolation'' (123). It is this latter issue with which *Ring* is concerned. It is noted in *Ring* that ''a virus usurps living structures in order to reproduce itself'' (361), but here ''structures'' connotes societal systems more than individual organisms. The curse is a symptom of social dysfunction since it requires the will to self-preservation to propagate. The curse is not a disease, but rather it signifies social dis-ease.

To understand *Ring* as simply as the tale of a vengeful ghost—as Verbinski and Nakata do in their adaptations—is to fall into the same trap of being too literal. The curse initially seems to belong to a category of violence that is ''enacted by social agents, evil individuals,'' but this ''distract[s] our attention from [and consolidates] the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence'' (Zizek 9). In *Ring*, the crucial ''other form''—or Other form—is moral responsibility. Asakawa and Ryuji are driven to ''resolve'' the Sadako case out of necessity inasmuch as they will die if they do not. However, that pressure is a metaphor for intersubjective obligation. To read Sadako as taking vengeance out on the world is to disregard the anti-solipsistic ethos that pervades *Ring*.

To focus on Asakawa as individual protagonist is also to misconstrue Suzuki's

point. Despite the narrative weight placed on Asakawa—the majority of the novel is aligned with his vantage point—*Ring* is not concerned with his experience as an individual. While Asakawa's role as an investigative reporter puts him in a unique position to drive the novel's mystery story, his personal response to the virus is presented as typical. That is, despite Asakawa's focus on individual responsibility—*his* desire to solve the mystery or his declaration that *his* decisions ''can save mankind'' or otherwise (366)—the problem is that ''everybody'' would do the same (364). Asakawa is thus to be interpreted as an allegorical figure. The character's personal choices stand for what *anyone* would do. That is, his choices articulate broader problems regarding each individual's a priori responsibility for the Other. Asakawa is not simply justifying his decision by projecting it onto ''everybody.'' The narrative corroborates his assessment via its self-interested populace. Since ''everybody'' would condemn the Other, the entire populace is brought to a universal conclusion. An egoistic society must inevitably collapse in on itself.

The allegorical mode is apt for such an exploration since its universalization encapsulates how we each experience the Other. We recognize that others claim the same relation to the world that we experience ourselves, even if we can never know what it is to be someone else. Engaging with the Other requires a kind of empathic projection, an estimation of how we might feel in their place. This is inherent to Levinas's conception of the endlessly negating self that is continually directed toward ''something other than ourselves'' (On Escape 58). Moral universalization, in this view, is rooted in phenomenal experience, which requires that we presume all Others have commensurate experiences of the world.[6]

Suzuki uses Asakawa both as allegorical figure and as a point of emotional

engagement by portraying his subjective states. This mode is *Ring*'s central strength and Suzuki's principal contribution to these philosophical discussions of selfhood and moral obligation. *Ring*'s allegory is unique because it dramatizes how the transformation of the egoistic self into intersubjectivity feels for the ''I'' undergoing that change. *Ring* shares many of Levinas's philosophical aims, yet Levinas brushes over the initial stage, focusing his attention not on the egoistic self but on the intersubjective self and its relation to the Other. Levinas is concerned with outward movement, away from the self. He concentrates on the Other, on the conditions that pre-exist the subject ''before acting, before feelings,'' perceiving emotion as that which ''shuts us up within ourselves'' (Entre 36, 38). Those emotions point away from the self for Levinas. Suzuki utilizes inward, emotional experience to explore the violent upheaval of *becoming* a subject. *Ring*'s horror emphases the *flux* and how that *feels* and thus is emotionally engaging in a way Levinas's philosophy cannot be.

Suzuki's other significant contribution to these debates stems from the relationship between allegory and social critique in *Ring*. Suzuki's novel uses allegory to underline that moral obligation is integral to selfhood but uses the horror idiom to warn that a populace motivated by self-interest is one that teeters on the brink of collapse. That underlying flaw is the ''Devil'' that Ryuji warns will reappear ''in a different guise'' as long as humans exist (366, 276). The novel's apocalypse presents this looming disaster as a situation for which everyone is personally responsible.

In conclusion, then, *Ring* does not write off humanity. It points out the dangers of self-interest to underscore how necessary it is to remain conscious of our moral obligation to others. The novel's ending *predicts* rather than

depicts devastation, meaning that the ''apocalypse'' is a stage in a process of becoming: that is, becoming a full subject. *Ring*'s surface tone feels fatalistic and the central conceit means the causal path appears to be clearly delimited: if one watches video, one dies. However, the novel's social critique is interested in the ''uncertain future'' (366) of communal relations. Asakawa's uncertainty over the future and *Ring*'s moral denouement leave the reader with a series of questions regarding selfhood, moral responsibility, and the internalization of social obligation. The true horror of Suzuki's story is not the ghost or the video: it is ourselves.

Notes

1.   For example, *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (2002, Japan) was remade as the American film *Dark Water* (2005, USA), and significantly influenced the plot and aesthetic of *Fear* (2007, India).

2.   These include Koji's sequel novels (*Rasen* [1995] and *Rupu* [1998]), and the many film adaptations spawned by the text; the television movie *Ringu: Kanzen-Ban* (1995, Japan), the television series *Ringu: Saishusho* (1999, Japan), the theatrical-release film adaptations *Ringu* (1998, Japan), *Ring Virus* (1999, Korea), and *The Ring* (2002, USA), as well as the sequel films *Rasen* (1998, Japan) and the TV series of the same name (Japan, 1999, both of which are based on Koji Suzuki's follow-up novel *Spiral*), *Ringu 2* (1999, Japan, an original screenplay based on *Ringu*), and *The Ring Two* (2005, USA, another remake), the prequel *Ringu 0: Basudei* (2000,Japan) and *Sadako3D* (2012,Japan). Its influence is also clearly felt in subsequent Japanese horror films dealing with

malevolent spirits that utilize technology as a conduit for contaminating the human populace, such as *Chakushin Ari* (2003, Japan), *Gosuto Shisutemu* (2002, Japan), and *End Call* (2008, Japan).

3.   Similar views are expressed by Alweiss 428; Datsur 7; Erneling 174; McGann and De Jaegher 427; Strawson 405.

4.   Suzuki's apocalyptic allegory thus matches Levinas's tendency towards excess or dramatic hyperbole (Surber 295).

5.   On this, see Leverick's thorough dissection of morality and self-defense.

6.   Universalization is to be differentiated from generalization, which for Levinas is ''death'' (Entre 23).

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