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

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> Any point on a ring is both before and after any other point, depending on the arbitrary choice of the starting point.
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> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*[1]

The Ring (2002), a horror film directed by Gore Verbinski, begins *in media res*. In a suburban bedroom two teenage girls discuss a cursed video tape:

Teen #1:   Have you heard about this videotape that kills you when you watch it?.. You start to play it and it's like somebody's nightmare… and as soon as it's over your phone rings. Someone knows you've watched it and what they say is: 'You will die in seven days' and exactly seven days later...

Teen #2:   Who told you that?... I've watched it.[2]

In terms of Genette's narratology, this exposition offers both a completing analepsis (a flashback filling in extradiegetic holes) and a repeating prolepsis (advance notice of what is about to happen).[3] It is not certain how many victims the video has already claimed, but shortly after her confession Teen #2 is killed and Teen #1 severely traumatized. The video kills again at the film's climax and denouement is deferred by a proleptic promise that it will kill again (a pledge delivered in the sequel, *Ring 2* (2005)). The opening point of *The Ring* simultaneously narrates what has happened and what will happen and is thus both *before* and *after*. Whilst recycling the *mise-en-scène* of teen horror, the prologue also permits a fast-forward subliminal glimpse of key images from the cursed video (a well, a barn, a horse's eye, a burning tree) that will be replayed and reviewed repeatedly in the scenes that follow.

And where do these rotary movements begin? The genealogy of the tape is traced to an originary trauma. A young girl, Samara, is pushed into a well by her mother. She survives the

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[1] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1989).

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

[3] See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980). For viewers familiar with *Ringu* (1998), the Japanese film directed by Hideo Nakata upon which *The Ring* is based, the analepsis here is interwoven with the eidetic presence of inter- and perhaps hyper-textual allusion.

fall and for seven days is left looking up at a ring of light. After her death, presumably by some form of psychic telegraphy, Samara's spirit is transferred to video tape. Seven days after watching this video the viewer is confronted by Samara herself. The spectator is transfixed by an electronic spectre, as Samara is first seen emerging from the well and then from the magnetic tape itself as she cuts through the TV screen. Samara's victim is mortified by her gaze. The shock is so severe that the spectator's face is transformed into its own grisly death mask.

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin suggested that film, by virtue of its continual and sudden changes, produces a 'physical shock effect' in the spectator.[4] For Benjamin, cinema was a privileged medium because it crystallized the phenomenology of a traumatic modernity. Whilst cinema constituted a key component in the technological infrastructure of modernity, allegory embodied the aesthetic logic.[5] Benjamin intuited a deep structural affinity between film, allegory and the historical crises of modernity. In *The Arcades Project*, he asserted that 'allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century'.[6] The allegorical mode mirrors the fragmentation and fetishisation promoted both by commodity fetishism and cinema. However, in a dialectical manoeuvre, Benjamin insisted that allegory's flaws might themselves be redemptive. As a discontinuous montage of historical fragments torn from their normal setting and thrust into violent collisions, allegory might spark defamiliarising jolts that illuminated social and even spiritual relations. Rather than simply mirroring alienated experience, allegory possessed the potential to critique by forging, in a flash, previously unseen and unsuspected connections. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, writing in that characteristically condensed and evocative style which Susan Sontag described as 'freeze-frame baroque', Benjamin juxtaposed the illusory unities and transcendence associated with the romantic symbol and the transparent failings of allegories which are enmeshed, eternally, in the contingencies of history and ruin:

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[4] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (XIV), in *Illuminations*.
[5] Something here on cinema – rhythms and factory labour and Beller on the industrialization of the senses.
[6] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 328.

> whereas in the Symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [death mask] of history, as a petrified, primordial landscape.[7]

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

GHOST MACHINES

Perhaps the least speculative but most circular allegorical interpretation of *The Ring* would read it as a horror film that encompasses the history of horror film itself. Since it revolves around a scary video, *The Ring* is an auto-reflexive text, haunted by its own ghost so to speak, in which the content is an allegory of the form, or, to be more exact, the content is an allegory of the viewer's consumption of the film. This qualification seems necessary since the production of images in *The Ring* is purely of secondary significance. Although Samara is clearly the source of the video, the means of its manufacture is shrouded in mystery and this ellipsis is itself allegorical of a postindustrial age in which, for some, production has become an increasingly remote, invisible and even spectral activity. Whilst the means of the video's production are vague, the consequences of visual consumption are clear and devastating. Looks can kill. Since its birth, horror film has been the subject of urban legends, conservative censure and puritanical jeremiads insisting on the moral, psychological and on occasion physical threat posed by the genre. Screenings of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), for example, were allegedly attended by nausea, vomiting and fainting. Sanchez and Myrick's cult film, like *The Ring*, circles round mysterious video footage, a young woman and

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[7] Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Picador, 2002) 126. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1977), 166.

televisual technology whilst threatening to confuse the borders between image and reality. Reports of the damage caused by *The Blair Witch* replayed folklore surrounding another film that revolved around a young woman: *The Exorcist* (1973). Even before it reached the cinema, William Friedkin's film was associated with supernatural violence that included set fires and the deaths of nine members of the cast, crew and production team. Once it was released at the cinema, according to media mythology, *The Exorcist* elicited so many instances of retching, hysteria and heart attacks that paramedics were routinely stationed in cinemas. A San Francisco newspaper headline proclaimed: '*The Exorcist* nearly killed me!' The evangelist Billy Graham proposed that a demon had possessed the film stock. The British Board of Film Censors may not have been persuaded that the film was cursed, but it refused to grant a certificate thus effectively banning the video version of *The Exorcist* from circulation for seventeen years (from 1981 to 1998). Horror videos have also habitually been linked to violent crime. In the UK, *Child's Play 3* (1991) was cited by the media as the inspiration behind the murder of a three-year old boy, Jamie Bulger. Between 1996 and 2001 there were over twenty cases of murder or serious assaults involving the iconic mask from the *Scream* trilogy (1996-2000).[8]

The horror genre, of course, had been plagued by allegations of malign influence since long before films about copycat murder were being blamed for copycat murder. In the late eighteenth century an explosive proliferation in gothic novels, bluebooks, chapbooks and shilling shockers was met by accusations of threats to the social, political and religious order. Gothic fiction was charged with promoting superstition and Satanism, heresy and revolution. Young women were considered especially vulnerable to the threats posed by this deviant genre. Self-appointed guardians of female virtue warned that this imperilled cohort might swoon in terror, or, worse still, experience a dangerous arousal that placed them in acute moral and spiritual jeopardy. As has been often noted, the critique of gothic literature and horror film often relies on hysterical tropes that are pivotal to the genre itself and at the centre of *The Ring*: possession, infection, curse, the crossing of boundaries between fantasy and reality. In the late eighteenth century, the boundaries between phantasmatic image and reality were being jeopardised not only by gothic fiction, but also by an array of new optical

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[8] See, ???, in *The Guardian*, November 17 2001.

technologies. The roots of this development lay in seventeenth century 'natural magic' (*magiae naturalis*) and in particular the development of the magic lantern. In *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (1646), the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher explained the design of a 'catatrophic lamp' that could be used to project images onto a wall in a darkened room. Following Kircher's pioneering work, a number of priests, scientists and performers used magic lanterns and camera obscura to project images of spirits, demons and devils. The period that saw the rise of gothic literature also witnessed a dramatic upsurge in these 'ghost shows'. In Leipzig, in the late 1760s, Johann Schropfer converted the billiards room in his struggling coffee shop into a venue for spectacular ghost shows that soon acquired a cult audience. In addition to projecting images of ghosts and demons, Schropfer utilised eerie music, sound effects, electricity and incense in a sensory extravaganza. Commercial success encouraged Schropfer to take his ghost shows to other European cities, but, whilst touring, he became increasingly unstable and started to believe his ghosts were real. Schropfer committed suicide in 1774, but his techniques and technology influenced numerous performers and scientists and were deployed in exhibitions, expositions and stage shows. In particular, Schropfer's ghost haunted the popular horror shows known as 'phantasmagoria'.

The phantasmagoria differed from the magic lantern ghost show in two key respects: the technology became increasingly sophisticated and at the same time increasingly invisible to the audience. Whilst the traditional lanternist made his optical device a centerpiece of the spectacle, in the phantasmagoria the technical apparatus was concealed. The most successful ghost showman of the early phantasmagoria was Etienne-Gaspard Robertson. In post-revolutionary Paris, the Belgian professor of physics and magician staged hauntings in a Capuchin crypt, crumbling catacombs and derelict convents. Robertson's publicity proclaimed that the audience would see the dead raised from their graves and his shows were so spectacular that, at one stage, the Parisian police closed them down due to rumours that the 'fantasmagorie' risked resurrecting Louis XVI. Robertson's intention was not merely to entertain, but to terrify by convincing the audience that his images were real: 'I am only satisfied if my spectators, shivering and shuddering, raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them'.[9] To achieve this aim, Robertson

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positioned the projection technology, his 'Phantascope', behind a screen and placed it on brass rails. Incorporating state-of-the-art optical lenses, the Phantascope could be moved towards and away from the screen to produce a 'looming effect': sharply focused and apparently three-dimensional figures, the distant ancestors of Samara in *The Ring*, lunged towards a terrified spectator. Robertson's repertoire of 'ambulant phantoms' revolved around female spirits, mad women in white and a Medusa's head which, according to contemporary newspapers, resulted in a petrification almost as potent as its classical source. It was claimed that women fainted and men leapt from seats to wave their canes and ward off the approaching phantom. Marina Warner describes Robertson's 'fantasmagorie' as 'a *son-et-lumière* Gothic moving picture show' (147). In the course of the nineteenth century, the phantasmagoria employed creative combinations of mobile lanterns and projectors, screens and glass, smoke and mirrors in ways that anticipated the camerawork and editing of twentieth century cinema: fades, dissolves, cuts, zooms and superimposed images.[10] The phenomenal impact, success and lasting influence of the phantasmagoria, alongside its signature splicing of the specular with the spectral, encouraged Walter Benjamin to adopt it as his master trope for modernity.

Although spectators of the phantasmagoria might have felt as though a ghost was moving towards them they knew rationally and in retrospect that the phantom was merely an optical illusion. The mid-nineteenth century in the US, however, witnessed the rise of a Spiritualist movement which claimed to connect people to real ghosts. American Spiritualism revolved around the same triad which is pivotal to *The Ring*: girls, ghosts and electrical technology. The birthplace of American Spiritualism was a family home in Hydesville, New York, where, in March 1848, two girls claimed to be communicating with the dead. Kate and Margaretta Fox, aged ten and twelve, confirmed (like the eleven-year old Samara in *The Ring*) the mythology which associates girls on the brink of puberty with sensitivity to psychic phenomena.[11] The Fox sisters deciphered a series of tapping and knocking sounds heard around their home as messages from 'Mr Split Foot'. Word spread of the 'Rochester

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[10] One of the most … 'Pepper's Ghost' illusion, invented by Henry Dircks and perfected and presented at the Royal Polytechnic Institute in London in 1862 by John Henry Pepper, utilized plate glass to make transparent ghosts appear and disappear in midair

[11] As Kate Fox grew older she retained a connection to the pre-teen cohort. The centrepiece of her psychic repertoire was a young girl, dressed in white like Samara, a ghost she knew as 'Katie King'.

Rappings' and hundreds of people flocked to Hydesville to see and hear the messages delivered by these prodigious young ladies. At precisely this moment, just twenty-six miles away in Seneca Falls, thousands flocked to see and hear the messages delivered at the first ever women's rights convention. Spiritualism and US feminism were interlaced. Women typically took centre stage at séances and in psychic circles and were permitted to say things that would have been deemed unacceptable or even radical in different social contexts. The spirit world often seemed keen to draw the attention of the living to social injustice: the plight of slaves and prostitutes, the evils of liquor, the suffering of the oppressed and abused.

Following the 'Rochester Rappings', the Fox sisters became celebrities and toured Europe and America. Often, like other mediums, they were championed and supported by those involved in women's rights, abolitionism, Quakerism and the temperance movement. Alongside these connections to contemporary progressive movements, US spiritualism sought legitimisation by association with cutting edge developments in science and communications technology. There was a significant synergy between mediumship and emerging media. In newspaper articles, pamphlets, books and speeches regarding the exploits of Kate Fox and other mediums, it was claimed that a 'spiritual telegraph line' had been connected to the other side. Jeffrey Sconce notes that the tappings and knockings at Rochester took place just four years after the first public demonstration of the electromagnetic telegraph by Samuel Morse.[12] Shortly after, ghosts began to communicate in Morse code and some spirit circles accordingly incorporated telegraphic technology into their séances. Whilst Morse's telecommunications device offered an uncanny abolition of geographical distance, psychic telegraphy claimed to abolish the metaphysical divide between the living and the dead.

The main connector between ghosts and communications technology in the nineteenth century was electricity.[13] In this respect, the electrification of ghosts witnessed in

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[12] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media*

[13] Of course, for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, electricity was located at the interface between science and mysticism. It was also a source of inspiration to gothic authors. Galvani's public exhibitions of the electrification of corpses (using recently executed criminals) was part of the inspiration for Shelley's *Frankenstein.* Electricity seen as the 'spark of life' that might resurrect but also an agent of destruction

The Ring is not an innovation so much as a rediscovery. At some séances the medium would attempt to improve her connection to the spirit world by asking each member of the circle to hold a rope whose ends were coiled in copper and zinc buckets of water. The medium was often described as a 'spirit battery' and spiritualism sought to explain phantoms as paranormal electrical phenomena. This rationale also 'explained' why the vast majority of mediums was female. Women were deemed to posses a heightened spiritual sensitivity and their bodies were more suited as conductors or vessels that could be entered by spectral-electrical energy. Starting in 1839 and working throughout the 1840s (**check**), the German chemist Baron Karl von Reichenbach began experimenting with predominantly young female subjects to explore the links between neurasthenia, psychosomatic illnesses (including somnambulism, hysteria and night terrors), sensitivity to psychic phenomena and electromagnetism. Parts of Castle Reichenbach were converted into a laboratory. A large battery was positioned on the roof and connected by wires to a darkroom below. In the darkroom, young female sensitives sat at a round table which could be rotated to place a variety of objects before them. Like Samara looking up at the ring of light from the darkness of a well, the sensitives claimed to perceive different types of 'aura' surrounding these objects. Reichenbach proposed that his subjects were able to perceive a vital electromagnetic force, the 'Od', not within the spectrum of normal vision. Other theorists in this area attempted to explain the particular sensitivity of young women to unseen forces by linking them to electrical menstruums and pulses emanating from the womb. The electrical ghost in *The Ring* is repeatedly associated with birth imagery: Samara emerges from the uterine darkness of the well through a tunnel into the light and then, coated in a slimy decidua, slips through the aperture of the television.

In the early stages of Spiritualism, sensitives and mediums were conductors for intangible electrical energies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, ectoplasm started to emerge spectacularly from mouths, ears, noses and vaginas. The imagery of ectoplasmic strings is conspicuous in *The Ring*. In one scene the heroine, Rachel,

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– cited as the cause of spontaneous combustion. Subjects of gothic tales in US and UK (Brockden Brown, Poe, Shelley, Dickens).

retches a long cord of black hair that has an electrode attached to it.[14] Ectoplasmic events were often captured on camera and these visual records can be read as a sub-genre of spirit photography. The practice of capturing phantoms on film started in the US in the early 1860s and became an important part of a Spiritualist movement which, by the 1870s, could boast around eleven million followers.[15] Some spirit photographs were revealed as hoaxes whilst others were accidents made almost inevitable by the rudimentary nature of the technology. Exposure times required sitters to remain immobile for protracted periods and even a slight movement could transform the subject into a wraith. In its early days, for some, the term 'spirit photography' was practically tautological. Photographs of ghosts merely offered a purified instance of the media's inherent ghostliness. Tom Gunning has written that photography was initially experienced as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a world of phantasmatic doubles'.[16] The photograph, like the phantom, produces the 'presence of absence'.[17] This uncanny conjunction also appears in *The Ring*: Verbinski's film is haunted by the iconography of spirit photography. Those who have seen Samara's image have their own image stolen and discover their face distorted on film. Samara transfers her image to film from the dark water of the well which might recall the manner in which photographs are developed: a virtual image emerging from a latent image in liquid darkness.

The image of the ghostly Samara crawling through the screen towards a terrified spectator is itself ghosted by the image of the audience at the Lumiere brothers moving

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[14] It is important to note that whilst Rachel is retching a long black cord she is carrying a cordless phone. Despite the insistent emphasis on her visuality, it is worth noting that Samara's first contact with her victim is sonic rather than optic and involves another haunted machine. Alongside the camera, the telephone appears as an uncanny technology in *The Ring*. Like the telegraph and the camera, the telephone astounded and at times unsettled Victorians with its radical dislocation of body and voice across space. It was quickly adopted by the Spiritualist movement and became associated with a range of paranormal phenomena.

[15] Although there is some controversy over the origins of spirit photography, William Mumler is often credited with being the first person to produce a ghost image in 1861. The popularity of these images in the nineteenth century was substantial, particularly in the wake of the Civil War when there was a massive upsurge in attempts to contact the dead.
[16] Tom Gunning, 'Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films and Photography's Uncanny'.
[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

picture presentation, in 1896 at the Grand Café in Paris, when terrified spectators froze in horror believing that a train was coming through the screen towards them. Cinema is the heir to the phantasmagoria and spirit photography. Moving pictures represented a spectacular evolution in nineteenth century optical technologies and an amplification of the ghostly decorporealization associated with sonic media such as telegraph, telephone, wireless radio, phonograph and gramophone. At approximately the same time that the Lumiere brothers were exhibiting their short films across Europe, Guglielmo Marconi was demonstrating the possibilities of wireless telegraphy. Marconi's wireless, along with the experiments of Tesla, Popov and Bose, established the technical infrastructure for the evolution of radio. Even more so than Morse's telegraph, radio produced an astounding and at the same time for some unsettling dislocation of body, thought and voice across time and space. And as with the appearance of the telegraph, the invention of radio was accompanied by a considerable increase in reports of paranormal phenomenon. Houses began to be haunted not by spectral tapping and knocking, but by weird electrical signals. The Spiritualist's assertion that ghosts were electromagnetic phenomena was sustained by twentieth century technological developments. Ghosts were 'discovered' in radio waves and even captured on recording devices. Since the 1950s, EVP or Electronic Voice Phenomenon has been a burgeoning field in parapsychology and the specific concept of the dead communicating through television has appeared in *Poltergeist* (1982), *Static* (1986) and *White Noise* (2005). Television transposes cinema's uncanny dematerialization to a domestic setting and since its inception, as Jeffrey Sconce has shown, this medium has repeatedly been experienced as 'haunted apparatus'.[18] In the pre-digital era all televisions were haunted, at least in technical terms, be *ghosting*: eerie double images produced by distorted analogue signals. Alongside mere technical issues, urban legends abound of sets that turn themselves on or refuse to be switched off and of voices and faces in the static. The *Television Digest* reported in 1954 that the Travers family were being haunted be the image of Mrs Travers dead grandfather which refused to leave their television screen. Long Island police took the set into custody and over 500 people visited the station to witness this televisual phantom.[19] *The Ring* is an important contribution to a gothic circuitry which connects television to the spirit world, but it also belongs to a longer history of haunted

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[18] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media*
[19] ibid.

machines. Samara is the image of an image which can be developed into a potent allegorical emblem for a genealogy of ghost shows that stretches back through cinema and radio, photographs and phantasmagoria, relays between telegraphic communications, spiritualism and the nineteenth century electrification of ghosts.

DIGITAL FEMME FATALE

Hands that can grasp, eyes

That can dilate, hair that can rise…

'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'…

Marianne Moore, 'Poetry'[20]

When crowds were gathering at the Long Island police station to see Mrs Travers' dead grandfather, television was still a relative novelty. In 1954 there were approximately 35 million TVs in the US. By the time that *The Ring* was released that figure had increased almost tenfold and this period simultaneously witnessed an explosive proliferation in other types of screen and gadget. According to a recent survey, in the average US household one would automatically find around three television sets, a VCR, a DVD player and a video game console.[21] Derrida has proposed that although ghosts are traditionally associated with the past, the spectral is in fact more pervasive within the contemporary global network of screens and gadgets:

> the experience of ghosts is not tied to a bygone historical period, like the landscape of Scottish manors…but, on the contrary, is accentuated, accelerated by modern technologies like film, television, the telephone. The technologies inhabit, as it were, a phantom structure… When the very first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms.[22]

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[20] Marianne Moore, 'Poetry'

[21] From the Pew Internet & American Life Project (at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_ICT_Typology.pdf. In addition, the majority of Americans own cell phones (73%), desktop computers (68%) and digital cameras (55%), whilst an increasing number can boast of video cameras (43%), MP3 players (20%) and PDAs (11%), GPS and many spend a significant percentage of their working lives at screens.

[22] Cited in Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*

This realm of phantoms finds its allegorical incarnation in *The Ring* and an occult video that demands to be endlessly copied and circulated (through televisions that turn themselves on). In the postmodern era, as never before, the image appears to have a life of its own and to be magically self-referential and self-replicating. Samara is the spectre of the electronic image: the phantasmagoria of postmodernity embodied in the disembodied form of a ghost. As an allegorical sign, Samara signifies the power and apparent autonomy of the free-floating image. The visual is routinely ascribed unrivalled supremacy in the sensorium of late capitalism.[23] The political economy of postmodernism seems to revolve around the circulation and exchange of increasingly globalised visual signs, icons, logos, media spectacles and virtual imagery. Whilst the material practices associated with image-making technology (which require phenomenal levels of production, distribution and maintenance) become increasingly spectral, the image undergoes transubstantiation. No longer the apparitional trace of an original object, the image has acquired its own heft and substance. According to a by now familiar postmodern sci-fi horror story, the dividing screen between reality and image has been crossed resulting in the 'dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV'.[24] Rather than a ghostly imitation of an *a priori* reality, the copy has usurped the original and replaced it with, in Baudrillard's phrase, the reign of simulacra. Whilst the modern era saw the conversion of land into private property, the postmodern era witnesses the refashioning of the very ground of the real as spectacle and simulation. History is replayed, we might say, 'the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce'.[25]

The act of watching actors watching in *The Ring* underlines the incestuous circle of simulation and recalls Debord's critical distinction that the society of the spectacle 'is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images'.[26] Trapped inside the Möbius strip of the postmodern gaze, the subject looks less at images themselves so much as the practice of others' looking. The focal point of the horror in *The Ring* is Samara's stare. The visual exchange here between the mobile image and her petrified subject might recall Baudrillard's gothic pronouncements on 'the murderous capacity of

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[23] Quote Jameson here.

[24] Baudrillard, *Simulations*

[25] Karl Marx, *18th Brumaire*

[26] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (211)

images: murderers of the real'.[27] Samara may be dead, but the 'evil genius of images' is mobile and murderous and like the cult of dead celebrity, her ghost insists that she be endlessly reproduced and transmitted.[28] W.J.T Mitchell's recent *What Do Pictures Want*? (2005) reflects a trend in visual studies towards greater recognition of the agency and autonomy of the image.[29] In this context, Samara represents an allegorical personification of the image's evolution from inert object to animated subject possessed of its own desires and a drive towards viral self-replication: postmodern phantasmagoria as a ghost in Von Neumann's machine. This ghost is gendered. In contemporary critiques and celebrations of postmodern visual culture the image is typically described as 'sensual' and 'seductive', it belongs to the world of 'fashion' and 'consumerism', it is 'narcissistic' and 'depthless', 'promiscuous' and 'chaotic' and it undermines the hegemony of reason and the printed word.[30] The image, in other words, is the feminine and Samara is its allegorical emblem.

As the unbridled *femme fatale* of postmodern visuality, Samara constitutes a high tech upgrade of the monstrous feminine. According to Barbara Creed, cultural representations of the monstrous feminine from classical mythology to contemporary horror film are underpinned by gynophobia.[31] The concern with reproduction in *The Ring* is pronounced and assumes two distinct though interwoven forms. Firstly, as mentioned above, Samara is associated with extravagant birth imagery. The channel for her spectral parturition is a television set. In *The Ring*'s climactic scene, Samara crawls from the virtual sphere and squeezes through the screen to murder Noah Clay. The victim's name alludes to creation myth and the film's water motif, but his profession is more apposite here. Clay works with but cannot control electronic technology. Alongside his failings as a father, Clay is

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[27] Baudriullard, ???

[28] Baudrillard, ???

[29] W.J.T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*

[30] Amongst male critics on the left there can be a tendency to characterize postmodernism as a feminine 'fall': the loss of an authoritative masculinity associated with modernity and muscular manufacturing industry and the emergence of an anarchic femininity associated with soft postindustrial technologies. A seminal instance here would be David Harvey's hostility towards a visual field described as 'frothy' and 'titillating' in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (See Gillian Rose... Jameson's at times anxious repudiation of the '*essentially* pornographic' nature of the visual might also merit scrutiny in this regard). More recently, in *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, Jonathan Beller remonstrates with the 'rampant visuality, overwhelming, indeed emasculating analytical thought' (Beller, 224) in postmodern society. At the other end of the spectrum, gender inflection is similarly conspicuous in rhetoric of cyberspace gurus who ecstatically embrace virtual reality as an imminent return to a high-tech womb.

[31] Barbara Creed,

shown struggling with cameras, television and VCRs. Samara's murder of this enfeebled patriarch underscores *The Ring*'s concern with and feminisation of those reproductive technologies which give birth to infinite serial images and sounds.

Just before Samara's foster father, the film's other enfeebled patriarch, commits suicide in a bathtub full connected to a TV and VCR, he offers the following warning: 'those pictures… the things she'd show you… And she'll never stop… She never sleeps'. Samara is the indefatigable image which demands to be copied and looked at over and over again. The auto-reflexive allegory in *The Ring* extends to the fact that this film about copying is itself a copy that has been copied. Verbinski's film was a remake of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) which was an adaptation of Koji Suzuki's cult novel of the same name. Suzuki's *Ringu* (1990) was followed by *Spiral* (1995), *Loop* (1998) and *The Birthday* (2000) which, alongside Nakata's *Ringu*, inspired the Japanese films *Rasen* (1998), *Ringu 2* (1998) and *Ring O: Birthday* (2000). In addition, there has been a Japanese TV series and TV film, a Korean remake of *Ringu* and numerous cross-media spin-offs such as a Manga comic, a video game and mobile phone accessories. The Hollywood remake of *The Ring* started a cycle of J-Horror and Hong Kong horror adaptations that includes *Feardotcom* (2002), *The Grudge* (2004) and *The Grudge* 2 (2006), *Dark Water* (2005), *The Pulse* (2006) and *The Eye* (2007). Hideo Nakata came to Hollywood to remake *The Ring 2* in 2005 and *Ring 3* and will also direct *The Ring 3* which is scheduled for release in 2008. In this context Samara appears as the shimmering spectre of seriality.

Seriality followed Samara from the cinema when *The Ring* was released in different formats for the home entertainment market. Film has been jointly marketed in analogue and digital format since 1997, but in 2002 sales of DVD players overtook sales of VCRs in the US. In that year, *The Ring* went on sale in the US and over 2 million DVD copies were purchased in the first twenty-four hours. Significantly, sales of the video version of this horror film about a video lagged significantly behind those for DVD. Indeed, watching *The Ring* in 2007 there is something rather dated, almost quaint about this bulky video with its tracking problems changing hands. *The Ring* was not made using celluloid film, but, in post-production frame after frame has been digitally enhanced, including the key sequence when

Samara emerges from an analogue video tape, has enhanced and altered by digital technology. Samara has been read as an allegorical emblem for the history of ghost machines (magic lanterns, telegraphs and cameras) and for contemporary optical technologies, but she also appears as a gothic premonition of an imminent digital zeitgeist, a sibylline spectre from the post-celluloid future. As this digital wraith crawls through the screen we might be witnessing the allegorical death of video, analogue and celluloid alongside the birth of next generation Virtual Reality (holography, cyberspace, telepresence technologies and haptics). The ghost produces an uncanny suturing of opposites: here and not here, past and present, dead and alive.[32] Similarly, Samara incorporates incongruent elements. Postindustrial devices (TV, VCR and cameras) are connected to preindustrial folklore (an ancient curse). Samara controls advanced electronic technology but her appearance is anachronistic: her costume approximates that most clichéd item of spectral attire (the white sheet). The FX team on *The Ring* employ state-of-the-art digital design to simulate low definition analogue graphics. The video ghost is silent, practically black-and-white and her image is fuzzy, granulated and prone to interference.

Samara's synthesis of residual and emergent technologies produces a temporal indeterminacy that is itself characteristic of the digital revolution. According to Virilio, in the postmodern age the past, present and future have been replaced by rewind, play and fast-forward. Virilio is surely right to highlight the extent to which VCR profoundly altered the viewing experience and promoted a sense of chronological mutability. In the post-video age of integrated media (TVs wired to DVD players and gaming systems and laptops and the Internet), temporal reconfiguration has been accelerated. The structural logic of video, which is still basically sequential (since the tape must be wound backwards and forwards), is being superseded by the digital rhizomatics of chapter selection and hypertext links. For the DVD viewer 'any point on [*The Ring* can be almost instantly] before and after any other point'.[33] The digital image is even more mobile and malleable, ephemeral and ghostly than its predecessors. Photographs and video tape capture rays of light with chemicals, paper and celluloid so that material bond still exists between the object and its reproduction. Conversely, digital technology, converts the visual into abstract electronic data. All that is

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[32] Thus its allure for deconstructive theory – emerged as a key trope in recent literary studies, philosophy etc. Examples. *Cryptomimesis.*

[33] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1989).

solid melts into binary code. We have come full circle from the dashes and dots of Morse code on the telegraph, to the abstract ones and zeroes of digital telecommunications.

Part of the ghostly contradiction which Samara embodies is that the digital image is both de-realizing and progressively corporeal. Postmodern optics acquire greater phenomenological tenuity even as their distance from material reality increases. Samara's entry into the spectator's world thus offers an allegory of the spectator's immersion in an image world that has and will become more and more substantial with advances in the technology of telepresence and virtual reality. In contrast to the diaphanous ephemerality of the analogue, Samara threatens the spectator with digital immanence and the cyberpunk prophecy of the image made flesh, the image that looks back. *The Ring* revolves around a classic gothic reversal whereby the ghost is not simply seen, but sees herself being seen. Armed with Medusean hair and Gorgon's gaze, Samara is the moving image that transfixes the viewer.[34] In this regard, Samara might recall Benjamin's definition of aura: 'To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return… In dreams… there is an equation. The things I see, see me just as much as I see them'.[35] As an optical phenomenon, aura is a bright ring of light or nimbus surrounding a misty moon or sun. In addition, aura has been used to describe the halo around a saint or angel.[36] Benjamin occasionally deployed the term 'aureole' to pun on these meanings and underscore the power of aura, but simultaneously developed an alternative definition. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin famously declared that contemporary technological forms jeopardised the aura of art by detaching it from its context and tradition and replacing a unique identity with endless copies. The consequent withering of aura was described in spatial terms. Aura involves the 'unique phenomenon of a distance', a clear

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[34] Perhaps an ironic return here to the situation of subjects in the early phases of photography – where you had to sit absolutely still, immobile for your image to be captured on the plate. Early photographers devised a contraption, perhaps the inspiration for Edison's electric chair, clamps which held heads in place and fixed the spine invisibly for as much as 5-10 minutes.

[35] 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'

[36] Footnote: According to New Age thinking – it's the halo of radiation around a person which can be seen by sensitives – in *The Ring* we see this effect in reverse – the camera registers the curse.

separation of subject and object, which is decimated by the mechanical reproduction of art works in film and photography (224). In film, the spectator loses contact with the 'whole living person' and their 'presence in time and space'. Immersion in the physical experience bridges the essential gap between observer and observed: 'the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of aura in the experience of shock' ('On Some Motifs'). As a result, the 'sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology'. In *The Ring*, however, Samara's blossoming from the land of technology is no *fata morgana* in the desert of the real. As a real toad emerges from an imaginary garden the spectator experiences a traumatic return of aura. Ironically, by coming closer Samara restores the distance between observer and observed alongside the etymological roots of television in the Greek for 'seeing at a distance'. *The Ring* thus offers an allegorical prophecy of the return of aura through digital colonization and the re-enchantment of technology.[37] Nor is this merely a matter of advanced technical fakery. For Benjamin, aura is rooted in the history of the object and its embededness in a network of social relations. In the next section we will examine the ways in which the aura associated with Samara's appearance stems from a buried history of transnational relations and trauma.

THE RING AT GROUND ZERO

> She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated… Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe.
>
> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

> What do we do when we press a button?
> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*[38]

Writing in 1991, Fredric Jameson proposed that video, or 'surrealism without the unconscious', was the key medium for a postmodern era in which spirituality had been

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[37] In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin proposes that epochs which tend towards allegorical expression will have experienced a crisis of the aura' (365).

[38] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 217.

practically extinguished and 'the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day' (67). Sixty years earlier in 1931, at a time when he was also deeply involved in analysing surrealism, Walter Benjamin published 'A Little History of Photography'. In this essay he reached the conclusion that electronic image technologies permitted insights into a vastly expanded territory of unconscious forces:

> A different nature speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye; most different in that in the place of a space penetrated by a person with consciousness is formed a space penetrated by the unconscious. It is already quite common that someone, for example, can give a rough account of how a person walks. But he would not be able to describe their position at the fracture of a moment of *stepping out*. Photographic aids: time-lapse, enlargements, unlock this for him. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of the optical unconscious just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.[39] **[Find the original quotation]**

In *The Ring* Samara rises, 'dripping and convulsive into the light of day', stepping out of a surrealist montage as a material spirit who personifies the political unconscious of optical technology.[40] An analysis of the political unconscious in *The Ring* should begin with the question of origins and this requires a return to the subject of reproduction. *Where does Samara come from?* A genealogy of ghosts in *The Ring* would head east, not simply because Verbinski's film is an adaptation of Nakata's *Ringu*, but because Samara is adopted and the spectator catches a fleeting glimpse of Oriental characters on her birth certificate. In western colonial mythology western, Japan, like Samara, is both 'the chrysanthemum and the sword': delicate and beautiful but also cold and deadly.[41] Since Samara is inseparable from the reproductive gadgetry which gives birth to her, technology in *The Ring* is not only gendered female, but orientalised as well. After she watches Samara's tape, Rachel is sensitised to the omnipresence of television. From her balcony, Rachel observes the sets switched on in every apartment in the adjacent building. The ubiquity of television extends from the city out into the cabins of isolated motels and the loft of a barn on a small island (Samara's bedroom). *And where do these televisions come from?* The production of televisions, VCRs and cameras is dominated by Asian manufacturing industry and corporate

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[39] 'A Small History of Photography'

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

[41] Benedict: *the chrysanthemum and the sword*' 1972 2

capital: Sony, Mitsubishi, Hitachi, Yamaha, JVC and other vertically-integrated high tech entertainment conglomerates. The Zaibatsu which design the cameras to record the film, often own the companies that air them, manufacture the TVS and VCRs and DVDs on which they are watched, as well as the game consoles, computer components, mobile phones and an array of peripheral gadgetry. Japan's economic ascendancy and attendant Japanophobia in the US reached its peak in the 80s and early 90s.[42] Although flagship Japanese corporations continue to flourish (Sony, for example, achieved record sales in the year of *The Ring*'s release), the Japanese economy has lost its supremacy and been outstripped by the four tigers (Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong) and now China .[43] However, despite the ups and downs of its economic fortunes, Japan has managed to retain much of its mythological status as the empire of the gadget and the spiritual home of miniaturisation, screens, cybernetics, robotics, computers, video games, AI and virtuality, techno-porn. In the cyberpunk imaginary, from Gibson to manga, Japan, technology and the future are virtual syllogisms.[44]

Samara, then, articulates an orientalised technophobia as the allegorical spectre of Sonyism. A foreign body that invades US homes and delivers deadly messages – a spectral yellow peril encrypted in semi-conductors. According to this reading, *The Ring* might be read as a paranoid allegory of reverse colonisation – the realisation of imperialist anxieties regarding Asian technology and trade relations. There is a long history of complicity between colonial power and reproductive technology. Writing on this subject, Elizabeth Edwards suggests that

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[42] Some key figures here. In the 1980s and early 90s Japanese corporate capital bought out key sectors in the US entertainment industry. [Footnote: Bought CBS for $2 billion in 1988. Columbia Pictures for $3.4 billion in 1989. Matsushita bought MCA-Universal for $6 billion in 1990]. Rockfeller building. Japan bashin,. Vincent Chin.Films and Michael Creighton. Demonisation of a country once regarded as providing the 'model immigrant'.

[43] In part this was due to a successful gamble that the 9/11 attacks would encourage US consumers to spend more time at home thus increasing demand for its video, audio and gaming equipment.

[44] 'The memory of World War II concluding in a mushroom cloud was relatively fresh throughout the 1950s. It was unthinkable that America's military could ever fail to establish its supremacy on the battlefield, that the industrial, scientific, and technological strength of the nation would ever be insufficient for the purposes of war. *It was almost as if Americans were technology*' (in Jeffords, p.8 her italics). But by the millennium? The extent to which the US nuclear industry became dependent on Japanese suppliers. Military dependent on high-tech Japanese components. Now the Japanese are technology and they bring radiation into US homes, endangering US children.

> [i]n many ways those people who fear the camera would steal their souls, would peel their faces were right. The camera was one of those instruments of appropriation, which recorded culture at the colonial periphery and removed it for analysis… in the metropolitan centres.[45]

In *The Ring*, these technologies are now deployed against the imperial master as Samara, the girl from the East, steals the souls and peels the faces of her American victims. The fact that this ghost assumes the form of an orientalised young woman resonates with the global reconfiguration of relations of production and the transnational recomposition of the industrial working class. As Gayatri Spivak (1999) has argued: 'The subaltern woman is now to a rather large extent the support of production' (p. 67). The 'ghosts' of dead industrial labour can never be entirely exorcised from the postindustrial landscape since

> the proliferation of phenomena of reproduction (fashion, media, publicity, information and communication networks) requires a vast expansion of material production; the greater circulation of images depends upon a variety of physical products - television sets, video recorders, satellite discs and the like.'[46]

Although, Samara's body may is trapped underground, across water and at the margins far away from the postindustrial city, her spectral labours return to haunt. For Benjamin, the aura of an object stemmed from the congealed presence of social relations and historicity. Samara's emergence from the technological commodity constitutes a materialisation of aura. In place of reified relations with things – a TV, a VCR, a phone – the consumer is confronted with the spectacular return of a human presence. Samara offers an allegorical embodiment of all that which is unseen behind the postmodern image: the dead labour, the social relations, the vast but spectral networks of production, distribution and maintenance which sustain the postindustrial apparatus. As the techno-spectre emerges she materialises all those forces which, like the butterfly effect in reverse, lie behind the apparently simple gesture of pressing a button.

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[45] (Elizabeth Edwards, in Warner, 197).

[46] *Against Postmodernism* (1989, Polity Press, p. 148)

As the orientalised ghost crawls towards her American victim in *The Ring*'s climactic scene it is clear that Samara's motive is revenge, but, perhaps it is less obvious that her weapon is radiation. This is anticipated in the film's opening dialogue in which the teenage girls discuss the dangers of technology and in particular the 'magnetic waves' and 'electro-rays' transmitted by television and telephones. The spectator who watches Samara's video is afflicted with the same symptoms produced by acute radiation poisoning: nose bleeds, vomiting, skin discolouration and a 100% fatality rate after seven days. The period before death is referred to as the 'walking ghost' phase and in this respect Samara transforms her victims into copies of herself, but is Samara herself a copy? According to Derrida, there is always 'a crypt within a crypt, a name within a name, a body within the body' (Derrida 1986: xxvii). Are there other bodies buried alongside Samara's? Is this well a mass grave? Is there a name within a name?

Aidan:	What happened to the girl?
Rachel:	Samara?
Aidan:	Is that her name?
Rachel:	Mm-hmm.

In the original Japanese version of *The Ring*, the ghost is not Samara, but Sadako, a name which for Japanese audiences is synonymous with Sadako Sasaki. In 1945, Sadako was a young girl living in Hiroshima around one-mile from ground zero. She survived the blast, but several years later she developed leukaemia, known locally as 'the atom bomb disease'. Whilst Sadako was in hospital she started folding origami cranes having been inspired by a Japanese proverb which teaches that the maker of 1000 cranes will be granted a wish. She died in 1955, aged 12.[47] A memorial was dedicated to Sadako Sasaki in Hiroshima as a symbol of all the children killed by the atom bomb and in the US a Sadako statue was built at the Seattle peace park. In *The Ring*, Seattle is the city that Samara terrorises. In Benajmin's terms, *The Ring* is an allegory in which we can detect the ruins of another story: the little girl dropped down a well is ghosted by the Little Boy dropped on a city. Little Boy was the codename given to the bomb carried inside 'Enola Gay' and then dropped on Hiroshima. *The*

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[47] the same age as the actress who plays Samara in *The Ring*.

Ring resonates with nuclear symbolism: the ring Samara looks up at recalls the dark sun that rose over Hiroshima; a burning tree is shaped like a mushroom cloud; the fall-out of endless black rain. The little girl is kept and experimented on at the Eola Psychiatric Institute. Again we might ask *is there a name within the name*? If we insert an 'n', which in nuclear physics is the symbol for neutron, Eola becomes Enola. The perverse combination of birth imagery and violent death in *The Ring* was also conspicuous at Hiroshima. In 'The Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War', Klaus Theweleit notes that the 'first hydrogen bomb was saluted as a newly born baby boy'.[48] He goes on to cite Carol Cohn's observation that '[t]he entire history of the bomb project, in fact, seems permeated with imagery that confounds man's overwhelming technological power to destroy nature with the power to create'.[49]

> According to Abraham and Torok in their gothic revision of classical psychoanalysis,
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> the source of the crypt might not even be a trauma experienced directly by the subject. Traumatic experience that is not properly buried can be inherited and 'travel' as a 'transgenerational phantom'. (Abraham & Torok 1994:171).

Nicholas Rand has speculated that the hauntings of ancestral spectres might not only be a family affair, but could involve 'the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of… the community, and possibly even entire nations' (Abraham & Torok 1994: 169). In *The Ring* we witness the phantomatic return of shameful secrets. Samara is a transgenerational phantom who travels from Hiroshima to Seattle. For Abraham and Torok, '[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objective correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person'. (Abraham & Torok; 1994, 130) Samara is buried alive in a secret tomb, but the psychic telegraphy she performs from the crypt offer screen memories in a double sense: memories projected onto a screen that screens other memories.[50] Words, vestigial

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[48] Theweleit, 293 William L. Laurence description of the Trinity test: 'the first cry of a new born world… the birth of a new force' (294).

[49] (Carol Cohn cited by Theweleit, 294).

[50] [**Footnote: 9/11?** Samara's hair as veil – face covered – semiotics of this? Term for the Islamic veil? **Hijab.** Ground Zero. Centripetal, centrifugal – moving out or in? Towards ground zero (link back to 9/11, if only as a footnote. Maybe mention, as I have written elsewhere, remembering 9/11 was a way of forgetting Hiroshima)].

scenes and affects are screened, encrypted and buried alive in *The Ring*: terror and guilt, revenge and radiation, Sadako and Hiroshima. In the immediate aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, an American eyewitness, Father P. Siemes, reported that '[n]one of us in those days heard a single outburst against the Americans on the part of the Japanese, nor was there any evidence of a vengeful spirit'. In Samara that vengeful spirit returns as an allegorical emblem. For Benjamin, such an emblem was the result of a failure to work through mourning. That which is not properly buried, that which has not been mourned, must return to haunt: '[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event' (Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995: 5).

AN ALLEGORY OF ALLEGORY

> First suggestion: haunting is historical, to be sure
>
> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of a Marx*

In one of the many circular moments in James' *Turn of the Screw*, Flora, a young girl around the same age as Samara in *The Ring*, sits down to her lessons with a 'sheet of white paper, a pencil and a copy of nice 'round O's'. Several deconstructive readings of this *fin-de-siecle* ghost story have proposed that it offers an allegory of reading.[51] This reading is corroborated by James who, in the New York Preface, explains that

> [t]here is not only from the beginning to the end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values are positively all blanks save so far as an excited horror... proceeds to read into them more or less fantastic figures.

James builds the text around blanks, gaps, absence, silence – blank letters, silent ghosts, hidden histories – and leaves the reader and critic to fill them in. In a gothic reversal we are no longer reading the text, the text is reading us. In this essay we have jumped through a series of rings, or concentric circles converging on ground zero. The O has been read as Optical technology, and Oriental Other, but there is another possibility. Flora's 'nice round O's' might signify an exclamation of horror, or sexual excitation, but they are also haunted

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[51] An allegorical reading, as De Man proposes, as always at level an allegory of reading itself. De Man's *Allegories of Reading.*

by the zero which reminds us of the ghostliness of meaning as that which is both absent and present. Allegory is a particularly ghostly hermeneutic which relies on the spectral sub-text of things which are there but not there. For Benjamin, 'allegory … means precisely the non-existence of what it presents' (Benjamin 12). Since the middle ages, allegory has been the poor relation of symbolism. As a narrative device allegory has been condemned as crude and contrived and as a critical method allegory can be a lax and facile tool that clumsily *applies* meanings to a text. In his essay, 'Allegorizing Hitchcock', Fredric Jameson warns against allegorical readings of popular film which attempt 'to promote them to the more philosophical dignity of *meanings*'. And where do these *meanings* come from? According to Max Pensky, in his work on Benjamin, allegory is drawn up from the 'well of subjectivity':

> The more allegories the allegorist dedicates to this goal [the recovery of meaning] the more the network of allegorical references multiplies and intertwines, the more distant this goal becomes, the more urgently the allegorist works, and the deeper the allegorist plunges into the well of subjectivity.[52]

The network of allegorical readings offered here, centered on what crawls from the well in *The Ring*, will of course be subjectively coloured. As Derrida warns, whilst ghost-hunting in *Spectres of Marx*, 'everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other.'[53] Subjectivity can never be fully exorcised and in part of the strength of the allegorical approach is that it confronts this fact head on. Allegory is self-consciously constructed, often excessive and contrived and automatically dispenses with pretensions of transhistorical truth. For Benjamin allegory explored the work as a ruin and offered a form of 'mortification' rather than the source of that which might be eternal (*German Tragic Drama*). The anamorphosis (optical distortions) informing the allegorical reading of *The Ring* offered here underline the extent to which history haunts allegorical readings themselves as well as the most spectral of postmodern images. To recognise this fact is the first step towards following the methodological wrinkle offered by Benjamin in

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[52] Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*.

[53] (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* full title, Routledge, NY 194).

The Arcades project: '[t]o educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows'.[54]

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[54] The words are from Rudolf Borchardt's *Epilegomena zu Dante*, v. 1. [Berlin 1923] pp. 56–7. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (N 1, 8), 458.