9. 'Round and round, the world keeps spinning. When it stops, it's just beginning'[1]

Analogue Ghosts and Digital Phantoms in The Ring (Gore Verbinski, 2002)

Abstract

The final chapter considers the impact of the shift from analogue to digital media upon the preoccupations and aesthetics of millennial uncanny child films. Via an analysis of The Ring (Gore Verbinski, 2002), Chapter Nine contends that this paradigmatic technological shift has deep intersections with the ideological tangling of beginnings and endings characterized by the millennial turn. These intersections are embodied by the uncanny child in The Ring who eerily conflates decay and growth.

Keywords: Digital, Analogue, The Ring, Obsolescence, Trauma, Uncanny child

The highest-grossing horror remake in history, The Ring, laid the template for subsequent American remakes of Japanese horror films, while demonstrating their commercial viability. In fact, The Ring is among the top 20 highest-grossing horror films of all time,[2] and Kristen Lacefield suggests that it 'nearly single-handedly revived a moribund sector of the film industry that had once been dominated by tired film franchises such as Halloween, Friday the 13th and Scream' (2010, 1) – although I contend that, in fact, The Ring achieved this in tandem with the other influential uncanny child films discussed throughout this book. Not only was The Ring one of the most commercially and critically successful horror films of the new

1 The lyrics to the eerie, nursery rhyme-esque song Samara sings throughout The Ring.

2 See 'The 20 Highest Grossing Horror Films of All Time' (Lynch, 2017).

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millennium, but it sparked a veritable body of fertile critical discourse. Many insightful scholarly and popular analyses of The Ring were produced in the aftermath of the film's release, evidence of the film's potent confrontation of the uncertainties of the early 21st century.[3]

In translating Ringu from Japanese to Hollywood horror, The Ring self-reflexively builds upon the original film's ambiguous postmodern anxieties about the power of media technologies to erase or displace human subjectivity. That The Ring draws out and embellishes the uncertainties of Nakata's film – analysed in Chapter Six – is of course one symptom of the process of remaking, as Verbinski and his team consciously reconfigured the culturally specific themes and aesthetics of the original in order to transform a low-budget, national horror film into a globally accessible, blockbuster Hollywood product: a process which necessitates the augmentation and clarification of the anxieties of the original, but a simultaneous effacement of their cultural specificity.

The Ring's centralization of postmodern tensions is also bound to the period of technological flux between analogue and digital audiovisual media in which the film was produced and released. As Lacefield suggests:

> its reluctance to embody the transition to the digital realm offers an important indication of the film's technological anxiety and resistance [...] it seems likely that the VHS tape, with its perceived degradation of quality and impending obsolescence, offers Verbinski an opportunity to forge a technological link from the past to the present, thus reinforcing a temporal/historicist trajectory that is identical to the one Samara herself accomplishes – via videotape – from beyond the watery sepulchre of the well that houses her remains. (2010, 13)

The Ring thus functions like 'a cathode ray tube or movie screen onto which gets played our anxieties over technological change' (Lacefield, 2010, 20-21). While the original prefigured the impending obsolescence of the VHS tape with eerie prescience, Verbsinki's film presents a supernatural curse that harnesses a technology already well on the decline. As I highlighted in Chapter Seven, most home viewers would have watched this film about an

3 Primary among these is Lacefield's *The Scary Screen* (2010), an illuminating collection of essays that considers the ways in which both the Japanese Ringu and the American remake express cultural anxieties surrounding technological and conceptual change. Most other works on The Ring emphasize the processes of adaptation and exchange between the original and the remake: for insightful studies, see Balmain (2004), Holm (2011), Lowenstein (2015), Meikle (2005), Phu (2010), and Wee (2013).

analogue videotape curse on the new *digital* home entertainment technology, DVD (or via the illegal peer-to-peer torrenting or grey streaming websites that were becoming popular in the early 2000s). This results in a shift in preoccupations between Nakata's and Verbinski's films, as ghost-child Samara becomes overtly implicated in the undulations of technological decline and progress.

The Ring emphasizes the manner by which Samara and her cursed videotape disrupt the ontological structures to which the adult protagonists blindly adhere in their fruitless quest to resolve the mysteries of the curse and the tape. Thus, Samara's unsettling of conventional (adult) wisdom becomes the primary theme of the film. Wee aptly points out that:

> by emphasizing reason, information, and knowledge, and subsequently undermining their power and consequence, the film reflects a declining confidence and security in humanity's ability to harness our intellect to control and determine our reality and destiny. What The Ring dramatizes is the failure and inconsequence of humanity's ongoing reliance on logic, science, and reason against a destructive supernatural force. (2013, 95)

I suggest that Samara's status as a child deepens the implications of this challenge to human – *adult* – discourse, as she draws to the surface many of the anxieties that have ambiguously surged through the uncanny child cycle. As Lacefield elucidates, 'Samara is deconstruction with a vengeance' (2010, 15): this uncanny child is a frightening embodiment of, and icon for, the postmodern child who simultaneously contaminates the processes of growing up and progress, challenging adult epistemological structures and narratives wholesale.

In a narrative device not seen in the original film, in The Ring, anyone who watches Samara's cursed videotape without copying it and showing it to someone else not only dies after seven days, but suffers in a way that precisely echoes Samara's own trauma throughout that week. The seven-day period in The Ring represents the length of time Samara herself was stuck alive in the well before finally dying (an element not made explicit in the original). The images on Samara's video, each of which evokes painful cathexis points around which her trauma revolves, infect each of her victim's minds and leave painful marks on their bodies, as the trauma of Samara's own death invades and overcomes their lives. Thus, Samara literalizes the uncanny child's associations with the aesthetics of trauma, becoming a self-reflexive archetype of uncanny childhood written in broad, apocalyptic strokes: Samara is a truly monstrous embodiment of childhood trauma, knowingly

harnessing her own trauma in order to terrorize her victims. Significantly, The Ring emphasizes that this trauma is eerily ungrounded from adult-centred personal and cultural narratives. Samara's trauma is not entwined with the deep, inner psychic turmoil of the adult protagonists, as was the case in the American films discussed in Section One – in fact, she reverses this relationship, imposing traumatic images that are distinctly her own into the minds of her victims, images that are horrifying in their unknowability and otherness. Nor is Samara's trauma associated with specific national histories or identities, as in the Spanish or Japanese films analysed in Sections Two and Three – as I suggested in Chapter Seven, Samara's unknowable origins and cultural hybridity are at the core of her monstrosity. In fact, the adult characters' persistent attempts to ground Samara's trauma in psychological causes or legible sociocultural realities is depicted as their failure, an unproductive means of domesticating Samara's power by sublimating her into a vulnerable, victimized child. It is in this way that Samara represents a powerful embodiment of postmodernity: through her ungrounded trauma, the obsolescence of modernist adult discourse is exposed.

Analogue Aesthetics and Corporeal Decay

In his insightful essay, Niles Tomlinson suggests that The Ring revolves around the fear that 'while technology has become infinitely flexible, the human itself has become "ponderous", an ossified relic trapped by its own conservative ontological categories and traditions, and made vulnerable by its insistence on its own exceptionality' (2010, 188). Tomlinson suggests that the film constructs a semantic parallel between the impending 'extinction' of human beings in the face of technological progress and the equivalent decline of the horse – an organic machine with intimate links to human endeavour, having been bred, cultivated, and trained over thousands of years in order to support the transport and agricultural requirements of human culture. Indeed, in The Ring, unlike in Nakata's original, horses are a central theme: Samara's adopted parents were horse breeders, until Samara mysteriously drove the horses to kill themselves by careening into the ocean. The horses' bodies appear in Samara's cursed videotape and one of the film's key horror set pieces depicts a horse throwing itself from a ferry in a panic when it encounters protagonist Rachel, who has become infected by Samara's curse. An extreme close-up of a horse's eye is a key motif of both the cursed videotape and the film itself.

Tomlinson suggests that the horses are a key clue to the film's core preoccupations, allegorically illuminating The Ring's millennial contemplation

of how progress no longer centres around the human being (2010, 188-189). As he outlines, the film engages with a contemporary cultural awareness (and fear) that technological advance in the form of advanced computer and biotechnologies had seemingly broken loose from human intellect and DNA, displacing the primacy of organic human 'code' and endeavour. To build upon Tomlinson's argument, I contend that it is incredibly significant that the film positions the *child* as the agent of this dismantling of a human-centred model of progress. Furthermore, the technologies with which the film is fixated, VHS and analogue television, are defined, not by their associations with technological advance and futurism, but by their *decline*. Thus, Samara embodies not just an 'infinitely flexible' technology, but, more specifically, the eerie flux between analogue and digital media technologies: she draws to light not the human being's impotence in the face of a generalized technological domination, but the adult's inability to navigate technological change without resorting to a teleological vision of progress. Refusing to be an 'emblem of futurity's unquestioned value' (Edelman, 2004, 4), Samara instead expresses the becomings of decay in overtly technological terms. Samara's videotape curse and her supernatural embodiment of analogue technology make visible the conceptual contortions underlying the shift from analogue to digital technologies.

As Lacefield points out, Verbinski was inspired to make the film after a degraded VHS copy of Ringu ended up on his desk: 'it was really poor quality, but actually that added to the mystique' he explains (cited in Lacefield, 2010, 6). In The Ring, the decaying aesthetics of the degraded analogue video pervade the entire film, even bleeding through the boundaries which demarcate the fictional diegesis: the opening DreamWorks logo is not accompanied by the usual bright orchestral soundtrack, but by the buzzing hum of analogue noise, and is interrupted by the juddering and grain of television static. As Lowenstein suggests, 'the result is that the DreamWorks logo, with its iconic American connotations attached to production partner Steven Spielberg, shows signs that it has become possessed by Japanese media infection – which of course, it has' (2015, 99). In addition, the quivering of the image gives rise to a fleeting glimpse of the 'ring' symbol, which is briefly superimposed over the moon/O of the DreamWorks logo, transforming it into a flickering circle of white light against a black background. This is the key motif of both the film itself (featured on posters and DVD covers) and Samara's curse ('before you die, you see the ring', explains protagonist Rachel, a line which is also the film's promotional tagline). This 'ring' was the last image Samara saw before finally dying in the well (in the form of the dim reverberations of sunlight creeping through the cracks in the

well's cover), and is also the last image her victims perceive before their death. It is the first and final image on Samara's cursed videotape, and also bookends the film itself, serving to reinforce that, despite our investment in a two-hour supernatural mystery narrative, no resolution has been achieved. Rachel has failed to abate Samara's curse, having only figured out how to perpetuate it – by copying the tape and passing it on – thus deferring the death of herself and her son, Aidan. As a result, despite the illusion of narrative progression and closure – a central expectation of the classical Hollywood paradigm that is not as pivotal to the Japanese original –, the final scene, in which Rachel and Aidan copy Samara's videotape in order to show it to an unwitting victim, reinforces the realization that we are still at the same point of disequilibrium established at the film's beginning. Like the horses and pervasive analogue aesthetics, this emphasis on ring imagery is a new addition to Verbinski's film that was not present in the Japanese original (which was titled 'ring' due to the telephone ring Sadako's victims hear when her spectre calls to announce their impending death). In Verbinski's film, the flickering, analogue ring becomes Samara's calling card, metonymizing her malevolent use of her own personal trauma to disallow rational, linear progress.

In another contrast to Ringu, when Samara erupts from the television screen to kill her victims, she remains suffused in the analogue grain and grey-blue hue of her tape's images even after she enters her victim's 'real' space, and she continues to jitter, flicker, and skip monstrously in the manner of the degraded images. Thus, the ghost-child's transposition of analogue aesthetics into the real space inhabited by her victims is a central component of her frightening aesthetic. Benson-Allott suggests that the film revolves around a belated acknowledgement of the distinct eeriness of analogue technology, and in particular the videocassette, a physical cavity in which images perpetually lurk in material form, waiting to be activated:

> The Ring was [...] the first film to be able to reveal (revel in) the horror of the videocassette, because it was the first produced after the rise of DVD, the new, impotent way to bring movies home. [...] In short, the studios could not afford to admit how damned eerie the videocassette was until they possessed another way to sell old movies to home viewers. (2010, 135-137).

While Samara does indeed monstrously expose the eerie power of the VHS tape and analogue aesthetics, the *decay* of analogue images and technologies is more specifically fetishized in the depiction of her monstrosity, in

amplified and more generalized ways than in Ringu. The degradation of the analogue image is intertwined with the monstrous decomposition of Samara's own physical form – unlike Sadako, when Samara emerges through the screen, she is figured as a mouldering corpse, with her wet, putrefying skin constantly threatening to slide off her body.

Similarly, when Rachel finally locates the child's corpse in the well at the film's climax, Samara at first floats to the surface of the water looking the very image of a pure, untarnished child, complete with a white dress and soft pale skin (not unlike Anne and Nicholas in The Others).[4] Parallel to the equivalent scene in Ringu, upon seeing the child's body, Rachel's eyes well with tears and she embraces the corpse tenderly: the film's monster seems thoroughly tamed through the adult's pitying gaze. Yet, as soon as Rachel grasps the child's body, Samara rapidly decomposes before her eyes. The corpse's putrefaction echoes abject scenes from Samara's video – in particular an extreme close-up of swarming maggots – as maggots overtake the child's skin. The child's skin turns from pure white to a rusted brown, before her flesh becomes black as it rapidly melts from her bones, resembling the magnetic tape of a VHS cassette burning and melting.[5] The child's decomposing body aestheticizes both the decline of the innocent, vulnerable child – as Samara reclaims her monstrous agency by collapsing the adult's romanticized vision of her – and the terrible antithesis to 'growing up'. Furthermore, through this monstrous fetishization of corporeal and technological decay, Samara makes eerily tangible the physical qualities of analogue media lost in the immaterial circuits of digital technology. She dramatically emphasizes the degradation of this formerly quotidian audiovisual technology and defamiliarizes it – and thus renders it distinctly threatening and uncanny – through its decline.

The Becomings of Technological Transition: Analogue Decline/Digital Emergence

In addition to fetishizing the entwined aesthetics of technological and corporeal decay, Samara also portends the uprising of digital technologies from analogue's degenerating remains. The outmodedness of the adult

4 This is in stark contrast to this moment in Ringu, in which Reiko feels under the water to grasp Sadako's skeleton.

5 This link is reinforced in the sequel, when Rachel burns Samara's cursed videotape and the image recalls the scene of Samara's decomposition. The burning tape is accompanied by an eerie screeching which melds a human scream with the sound of the tape coiling and melting.

characters is drawn to light in the face of this technological flux: the adults' failure to adapt to the uncertainties of technological becoming is ultimately their undoing. When Noah and Rachel are first studying Samara's tape, Noah notes that it does not have a control track. As he explains, the control track consists of numbers that are:

> put on the tape whenever it's recorded. Which means, [by not having a control track] theoretically, there shouldn't be any images [on Samara's tape]. [...] When you record a tape, the makeup of the tracks is like a signature for whatever did the recording, like a camcorder, VCR, whatever. So the control track can tell us where it came from. But to not have one, I mean, that's like being born without fingerprints.[6]

This slippage between biological and technological codes – that which identifies the origins of a videotape and that which identifies a human – articulates the way Samara conflates anxieties about the shifting ideological status of childhood with those surrounding technological flux. Just as her tape's images were formed without the 'real' physical staging of the scenes, or the technologically determined processes necessary to record them onto the videocassette's magnetic tape, nor was she 'born' with the symbolic fingerprints of an identifiable lineage and genetic code, which would ground her in a secure narrative of intergenerational and historical continuation.

Throughout the film, Noah and Rachel fruitlessly try to affix Samara with material, rational grounding in tandem with solidifying her origins. Rachel's research into Samara's curse is conducted mainly in dusty libraries, as she sifts through large leather-bound historical texts and newspaper records, and is only once seen searching the internet (and notably, she prints out her findings). She also analyses the tape using a huge analogue playback and recording device – as the technician states, 'the big box here's a warhorse. Totally analogue' – which she uses to print out shots from the tape on paper, further materializing the tape's images. Notably, Rachel herself works at a newspaper, another material media mode threatened with obsolescence with the uprising of digital media. Near the end of the film, after failing to resolve the video's mysteries Rachel and Noah return to the Shelter Mountain cabin where Rachel first found the tape, at which point

6 As Benson-Allott points out, a control track just tells a videotape how fast to scan the images, but nevertheless, 'Noah's anthropomorphic mischaracterization of this technology actually tells the spectator how The Ring reads its videotape. For Noah, Samara's tape either has no origins (was never recorded, does not exist) or is capable of obscuring its origins' (2013, 116).

Noah cries out in exasperation as he grasps hold of various objects in the room 'There's a reason that we're here! There's something in this room! It's in this phone! It's in this television!' Rachel and Noah's subsequent attempt to locate Samara's corpse – the tangible remnants of her identity – in the well underneath one of the cabins represents a related grasping for her form through emplacing her in material reality. Yet in the scene in which Rachel finally locates Samara's body, which directly follows Noah's desperate clutching of the objects in the cabin, this climactic moment towards which the plot has been driving quickly crumbles before our eyes with Samara's corporeal disintegration. As in RINGU, excavating and burying Samara's remains is promptly revealed to be a false resolution to Samara's curse.

The adult's flailing investment in materiality is crystallized in the iconic scene in which Samara emerges from Noah's television screen, killing him even though he helped Rachel to find the child's corpse and bury her body. As the image of Samara on-screen breaks free from its material housing, Noah is unable to do anything apart from stare in horror and back away. In contrast to RINGU, the grey-blue hue and static that suffuses Samara even after she crawls out of the television emphasizes that this is the mediated *image* which defies the boundaries of the frame – not just the ghost herself – as is reinforced in a moment in which she evades physical grounding and skips forward via a burst of static, a deterritorialization of bodily movement that knocks Noah backwards with the force of his shock. Unlike the equivalent character Ryuji of RINGU – a mathematics professor – Noah is a filmmaker and analogue video expert (at one point Rachel proclaims that he reads 'Video Geek Magazine'), underscoring his attachment to analogue technology and subsequent inability to adapt to Samara's rerouting of the mechanics of the mediated image. Samara emerges from Noah's screen surrounded by his technological paraphernalia, and, as he backs away from her, he falls into a cabinet of videocassettes and analogue recording equipment, smashing its contents. After Noah's death, in her hopeless desperation to understand Samara's motives, Rachel breaks open the cavity of the videotape screaming 'What do you want from me!' as she unfurls the tape inside, still searching for a material core to Samara that she can hold, touch, and unravel.

Samara's monstrous capability for wanton image proliferation is repeatedly highlighted throughout the film. For instance, she is able to produce telekinetic x-rays – referred to as 'projected thermography' – imprinting images from her mind directly onto the film. On a videotape that Rachel finds in Samara's family home depicting her sessions with a psychiatrist, the doctor says to the child, 'Let's talk about the pictures. How did you make them?' to which Samara replies 'I don't make them. I just seem them, and

then, they just are.' Another of Samara's images – a large tree seemingly burnt into the wood of the barn in which she spent much of her childhood – resembles a giant Japanese woodblock (the carved wooden base used for woodblock printing), a link reinforced by the fact that the image depicts a Japanese maple tree. The tree bears clear signs of the physical labour necessary to create the image even though it was 'burnt' directly from Samara's mind onto the wood.[7] That each of these images gesture to long-standing, highly specialized processes underscores Samara's monstrous eradication of the material, technological, and cultural contexts involved in the creation of these images, suggesting the coiling of tensions related to the deterritorialized transnational exchange of images, the child's lack of clear origins, and her eerie embodiment of technological flux.

The Ring thus pairs the adult protagonists' fixation with material grounding – a cleaving to materiality that parallels their adherence to rationality and logic – with Samara's monstrous ability to defy material processes in her creation and propagation of images. While the adult characters are fatally slow to comprehend Samara's monstrous empowerment of the image, Rachel's young son, Aidan, shares her ability, telekinetically communicating with Samara through the sharing of mind-images throughout the film. Thus, Samara, and to a lesser extent Aidan, project in embodied form an anxiety that Dominik Schrey associates with the technological flux of the early 21st century: 'even media formats with a strong tradition like the book (as a material object) or cinema (as a specific "dispositif") are now perceived to be threatened by obsolescence and seem to be outpaced by their increasingly ephemeral digital successors' (2014, 27). As Schrey suggests, the transition from analogue to digital media has incited a pervasive cultural 'longing for what is assumed to be lost in the continuing process of digitisation' (2014, 28): the sense of belonging to material realities associated with both the material creation and physical degradation of non-digital images. Laura Marks characterizes such analogue nostalgia as a 'retrospective fondness for the "problems" of decay and generational loss that analog video posed'

7 Of course, the maple tree image references the film's Japanese origins, and the anxieties associated with this image are underscored by the fact that woodblock printing has a lengthy, culturally specific legacy involving master craftsmen that Samara has deterritorialized in her own, mentally projected image. Furthermore, Lowenstein (2015) intriguingly connects the maple tree, which actually stands beside the well in which Samara died, to atomic blast imagery, referencing a striking shot after Rachel watches the cursed tape, in which the tree is suddenly bathed in a bright light which searingly projects the redness of the leaves. He suggests deep links between the Japanese and American films in relation to post-WWII trauma, which he suggests lurks within the 'mediated unconscious' of both films (102).

(2002, 152) which expresses a 'longing for analog physicality' not attainable with digital media (2002, 153). Samara expresses a fetishization of the decay of analogue physicality so extreme that it becomes monstrous, while simultaneously insinuating the terrible deterritorialization of the image post analogue. In The Ring, the adult characters are simply unable to keep pace with Samara's boundless image proliferation, a monstrous amplification of fears that, with the rapid emergence of digital media and the subsequent 'loss' of the image's physical and indexical contexts, we will become swamped by a flurry of images projected across various formats, effacing the material referents and cultural backgrounds of the images with which we are confronted. The Ring thus works through the tensions that Thomas Elsaesser points to in his analysis of anxieties surrounding digital media, a sense that 'the digital image is not part of cinema or film history, and the reason seems to be an absence: the lack of "roots" and "texture", which is to say, materiality and indexicality' (1998, 31).

Yet this is not to say that the film maps a clear (albeit anxious) path from analogue decay to digital deterritorialization through its uncanny child. In order for her curse to perpetuate, Samara requires that her tape be copied and passed on – a fetishization of a material process of viral image sharing that seems disjunctive given that Samara is able to project her images directly into the minds of others. Furthermore, Samara's curse always reaches its climactic point via an analogue television screen spatially rooted in someone's home: while Samara's monstrous eruption through the screen incarnates her defiance of this boundary, she still relies on the analogue television set to emerge into her victim's reality. Furthermore, as I suggested earlier, Benson-Allott points out that the film is marked by a strange absence of DVDs (2013, 103). Thus, the film gives charge to the point of transition between technological states, a moment in which the decline of analogue technology portends the rampant propagation of digital images. This eerie conflation of analogue decay and a monstrously exaggerated expression of digital proliferation is projected by Samara's form as she approaches her victims: diegetically, it is ambiguous as to whether she has any physical substance (as did her predecessor, Sadako), or if she is purely an endlessly circulated mediated image fulfilling a preprogrammed function. Extra-diegetically, it is clear that this monstrous image of analogue decay has been created with *digital* special effects technologies.

Thus, Samara embodies the unstable moment of becoming between analogue and digital visual media technologies. As Kim Knowles points out, in the early 21st century much popular and critical discourse has considered the shift from analogue to digital, but such analyses:

> tend to overlook the more complex dialectical relationship between the old and the new [...] in the heady rush to embrace and theorize the 'new', we have neglected to consider the wider cultural, economic and ideological implications of recent technological change, including the ever-changing notion of the 'old' and its precarious position in both culture and society. (2011, 2)[8]

Samara's amalgamation of analogue decay and digital emergence captures the uncanny limanilty of impending obsolescence, making visible the processes whereby a current technological mode becomes-past in simultaneity with a new format claiming dominance. Joel Dinerstein asserts that ideological investment in technological advance is typically 'synonymous with faith in the future' (2006, 569) because technology functions 'as an "autonomous" aspect of cultural production illuminating the road to a utopian future that will not require social or political change' (2006, 571). Thus, technological development offers a teleological vision of futurity and progress that does not necessarily require cultural and sociohistorical grounding. Yet Samara monstrously disrupts this simple alignment of technological development with faith in futurity, by twinning her own corporeal decay – and thus perversion of growth and futurity – with the point of becoming inherent in technological change, embodying not advance but the turbulent conceptual upheavals involved in comprehensive technological transition.

Samara's Challenge to Adult Discourse

Ultimately, Samara's powerful technological becoming is depicted as a direct affront to adult knowledge and understanding throughout the film. The anxiety surrounding the child's breaking loose from material and cultural grounding – and from adult discourse wholesale – is particularly highlighted in the scenes which depict her psychiatric sessions. Like Samara's curse, these sessions have been recorded on VHS videotapes, but by the psychiatrists in charge of her care. Unlike Samara's tape, these tapes not only *have* control tracks, but are obsessively marked by session numbers which place them in linear sequence, technologically imposing linear temporal continuity upon the child while aestheticizing the disciplinary, medical gaze to which Samara

8 The field of media archaeology has since started to examining this gap, addressing what James Newman describes as 'the complexity of obsolescence as a lived experience, and the ecology of contemporary media as one in which old and new rub along together, each informing one another and bestowing meanings upon one another' (2012, 87).

was subjected while alive. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests that the medical gaze intends to 'position the constitution of the individual as a describable, analysable object. [...] a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power' (1995, 191). The tapes of Samara's psychiatric sessions clearly function in this way, representing the adult's quest to forcibly re-situate the child into his own, rational discourse: to excise her of her irrational power and reinscribe her as a comprehensible, controllable object of the adult gaze.

The session video that is depicted in the film positions the viewer in parallel with the faceless psychiatrist, a seemingly omnipotent figure whose gaze is synonymous with that of the camera recording the session. Emphasizing Samara's colonization by the adult's gaze, she appears not just in front of the psychiatrist in physical space, but on the screen of the television monitor which sits upon his desk. She is thus captured in a layered *mise en abyme* of adult frames: the psychiatrist's gaze and that of the camera recording her session; the television monitor on his desk; the diegetic television screen on which Rachel watches the session tape in this scene; by Rachel's own gaze; and finally, she is contained by the viewer's own screen and gaze in our real space (Fig. 16).

The Droste effect created by this layering of frames emphasizes how the child is obsessively captured within the boundaries of the adult's gaze in an attempt to counteract her own empowerment of the mediated image. As well as being filmed, surveyed, and interviewed, Samara is also shown with electrocardiogram (ECG) monitors attached to her torso and head, as the medical gaze becomes inscribed upon the girl's body. In fact, the ECG cords trail off from her body to make it seem as though she is tied to or 'plugged in' to the wall of her padded cell. Throughout the video, she sits meekly in the middle of the room, passively averting the psychiatrist's all-encompassing gaze. The psychiatrist talks to her in condescending tones, saying 'you love your Mummy and Daddy? Don't you? And you don't want to hurt anyone, do you?' When we first witness this video, Samara sadly replies, 'But I do, and I'm sorry, it won't stop', her voice suffused with guilt as she seems to be, under the adult's penetrative watch, a powerless victim of her pathology, from which the adult promises to save her. Indeed, interspersed with the images from the videotape are close-ups of Rachel's face as she reacts to the session, watching the child with pity and shaking her head in dismay. After Rachel recovers Samara's corpse just prior to the twist in the final minutes of the film, Rachel sighs '[Samara] just wanted to be heard. Sometimes children yell or cry or draw pictures.' Thus, despite all that she has experienced, Rachel sublimates Samara's powerful images within the

realm of rational adult knowledge, positioning them as fragmented cries for help borne of a naive childish psyche, to be interpreted and responded to by the superior knowledge of the adult.

However, Samara comes to overpower this penetrative and patronizing adult gaze. Her own uncanny cursed tape, made up of ambiguous and surrealist[9] images with no coherent flow, stands in stark opposition to the clinical, explanatory session tapes – the two videotapes thus express the competing discourses of the adult and the child. Samara symbolically ejects the clinical adult gaze from her body on her cursed videotape, in an extreme-close up showing an ECG cable being pulled violently out of her throat and through her mouth. Later in the film, Rachel herself is forced to echo this evacuation of adult discourse when she also violently regurgitates an ECG cable. As it finally starts to dawn on Rachel in the film's final moments that the child possesses a power that she has failed to appreciate and is unable to subdue, brief images of Samara's psychiatric session are replayed: it is implied that Rachel is remembering the video, as the images from the session tape take over the screen and the audience too is impelled to recall these moments from earlier in the narrative. Yet this time, the diegetic camera recording the sessions has been eradicated, removing the smaller image of Samara on the psychiatrist's television screen from the frame and thus undermining the power of his gaze. Samara is now filmed in direct close-up. The child utters the same words that she spoke in response to the psychiatrist's questioning earlier in the film ('You don't want to hurt anyone, do you?'): 'I do, and I'm sorry. It won't stop.' This time, instead of passively avoiding eye contact, she stares directly at the camera and viewer – harshly enunciating the words as a direct threat, rather than a helpless, guilt-riddled admission. The 'victimized' child's unacknowledged agency and power is thus finally unveiled.

This replaying of the scene stripped of the *mise en abyme* of adult gazes and frames – which served to position the actual Samara as a tiny, blurred figure in the background of the image – incarnates the adult's belated recognition of the child's true intentions and power (Fig. 16). Samara subverts the assumption that she is the hopeless victim of her pathology, exposing that her wrath is wilful and unstoppable despite the subjugating efforts of the adults who purport to care for her. The scene thus crystallizes the horrifying process at the heart of The Ring's depiction of progress in disarray. The adults' recalcitrance to come to terms with the child's power indicates

9 Lowenstein (2015) studies the film's surrealist aesthetics, and suggest that surrealism functions as an intertextual link between the Japanese and American versions.

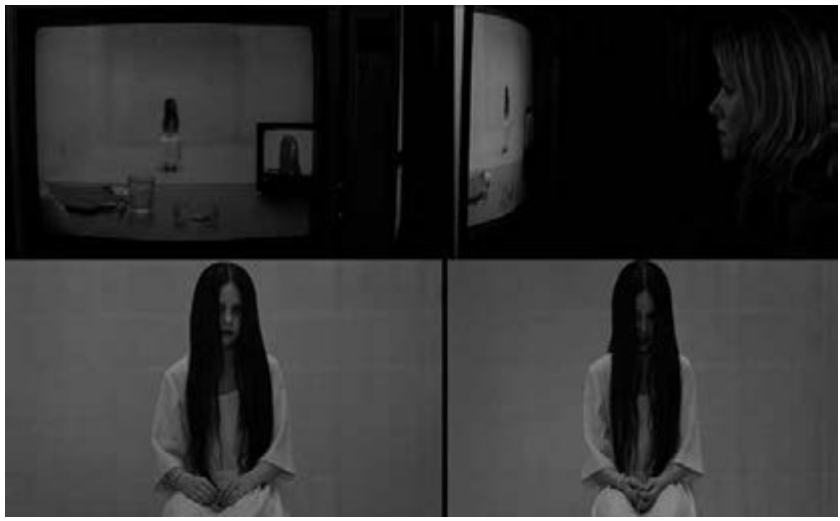

Figure 16. Samara is captured by a mise-en-abyme of adult gazes when her session tape is first depicted (top) and the replaying of the tape at the end of the film with the eradication of adult frames (bottom) in The Ring.

their inability to grasp the powerful becomings of the child freed from modernist adult discourse: her simultaneous analogue/corporeal decay and becoming-digital heralds the obsolescence of the linear teleologies of growing up and rational progress, and thus the decline of the adult's unquestioned dominion over the cultural function and personal trajectories of childhood.

Conclusion

As is exemplified by The Others and The Ring, when the uncanny child is deterritorialized from clear and specific cultural grounding, she becomes implicated in broad anxieties associated with the conceptual and technological shifts of the early 21st century. Thus, instead of working through traumas of the adult protagonist's own mind or submerged beneath specific sociohistorical narratives – as is the case with the films analysed in this book's previous sections – the transnational uncanny child's association with trauma is consciously developed on the child's own terms, presenting a vision of childhood which disassembles the previously unquestioned ideological braiding of growing up with optimistic, 'fixed' images of progress and futurity. As a result, these films suggest a burgeoning rethinking of the child's symbolic function in the early years of the 21st century.

Although frightening, these child characters play out a dramatic break from the concept of the passive, innocent child waiting to be moulded by adult ideology, suggesting that this model of childhood is becoming outmoded – a coming undone that is expressed by these figures' embodiments of decline and decay, and subsequent subversions of futurity and rational progress. As is emphasized in varying contexts throughout the work of Deleuze, Edelman, and Trigg, it is just such uncomfortable dislocations from existing ideological frameworks – interruptions to the process whereby we craft visions of the future that reflect and serve our own image, the conditions of the adult's present – that open a space for conceptual change. As Deleuze theorist Elizabeth Grosz puts it:

> political and cultural struggles are all, in some sense, directed to bringing into existence futures that dislocate themselves from the dominant tendencies and forces of the present. [...] The more we affirm the value of the nick, the cut, or rupture, the more we revel in the untimely and the more we make ourselves untimely. (2004, 14)

The uncanny children of transnational horror films revel in such deterritorialized spaces of 'untimely' becoming, unhinged as they are from fixed sociohistorical trajectories and teleologies. Rather than *re*-territorializing this figure into linear narratives that serve the needs of the adult's present, The Others and The Ring sustain the subversive qualities of this temporal rupture. By dramatically playing out millennial anxieties about the decline of rational progress through the child, these films position the collapse of modernist, adult-centric discourse as a terrifying opportunity for the uncanny child's chronological disjunction to reign supreme. In so doing, these films not only point to the ontological tensions associated with shifting understandings of childhood in the early 21st century, but to the generative potential represented by the conceptual untethering of childhood from growing up and fixed images of progress.

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