The examination of Hollywood remakes of Asian horror films presents the compelling opportunity to analyze the imagination of ghosts and haunting in diverse cultures. In 1998, *Ringu*, directed by Nakata Hideo, was released to widespread acclaim. Four years later, Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring* (2002) was released in the United States. The latter film was criticized as a retelling of the hit Japanese thriller, little more than a Hollywood knock off. It was dismissed by many critics, as everything from the visuals to the atmosphere felt recycled. Brashinsky claims “[the remake] is nothing but a film based on another film that is itself a system of narrative and cinematic properties” (1998:162).

While Brashinsky is contemptuous of such adaptation, I argue Verbinski’s remake can be seen as an aesthetic expression built on reinterpretation, a translation the system of cinematic properties that compose the text of the original *Ringu*. Many of these cinematic properties are visual elements that carry a distinctive cultural connotation. The number 4, a number freighted with terrible implication in Japanese horror, is meaningless to an American audience unless depicted as analogous to the number 13 in Western superstition. Likewise, the popular American belief that it is bad luck to walk under a ladder can substitute for a pair of chopsticks standing straight up and down in a rice bowl.¹ In Hollywood’s remakes of Japanese ghost stories, the central ghost figure – the representation of fear – is often a hybrid construction: the frequently female ghost features East Asian looks, but physically resonates corporeal death. This idea has a counterpart in Japanese cultural ideas about ghosts: too solid, too real, and too earthly.
American horror films have long been obsessed with bodies. On screen ghosts frequently materialize as physical characters. Japanese ghosts are perceived and portrayed, in literary tradition and cinematically, differently than their American counterparts. To the Japanese, ghosts are part of life, and the tales told by this culture are instinctively related to these ghosts, which are usually female. As much as film critics disparage *The Ring* for its flawed representation of the Eastern ghost, many only question the need for a remake of a foreign film, but not its nature. The remake refers back to an original film but its referential nature does not have to be secondary. By studying original material alongside such remakes, considering what is gained or lost in the passage from one medium to another, it is apparent that remakes highlight points of departure from the originals. When a remake deviates in this fashion, it creates a contested space. It is this space I wish to explore. This paper aims to identify the similarities and differences in the rendering of the ghost in American and Japanese media culture in a case study of *The Ring* (2002) and *Ringu* (1998). By approaching these two films from a cultural studies perspective, I argue that *The Ring* replaced the fear of the unseen ghost with denial of death and fear of physicality in the cinematic rendering of the ghost—a common representation visible in the monster motif throughout American horror film history. In doing so, *The Ring* adapts the materiality of bodies, places, and time to American audiences, and reminds them what the horror repressed.

I have chosen to analyze *Ringu* and its American remake, *The Ring*, because *Ringu* is considered the principal film that inspired remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films around the world, particularly in the U.S. market. Among the films that have been remade in Hollywood in the past twelve years, *The Ring* is the first and the most
commercially successful. Given its production cost, estimated at US$45 million, *The Ring* earned more than $129 million in box office sales just in 2002, almost double the amount made by its sequel, *The Ring 2*, two years later. In 2005, the success of another Japanese remake, *The Grudge* (2004), prompted the release of other films such as *Dark Water* (2005), *The Grudge 2* (2006), *Pulse* (2006), and *One Missed Call* (2008).\(^{ii}\) *Ringu* is an essential work of the remake franchise, but the film did more than simply inspire the remake phenomenon—it also revived popular interest in ghost films among other East Asian countries. This resulted in *The Eye* (2002) from Hong Kong, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) from South Korea, and *Shutter* (2004) from Thailand. Each of these films has an avenging ghost motif that was very well received in Asia. On the other hand, what are the origins of Hollywood’s recent fascination with Asian cinema and why do American studios appropriate elements of Asian culture for their own films (beyond the obvious commercial motivation exemplified by the success of *The Ring*)? To answer these questions, some background on Hollywood’s transformation and acculturation of a foreign cinematic mode to Americanized horror would be helpful.

**HOLLYWOOD AND THE REMAKE KING**

Over the years, Hollywood has produced a number of remakes of Asian films, and behind their success have been people with vision who supported the movement. In many ways, Roy Lee, known as the “Remake King,” is responsible for inaugurating the Japanese horror remake trend. He is the movie scout and producer largely credited with discovering *Ringu*, and frequently persuaded DreamWorks to greenlight remakes of films already successful in their respective countries. In the past, Hollywood looked primarily
to European horror and U.S. cult horror films, and Lee realized that Asian horror was an untapped resource. Although he doesn’t speak Japanese, Chinese, or Korean, he is considered “the go-to guy for Asia” in the business. Lee’s job is to watch videos of as many Asian movies as he can, pick those he thinks have potential, and sell the remake rights to Hollywood so they can be turned into “big-budget American spectacles” (Friend, 2003:1). Like Hollywood itself, Lee’s first success of this type was Ringu. After watching it, he immediately showed it to producers at DreamWorks, who opted in on the remake. DreamWorks hired Gore Verbinski to direct their version of the film, The Ring.

Verbinski admitted his first viewing of the Japanese original was a poor VHS copy that seemed to have been handed down at least seven or eight times (Verbinski, 2002:1). Even though his copy of Ringu was without subtitles, Verbinski recalled that it was one of the scariest horrors he had ever watched. The fact that the film revolved around a killer VHS tape was only a coincidence. Lee continued to negotiate remake rights for Hollywood, including those for Ju-On, which would become The Grudge. Between 2001 and 2003 alone, Lee helped American studios option the remake rights to eighteen Asian movies.

Roy Lee’s connections with both American filmmakers and Asian film industries enabled Hollywood to acculturate foreign storylines and go forward with remakes that could appeal to American audiences directly. As a mediator, Lee alters the plots to make the story easier for American audiences to understand and relate to the story without prerequisite knowledge of Asian customs and culture. Lee trusts his own instincts in the production process: “I’m young, I like commercial fare, and I get bored easily. I am the target audience” (Friend, 2003:3). By situating himself as the target audience, Lee expresses his belief that American audiences need connections, lack of ambiguity,
visual excitement in film. In an interview with *Kateigaho*, a Japanese arts and culture magazine, Lee also comments on why he thinks remakes are important: “The film industry is now transcending national borders. The role of Japanese films and how they will be evaluated in Hollywood will depend on how much their original content can directly appeal to the American people,” implying his preference for remakes over subtitled foreign films, and suggesting why such film adaptations need to be made (Heianna, 2005:1). Thus, with the help of Roy Lee, more and more foreign-born films are being remade and introduced into American culture.

Remaking films is often viewed as an act of repackaging artistic ideas and images as commodities. The ideas and meaning of the original are often treated as a fixed entity, and the remake stands as a distorted mirror image of these concepts. However, such conversion is also necessary for a remake to have an impact on audiences unfamiliar with cultural assumptions implicit in the original films. A cinematic conversion (referring to a change to American actors speaking English, and replacement of images) is also very different from adding subtitles to a film. In the latter, the viewing experience changes from direct exposure to the visuals to reading the subtitles as a literary text. Audience preference for watching action over reading cinematic speech shows how arbitrarily the spoken word is tied to visible signs. For American audiences it is more straightforward to experience the story and the visuals firsthand, without translation and inscription of the verbal element, and often the conversion contains new ideas that help to explain the situation in a more familiar cultural context. In other words, American audiences need to experience horror in a way they are able to recognize. At the same time, when a director is presented the original film as a source for adaptation, he or she sees the opportunity for
individual expression as one element in the process. The completed filmic text displays the result of an underlying cultural path of conversion.

**Cultural Diversity and Cognitive Dissonance**

American horror films are distinctive in their visceral violence. The roots of American horror can be traced to the Gothic tradition, particularly literary classics that helped shape these paradigms over the last two centuries. The first influential gothic writing was Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818, followed by *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (Edgar Allen Poe, 1840), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). This is not to exclude classical mythology, populated by monsters such as the Minotaur, Medusa, the Sirens, and Scylla, to name a few. Films that gave life to horror creatures include vampire films such as *Nosferatu* (1922) in the early silent era. Others featured monsters and mad scientists: *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), and *King Kong* (1933). Monster films offered a vision of destruction created by nonhumans, and this kind of cinematic escapism was also employed during the Cold War in films about aliens from outer space. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) best exemplifies fear of the unknown ‘Other,’ and is often seen as a parable about communism. Coming into the 60s, McCarthyism and Red paranoia faded, and the horror genre began integrating film noir elements into psychological thrillers. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) presented Norman Bates, the villain who appears normal but ultimately reveals how monstrous a man can be.

The monsters of horror pictures continued to evolve when the 1970s saw the horror genre turn to the psychological subtext for much of its power, such as in the fear of
the mother-child relationship and of the castrated body under the construct of abjection (cf. Kristeva). *The Exorcist* (1972), to cite a landmark example, featured a demonic spirit who possessed a young girl. Another example of this movement was *Carrie* (1976), the story of an outcast high school girl with telekinetic powers, who ultimately takes revenge on all her schoolmates who reject and tease her throughout the film. The final scene is filled with blood, fire, chaos, and the massacre of ever major character. *Carrie*, together with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978), highlights the genesis of the slasher film. Gore remained popular throughout the 90s with the incredible success of franchises such as the psycho-killer film (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Se7ven*, *Copycat*, *American Psycho*), followed by the apocalypse film (*28 Days Later*, for example) after the September 11th tragedy.

This is not to say that ghosts and haunting are nowhere to be found in American film. Spiritual manifestations in American cinema are frequently materialized, or transfigured into palpable creatures. In her studies of postmodern ghosts, Linda Badley lists a number of films that feature a ghost or a haunted house as central elements (1995:39-64). Films like *The Haunting* (1962), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Ghostbusters* (1984), and *Beetlejuice* (1988) represent spirits by disembodied sounds, images (spirit photographs), or “ectoplasmic residue”—slime, gas, abject leavings—the spirits manifest as an excess of material form. This type of ghost story is often interspersed with pre-adolescent jokes and humor. In other haunted films by the influences of Freudian psychology, Badley argues that “the mind itself had become haunted, . . . the dreaming subject was haunted and dream infiltrated reality” (1995:47). The demonic figure was no longer supernatural, but instead born in the darkest corners of the mind. The dream motif
gave new life to the ghost, resulting in films like *The Shining* (1980) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Badley’s extension of the horror genre to the level of psychological fear blurs the line between ghost films and slasher films. Her research suggests that these films often situate their central haunting as a figment of the imagination or a hallucination caused by a central character’s repressed subconscious. Responding to Badley’s argument, Nicola Nixon points out that horror at the end of the twentieth century “has adopted instead the cultural repression of death as constitutive of its primary horrifying subject” (1995:69). Part of the horror film’s transformation since the 80s has a great deal to do with live burial. Even ghost films cannot escape American horror’s obsession with death and bodily violence. The cinematic embodiment of the return of the dead has resonance with the cultural perception of death as a “failure (of medical care)” that is central to Christian belief generates the notion that a “ghost” is monstrous and wrong. In short, ghosts of American cinema are either representations of corporeal embodiment or psychological otherness. Finally, American ghosts, unlike those of Japan, are rarely gendered as female.

How then, does Japanese horror cinema differ from its Western counterpart? Japanese horror films emerge from culturally specific traditions that feature tales of morality and vengeance rooted in Japanese mythology. In this cinematic tradition, the supernatural manifests primarily in cinematic technique. Japanese horror embodies unique aesthetics such as ambiguity and implication in narrative, empty space, and silence, rather than explicit violence and gore. Japanese horror conveys fear through supernatural absence (such the paranoia that a ghost is watching) rather than supernatural presence. Early Japanese horror can be described as supernatural drama. Quiet, haunting
films like *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953) and the influential folk anthology *Kwaidan* (1964) foreshadowed the rebirth of Japanese spectral films in the 90s. These films disseminated traditional morals such as loyalty, faith, and critiques on greediness. During the same period, many other ghost films were produced, including *Ghost of Hanging in Utsunomiya* (1956), *The Ghosts of Kasane Swamp* (1957), *Ghost Story of Yotsuya* (1959), and *Ghost Story of the Snake Woman* (1968). By the late 60s, Japanese horror cinema increasingly reflected the violence of war. Horror of this period was a graphic exploitation that displayed violence, sadism, and sexual depravity. This type of film is considered “pink film,” a distinct style of Japanese horror centered largely on sexual fetishes. A subgenre that emerged during this time was “pinky violence,” which combined explicit sexual content with graphic brutality, the latter usually aimed at women. As the 80s approached, these films pushed even further with films showing rape, murder, mutilation, and explicit misogyny. By the late 90s, Japanese horror retreated to focus on ghost stories that recalled the 50s, such as *Onmyoji* (2001).

Japanese horror movies trace their roots to Japanese literature of the Heian period (794-1185). Among the novels included in this period are *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, *The Tale of Genji*, and *Tales of Ise*. The spirits in these stories are not always dreadful, nor are they necessarily vengeful. Some spirits are described as existing naturally, as much a part of the world as are people, rather than as supernatural. In Japanese culture, there is an unseen world existing all around, a world in which numerous gods inhabit all natural phenomena. Since ancient times, the Japanese have believed that ancestral spirits protect their descendants and reside among them. Daily life is carried out in awe of the spirits, and during the celebrations of o-Bon in mid-August, every family gathers to
commemorate its ancestral spirits and welcome them on their annual return to this world. In contrast to the Christian belief that the manifestation of the supernatural is fundamentally evil and unnatural, the Japanese believe ghosts are not only earthly entities but also active participants in human affairs. According to Japan’s two dominant religions, Buddhism and Shinto (which have coexisted since the 8th century and share many common beliefs) everything is endowed with a spirit or a soul. Obake, a Japanese word for ghost, litterally means “transforming thing.” Ghosts are often thought the cause of extraordinary events, and any phenomena that transcend the mundane. Even a discarded umbrella may enter the world as an umbrella obake.

While the term obake is used more generally to refer to anything that is strange, the word yurei, similar in meaning to the English word ghost, is a more specific term to describe spirits who were once ordinary people. Yurei are generally considered more frightening, because they are usually the result of sudden death, murder, death in battle, or suicide. In all cases, yurei are the spirits of those who have died of unnatural causes. The trauma of sudden death is compounded by the lack of proper burial, and such a spirit may become an onryo, a tormented ghost who stays among the living in order to seek revenge or otherwise tie up the loose threads of its former life. Most onryo are female ghosts who once suffered in love, and powerful emotions of jealousy, sorrow, and regret fuel desperate malevolence. Onryo seek revenge against the causes of their suffering in life. The source of the horror here is not the spirit itself, but its emotional genesis. The possibility of someone, especially a woman, hating powerfully enough to disfigure herself into a malicious apparition is terrifying to the Japanese psyche. Such a spirit represents the ultimate situation spun out of control, or even the possibility of control. A
typical example of the *onryo* story is a play (*kabuki*) entitled *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (Ghost Story of Yotsuya), or the story of Oiwa, a tale that has been performed in traditional Japanese theater since the Edo period (1603-1868). In the story, the beautiful Oiwa is poisoned by her husband. Because she dies with a grudge, she becomes an *onryo*, her face disfigured by the transformation, and reappears to haunt her husband. Everywhere he goes, he sees her ruined face, even projected from an overhead lantern. While in life the husband was able to command his wife, he is rendered helpless against her in part because of his inability to command her ghost. He is no longer able to act upon his circumstances. In film adaptations, the avenging ghost motif is best depicted as it is in “The Black Hair” chapter of *Kwaidan*, a 1964 film consisting of four stories based on Japanese ghost tales.

“The Black Hair” tells the story of a samurai who left his first wife and remarried into a wealthy family. When returns home to beg for his original wife’s forgiveness, he finds himself haunted by his dead wife’s spirit: the ghostly figure of a skeleton with long, black hair. This image can be traced to Oiwa’s imagined portrait, including her white burial kimono, pale face, and long disheveled hair. This hair, an element common in Japanese ghost imagery, connotes that either the ghost’s corpse was not properly buried, or the ghost was uncivilized and behaved inappropriately in life. Oiwa’s manifestation in a lantern is also carried into modern Japanese cinema. Ghosts frequently materialize through media such as televisions, cell phones, and photographs, objects that serve as contemporary “lanterns” for the ghosts of Japanese cinema.

The Japanese ghost story has a distinguished lineage—plays and film adaptations featuring ghosts form some of the foundational traditions of each medium. Filmmakers
like Kenji Mizoguchi, Masaki Kobayashi, and Nakata Hideo honor their obligation to and acknowledge their awe for the spirits they feature in their works. But the way in which ghosts are featured in these films diverges from the way they are employed in Western Gothic. According to Andrew Hock Soon Ng, ghost stories are a vehicle which writers and readers confront the pride, corruption and jealousy, and suggests that ghost is a metaphor for the rupture of family life and transform such disturbance into tales of unrest (2008:6). In Japanese literature and cinema, ghosts or spirits demonstrates not as punishment after death but continue in different dynamics into the afterlife. Also, Japanese ghosts often are employed to encourage amends between friendship and family affairs and reminiscences, as Ng argues “Ghosts often return not to take revenge, but to seek remembrance and reparation in order to free those who have forgotten from their ancestral and historical debts” (2008:7). Based on Ng’s argument, supernatural occurrences are often the result of the failure to perform one’s obligation to the family, and the ghosts return to encourage the living his or her duty and to remind them not to forget the existence of the dearly departed.

American horror lacks this complex relationship with the ghost. American ghost films, because of the cultural influence of Christianity, often deal with conflicts between the sacred and the profane, or a more direct confrontation between the Devil and God. This particular motif seems to derive from fear of hell and uncertainties toward afterlife. One notion of afterlife (or life after death), common to Judaism and Christianity, is that a resurrection is seen as a reward and death (non-existence) is a punishment. With such a view, the Western treatment of death involves a level of forgetting the past after a period of grief and sorrow as a healthy process of experiencing loss. Ng notes that “In
psychoanalysis, such a prolonged form of mourning is known as melancholia, which to Freud, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, is abnormal and aberrant” (2008:7).

Compared to the Western culture where an extended grief phase is not acceptable or encouraged, the process of mourning in Japan implied a lifelong worship of the ancestors, which entails frequent performed rituals to honor and remember the dead. For example, a family shrine with incense is offered at home and a bowl with a small portion of rice is left on the table for the dead, or in the case of the yearly celebration of o-Bon festival in August. As such, Japanese did not view death and ghosts as threats but welcome them as many rituals assure that the ghosts return back to their own realm of existence after the visit with the living.

Indeed, the gap between American and Japanese culture is immense in this regard. It is through the remake that disparate ideas of ghosts and haunting can be negotiated in a multicultural discourse. The remake operates simultaneously as an interpreter of and a response to an opposing idea of ghosts and hauntings. Although Brashinsky suggests, “The remake has become the most explicit gesture of a culture that finds its psyche in the Other and cannot express itself through anything but a quote” (1998:163), I argue in variation of the cinematic properties the remake interprets is where originality begins.

CASE STUDY: Ringu vs. The Ring

*Ringu* is the story of a cursed videotape that kills anyone who views it seven days after the incident. A television reporter, Reiko (Nanaka Matsushima), tracks down the tape while investigating the mysterious deaths of two such victims. Unsettled by her viewing of the tape, Reiko turns to her ex-husband Ryuji (Hiroyuki Sanada), a
mathematics professor with psychic abilities, for help. Soon, Reiko learns her son Yoichi has also watched the tape. Desperate to unravel the mystery, the couple rush to the island of Oshima to investigate the curse. There, they discover Shizuko, a woman with psychic powers, who is able to read the contents of sealed envelope and cause text to appear on blank sheets of paper. As Reiko and Ryuji unravel the mystery, they unearth evidence of the vindictive ghost Sadako Yamamura, Shizuko’s daughter. Thirty years ago, Sadako was murdered by her stepfather – Shizuko’s husband – for his belief that the girl possessed psychokinetic abilities. He pushed her down a well and left her to drown. Sadako’s powers, however, seem to allow her to imprint her hatred on the video even after death, and the distribution of that video becomes the means by which she wreaks vengeance on the living.

Although Hollywood’s *The Ring* shares a similar narrative structure, it also features obvious alterations. First, the Japanese names and places were changed to be more familiar to an American audience. The career-obsessed single mother, Reiko Akasawa, becomes Rachel Keller; her son, Yoichi, is reinvented as Aidan; and Aidan’s father is Noah rather than Ryuji. The psychic powers that grant Ryuji insight into the spirit world are now possessed by Aidan, Noah’s son, rather than Noah himself. Though the ghost’s name is similarly altered, it is important to note that the name of *The Ring*’s ghost, Samara, contains audible traces of her *Ringu* counterpart’s full name, Sadako Yamamura. The name Samara is neither American nor Japanese, but an alien name that sets the ghost apart. Samara is isolated, alienated, and unloved. While in the Japanese version, Reiko’s neglect toward her son parallels Shizuko’s relationship with Sadako, Rachel’s struggle combining the duties of both single mother and professional reporter is
not the central issue in *The Ring*. The American film also changes Rachel’s relationship with Aidan. Instead of only a mother desperate to protect her child, Rachel is both mother and friend to Aidan, and relies on his prophecies. Not only is he reliant on her for protection as in *Ringu*, but she is reliant on him for information.

These shifts in filial, functional, and emotional relationships are not the only significant difference between *Ringu* and *The Ring*. Also worthy of consideration are matters purely visual: the content of the cursed video and Samara’s altered appearance.

Director Gore Verbinski’s decision to change the images featured on the cursed video is clear evidence of an attempt to “translate” the situation of the video in a Japanese cultural context into a context familiar to American audiences. This effort includes, for example, the substitution of culturally specific signs of Western superstition and folklore (a ladder, horses) for Japanese signifiers with similar meaning (*a kanji*, a volcano). Of particular note in *Ringu*’s cursed video is a montage alluding to *kaidan*, Japanese folktales particular to Edo era Japan, which are often horror stories. The montage features a bright moon filling the ocean-blue sky; a woman brushing her long black hair in front of a mirror; the reflection in the same mirror of a girl dressed in a white *katabira* (a plain, unlined kimono); a floating *kanji* (ideogram) describing a volcanic eruption; men crawling away in fear; a man whose head is covered with a white square cloth; a close-up shot of the word *sada* (貞; chaste) in the pupil of a human eye; and finally, a well. In *The Ring*, the visual signs of the curse of Samara overlap several almost identical images, with subtle but significant variation. For example, the same mirror from *Ringu* reemerges at the opposite side of the wall, but the woman and the child in front of it are not Japanese. The human eye from *Ringu* is replaced with a horse’s eye in *The Ring*, yet both
videotapes end with the same final shot of the well. The rest of the images form a unique cinematic text: what at first appears to be moonlight takes the form of a ring/circle, but is later discovered to be the view from the bottom of a well, corresponding to the ring motif present throughout the film; disjointed images of an external view of a house, a cliff, a needle penetrating an index finger, phallic object emerging from a person’s mouth, maggots, a pig tail, a burning tree, a chair swirling upside down in the air, a ladder falling down, and ocean waves breaking on stones. Taking aside the way each videotape transmits its respective film’s motifs, they drive the narratives in two different directions. Elements that are associated with Japanese culture, such as *kanji*, volcanoes, and kimonos, are taken out and are replaced by maggots, blood, and a ladder suggesting misfortune. Unlike Sadako’s manifestation of the montage, most of the images in *The Ring*’s video are not explicated in subsequent narrative.

*The Ring* writer Ehren Kruger explains Verbinski’s decision to photograph a new set of images for the cursed video as a result of the desire to leave the video open for interpretation (Kruger, 2002: 53-55). Unlike in *Ringu*, in which the video carries its own meaning, the video featured in *The Ring* is less explicable, but at the same time related more strongly to the film’s narrative. Examples of images from the video manifesting in Rachel’s world, such as the fly emerging from the video tape through a monitor or Rachel’s visit to the Morgan horse farm on Moesko Island following the appearance of a horse’s eye in the video, foreshadow the end of the film. The videotape in Nakata’s *Ringu* functions as more than a provider of clues. It is instead a *result* of the dream logic—every image is explicative, but what is ambiguous and obscure links to *why* it is and *what* it does. The American remake operates in the opposite way; the film explicitly resolves the
mystery of Samara, but doesn’t explicate the images in terms of Samara’s lived experience. The videotape, in *The Ring*, is left a cipher. By disassociating the video from the events of Samara’s life, by rendering its images irrelevant to the ghost figure, Verbinksi’s film actively invites new readings of cinematic reproductions. The videotape is not merely a vehicle to put forward the narrative, but operates as visual rhetoric itself. The images rely on the viewer’s familiarity with *The Ring*’s particular cultural context for their meaning. The original images in *Ringu* are the visualization of Sadako’s compulsions, whereas the American version reflects Samara’s actions and fears.

Kruger comments, “If there were a way to make it a little more frightening, in that everything that’s on it doesn’t necessarily have a correlation in the story. There are some ambiguous, bizarre, obscure things, in an experimental way” (Kruger, 2002:53). Kruger here suggests an inclination to show what he feels is more obvious or familiar, and the result is a version more concerned with body horror than the original *Ringu*. Maggots, blood, obstructing objects, a mouth, an index finger, and a pig tail—these images trigger an unpleasant and visceral reaction in Western viewers, thanks in part to the link between medical fear and the treatment of illness and injury. Fear of death is also evident in the ongoing social obsession in the West with science and medical technology, apparent since the Industrial Revolution and showing no sign of decline. The association is blatant, but it is a direct reflection on how the Christian West approaches the concept of ghosts: monstrous, wrong, demonic, and a defiance of death. Sarah Ball argues the original fear found in *Ringu*’s cursed video, “a cultural and social explosion of repression [in Japan], has been replaced with a fear that a large, geographically diverse nation such as the United States can easily recognize: death” (2006:41). Perhaps Verbinski felt the need to
revise the logic of the narrative because “the Western desire for linearity and resolution are so destructive to a film like [Ringu]” (Meikle, 2005:169). The director can express a different type of horror imagery with a videotape that owes much to his own imagination, or his own dream logic. The compelling aspect of this visual representation is that it ultimately leaves footprints to the door of human psychological fear.

Another attribute worth noting is the rendition of Sadako in The Ring. In addition to the previously mentioned change of her name, Sadako/Samara’s Asian features have been minimized to only long black or brownish hair, and she wears a frock (Fig. 1). Her long hair no longer obscures her face, and she wears socks and shoes (differing from Sadako’s bare feet) (Fig. 2). Meikle describes Samara as a “Gothic monster, whose corporeal form lies not dead but sleeping in a dank, underground cavern near a mysterious volcanic isle,” “Death Incarnate,” and “not an image…a virus; she is real” (2005:169-193). Meikle’s choice of words, such as “Gothic monster,” “Death Incarnate,” and “virus” present the Western idea of a ghost as essentially the return (rebirth) of the dead, more acceptable to American audiences than Japan’s transforming Sadako.

The reconstruction of Sadako/Samara’s appearance is even more drastic in the cabin sequence and in the climactic scene of her emergence from the video/TV. The cabin sequence in particular is very different in The Ring from the original film (Fig. 3). Unlike in Ringu where Reiko and Ryuji plan the rescue of Sadako’s corpse with a bucket and ropes, Rachel and Noah are forced into discovering the reason behind the death of Samara and the connection between her hatred and the cursed video. When Rachel and Noah return to the cabin and discover the well underneath the room, they also encounter supernatural forces. First, a swarm of flies bursts in and knocks Noah down. The
television flickers to life and lurches into Rachel, pushing her into the well. In the swamp of murky water and floating black hair, a dead hand clutches Rachel by the arm. The corpse appears, which itself turns into a young girl as Rachel holds it. Samara’s face is revealed. Her white Sunday dress, standing in for Sadako’s white kimono, strips away the dead body/immortal factor, investing her as a tragic figure (Fig. 4). This harmless look creates a major contrast with the final scene. When Samara emerges from the television to attack Noah, her attack does not remain a slow crawl, but instead picks up speed as she draws closer. Samara’s face is dominated by putrescent green skin, reminiscent of a Gothic zombie (Fig. 5). Samara’s victims all have similarly decayed skin, very different from Sadako’s victims in Ringu, whose faces are simply frozen in fear (Fig. 6 & 7).

These changes, in essence, bring depression and mental disorder, malignancy, and a sense of danger to the more cathartic fear of the Japanese version (Fig. 8). The Ring’s portrayal of graphic visual details suggests the American remake is less interested in what inspires Sadako/Samara’s curse than with what happens after her awakening. The gruesome shots of the victims’ horrified faces depict the horror of physical death rather than spiritual pain. In Meikle’s words, “for all its self-professed Christian certainties, it is Death, rather than imaginary phantoms, which still petrifies the West” (2005:192). Whereas Ringu’s audience is offered no escape from Sadako’s curse, Verbinski’s The Ring offers a Gothic setting inhabited by monstrous corpses, in which mortals can strive to understand the complexities of an unknown realm: death.

Verbinski’s alteration of the video and his gruesome depiction of Samara reflect a different cultural concept of the ghost. The Ring expresses the original’s fear of the female ghost, yet extends itself to examine a contrasting, visceral fear of death. What
makes *The Ring* frightening is its portrayal of grisly death, not Sadako’s/Samara’s unbound spirit. The root of the remake’s unpleasantness is what the ghost can *do* instead of what the ghost *is*. Japanese audiences fear Sadako because ghosts represent an escape from the material body, and therefore violate the boundaries between the living and the dead. American audiences fear instead Samara’s materialization, the ghost’s capacity to harm the living.

To conclude, I wish to refer back to the question of remakes and their relationship to their original counterparts. National and historical conditions constitute different cultural renditions of the ghost. Instead of forcing a new audience to identify with unfamiliar horror imagery particular to the cultural context in which original films are made, remakes of horror films enable this new audience to experience familiar elements of horror alongside motifs to which it has never been exposed. Translating original films into remakes produces new meaning in the filmic text and disconnects the audience from the film’s original cultural context, but it also liberates the audience by lessening the determining influence the original cultural context exerts on the viewing experience.

1: Samara in *The Ring*. 
2: The original Sadako: bare feet and hair covering her face at all times.

3: Reiko holding Sadako’s corpse.
4: Uncovering Samara from the well.

5: Samara’s Gothic look.

6: Sadako’s victim in *Ringu*.

7: Katie’s gruesome face.
8: *Ringu*’s worst nightmare: Sadako’s unsettling gaze.
NOTES

i Vertical chopsticks symbolize burning incense sticks, a gesture offered to the deceased during funerals and sometimes as a form of sacrificial offering to a deity.


iii Kruger explains to Den Shewman of *Creative Screenwriting*, “There were a lot of discussions of what precisely the nature of the videotape should be…In the Japanese film, it’s very strange imagery, but every image plans an expository role; every image is explained (more or less). I thought it would be nice, and Gore felt the same way, if the videotape was a little less straightforward in our version” (Kruger, 2002:54).
References


