4. The Moral Dimension of the Supernatural Media Virus in the *Ring* Franchise

> "In order to protect my family, I am about to let loose on the world a plague which could destroy all mankind. Asakawa was frightened by the essence of what he was trying to do. A voice was whispering to him. If I let my wife and daughter die, it'll end right here. If a virus loses its host, it'll die. I can save mankind. But the voice was too quiet."
> *Kōji Suzuki, Ring*

> "In many societies, epidemics are viewed as unnatural events brought on by various taboo violations. Even in modern Western cultures, victim blaming and viewing disease as punishment from God are frequent. Throughout history, disease has often been blamed on 'outsiders,' as defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. In Western cultural concepts, disease is considered unnatural, and the genesis of disease is best placed as far from 'people like us' as possible."
> *Susan C. McCombie, "AIDS in Cultural, Historic, and Epidemiologic Context"*

4.1 *Ring* as a Cross-Cultural Example of the Supernatural Media Virus

"Seven days," a childlike voice tells the journalist Rachel Keller after she has picked up the phone. The implication of these words: in a week, exactly seven days after watching a mysterious videotape, Rachel will die. After this, a quest for the origin and meaning of the confusing tape be-

gins, the contents of which are made up of a juxtaposition of disorienting and unsettling images. The stakes are raised significantly after her son, Aidan, also watches the tape. Rachel traces the tape back to the supernaturally gifted girl Samara Morgan, who went missing decades previously, while supported by her ex-boyfriend and Aidan's father, Noah.

This is the premise of the 2002 US blockbuster horror movie *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski. A remake of the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), Verbinski's film was not only financially highly successful, grossing more than $230 million worldwide, but furthermore kicked off a wave of American remakes of Asian horror films (Lacefield 2010b: 1-2), which included the films *Kairo* and *Pulse*, which I discuss in Chapter Five. *Ringu*, in turn, is an adaptation of a 1991 novel written by Kōji Suzuki, entitled *Ring*.[1] While Suzuki's novels are available in English today, they were translated only after the movies' success. Over the years, *Ring* has grown into an incredibly large and complex franchise, which has been adapted to diverse media (novels, comics/manga, films, television series, video games) and cultures (Japan, the US, South Korea) and which continues to grow to this day. As recent as 2019, the film *Sadako* (dir. Hideo Nakata) once again unleashes the curse of the evil spirit – this time in the form of a viral YouTube video.

Of all of the narratives discussed here, *Ring* provides the most explicit portrayal of the supernatural media virus. Unlike the other fictions discussed, this franchise explicitly ties the virus to a moral dilemma, one in which selfish behavior threatens to induce the apocalypse. While each of the narrative's numerous installments adds its own twists and innovations, the premise of most texts stays true to the original novel's plot: an evil ghost creates a supernatural media virus that threatens to wipe out all of mankind, its spread being facilitated by the omnipresence of media and the selfishness of human beings.

1 This complexity necessitates that the terminology used in this chapter to discuss the franchise be specific and unambiguous. Hence, Suzuki's novel, as well as the franchise at large, are referred to as *Ring*; the Japanese film adaptation is referred to as *Ringu*, whereas the US adaptation is labeled *The Ring*.

The only means of surviving the curse is by copying the corruptive medium and passing it on to another human being. The infected are forced to become complicit in the virus' spread if they want to survive.

In this chapter, I examine the moral dilemma that lies at the center of *Ring*, and how it connects to two focal points: first, the city as a tangible representation of the network society. Metropolises, such as Tokyo or Seattle, feature broadly in each installment. These cities comprise networks, consisting of streets, buildings, institutions, businesses, and people. It is within such networks that *Ring*'s supernatural media virus poses the greatest danger, exploiting both the city's anonymity and population density, in which people might not think twice about infecting another person in order to survive themselves.

Second, a theme of interest is the affordances of the corruptive medium as well as the social practices elicited by these media technologies and *the* media. Videotapes are easily copied and passed on to other people. It is important to consider the production and consumption mechanisms that are enabled by such a medium. Significantly, the institutions behind such content – the news and entertainment media – are implicated in the viral process as well. In most texts of the franchise, it is their desire for better and more dramatic stories that lets the virus loose on society.

Considering its complex, vast structure, the franchise has often been regarded as a virus in itself: spawning numerous copies in the forms of sequels, prequels, adaptations, and remakes, all spreading from one culture to the next. While originating from the same novel, many of these installments are unrelated, stand-alone entries: for instance, the sequels to the Japanese and US American film adaptations are not related to the novel's sequels. Hence, the franchise has branched out to "evolve" multiple narrative strands. These strands, in turn, have mutated to fit their cultural and historical contexts: in later installments, such as the abovementioned *Sadako* (2019), the curse can exploit digital technologies as well.

Ring offers insight into the changing perceptions of the network society over the years, as well as across distinct cultures, precisely because it is such a large franchise. It is useful to view the franchise through

the lens of Hutcheon's theory of adaptation: the "original" text is by no means superior to its adaptations (2006: 9). Instead, these adaptations reveal the cultural context of the narrative and should be regarded as a form of "evolution" (ibid: 31). In the case of *Ring*, the metaphor of evolution must be applied not only to the numerous adaptations within the franchise, but also to its sequels and prequels. It is this value of adaptation and franchising that Valerie Wee builds upon in her analysis of Japanese horror ("J-horror") films and of their remakes: "acts of repetition, copying, adoption, and adaptation can be appreciated as activities that, far from merely diminishing the artistic and cultural value of each subsequent iteration, can actually contribute to the text's and the medium's richness, sophistication, and intricacy" (2014: 24). Readers and viewers are invited to read between these texts and to engage critically with their differences. Tracing these mutations can yield insight into how the texts "trigger unexpected echoes in unexpected places," as Felski phrases it (2015: 160). *Ring* would not be so successful or continue to fascinate a global audience almost thirty years after its original novel was published if it did not resonate with this audience's interests and concerns.

However, this analysis focuses primarily on the original novel *Ring* (1991) as well as its highly successful Japanese and US American adaptations, *Ringu* (1998) and *The Ring* (2002), given that a discussion of the entire franchise, with its more than twenty entries, would go far beyond the scope of this chapter. These installments present *Ring*'s supernatural media virus' *modus operandi* most clearly. The discussion touches upon some of the franchise's other entries only where it is fruitful to do so. This way, it is possible to trace the mutations of the *Ring* franchise and the supernatural media virus represented therein, taking the diverse facets of its evolution – cultural, historical, and media-related – into account.

Critics have discussed the franchise extensively. The diverse contributions in Kristen Lacefield's collection *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in* The Ring (2010a), for instance, predominantly explore the complex interrelations of technology, sexuality, and gender throughout the entire franchise. Some analyses in the collection discuss the theme of mon-

strous motherhood and uncanny reproduction (Jackson 2010; Tomlinson 2010; Haque 2010; Brooks 2010); others engage in a Baudrillardian reading of Sadako's/Samara's "birth" from the television into the real world (Tirrell 2010; Jackson 2010). Another approach to the franchise singles out the dynamics of adaptation that guided the transformation of *Ring* across media and cultures (Wright 2010; Wee 2010; Rawle 2010). Wee in *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes* (2014) analyzes not only how ideologies and cultural values are changed during the adaptation process, but also how each of the story's iterations is guided by culturally specific narrative structures and aesthetic conventions.

A discussion of the Japanese horror tradition and its intersections with Western Gothic conventions is essential to any detailed analysis of the *Ring* franchise. Therefore, I outline some of the basic differences between the entries into the franchise in terms of plot, storytelling, and aesthetics in the following subsection. Subsequently, building on the notion of Globalgothic, this section introduces the central features of J-horror narratives and their cultural contexts.

This chapter's third section, "The Metropolis as a Figuration of the Network Society," focuses on the representation of the network society by taking the lingering threat of apocalypse in each installment as its starting point. Social interactions and interpersonal contact are of great importance in the narratives. Whereas *Ghostwatch* and *House of Leaves* can be read as a Gothic haunted house tale, *Ring* shifts the focus from the singular house to the city at large. Densely populated, mediasaturated urban spaces take on a central function and become a tangible representation of the network; *Ring*'s supernatural media virus finds its ideal breeding ground in these megacities. Significant differences between the distinct texts reveal unique insights into the network society and about its implications. *The Ring*, for instance, Orientalizes its antagonist and, in so doing, tells a conventional tale of dangerous, exotic outsiders and the worrisome permeability of hitherto stable boundaries. In this regard, the adaptation closely follows the outbreak narrative's formula. Exploring the virus metaphor's full potential and its use in such narratives of disease, the evil spirit in *Ring* cannot be contained by binary categories, but instead comprises a messy disruption of di-

chotomies, exploiting the affordances of the network society to spread everywhere.

In the final section, I discuss the virus' viral vectors and its hosts. Each medium comes with unique technical properties and social practices: for example, some media are easy to copy and share whereas others are not; these features motivate different ways of interacting with the medium. The centrality of this relationship between the technical and behavioral trajectories is underlined by the mutation of the supernatural media virus throughout sequels as well as the "evolution" of the franchise itself down through the decades. The significance of the interaction between virus and host in *Ring* becomes approachable by analyzing these media's distinct features throughout the franchise. A moral dilemma resides at the heart of the franchise: a person must infect another human being in order to survive. Hosts spread the infection knowingly, endangering the network society and possibly inducing the end of mankind. In the Japanese iterations of the story in particular, the responsibility that each individual has for the community at large is foregrounded.

Significantly, the evil spirit's origin story, as well as the eventual spread of its curse, is intricately connected to the news and entertainment media. The narrative centers on the practices and habits tied to their production (journalists seeking out a new story at all costs) and consumption (an audience that continuously needs to be entertained). *Ring* underlines the implication that news media capitalize on sadistic voyeurism, consuming the pain of others for entertainment, and that spectatorship makes one potentially complicit in the acts of violence that are performed. This becomes apparent through the curse's infection mechanisms: the tape is an account of Sadako's/Samara's suffering; those who dare watch it become its victims. Significantly, the curse forces its victims to victimize others by exposing them to the corruptive medium if they wish to survive. Carriers of the virus are no longer passive recipients, but instead become agents of the virus' continued circulation.

4.2 Japanese Horror Traditions: The *Kaidan* and Globalgothic

There are significant differences between each version of *Ring* in terms of both storytelling and aesthetic presentation. In the novel, the protagonist is a male reporter, Kazuyuki Asakawa, who must save both his wife Shizuka and daughter Yoko from the tape's deadly powers with the aid of his high school friend Ryūji Takayama. In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, the protagonist is a woman, Reiko Asakawa/Rachel Keller, struggling to save the life of her son Yōichi Asakawa/Aidan Keller with the help of her ex-lover Ryūji Takayama/Noah Clay. Furthermore, there are substantial differences regarding the backstory of the evil spirit Sadako Yamamura/Samara Morgan – the only thing common to all versions is that she was killed by being thrown into an old stone well. In the novel, Sadako is a young woman at the time of her death, which occurred thirty years prior to Asakawa's discovery of the tape. She is intersex and, having been raped shortly before her violent death, she is also a carrier of smallpox. In Suzuki's novel, the Ring virus is hence the fusion of the smallpox virus with her supernatural abilities. Neither the woman's "[t]esticular feminization syndrome" (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 224)[2] nor her rape and resulting smallpox infection were included in either of the two film adaptations, where Sadako/Samara is instead a young girl. The news media are central to the narrative, albeit to different degrees, in all three versions of the tale. In the novel as well as its Japanese adaptation *Ringu*, the news media played a significant role in Sadako and her family's demise. *The Ring*, by contrast, details how Samara was studied as a scientific object for most of her life. In the American version, the potentially detrimental impact of the news media on a person's life is introduced mainly via Rachel's job as a journalist in search for her next big story. Lastly, whereas the spirit's victims die of "sudden heart failure" in the novel (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 22), both movies portray a virtual

2 Today, this condition is referred to as "androgen insensitivity syndrome" (Haque 2010: 191).

Sadako/Samara climbing out of a television set into reality at their respective climax, literally breaking through the fourth wall and killing her victims by looking at them.

Each version is shaped by its cultural contexts, particularly in terms of aesthetics and narrative strategies. Whereas the Japanese tradition oftentimes privileges "decentered positions and fragmentation" (Blouin 2013: 122) and "emotion over reason, mood over coherence, form over narrative, and presentation over representation" (Wee 2014: 82), American storytelling instead tends to favor goal-oriented protagonists, a cause-and-effect progression, and narrative linearity (ibid: 34; Blouin 2013: 121).[3] For instance, *Ringu* largely leaves the videotape's precise meaning unexplained; *The Ring*, in contrast, offers explanations for the contents of the tape as well as the mechanisms behind the curse by adding an in-depth backstory for the entire Morgan family. During her investigation, Rachel repeatedly comes upon images and objects mirroring shots from the tape, which add another piece of the puzzle to her research into the Morgans. The curse's incubation period amounts to seven days because Samara survived for a week in the well. Samara is subjected to intense scientific research in *The Ring*; this fits alongside the attempts to explain every aspect of the cursed videotape.

It is fruitful to regard *Ring* in terms of the "Globalgothic," a conceptualization of the Gothic that considers the cross-cultural influences of narrative traditions, instead of restricting the mode to either a British or American context (Byron 2012: 373). The tale of the vengeful spirit of a wronged woman/girl haunting the world of the living from beyond her grave is not a convention exclusive to the Western literary canon; instead, it has a long tradition in the Japanese supernatural story, the *kaidan*,[4] as well. While each of these traditions has its unique traits, cross-pollination continues to shape them to this day. Whereas Gothic

3 Wee explores this argument in her comparative close reading of the videotape in *Ringu* and *The Ring*. For more information, consult Chapter 3 in her study *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes* (2014).

4 The term is sometimes transliterated as "*kwaidan*" instead. However, I refer to the terminology as used by scholars such as Wee (2014) and McRoy (2005), denoting Japanese ghost stories as "*kaidan*."

fiction has been discussed in detail in the Introduction, it is necessary at this point to discuss Japanese conventions and to illustrate their connection to the Globalgothic.

The *kaidan* has been a popular genre in Japanese culture since the Edo period (1603-1867) and achieved global fame during the 20th century through Japanese horror cinema. As Jay McRoy writes, J-horror films

> draw on a multiplicity of religious traditions (Shintoism, Christianity, etc.), as well as the plot devices from traditional literature and theatre (including Noh theatre's *shunen-* [revenge-] and *shura-mono* [ghost-plays], and Kabuki theatre's tales of the supernatural [or *kaidan*]). (2005: 3)[5]

The *kaidan* – both its literary and cinematic examples – usually focuses on an unquiet and vengeful *onryō* ("spirit" or "ghost"), which in most cases is a female, haunting the world of the living and seeking revenge on those who wronged her (Wee 2014: 29). These supernatural creatures are not evil by nature, but are rather made evil by other peoples' wrongdoing or neglect. The relationship between the individual and the community, as well as the responsibility each carries for the other, thus comprise important elements of the Japanese ghost story.

The notion of evil constitutes a central difference between the narrative conventions of the Japanese *kaidan* and the Western Gothic tradition. Whereas the latter tends to conceive of good and evil as two forces battling for dominance, the former instead favors a dualistic view grounded in balance and symmetry (Wee 2014: 58-59). The equilibrium is disrupted by the actions of irresponsible individuals:

> The Japanese perspective is […] founded on notions of morality that are determined by questions of responsible, dutiful, and honorable behavior, which are most commonly equated with honoring one's social and communal responsibilities. Consequently, Japanese cultural

5 For a detailed discussion of Japanese traditional theater and its influence on film, consult Balmain (2008).

> narratives are less concerned with evaluating characters and their actions in terms of any prevailing notions of good and evil, and more interested in examining them in the light of right/socially acceptable behavior or wrong/socially irresponsible behavior. (ibid: 60)

Harmful spirits are the result of a person neglecting their social duties. It is those communal responsibilities that are especially important in traditional Japanese narratives, defining the relationship between the individual and its community – the family, the corporation, and the community at large.

With the Allied Occupation after World War II, however, these social values began to change, as Western ideas were imposed through legislative rulings to suppress what was seen as premodern Japanese traditions. Hence, emphasis was laid on democracy instead of imperial supremacy, on individualism instead of collectivism, and the Japanese patriarchal *ie* system was supplanted with a more liberal view, enabling a greater degree of gender equality (ibid: 40). This forced modernization, and the fact that the former colonial power was now being colonized itself, had profound effects on Japan's sense of nationhood and identity (Balmain 2008: 8, 21). The arising tension between tradition and modernity has shaped Japan's cultural landscape significantly, including Japanese horror narratives. In a small, easy to miss instance, Suzuki's *Ring* directly ties Sadako's mother's supernatural abilities to the Allied Occupation. As part of their modernization policies, the Occupation forces throw a religious statue into the ocean near Shizuko's home; it is after diving for this statue of the mystic Ascetic En no Ozunu that the woman first exhibits her supernatural abilities. Later, she passes these powers on to her daughter and these eventually enable Sadako to create the supernatural media virus after her death (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 191-3). Without the Occupation forces' intervention in centuries-old Japanese traditions, Sadako and her curse might have never been born.

The 1990s in particular proved to be a decade of great change and turmoil in Japan, and it was during this decade that the horror tradition changed most notably. While the country was undergoing rapid

modernization, Japan also suffered from a wide range of political, social, and economic problems, such as governmental inefficacy and domestic terrorism, as exemplified by the Aum Shinrikyo attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995 (Wee 2014: 16-17). Social problems were alarming, ranging from death by overwork and "classroom collapse," to isolation and alienation, all of which resulted in the loss of shared communal responsibility and in individuals' complete withdrawal from society, and finally to rising gender tensions and familial dysfunction (ibid: 17). Children and young adults were regarded as being at risk of developing the inability to participate in meaningful human relationships and communication; accordingly, there was a growing anxiety that these factors might spawn "warped children who eventually emerge as either vulnerable victims or vengeful villains" (ibid: 57). In the wake of these developments, an increasing number of Japanese horror narratives, including the film *Ringu*, feature uncanny or even monstrous children. This concern with "warped children" may also be the reason why the Japanese film adaptation casts Sadako as a girl, instead of a grown woman.

This juxtaposition of the modern and the premodern continues to shape Japanese narratives even today. Ramie Tateishi describes J-horror's treatment of this rupture as a kind of layering: "Considered in terms of the framework of modernity discourse as it relates to the horror film genre, every such step in the process of modernisation might be seen as the addition of another 'layer' that further distances the past from the present" (Tateishi 2003: 295-296). As he goes on to explain, there are two possible reactions to this layering: cultural nostalgia or an active destruction of the premodern. It is particularly this latter response that appears most frequently in J-horror:

> This response entails a form of *active destruction*, insofar as it involves a wiping away of the previous foundation in order to construct a new one. […] [T]he elements that characterized the past are (re-)defined as chaotic and/or monstrous, embodying the spirit of primal irrationality that is supposed to have threatened and worked against the new, modern way of thinking. (ibid: 296, original emphasis)

In an attempt to vindicate new and modern perspectives, the past must be rendered primitive, even though it may be the very foundation upon which this supposedly progressive world is built. Significantly, such representations of the past, as a chaotic force encroaching upon the present, are not exclusive to Japan, but can also feature in the anglophone Gothic tradition. In fact, closer inspection reveals that the *kaidan* and the Gothic are highly compatible.

One possible reason for J-horror's rise in global popularity during the second half of the 20th century might be its potential for introducing fresh ideas to the then highly conventionalized and tired Hollywood horror, which was largely constructed around predictable, well-known plots and long-established characters. To give an example, the franchises *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* had released their ninth and seventh installments, respectively, by the time *Ringu* was released in Japan. Wes Craven's meta-horror slasher film *Scream* (1996) was regarded as a highlight of the decade, simply because it self-consciously commented on the genre's predictable conventions; ironically, this meta-horror film itself had spawned its third, highly formulaic sequel by the time *The Ring* was released.

While J-horror films such as *Ringu* added new blood to the Hollywood heritage, they also resonated with Western audiences in that they featured recognizable issues and topics. The situation in Japan at the close of the 20th century may have been unique, but tensions between tradition and modernization in general are a recurring source of anxiety in fictions from many diverse narrative traditions. Due to "its conceptual universality (fear of tech)" as well as the simple, recognizable premise of the supernatural curse, *Ring* is "translatable across cultural divides" (Lee 2020: 191). While there are certainly wide variations in cultural-historical contexts and narrative modes across cultures, there are also "continuities and commonalities between imaginary supernatural, spectral and monstrous forms in fiction, film, fashion, media, music and culture" (Botting/Edwards 2013: 12). In fact, there are numerous narrative modes and genres which are comparable to the Gothic:

> Not only has Western gothic travelled but one of the effects of the increasing mobility and fluidity of people and products in the globalised world has been a growing awareness that the tropes and strategies Western critics have associated with the gothic, such as the ghost, the vampire and the zombie, have their counterparts in other cultures, however differently these may be inflected by specific histories and belief systems. (Byron 2013b: 3)

Remaking *Ringu* and other Japanese horror movies for an American context, therefore, required only a few changes to be made in terms of storytelling and aesthetics in order to create films that, while introducing new and unexpected elements, were nonetheless comprehensible to a Western audience. For example, with their portrayal of the vengeful spirit as the ghost of an innocent female, bearing long black hair and a distorted face, disfigured features, long white robes, and unnatural movements, both Nakata's and Verbinski's films explicitly build on the conventions of the *kaidan* and the cinematic representation of the *onryō* (Wee 2014: 36; McRoy 2005: 3; Balmain 2008: 47). While Samara is recognizable to a Western audience as a ghost, her distinct appearance, inspired by Japanese imaginations of the *onryō*, introduce some degree of novelty to the film.

This is not to say that J-horror can or should be read using concepts developed for the Anglo-American Gothic exclusively, nor is it true that J-horror is a narrative form that is culturally disparate from and entirely unrelated to other cultures. Claims to a "national cinema" are highly problematic in that they essentialize a multifaceted range of films as one coherent category (Balmain 2008: 26). As Baryon Tensor Posadas explains, this line of argumentation is especially controversial when it comes to the topic of J-horror:

> The irony here is that J-Horror is perhaps an exemplary transnational form, made possible precisely through the processes of globalization. Thus, contrary to any claims as to their supposed cultural particularity, the genre of J-Horror from the outset already imbricates the production and commodification of nationality through the circulation of images. (2014: 450)

J-horror and globalization are interwoven, with the former often intentionally being produced for an international market. This certainly holds true for movies such as *Ringu*, but also *Kairo*, which I discuss in the next chapter, counts as an example of J-horror's deliberate transnational appeal. Cross-cultural influences between these distinct narrative and aesthetic traditions need to be acknowledged.

Japanese narratives not only exploit the affordances of globalization to reach a wider audience, but they often also have globalization and its effects as their central theme. As the world is growing ever more complex, with information and capital moving from one space to another instantly and invisibly, it is no surprise that archaic magical beings are once again being invoked in the Globalgothic (Botting/Edwards 2013: 11). Globalization's most valuable commodities are ghostlike and detached from material confinements. Fictions such as *Ring* illustrate the horrors of a "technology-based Global Village" (Edwards 2015b: 5), in which technology and humanity are pitted against one another. Inhuman technologies threaten to initiate the ultimate demise of mankind and to make humans complicit in the process. Kimberly Jackson identifies this interest in apocalyptic, self-determined technology as typical of 21st century horror in general:

> Anxieties about the end of humanity are intimately linked in these films with the perception that technology, particularly media technology, has begun to take on a life of its own and that the human subject is no longer the determining factor in how reality is constructed or experienced. (2013: 4)

The ghost of Sadako/Samara regains aspects of her corporeality through the media technologies that she exploits. In other words, *Ring* portrays not only the Gothic return of the past into the present, but specifically portrays a return made possible by the affordances of modernity. The technologies that the spirit uses – *tele*-phones, *tele*-visions, *mass* media, and even *networked* digital media in later installments – expand her powers significantly, allowing her to haunt not only the individual responsible for her death, but rather cast her supernatural media virus over vast distances and to wreak havoc on a global scale. *Ring* ex-

plores the fears regarding the costs at which such modern media are produced and consumed by entertainment industries and thrill-seeking audiences, respectively.

4.3 The Metropolis as a Figuration of the Network Society

Japanese popular culture has been dominated by apocalyptic imagery since the second half of the 20th century (Posadas 2014: 430). One famous example of this predominance is the 1954 film *Godzilla* (dir. Ishirō Honda). Since then, there has been a continuous stream of fictions featuring end of the world fantasies. Of course, this trend is not limited to Japan alone, but can be witnessed in other cultures as well. For several decades, pop culture has been repeatedly overrun by zombies, killer viruses, aliens, and evil technologies.

At first glance, *Ring* is a traditional ghost story: an unrightful, brutal murder causes the vengeful spirit of the victim to haunt its perpetrators, even after death, until the victim's sad demise is revealed and her remains are buried properly. However, by fusing this well-known, conventionalized type of monster with media technologies, as well as the logic of viral infection and the network society, she is imbued with great apocalyptic potential. The spirit's powers are directly tied to the modern world's affordances. While *Ring* does not engage in large-scale destruction explicitly, it does continuously carry apocalyptic undertones, implying that the supernatural tape may endanger the entire globe, due both to the nature of the curse as well as the conditions of modern society.

The threat of apocalypse becomes most tangible during each installment's ending. In each version, the protagonist consciously decides to pass the cursed tape on to another human being in order to save their child's life. Expressing the potential impact of this decision, every narrative concludes on a foreboding note. The novel *Ring* ends with its protagonist Asakawa on his way to meet his wife and daughter. Since both are infected, Asakawa intends to have them copy the tape and to show

it to his parents. During the ride, he imagines the consequences of this plan:

> *What effect is this going to have? With my wife's copy and my daughter's copy, the virus is going to be set free in two directions – how's it going to spread from there?* […] It really wasn't very difficult to make a copy and show it to someone – so that's what people would do. As the secret traveled by word of mouth, it would be added to: "You have to show it to someone who hasn't seen it before." And as the tape propagated the week's lag time would probably be shortened. People who were shown the tape wouldn't wait a week to make a copy and show it to someone else. How far would this ring expand? […] [D]riven by fear, people would start to spread crazy rumors. Such as: *Once you've seen it you have to make at least two copies, and show them to at least two different people*. It'd turn into a pyramid scheme, spreading incomparably faster than it would just one tape at a time. In the space of half a year, everybody in Japan would have become a carrier, and the infection would spread overseas. (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 280-281, original emphases)

Asakawa realizes how, as rumors and fears regarding the tape grow, the number of deadly copies will increase – this will result in a "pyramid scheme" of infection. Ultimately, once Japan is infected with the curse, carriers will take copies overseas to find salvation there. The journalist's journey on the transport network as he ponders this potentially catastrophic spread is highly symbolic: not only does this scene foreground the channels through which the contagion may spread across far distances, his journey also proves that he is willing to ensure the continued existence of the supernatural media virus, even though Asakawa is fully aware of the consequences. He is a carrier of the virus in the literal sense, an agent of the disease's geographic dissemination.

This symbolic meaning of the highway is further developed in *Ringu*. The movie copies the ending of the novel, portraying the female protagonist Reiko Asakawa traveling in her car on the highway as well. As the camera cuts from a shot of Reiko's car on the highway to a close-up of a VCR and the tape on the passenger seat and finally to her face, voice-over dialogue between two undisclosed girls recapitulates the rules of

the videotape, hinting at the consequences Reiko's present decisions will have eventually. The film's final shot foreshadows the curse's future implications: Reiko's car travels on an empty highway towards dark, menacing storm clouds. A caption is displayed revealing the exact date; this extra-diegetic calendar caption is inserted into the movie multiple times, tracing the passage of time and Reiko's race against death (see Fig. 4.1). Inserting the date at this point, when the journalist supposedly is saved from the curse, implies that the Ring virus will continue spreading. Reiko might live, but time is running out for humanity.

Fig. 4.1 Foreshadowing at the end of "Ringu"

Source: *Ringu* (1998)

The Ring's ending diverges significantly from that of the novel and its Japanese adaptation, further emphasizing the moral implications of the curse. The final scene shows Rachel and her son Aidan duplicating the tape. The film cuts from a close-up of the VCR and Rachel's hands guiding Aidan's on the device, to them sitting in front of two TV screens, waiting for the duplication process to be finished. Aidan asks his mother about the effects their actions will have:

> Aidan: "It's going to keep killing, isn't it? She'll never stop."
> Rachel: "Don't worry, sweetie. You're going to be okay."
> Aidan: "What about the person we show it to? What happens to them?"
> (*The Ring* 2002)

The viewer never sees them taking the new copy to another person. Whereas the novel and the Japanese film imply that the tape still must be physically taken to a potential victim, *The Ring* instead focuses on media technologies and the copying process itself. The film thereby highlights the simplicity of passing on the curse due to the nature of its viral vector. A scene was deleted from the movie's final cut that illuminates the full amplitude of Rachel's morally questionable decision. This scene reveals the people to whom Rachel and Aidan give the tape: to potentially everyone, as they apparently have placed the copy in a busy video rental store. There is no need for the tape to travel anymore, as people flock together in the store. Forebodingly, the camera slowly moves through the crowded store, finally zooming in on a particular shelf. The cursed tape is placed on the "Employee Picks" shelf, being advertised as the next big entertainment for the customers (see Fig. 4.2 and 4.3). The deadly tape is dangerously inconspicuous among this flood of countless films. Rachel knows that one of the best ways of passing on the tape as quickly as possible is by introducing it into the cycle of such recommendations and word-of-mouth suggestions. In this regard, each of the endings of *Ring*, *Ringu*, and *The Ring* ties the supernatural media virus' apocalyptic potential to the social dimensions of media consumption: the curse's proliferation is aided by the rumors surrounding its existence.

These social practices are a central aspect of the franchise and its portrayal of the network society. Whereas *Ghostwatch*, for instance, concentrates on the uncanny aspects of television airwaves and mass medium viewership, *Ring* instead portrays a virus spreading due to the irresponsible actions of individuals. The focus shifts from largely passive masses and unknowing virus spreaders to active individuals. This intersection of social practices and the medium's properties is discussed by Sconce as well: "*The Ring* anticipated that the mediated horrors of the future would be less about the superstitions attending technological devices than *emerging social practices of networked circulation*" (2010: 216, my emphasis). In his discussion of the narrative, Sconce expounds an intricate link between social conditions, networks, and (viral) circulation. In *Ring*, the investigation is kicked off after

Fig. 4.2 Deleted scene from "The Ring"

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.3 Close-up of the video tape

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

rumors surrounding a mysterious death, spread by classmates of the deceased person, come to the protagonist's attention. Sadako/Samara and her videotape are an urban legend and, as Tateishi points out, the protagonist's job revolves around the evaluation of such hearsay, rather than the discovery of any definite conclusions (2003: 299). Reminiscent of the social contagion theory which was common at the end of the

19th century, *Ring* thus plays with the idea that the network society, enabling both faster flows of information and social fragmentation into groups of interest rather than proximity, provides the ideal breeding ground for rumors. In most of the franchise's installments, protagonists encounter rumors about the supernatural media virus before they encounter the virus itself. Significantly, its "contagious narrative" (Schmitz 2020b: 342) – those shared tales surrounding its existence – constitutes a central feature of the virus' reproductive mechanism; it is this hearsay that initiates the protagonists' investigation and hence sets off a loop of infection.

This distinguishes *Ring* from the other narratives examined in this monograph, which display the network society as a type of environment in which physical interactions become negligible. *Ghostwatch* conceives of television viewers as atomized masses, with large numbers of people sitting in front of the TV set in isolation at home; in *House of Leaves*, characters end up homeless and detached from one another; likewise, in *Kairo* and *Pulse*, the network society causes feelings of alienation and isolation long before the supernatural media virus begins to spread. In *Ring*, however, the virus gains a foothold precisely because the everyday social interactions of people living in close proximity are essential: the restructuring of society and the rise of densely populated megacities affect the social ties between human beings, determining with whom and what they may come into contact.

The novels and its adaptations are all set in large urban spaces for the most part: Suzuki's work and Nakata's movie take place in Tokyo, whereas Verbinski's version of the tale is set in Seattle. These cities function as networks in themselves in each narrative. In her discussion of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, Levine claims that the city of London as portrayed in the novel can be read as a network:

> "London." is the famous first sentence of the novel, and the city can itself be understood as a network, a set of interconnected streets and buildings, linked largely by sheer contiguity. And because of the larger networks of transportation and communication that crisscross it, London is always linked to adjacent sites: its streets prove contiguous with

> rural roads […]. Importantly, too, the city does not work *only* as a principle of adjacency: it also fosters connections between characters and institutions. […] The city emerges in this example as a kind of meta-network, linking and assembling other principles of interconnection. (2015: 123-124, original emphasis)

The diverse installments of the *Ring* franchise utilize their metropolitan setting in a manner comparable to *Bleak House* – Suzuki's novel even starts with a similar, precise description of setting and date. The megacities in the franchise comprise the "meta-network"; in this way they become a symbol of the diverse social crises tied to the modernization process and the rise of the network society.

Each city – Tokyo in *Ringu* and Seattle in *The Ring* – fulfills a specific function in each of the films. The Japanese movie is set not just in any city, but explicitly in the densely populated capital, conveying "a sense of Tokyo urbanity" through its images (Wada-Marciano 2009: 18). Tokyo serves simultaneously as an image of the world that once was, featuring numerous archaic and derelict spaces, "a relic of disappearing history," and as a symbol of modernization, technologization, and urbanization (ibid: 19). Through this discrepancy, itself representative of the central tension found in J-horror narratives more generally, the city becomes a kind of labyrinth:

> The metropolitan area of Tokyo is today ever more a non-place, hailing less from architecture and the traditional definition of spaces than from the ubiquitous, labyrinthine presence of telecommunications networks, intelligent buildings and machines, plants for the accumulation and diffusion of energy and water, waste removal and recycling, and diverse, interconnected transport systems. (Sacchi 2004: 228-229)

Sacchi's argument entails an intriguing paradox: Tokyo appears as a "non-place," yet, at the same time, it is precisely its labyrinthine, complex structure which makes the city so unique and recognizable. The particular architecture and urban structure of Tokyo mirror the confusion and alienation arising from the city's rapid growth and modernization.

This tension between the archaic and the futuristic becomes apparent in the novel *Ring* as well. The story's metropolitan context constantly lingers on in the background:

> *September 5, 1990, 10:49 pm*
> *Yokohama*
> A row of condominium buildings, each fourteen stories high, ran along the northern edge of the housing development next to the Sankeien garden. Although built only recently, nearly all the units were occupied. Nearly a hundred dwellings were crammed into each building, but most of the inhabitants had never even seen the faces of their neighbors. The only proof that people lived here came at night, when windows lit up.
> Off to the south the oily surface of the ocean reflected the glittering lights of a factory. A maze of pipes and conduits crawled along the factory walls like blood vessels on muscle tissue. Countless lights played over the front wall of the factory like insects that glow in the dark; even this grotesque scene had a certain type of beauty. The factory cast a wordless shadow on the black sea beyond. (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 2, original emphasis)

Ring begins with a detailed description of its urban setting, establishing a Gothic atmosphere early on. Tokyo is introduced as a metropolis buzzing with people living in close proximity, but also suffering from anonymity. This portrayal of the megapolis resonates with van Dijk's observations regarding the consequences of increasing connectivity. The network society's implementation causes a fragmentation of social environments as people no longer necessarily form their social ties according to proximity, but can do so according to personal interests instead (2012: 175). This leads to growing individualization and anonymity among neighbors, with people withdrawing into their self-created environments – trends which stand in stark contrast to the Japanese sense of communal responsibility.[6]

6 In Japan, these developments are described in specific terms. *Otaku* are young people, predominantly male, who withdraw into virtual lives and appear to pre-

This new social environment is increasingly perceived of as a natural environment with widespread symptoms of alienation, due to its complexity and seeming uncontrollability (van Dijk 2012: 175). Crises of diverse kinds come to resemble natural disasters in that they are too vast and intricate for human understanding. Paradoxically, it is precisely its industrialization and technologization that elevate Tokyo to such complexity that the city and its buildings resemble a living organism in *Ring*. Through this biologization, the texts not only give shape to the network society as a natural environment. More importantly, Suzuki's novels foreground the threat of viral infection: the city as organism is prone to infection after all. A quote from the second novel makes this particularly apparent:

> Ando […] found himself looking down on houses and the neon signs. At six on a late-November evening it was already nearly pitch-dark. Turning his gaze toward the harbor he saw the Yashio high-rise apartments straddling the canal, their lit and unlit windows forming a checkerboard pattern. A surprising number of the windows were dark for a weekend evening. Ando found himself trying to find words in the patterns of light and dark; he'd had codes too much on the brain lately. On one among the forest of buildings he thought he saw the phonetic syllable *ko* – child? – but of course it meant nothing. (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 162)

While "*ko*" may mean "child" in Japanese, it is also the last syllable of Sadako's name. Undetected among this "forest of buildings," Sadako has already written part of her name across the buildings of Tokyo. Sadako is the virus that burrows deep into the city, slowly infecting everything and everyone. Unnoticed, the infection has already reached a dangerous level by this point.

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fer virtual (romantic) relationships over real-life experiences. *Hikikomori* ("shutins") are youths who completely detach themselves from society and from their own families (Wee 2014: 77-78). These developments are directly linked to the rise of digital media and it is mostly young, middle class people engaging with these media that are affected (Wetmore, Jr. 2009: 75).

Detailed descriptions of the public transport networks contribute to the sense of Tokyo's urbanity in Suzuki's novels. Key scenes, including the novel's ending cited at the beginning of this section, are set either at those network's nodes, such as train stations, or on its links, with characters traveling from one node to the next. Asakawa commutes to work via subway; the effort in terms of time and money that it takes for him to travel between his home and his workplace is stated in the minutest details (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 12-13). Significantly, these descriptions of the diverse transportation networks also mark the city as a network of choices: it is only due to Asakawa's decision to treat himself to a taxi ride, instead of the usual subway journey, that the events of the story are set off. This choice is the first link in a disastrous chain of cause and effect: "If he had taken the subway home, however, a certain pair of incidents would almost certainly never have been connected" (ibid: 13). On this taxi ride, Asakawa learns of a mysterious death, which will ultimately be revealed to have been caused by Sadako's curse. The few occasions on which Asakawa does travel outside of Tokyo, he does so by rental car. His reasons for taking the car and how he obtains it from the company are described in detail in the novel, once again foregrounding the relevance of transportation and mobility. Using the car, Asakawa travels to the "Villa Log Cabins" resort in South Hakone, where the videotape originated, and to the volcanic island Izu Ōshima, where Sadako grew up. While these locations stand in contrast to the crowdedness of Tokyo, they are not truly disconnected from the metropolis. It only takes a few hours for Asakawa to reach Izu Ōshima, and Villa Log Cabins is regarded as a popular retreat for Tokyo dwellers in the text. Through this preoccupation with mobility, the novel *Ring* represents the network society as consisting of both invisible, immaterial information networks and physical networks of transportation and interpersonal interaction. Asakawa's taxi ride exemplifies the fact that such transport networks connect more than just trains and people: they also connect choices and fates.

In *The Ring*, by contrast, Seattle does not serve as a recognizable, unique metropolis, but instead as a large, anonymous, and unrecognizable urban space crowded with people: "What the film creates with

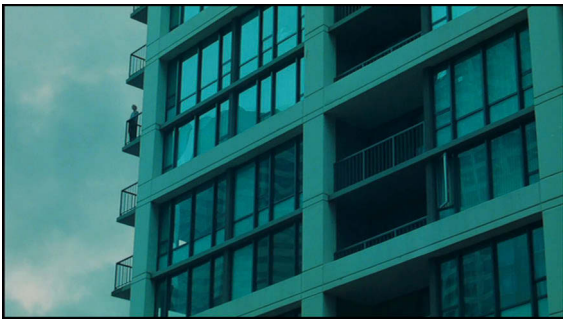
its locales is not a simulation of an urban dweller's actual topography, but only a geographic plot device for the narrative development" (Wada-Marciano 2009: 19). In fact, the movie was not filmed in Seattle, but in Vancouver (ibid). The implications of large megacities or global cities for the network society are discussed by Castells in dramatic terms: "they are the nodal points connecting to the global networks. Thus, in a fundamental sense, the future of humankind, and of each mega-city's country, is being played out in the evolution and management of these areas" (2010b: 440). The megapolis is reduced to its essential function as a central hub in a larger network here: a space with a high population density, high levels of anonymity, and high media saturation. A media-based infection can take hold quickly under such circumstances, where irresponsible individuals might not think twice about sharing the virus with their unknown neighbors. This threat is visually foregrounded shortly after Rachel begins her investigation into the tape and asks her ex-lover Noah for help. While he watches the tape in her high-rise apartment, Rachel steps outside onto the balcony, surveying the neighboring houses and apartments. Her eyes wander from one apartment to the next – in almost every window, she spots a television set and a lonesome person in front of it. The shots of these balconies are visually fragmented and overloaded with the repeating pattern of the rectangle: single windows vertically and horizontally aligned to form the fronts of boxlike apartments, which in turn are stacked on top of and next to each other to create the façade of right-angled, highly function-oriented, yet ultimately aesthetically boring high-rise buildings. These visually powerful images underline how these people exist right next to each other, separated merely by thin walls. Yet, while they literally are sitting on top of each other, they dwell in complete isolation (see Fig. 4.4-4.9).

Whereas *Ring* and *Ringu* offer some insight as to how Sadako was turned into an evil entity and why she seeks revenge on society at large, *The Ring*'s Samara simply is inherently evil. Rachel's investigation on Moesko Island leads her to a doctor, who tells her that Anna and Richard Morgan "wanted a child more than anything," yet had troubles conceiving (*The Ring* 2002). How they eventually conceived Samara remains unclear, the doctor only knows that someday, the Morgans went away for

Fig. 4.4 Disorienting shot of high rises

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.5 Rachel steps out onto her balcony



Source: *The Ring* (2002)

some time and came back with the girl. Soon after, however, the people on the island, and Anna Morgan in specific, began suffering from horrible visions when in the vicinity of Samara. Even the horses of the Morgan farm were afflicted by these visions, until they collectively drowned themselves in the sea. It is only after the girl was taken away to a psychiatric hospital that the islanders recovered. A videotape taken at the

Fig. 4.6 Rachel gazes into apartments in neighboring buildings

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.7 The camera pans from one window to the next...

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

institute reveals Samara's own take on her mental influence over other persons:

> Doctor: "You don't want to hurt anyone."
> Samara: "But I do, and I'm sorry. It won't stop." (ibid)

Fig. 4.8 …displaying the physical proximity of the inhabitants

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.9 Rachel as part of the overcrowded, fragmented metropolis

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

The Ring's Samara is evil to begin with, needing no motivation or explanation as to why she torments the people and animals around her.

This is, arguably, because Samara as a person is not as important to the narrative as Samara as a supernatural media virus. The island doctor explicitly compares the girl to a disease: "when you live on an

island, you catch a cold, it's everybody's cold." (ibid). For the doctor, the problem is done away with after Samara leaves the island, in full knowledge that this "cold" will now infect other people. Reinforcing an us/them mentality, the easiest solution to this disease lies in keeping it as far away as possible and in shutting it out from the community. The islanders' strategy corresponds to how disease continues to be viewed and treated. This is vividly illustrated by Susan C. McCombie in her discussion of cultural reactions to disease and epidemics. To reiterate this chapter's epigraph:

> In many societies, epidemics are viewed as unnatural events brought on by various taboo violations. Even in modern Western cultures, victim blaming and viewing disease as punishment from God are frequent. Throughout history, disease has often been blamed on "outsiders," as defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. In Western cultural concepts, disease is considered unnatural, and the genesis of disease is best placed as far from "people like us" as possible. (1990: 15)

As a disease, Samara signifies such taboo violations and their punishment. Significantly, the choice to expel her from society is not only morally questionable, but outright dangerous in *The Ring*. Society becomes vulnerable to outside forces as older social values decay in favor of media and interconnection.

In line with such outbreak narratives, *The Ring* inscribes these anxieties onto Samara's foreignness. When Noah discovers Samara Morgan's birth certificate at the psychiatric hospital in which Anna Morgan – and later her daughter – was a patient, he discovers a sheet of paper with Japanese *kanji* on it (*The Ring* 2002). Samara is cast as an external, Oriental threat that is brought upon an unsuspecting and vulnerable island community by the Morgan's willingness to obtain a child by any means necessary. Whereas both Japanese versions of the tale concentrate on the topic of communal responsibility, *The Ring* instead tells a

tale of Oriental Othering and a society vulnerable to foreign threats.[7] Globalization and the network society have made it possible for such an external force to invade the hitherto clean, modern, and sanitary realm of the United States.

Just as she cannot be kept on the outside by any boundaries, Sadako/Samara does not adhere to the general logic of binary categories. This blurring of dichotomous categories is one of the virus metaphor's central features. In *Ring*, the ability to disrupt opposing categories arises at the intersection of the virus' biological, technological, and media-related aspects. Oppositions such as biological/technological, dead/living, material/immaterial, and real/virtual are constantly contested. Sadako's medical condition in the novel is one instance of such boundary breaking. The most powerful instance of her disruption of binary categories, however, can be found in the climaxes of *Ringu* and *The Ring*. The now iconic scene that appears in both movies visualizes her powers by having her literally crawl out of the television screen. As Steffen Hantke writes: "This is the moment when technology comes alive, when the infrastructural networks of mass communication reveal that they are possessed, haunted, eerily and uncannily animate" (2016: 17). Sadako/Samara is biologically reborn from the technological realm: the inanimate becoming alive; the virtual becoming the real. It is no surprise that the movies have been discussed extensively in terms of Baudrillard's simulacrum. Through his famous anecdote of a tale by Jorge Luis Borges, which features a map that is created in such scale and detail that it mirrors the represented territory, Jean Baudrillard illustrates how representations can become the real:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra*. (1988: 166, original emphasis)

7 For more information on racial stereotyping in *The Ring* and US adaptations of J-horror films more generally, consult Balmain (2009).

Simulacra appear to refer to real phenomena. In truth, however, they mark the absence of these referents. Hence, "the map […] precedes the territory." The notion of the simulacrum is tied to technology and identity in both *Ringu* and *The Ring*:

> The two films propose that information technology induces a shape-shifting fluidity of identity by installing a culture of simulacral proliferation in which contagious shards of personality infect anyone who comes into contact with them, reconstituting those thus touched as no longer quite themselves. (White 2005: 45)

In the sequels of all versions, Sadako/Samara aims at being reborn into the world through possession (*Ringu 2*, *The Ring Two*, *Rings*) or through literal rebirth (*Spiral*). Like a virus, she respawns endlessly, perforating the boundaries of dichotomous categories in the process.

Sadako's/Samara's emergence from the TV can also be read in terms of Castells' notion of real virtuality (2010b: 404). As he states in a bold claim regarding media in the network society: "in urban societies media consumption is the second largest category of activity after work" (ibid: 362). Significantly, such media interaction is not an exclusive activity, but rather a

> constant background presence, the fabric of our lives. We live with the media and by the media. […] [T]he media, particularly radio and television, have become the audiovisual environment with which we interact endlessly and automatically. Very often television, above all, is a presence in the home. (ibid)

It is this "constant background presence" which constitutes the demise of Sadako's/Samara's victims: they are always surrounded by those devices that will eventually kill them.

The Ring further emphasizes Samara's boundary-disrupting seepage through her visual representation. On the one hand, her appearance flickers like television static; on the other hand, she carries over

muck and brackish water from the virtual well into reality.[8] Her representation gives shape to the paradoxical relationship of biologization and debiologization, in which biological bodies are conceived of in terms of informational code. Dougherty sees this as an "ontological shift whereby the corporeal body is turned into an information system, a purely discursive network of signs" (2001: 2). The boundaries delineating the human being become increasingly leaky and ill-defined. For Samara, the confluence of the biological and the technological as represented through her bodily appearance is an empowerment.

Her victims, however, disintegrate when visited by this biotechnological ghost. The infected die at the very instant she looks at them. Both *Ringu* and *The Ring* prominently feature a close-up of the girl's eye as she looks at Ryūji/Noah. In *Ringu*, the film images turn into negatives at the instant of death while Sadako's victims grimace in shock and pain. The film explicitly associates death with photography, as Sadako's victims "are literally negated" (Lacefield 2010b: 10). In *The Ring*, by contrast, a quick montage of shots from the cursed tape suggests that the victims experience Samara's own death within the blink of an eye and die instantly. Each victim's face is contorted into a grotesque visage and shows signs of advanced decomposition. Both versions portray death at the hands of the biotechnological spirit as a hybrid experience of biological and technological decay.

4.4 The Evolution of *Ring*'s Viral Vector: The Media's Moral Dilemma

Discussing the supernatural media virus' viral vector necessitates an analysis of a given medium's intrinsic properties, and how these properties affect the information and narratives that can be communicated via this medium/vector. Such a media-conscious narratology requires

8 *The Ring*'s Samara is an example of the "technoghost" (Wetmore, Jr. 2009: 73), a trope I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five: "The Digital Supernatural Media Virus and the Network Apocalypse in *Kairo* and *Pulse*."

that the semiotic, technical, and cultural dimensions of the medium be taken into consideration (Ryan 2014: 30). In the context of *Ring*, it is especially the latter two that are of interest: the technical approach

> explores such issues as how technologies configure the relationship between sender and receiver – for instance, one to one, few to many, many to many, and close or remote in either space or time – how they affect dissemination, storage, and cognition […]; and what affordances certain types of material supports bring to storytelling. (ibid)

The cultural dimension underlines the relationship between consumers, producers, and the institutions that governs the media as well as the production and/or consumption practices of each of these instances (ibid). Any discussion of *Ring*'s supernatural media virus warrants an examination of the corruptive medium's technical properties, as well as the cultural practices of media production and consumption that surrounds it.

From today's vantage point, *Ring*'s tale of a haunted VHS cassette seems outdated. Reading the story in its historical and cultural context, however, reveals the significance of the choice to use this medium as the vehicle of doom. US audiences have consumed the majority of their movies on a video platform at home, rather than at the cinema, since 1988 (Benson-Allott 2013: 1). From roughly 1986 to 2001, VHS was the most successful of these home media (Benson-Allott 2010: 115). Nearly 70% of videocassette recorders (VCRs) worldwide were produced in Japan (Tateishi 2003: 298-299).[9] It was only with the launch of the DVD that the popularity of the videocassette dropped. The DVD was legally licensed in Japan in 1996 and launched on the North American marketplace in the following year (Wada-Marciano 2009: 31; Benson-Allott

9 *Ring* can be read as an example of "techno-Orientalism" in light of Japan's leading position in the entertainment technology industry (Roh/Huang/Niu 2015: 2). Whereas Orientalism portrays the East as premodern, techno-Orientalism casts the East as hypermodern and futuristic instead. This is a direct effect of globalization and technological innovation. Both perspectives exoticize Asia, casting the East as both spatially and temporally removed from the West.

2013: 14). By 2001, DVD sales exceeded those of videocassettes for the first time; by 2006, DVD players were more common in US households than VCRs (Benson-Allott 2013: 14). When Suzuki published *Ring* in 1991, he did so at the height of the VHS era. Similarly, when Nakata's *Ringu* was released, the DVD was licensed, but could not compare in any way to the continued popularity of the videocassette. When Verbinski's *The Ring* was filmed, in contrast, VHS was already on the decline and it features as an anachronistic element in the movie. Paradoxically, not a single DVD features in the film. Even *The Ring Two* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2005), in which digital technologies like computers and camcorders play an important role, does not depict any DVDs. *The Ring* uses this absence of DVDs as a journey into the past of media technologies. As Rachel researches both Samara and the Morgan family's pasts and she must dive into those technologies that were modern at the time. Thus, her research begins in high-tech media labs and ends in dusty archives and libraries. The videocassette represents Samara Morgan's era and it proves to be a surprisingly powerful viral vector.

In a sense, the videocassette empowered its viewers. Central properties of the videocassette include its reproducibility, alterability, and shareability. As Caetlin Benson-Allott puts it, VHS granted viewers "the pleasures of pausing, fast-forwarding, rewinding, and recording. From time-shifting to tape dubbing, VCRs radically increased viewers' access to film" (2013: 102). Copying the tape and passing it on to another person is easily done; from this vantage point, similar to *House of Leaves*, *Ring* is also a cautionary story about illegal bootlegging practices.[10] More importantly, the videotape is a social medium, inviting people to share and to enjoy its contents together. It is through these viewing and sharing habits that the supernatural media virus' social dimensions in the narrative becomes apparent.

In each version, the Ring tape itself is the symbolization of the medium's affordances: a chaotic, jarring juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images. The tape is composed of a glut of information that needs

10 For more on this, consult Benson-Allott (2013) as well as Wright (2010).

to be decoded to be understood. Essentially, *Ring* is a paranormal detective story in which the characters try to "read" the story behind the videotape by deciphering its cryptic fragments so as to find a cure to the supernatural media virus. Sadako's/Samara's entire tragic history is encoded within the tape. As the protagonists follow the clues on the tape, they – and the reader/viewer along with them – piece together this backstory and the origin of the virus from a confusing deluge of facts.

Their journey to discovery is similarly nonlinear and fragmented: when Asakawa tries to decode the tape, he initially attempts to identify the people shown, which leads him to Izu Ōshima, where Sadako lived as a small child, and then back to Tokyo again, where she briefly joined a theater troupe after her departure from the island. After Sadako left the group, however, her trail goes cold. Asakawa then returns to where it all began for him and, as he eventually learns, where it all ended for Sadako: Villa Log Cabin. It is here that Sadako died and the tape carrying the viral curse was first created. The ending and beginning of both Sadako's life and the narrative itself become connected – they form a ring. Like the videotape, the narrative structure of *Ring* is nonlinear, a collection of facts and instances that must be connected in the right way to form the big picture.

Numerous acts of reproduction do not leave the tape unchanged. While such bootlegging does not lead to a deterioration of the tape, as should be the case with the medium (Tirrell 2010: 147), there are modifications to its contents. In the novel, the teenagers staying at the Villa Log Cabin have taped over the most important part of the cassette; Asakawa only finds a recording of a random commercial where the instructions for how to evade Sadako's curse should be. It is precisely due to this lack of knowledge that Asakawa begins his investigation, uncovers the fate of Sadako Yamamura, and ultimately facilitates the spread of the virus. In *Ringu* as well as *The Ring*, Ryūji's/Noah's copy runs longer than Reiko's/Rachel's – instead of ending with a brief shot of the well, this version of the tape depicts Sadako/Samara slowly crawling out of the well, towards the camera, and finally out of the television set into

reality. Each change comprises a kind of mutation, leading to the virus' empowerment and extended reach.

As an analog medium, VHS is not determined by the binary logic of digital code, of either/or. Instead, *Ring* "taps into themes of separation and mingling, replication and degradation" (Tirrell 2010: 142). Messy seepage and chaotic disruption are key markers of VHS technology; it is those properties that enable the mutation of the supernatural media virus. In the novel *Ring*, the cursed tape's contents suggest that Sadako was about to give birth, even though her biological condition renders that impossible. Therefore, "What did Sadako give birth to?" is the question the novel's protagonists ask repeatedly (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 257). The answer is: herself. It is through the technological device of the videotape that the spirit regains aspects of her former corporeality and infects biological bodies. The supernatural tape is the womblike vessel through which the spirit is reborn (Benson-Allott 2013: 123).[11] In every sequel of *Ring*, she uses technology to regain a physical, biological body, being reborn into the world of the living again.

The Ring draws a far darker image of the perilous consequences of living in a modern, mediasaturated, and interconnected world than either *Ring* or *Ringu*. In most shots, at least one television lingers in the background. This uncanny presence of the screen not only foreshadows the supernatural media virus' apocalyptic potential, with Samara emerging from televisions potentially everywhere, but further expresses the fear of growing anonymity and loneliness that is tied to the rise of the network society. In the Japanese versions of the tale, the contagious videotape predominantly travels through channels of interpersonal contact, passed on among friends in school, or from parent to child. Both the novel and its 1998 film adaptation end by having the protagonist save their child by passing the tape on to their own parents. Metaphorically, the curse is passed on through shared

11 As Benson-Allott explains elsewhere, the well itself already functions as a metaphor for the womb and for supernatural (re-)birth (2010: 125). In each version of *Ring*, the protagonists unknowingly help Sadako/Samara escape the confinements of this womb.

blood, like a biological infection. The 2002 American film ends with the tape anonymously being placed in a video rental store instead. Therefore, while the virus is initially passed on from Rachel to her ex-lover and then her own child, the virus' mode of dispersal eventually evolves beyond such familial relationships and spreads among strangers. *The Ring* explores new types of interpersonal contact and different channels of infection.

With the aid of media such as the television and videotapes, notions of time and space are transformed considerably by Samara's uncanny abilities. The retrieval of the girl's corpse from the well empowers the spirit, instead of appeasing her:

> Aidan: "What happened to the girl? […] Is she still in the dark place?"
> Rachel [smiling]: "No. We set her free."
> Aidan [shocked]: "You helped her?"
> Rachel: "Yeah."
> Aidan: "Why did you do that?"
> Rachel: "What's wrong, honey?"
> Aidan: "You weren't supposed to help her."
> Rachel: "It's okay now. She's not going to hurt you. She…"
> Aidan: "Don't you understand, Rachel? She never sleeps." (*The Ring* 2002)

Samara's escape from the well marks the moment at which the supernatural media virus truly learns how to go global. Aidan's terrified remark that "[s]he never sleeps" uncannily points out how Samara has become the ultimate ghost of globalization and of the network society: she was never restricted by human biological rhythms of sleep and work, life and death to begin with, but at least she was confined in terms of location. Since her powers of image projection are limited, the tape first appears in the cabin directly above Samara's well. She depends on humans to watch the tape and to pass it on so that she can travel beyond her spatial limitations. However, Rachel sets Samara free, as her attempt to appease the spirit is based on an incorrect premise: she assumes that the girl wants to be laid to rest, but Samara will never rest. She is the supernatural media virus that demands to be copied over and

over again, dispersed to every last corner of the modern world. The victims of the virus, in contrast, are entirely subjected to time and space as determined by Samara: she controls their exact moment of death and she forces her victims to relive her seven-day death struggle. Every place is still within Samara's reach, provided that there is a television screen to project her image. The television becomes a symbol of the global, interconnected world, and of how the network can control the individual.

The curse develops more efficient viral vectors that enable it to exploit new communication and entertainment practices, as the franchise's diverse sequels reveal. In *Spiral*, the virus learns how to infect written text, including Asakawa's newspaper report on the investigation. It is revealed that this published report was such a hit that the rights to a movie adaptation have been sold – and the film is only the beginning: "Just as that videotape mutated into a book, it's going to get into every stream: music, video games, computer networks. New media will cross-breed with Sadako and produce more new media" (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 276). Not only does the 1995 novel uncannily prophesy the franchise's later success in adapting to new media and "infecting" new audiences, but it also makes explicit how, even though videotapes are a popular medium easily shared, they do not spread fast enough when compared to media which can be dispersed to a large number of people simultaneously, such as newspaper publications and cinema movies.

The franchise installments released after 2010 center on viral videos spread via the Internet and on mobile devices. The 2012 Japanese film *Sadako 3D* as well as its 2013 sequel *Sadako 3D 2*, both directed by Tsutomu Hanabusa, have the supernatural media virus travel through digital technologies such as computers and cell phones. In this mediasaturated world, it is impossible to escape those technologies that Sadako can use for her own propagation. Characters attempt to escape from the evil spirit, but seemingly every surface in this modern world has been turned into an LCD screen. In these films, Sadako is no longer a single antagonist; multiple incarnations of her can appear at once (see Fig. 4.10 and 4.11).

Fig. 4.10 Multiple Sadakos in a shop window at an electronics retailer

Source: *Sadako 3D* (2013)

Fig. 4.11 Truck with LCD screen as symbol of the mediasaturated world

Source: *Sadako 3D* (2013)

In *Rings* (dir. F. Javier Gutiérrez, 2017),[12] the third installment of the US trilogy, the cursed videotape has been digitized for online shar-

12 *Rings* is the feature film adaptation of a short film of the same name (dir. Jonathan Liebesman, 2005). The short film was included as bonus mate-

ing by a group of university students calling themselves the "Sevens." They study and experiment on the virus by watching the video clip, experiencing as many of the horrifying seven days as they can stand, and then passing the footage on to their consensual "tail." While *Rings* continues *The Ring*'s preoccupation with the scientific examination of Samara and her tape, the movie also returns to the emphasis on word-of-mouth communication and close-knit communities of young people as the ideal breeding ground for the cursed video.

These films focus on the idea that humans increasingly structure every aspect of their everyday life around mobile devices: work schedules, entertainment options, social interactions, and most forms of communication are controlled and performed through smartphones and tablets. Television screens are already present in most key scenes in *The Ring*; in the movies since 2010, however, screens of all kinds – television, smartphone, advertising boards, and others – are truly omnipresent and inescapable. What is more, digital media in these films of the smartphone era exemplify the bottom-up participatory model of culture (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 6-7): how content will be modified, spread, and shared, is unforeseeable as there is no longer a controlling instance, such as the producer or author. In an analogy of this media-sharing culture, the villain's attempt to reproduce more Sadakos in *Sadako 3D* created a legion of flawed, yet equally terrifying copies of the ghost instead.

Undergoing the "evolution" discussed by Hutcheon, these later films have adapted to new media technologies and the emerging social practices that come with these formats. A mysterious link sent to a smartphone is all it takes to spread the virus; "catching" the disease becomes very easy in the age of omnipresent technology, risk, and peer pressure to stay up to date. With Internet technology, the video no longer depends on a physical storage medium, but can be shared over vast distances within an instant. *Rings*, for instance, foregrounds the issue

rial on a re-release of *The Ring* launched shortly before *The Ring Two* was made available, and it functions as a bridge between these two feature films.

of trust arising from the easy shareability of media content in the digital age. When the film's protagonist investigates her boyfriend's strange behavior, one of his supposed friends attempts to trick Julia into watching the video clip in order to save her own life. The film suggests that such selfish and irresponsible behavior is simplified by digital media. New technologies entail new, potentially problematic, social habits.

The supernatural media virus' diverse mutations illustrate how the entire *Ring* franchise has evolved over the decades, introducing some novelties, but largely staying true to the original formula. Importantly, this evolution has led to the convergence of viral vector and narrative medium: except for the original novel, every installment of the franchise plays with the fourth wall, indicating that readers/viewers might also become infected by the Ring virus.

Spiral performs this convergence by modifying the viral vector: the supernatural media virus learns how to infect written text. The novel copies several phrases and sentences from its predecessor *Ring* word for word, thereby indicating that the initial novel might be the cursed written report: "In *Ring* it was written, 'In a lane in front of Kinomiya Station was a small, one-story house with a shingle by the door that read *Nagao Clinic: Internal Medicine and Pediatrics*.'" (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 227). The readers of *Spiral* as well as *Ring* are thereby implicated in the contagious reading process, reading the cursed report along with the protagonist Mitsuo Ando.

One particularly insightful example of the franchise's treatment of the fourth wall is the film *Sadako 3D 2*, which was released in Japan along with an app for mobile devices. This app – an example of so-called "second screen technology" – was intended to expand viewers' cinematic experience by having them interact with their devices at key moments of the film. Usually, second screen technology attempts to enhance the viewing experience by synchronizing the film screen – the "first screen" – with the viewer's mobile device – the "second screen" (Atkinson 2014: 79). Second screen technology is not restricted to film and television, but has also found application in the video game industry and in other fields besides. The second screen usually provides bonus information, commentary, or options for personalization, to list just a

Fig. 4.12 Corrupted paratext

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

few examples. In the case of the *Ring* franchise, however, such second screen concepts "blur boundaries between cinematic and spectatorial space by imagining the user's mobile device as infected by the same malevolent spirits plaguing the characters in the films onscreen" (Svensson/Hassoun 2016: 171).[13] The diegetic world is expanded and seeps into the world of the viewer/user. In the case of *Sadako 3D 2*, the second screen technology came with a nasty surprise:

> [H]ours after finishing *Sadako 3D 2*, at midnight in our time zone, we received a disturbing phone call from "Sadako" herself […]. In this moment, the app tested the limits of our control in ways beyond those experienced during the actual film. It does not matter if the film and

13 This blurring of the diegetic and spectatorial space is not a new phenomenon in horror film. In particular, the films directed and/or produced by William Castle during the 1950s and 1960s were known for their imaginative special effects. The "Emergo" gimmick in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), was comprised of a skeleton flying over the cinema audience at key moments throughout the film. Other movies made use of vibrating seats (*The Tingler*, 1959), special polarized viewing glasses (*13 Ghosts*, 1960), and multiple other resourceful techniques.

> app are synced, nor does it matter if you have the app actively running on your mobile device; Sadako can still reach you […]. (ibid: 187)

Of course, viewers of horror films volunteer for frights and scares. The *Sadako 3D 2* app, however, creates frights that the audience cannot anticipate, acting while supposedly deactivated. It is through such experiments with the fourth wall that the *Ring* franchise has achieved its long-lasting popularity.

Through this evolution of the supernatural media virus as well as the narrative itself, readers/viewers/users become aware of the medium with which they are interacting. They are invited to pose the same questions that the characters of the story have to ask themselves: who created this content, and for what purpose? How are these media consumed, and by whom? How do these media shape our lives and perception of reality? In other words, just like the fictional characters within the story, readers/viewers/users are invited to question critically those media they interact with on a daily basis. These inquiries resemble those pertaining to the formula of the outbreak narrative. Wald examines the networks through which an infection spreads in detail, as well as the epidemiological work which attempts to contain the crisis:

> As epidemiologists trace the routes of the microbes, they catalog the spaces and interactions of global modernity. Microbes, spaces, and interactions blend together as they animate the landscape and motivate the plot of the outbreak narrative: a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance and impending disaster. (2008: 2)

Ring's "epidemiologists" are media-savvy people such as Asakawa/Reiko/Rachel and their sidekicks. Their experiences as news reporters provide them with the necessary knowledge to understand the deciding factors in the curse's spread: the easy accessibility and reproducibility of the corruptive medium as well as human proneness to curiosity and fearmongering. These journalists are well-acquainted with the "ecological

balance" – the mediascape – endangered by the supernatural media virus.

So far, the discussion has centered largely on the technical properties of these media, as well as the social habits they inspire more generally. Through the moral dilemma coded into *Ring*'s supernatural media virus, it is the behavior of the virus' host in particular which is brought to attention: it is their selfishness and irresponsible behavior which ensures the virus' continued existence. Like the viral manuscript in *House of Leaves*, *Ring*'s supernatural media virus enforces certain behavior in its victims. The only possibility of surviving the curse is by creating another cursed tape and by having another person watch the video. This comprises the most important difference to Danielewski's novel: whereas the infected in *House of Leaves* slowly descend into delusions, oftentimes spreading the manuscript without realizing it, the victims of *Ring* pass the virus on in full knowledge of what they are inflicting on other people. The central exception to this is Asakawa/Reiko/Rachel, as they initially perform the task that saves them from the curse accidentally. However, their ignorance does not free them from the moral implications of the Ring virus.

With regard to Japanese culture, these moral implications of the host/virus interaction in *Ring* can be read as a clash of communal responsibility (*giri*) with selfish individualism. Placing one's personal interests over the duties to the community bears terrifying consequences. In the end, Asakawa/Reiko are given the choice of whether they value the life of their child over humanity's continued existence. They decide to copy the tape and thereby become complicit in the potential apocalypse to come. The actions of few individuals such as Asakawa/Reiko suffice to destroy the entire community. As Steve Jones has it: "Sadako is not the real threat: it is self-interest that plagues *Ring*'s populace" (2012: 214). Whether or not Asakawa's/Reiko's parents also pass on the cursed videotape, or whether they take it upon themselves to stop the growing infection by choosing their own death, is left unclear. Issues of communal responsibility as well as differing esteem of these duties between older and younger generations are foregrounded.

Many J-horror films also warn of the results if a community fails its members: "just as the individual is expected to place communal interests first, the community is also expected to bear the burden of guilt if the social system fails to protect the interests of vulnerable individuals" (Wee 2014: 64). Suzuki's *Ring* and Nakata's *Ringu* represent Sadako as a person that, while always supernatural and otherworldly, was turned into an evil entity by a community that failed her. Both she and her mother are rejected by society for their unique telekinetic powers. Whereas her mother eventually commits suicide, Sadako instead is killed by persons who should fulfill a caregiving function: in the novel, she is raped and killed by a doctor at a tuberculosis sanatorium; in the film, her own father throws her down the well. The Japanese versions of the tale center on the decay of traditional values of communal responsibility.

The Ring deemphasizes these communal aspects in favor of the moral implications of VHS technology itself. In comparison to the novel *Ring* and the film *Ringu*, *The Ring* showcases diverse technologies to an extreme degree. Photographs reveal whether a person has been infected with the supernatural media virus, as their faces appear blurry in the image – hence, digital cameras with their ability to display the photograph that was taken instantly play a central role in verifying the existence of a curse. Rachel discovers hidden imagery while analyzing the tape at an elaborate electronic media lab. With the help of an Internet search, she is able to match that imagery to the island on which Samara was brought up. These are only some examples of the heavy focus on media technologies in *The Ring*. This obsession ultimately culminates in the detailed portrayal of Rachel helping Aidan to produce another copy of the tape. Discussing this scene in detail, Benson-Allott regards the US adaptation as "a horror movie that depicts videocassettes as lethal weapons and video piracy as murder" (2013: 102-103). The curse forces its victims to engage in illegal copying and distribution practices; people who watch such a pirated tape will either die or perform the crime themselves. Thus, the means of production of such media are called into question.

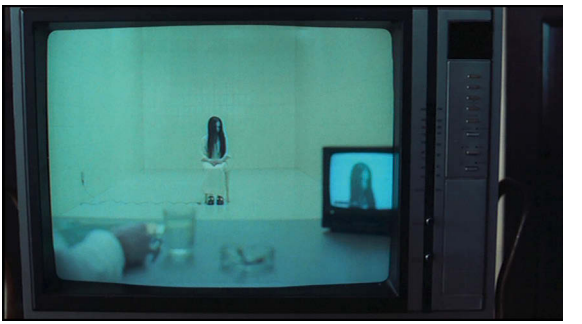
The moral implications of spectatorship are problematized as well. Watching the cursed tape is a dare among entertainment-seeking teenagers: "*Consider yourself warned: you'd better not see it unless you've got the guts*" (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 70, original emphasis). Keeping in mind that the cassette holds the key to the gruesome crimes committed against Sadako/Samara, the playful handling of the myth appears horribly insensitive. Watching the tape means engaging in a kind of sadistic voyeurism: the girl's suffering becomes a form of entertainment for others. In a way, this can be read as a meta-comment about the horror genre writ large: gaining pleasure form watching horrifying, violent, yet fictional content. In *Ring*, however, spectators are eventually subjected to the same ordeal themselves – either living with the fear of nearing death (*Ring*, *Ringu*), or even experiencing the girl's painful death struggle themselves (*The Ring*) – even becoming complicit in the crime. The protagonist of *Spiral* realizes that he is no longer an observer, but rather a participant (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 229). He is part of the ring that ensures the circulation of the virus.

In particular, news and entertainment media – the institutions responsible for creating or at least disseminating such contents – are implicated in this problematic voyeurism. In this regard, *Ring* closely resembles *Ghostwatch*, where the paranormal investigation – driven by the wish for good audience ratings primarily – releases Pipes from the Early house. Significantly, *Ring* and *Ringu* tie Sadako's tragic backstory directly to how horribly she and her mother Shizuko were treated by the media: Shizuko was ostracized by the media after failing to showcase her telepathic powers in public. In *Ringu*, it is at this public performance that the little girl Sadako first displays the true extent of her own powers, killing one of the journalists. Here, the news media are endowed with communal responsibility as well, yet they utterly fail in their social functions. In their greediness for profit, and for the next big media hype, they thrive on the suffering of helpless individuals.

In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, Sadako's/Samara's dehumanizing treatment by the media is implicitly voiced through the motif of effacement. The faces of both Sadako and Samara are covered by her long hair. Every infected person's face appears blurred in photographs, making their fea-

tures unrecognizable. *The Ring* adds further levels of effacement: the infected begin unconsciously to scribble out depictions of faces in magazines and photographs. The only time when Samara's face is not hidden behind her hair, her image is twice removed: this is at a research facility where the girl is studied, treated as little more than a scientific curiosity (see Fig. 4.13). Just as Sadako/Samara is dehumanized by such institutions who turn her into a faceless object, she also imposes the same fate on her victims.

Fig. 4.13 Samara's appearance twice removed from reality



Source: *The Ring* (2002)

As journalists working at a large newspaper, Asakawa/Reiko/Rachel personify these immoral (media) institutions. Their relentless journalistic impulses eventually let loose a virus of apocalyptic dimensions upon the world. Throughout Suzuki's *Ring*, Asakawa repeatedly justifies his questionable behavior towards his own family and the lengths he is willing to go in order to bring his investigation to a successful end. Asakawa's true motive for spending time with his extended family is not grief, but rather curiosity as is revealed at his niece's funeral:

> Asakawa slipped out of the room and listened to see what was going on downstairs, and then entered Tomoko's bedroom. He felt a little guilty about invading a dead girl's privacy. Wasn't this the kind of thing

> he abhorred? But it was for a good cause – defeating evil. There was nothing but to do it. But even as he thought this, he hated the way he was always willing to seize on any reason, no matter how specious, in order to rationalize his actions. (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 42-43)

Asakawa's job at the newspaper does not depend on writing sensational reportage about the mysterious deaths; he investigates his niece's death mostly due to his boredom with his current journalistic projects (ibid: 25-26). Aware of his problematic moral standards, Asakawa tries to excuse his behavior even when Ryūji states that it is exactly this kind of media ethics that created the supernatural media virus in the first place:

> "Imagine how Sadako must have felt when her mom threw herself into Mt. Mihara."
> "She hated the media?"
> "Not just the media. She resented the public at large for destroying her family, first treating them like darlings, and then when the wind changed scorning them. […] She had first-hand knowledge of the vagaries of public opinion."
> "But that's no reason to arrange an indiscriminate attack like this!" Asakawa's objection was made in full consciousness of the fact that he himself belonged to the media. In his heart he was making excuses – he was pleading. *Hey, I'm just as critical of the media's tendencies as you are.* (ibid: 198, original emphasis)

His actions make Asakawa complicit in Sadako's death as well as her deadly vengeance, and they will bear grave consequences for the entire society. Not only have news media failed their duties to the community through the treatment of the Yamamuras, but years later they also aid Sadako in her revenge, once again in search of the perfect media spectacle.

On a smaller scale, the implications of Asakawa's actions for the community at large can be observed in the dynamics of his own family. He constantly disregards his duty as a loving family father in favor of selfish interests. Most times, Asakawa appears to be annoyed by his

wife and daughter, as they restrict him in his freedom and demand his attention (ibid: 41-42). In a similar manner, Reiko and Rachel, both single mothers working fulltime jobs, neglect their only child in favor of work. Yōichi and Aidan are not only exceptionally self-reliant for their age, walking to school by themselves and preparing their own meals, but at times the roles of child and parent are reversed when they take care of their mothers. In both *Ringu* and *The Ring*, it is Yōichi/Aidan who picks out an adequate gown for his mother to wear at the funeral, since Reiko/Rachel is once again late from work.

Ring is a story about media and *the* media, and how they affect lives in numerous ways. They can enforce specific behaviors and destroy human lives. They confront human beings with troubling moral dilemmas. How individuals interact with (the) media can have frightening consequences for the network society at large. It is stunning how successful the franchise has remained over the course of several decades. One reason for this might be that the themes and anxieties voiced in *Ring* continue to resonate even today, and across diverse cultures. Hantke writes something similar with regard to the iconic shot of Sadako/Samara stepping out of the television screen:

> The shot has been imitated countless times as a sign of earnest admiration and parodied as a sign of the moment's rapid affective, generic and, ultimately, cultural exhaustion. […] And, yet, the cultural life of this emblematic shot marks a period in which cultural unease with digital technology was, quite obviously, not the provenance of any particular nation and its idiosyncratic relationship toward digital technology but a general phenomenon closely linked to highly technological cultures around the globe and, thus, to modernity itself. (2016: 17)

Of the narratives discussed in this book, *Ring* perhaps comprises the most intricate interweaving of virus, host, environment, and vector. It is its urban setting particularly, in which the physical proximity of many people plays a significant role, which distinguishes *Ring* from *Ghostwatch* and *House of Leaves*. As the next chapter claims, both the J-horror film *Kairo* and its Hollywood adaptation *Pulse* assign an equally important function to physical places. Whereas *Ring* only implies that the end

of mankind might be the inevitable consequence of the spreading supernatural media virus, *Kairo* and *Pulse* render this apocalypse explicit.