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LOST IN TRANSLATION: REGRESSIVE FEMININITY IN AMERICAN J-HORROR REMAKES

by

Matthew Ducca

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in
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Abstract

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by

Matthew Ducca

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This thesis examines the ways in which the representation of female characters changes between Japanese horror films and the subsequent American remakes. The success of Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2002) sparked a mass American interest in Japan's contemporary horror cinema, resulting in a myriad of remakes to saturate the market. However, the adaptation process resulted in alterations of the source material to better conform to gender stereotypes and conventions associated with the American conception of the horror genre. Valerie Wee and Steven Rawle's research regarding cultural and gender differences between *Ringu* and *The Ring* is expanded to also include similar readings of *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* and its subsequent American remake *Dark Water*. These films are situated within the context of cinematic cultural differences and the horror genre's obsession with the female as victim, as well as, scholarship regarding the male and female gaze. The changes between the Japanese films and the American remakes result in a regressive re-interpretation of femininity.

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Introduction: J-Horror, America, and Interpretation

America's obsession with Japanese horror films (or "J-horror") began with the release of Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* in 2002. This new genre exploded in popularity in Japan with the release of the Hideo Nakata directed *Ringu* in 1998. The Japanese films' "slow-burn" style of generating scares via a slow building of suspense directly opposed the prevalent American style of horror, which primarily utilized sudden "jump-scares" and gratuitously graphic on-screen portrayals of violence and gore to instill fear and tension within the audience. Japanese horror offered a refreshing alternative to what American audiences had become accustomed. When *The Ring* proved to be a commercial success—earning over \$129 million in the U.S. alone (*BoxOfficeMojo.com*)—it was only a matter of time before Hollywood seized upon the opportunity to remake numerous other J-horror films in an attempt to quickly replicate its profit. Soon enough popular J-horror films such as *Kairo* (Kurosawa, 2001), *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* (Nakata, 2002), and *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2002) were remade as the commercially successful films *Pulse* (Sonzero, 2006), *Dark Water* (Salles, 2005), and *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004) respectively. Adaptation of these popular horror films appeared to be a quick and easy process for Hollywood to generate profit, merely requiring visual replication and minor narrative cultural changes. However, an important element was lost in their translation for American audiences especially in their representations of women and femininity.

As if dissatisfied with the way that the original Japanese films presented its female characters the American remakes (whether consciously or not) reworked the original narratives, ultimately undermining the women in these films. While the Japanese source films could be read as offering a progressive representation of femininity within the horror film genre as a whole, the Americanization of these films redacted the female characters to conform to the (repressed) standards of femininity, thus conforming to the American horror genre. Certainly J-horror films such as *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* are not completely feminist works that actively seek to redefine femininity within the horror genre, but the films are situated within a milieu that is not as conservative about gender as many traditional horror films are—specifically American ones. What emerges in the J-horror genre then is a focus on the female figure not simply as a victim, but as the center of the narrative through which the problems of contemporary Japanese society are illuminated.

Focus on the feminine within J-horror is due, in part, to reactions toward what Jay McRoy considers, “an ever-emerging politics of identity informed by shifting gender roles” within Japanese culture (5). The emergence of women within the work force and the destabilization of the “traditional” Japanese family threaten the established societal patriarchy resulting in “female protagonists function[ing] as aesthetic and cultural barometers for highly contested comprehensions of gender and gendered behaviors in Japan” (McRoy, 76). It is important to note that while these Japanese films were reacting to contemporary social changes the American film industry was not reacting to those same social concerns. The adaptation of Japan’s horror films was not politically or socially motivated, but determined by the ease with which profit could be generated from a mass market that was, following the release of *The Ring*, already in place. The interest in Japanese horror cinema was not necessitated by shifting American gender roles, but instead reflected the influence of “exotic”, culturally different horror aesthetics that were remolded into distinctly American commodities.

Many of the narratives that are found in J-horror films can be argued to be progressive in their treatment of female characters in part due to the filmmakers’ desire to critique contemporary society. Independent women often occupy the central roles of these films and patriarchy is often directly, or indirectly, implicated for the perceived faults of society. Whereas McRoy asserts that, “an analysis of recent Japanese horror cinema provides valuable insights into the assorted perspectives constellating around the morphing sex and gender roles that accompany a period of economic, social, and cultural transition” (81), an analysis of American remakes of Japanese horror films reveals that the American films reassert the very patriarchy that the J-horror films critique. Emerging out of the American remakes is a focus on the reestablishment of a patriarchal hierarchy that is consistent with most American horror films, while opposing the gender representations that appear in the source films.

Even if one were to abstain from reading these films in conjunction with the socio-political environment in which they are created a strict comparison of the various narratives reveals that another cultural divide between Japanese horror films and their American remakes alters their respective depictions of femininity – the presence of the *onryou* from Japanese folklore. Jay McRoy summarizes the *onryou* as follows:

In the majority of cases, visual representations of the 'avenging spirit' [onryou] assumed the form of a 'wronged', primarily female entity returning to avenge herself upon those who harmed her... prominent features associated with the *onryou* include long black hair and wide staring eyes (or, some instances, just a single eye). These physiological details carried a substantial cultural and aesthetic weight, as long black hair is often aligned in the Japanese popular imagery with conceptualizations of feminine beauty and sensuality, and the image of the gazing female eye (or eyes) is frequently associated with vaginal imagery. (6-7)

The foregrounding of the *onryou*'s femininity is a central component within much of Japan's horror cinema and becomes a key motif in many recent J-horror films, which thematically deal with working-class women and the collapse of the family unit due, in part, to paternal failure/violence. The presence of the *onryou* coupled with independent working-class female protagonists situates these films within a specifically feminine narrative dynamic that is essentially abandoned in the subsequent American remakes. Because American horror cinema (and folklore) lacks a tradition of a distinctly feminine avenging ghost, this element of the J-horror films is typically altered to conform to more "standard" (patriarchal) conventions of the American horror genre. In most cases the *onryou* is re-conceptualized as pure evil rather than a (justified) avenging spirit, thus breaking the link the *onryou* creates between being sympathetic and feminine, and replacing it with a link between femininity and unnatural evil.

The following pages focus on close analyses of two of the more popular J-horror films and their subsequent American remakes: *Ringu* and *The Ring*, and *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* and *Dark Water*. Looking closely at the changes in the narratives and characterizations emphasizes the extent to which American filmmakers subvert and reinterpret the femininity present in the Japanese genre. Rather than simply translating the dialogue and plot elements for audiences American filmmakers systematically deconstruct the various women of these films and rebuild them in the Hollywood image. The alterations made to these Japanese originals illustrates not only how the American industry reinterprets foreign cinema through a patriarchal lens, but also how these Japanese horror films offer a positive portrayal of femininity within the horror genre that is lost through the Americanization of their narratives.

Ringu and The Ring

In many ways *Ringu* is the progenitor of the J-horror boom of the early 2000's, achieving widespread success in Japan and subsequently inspiring Hollywood to remake the film (also with great success), thus paving the way for a plethora of similarly themed horror films in Japan that are all inevitable remade for American audiences. Although the American interest in these films can be looked upon as merely a fad—a passing interest in a culturally “exotic” cinema—the emergence of these films in Japan is significant because it marks a clear interest in placing women and femininity at the forefront of, not only horror cinema, but modern critiques of a society at large. In most horror films women are relegated to the roles of pleasurable “eye candy” for male audience members, victims to be tortured and killed, and hysterical screamers embodying the stereotype of weak, helpless femininity. Where these J-horror films break from this trend is in their clear emphasis of, and interest in, the female perspective that many horror films refuse to acknowledge. As Steven Rawle writes in “Video Killed the Movie: Cultural Translation in *Ringu* and *The Ring*,” “[diminish] certain specific Japanese elements in the original, especially... intertextual references to traditional conceptions of ghosts and the amplification of other elements that have equivalents in Western and/or global culture, such as... patriarchal discourses” (99).

Opening Perspectives

The opening sequences of both *Ringu* and *The Ring* immediately situate the viewer within opposing discourses relating to the representations and treatment of women within each narrative. In both instances two girls discuss the “Ring curse” and the mysterious videotape that supposedly kills its viewers after a week, while watching television late at night. Although the scenes are nearly identical from a narrative standpoint the execution of each is drastically different—creating two opposing readings of how each film treats its female characters. *Ringu* opens with a shot of the ocean at night that dissolves into an extreme close-up of a television and then slowly zooms out to show the two girls discussing the curse of the “Ring” videotape. Televisions are a key motif throughout the film because it is through the television that Sadako (Samara in the American version)—the films’ *onryou*—stalks and kills her victims. The camera’s emphasis on the television—it is centered on the screen with both girls acting as a frame around it—creates a link between the audience and the characters by positioning both as potential victims

of Sadako. The film's audience and the characters within the film are all consumers of screen images and are thus at the mercy of the screen—the characters are scared to death by Sadako emerging from the television and the audience is likewise scared by the images that follow in the film. The presence of the television set between the two girls emphasizes their status as potential victims of the curse, while also placing the audience within the same position. The audience passively observes the conversation while the threat that the television represents—not only to the characters, but also to themselves as they await the inevitable first scare of the film—is underlined within the opening shot. *Ringu* therefore permits the audience to identify with the girls to the degree that they all become “victims” of being scared by Sadako. This identification is amplified for female viewers who can easily place themselves within the scene— young girls sharing gossip of urban legends—while male audience members are permitted to identify with the girls by subsequently occupying the same position as potential victim of the “death scare”—literally through being scared by the film and figuratively by the position of the camera.

The opening shots of *The Ring* are nearly identical to *Ringu's*, but there are immediate key differences that produce an entirely different reading of the film's opening and its treatment of the female characters. The two girls (Katie and Becca) still discuss the cursed tape in the presence of a television, but in the American version the camera *is* the television. The camera frames both girls from the front in a medium shot as the girls look toward the camera/television and then slowly begins to zoom-in toward them. This reversal of *Ringu's* opening shot no longer situates the audience within a position of identification with the girls because they do not occupy the same vantage point as inevitable victims. Instead of being seated in front of the television as potential victims—like the girls in *Ringu*—the camera in *The Ring* allows the audience to occupy the space of the television, thus becoming the conduit through which the *onryou* will emerge to kill.

Identification with the killer, rather than with the victims, is a staple of the American horror genre and one that breeds a voyeuristic intent on the part of the audience to watch the characters die while sympathizing with none—this tradition can be seen in “slasher” films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) and *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), in which, the audience respectively sees Freddy Krueger assemble his razor glove and Michael Myers murder his older sister with the camera occupying point-of-view shots. By transferring audience identification away from the victims and onto the source of

violence—defined by David Cook as, “a male psycho-killer who stalks sexually active teenage girls” (235)—the slasher genre situates the audience within a “deep strain of misogyny” (Cook, 238) synonymous with certain genres of American cinema. By evoking the slasher style of horror *The Ring* aesthetically and thematically recalls the misogynistic traditions of American cinema (Westerns, horror, *film noirs*), displacing the feminist aspects of *Ringu*’s allusions to *onryou* folktales and reflecting the Americanization that *Ringu*’s narrative underwent. The first shot in *The Ring* is an establishing shot of a house late at night, recalling the clichéd tropes of the slasher genre, preparing the audience to view the unfolding deaths as a “spectator sport” with complete detachment. Valerie Wee describes how *The Ring*’s opening conforms to the slasher tradition in her essay, “Cultural Constructions of the Supernatural: The Case of *Ringu* and *The Ring*”;

In the tradition of the American horror film, including the popular slasher subgenre, we cut to a bedroom in which two young teenage girls, Katie and Becca, are watching television. The girls are alone in the house and none of the lamps appear to be lit... Almost all color has been bleached out, and the house seems to be lit only... by the television screen... Unlike the opening sequence in *Ringu*, which constructs an overtly ordinary and seemingly banal world, this sequence employs all the familiar conventions of the supernatural horror genre... This sequence seeks to present a reality that has already been tainted by a pervasive sense of malevolence and evil. (92)

The Ring prepares the audience for the inevitable (and now expected) outcome—someone will die—preventing any kind of identification with its female characters because the audience has been conditioned by countless other American horror films to view the female characters as disposable objects for the slaughter. Any potential to identify with the girls is ultimately reversed into a voyeuristic detachment by the literal reversal of camera movement from *Ringu*’s opening to *The Ring*’s—rather than the camera zooming *out* of the television the camera zooms *in* toward the girls. The girls are no longer characters, but merely objects that the film will destroy for the entertainment of the viewers, hence changing the first girl’s death from a freeze frame of her scared face in *Ringu* to a quick zoom in and grotesque distortion of her face via special effects in *The Ring*.

The alteration of Katie and Becca's costumes in *The Ring's* opening sequence also allows for an objectification of their bodies. While the girls in *Ringu* are dressed in a fairly conservative manner—one wears a knee-length skirt and the other a tracksuit—Katie and Becca both wear a schoolgirl ensemble consisting of a low-cut skirt and a loose fitting shirt. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey writes, "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (750). While the presence of women does not "work against the development of a story line" in either of these films—on the contrary, women are integral to these narratives—the needless alteration to the characters' clothing certainly allows for "erotic contemplation" on the part of the audience. The eroticism of Katie and Becca's characters in *The Ring* is unquestionably enhanced from *Ringu's* by this costume change and reduces them to objectified female bodies that are meant to be voyeuristically watched, then disposed of. Any attempt to create identification between the girls and the audience is destroyed by *The Ring's* pandering to a prescribed male gaze. From its opening moments *The Ring* undoubtedly situates itself against the non-regressive feminine narrative that *Ringu* clearly establishes (and continues to remain) within.

Women and Family

Integral to many of the J-horror films is the presence of a strong, independent (single) woman as the central protagonist. J-horror's narrative emphasis on female characters speaks to the various filmmakers' interest in the "ever-emerging politics of identity informed by shifting gender roles" that McRoy points to as a key argument regarding the genre's social concerns. *Ringu's* narrative primarily follows Reiko, a television reporter, as she attempts to uncover the truth of the cursed videotape to save herself, her son, and her ex-husband who all become exposed to the curse. It is worth noting that in adapting the narrative from its source novel, *Ring* by Kôji Suzuki, the main character was changed from the married man, Kazuyuki, to a divorced, single mother, Reiko, instead. This change alone immediately sets the tone of the film's feminine interest and informs a much greater complexity to the narrative's gender roles. Kristen Lacey writes:

[*Ringu's* director, Hideo Nakata] changes the male protagonist to a female (a single working mother), thus skewing Suzuki's focus on fatherhood and paternal responsibility, and muting the treatment of various gender issues that are foregrounded in the novel. As a consequence of these directorial decisions, the film's narrative focuses almost exclusively on the activities of [a female] investigative reporter... Once Reiko and her son view the tape, maternal (rather than paternal) instincts displace journalistic curiosity. (9-10)

The Ring similarly maintains *Ringu's* change to a female protagonist (Rachel); however, questionable choices are made to her characterization that undermines the gender realignment.

Rachel is first introduced in *The Ring* as she picks her son, Aidan, up from school. She is running late—Aidan is the only child in the classroom—and busy arguing on her phone, her loud voice penetrating the classroom walls causing Aidan and his teacher to exchange looks. Rachel threatens to stab the person on the other end of the line with a pencil before hanging up and exclaiming, “Shit!”, upon entering the room, before embarrassingly collecting herself and apologizing to the teacher—but not Aidan—for being late. Aidan seems (understandably) emotionally distant from his mother, unlike in *Ringu*, no doubt because she is too preoccupied with her work to pick him up on time. When Aidan's teacher informs Rachel that she is disturbed by his recent drawings regarding his cousin's death (Katie, from the film's opening) Rachel is quick to dismiss her with a half-hearted, “He knows I'm there”. Rachel also says she is already looking for a daycare for Aidan when asked about Katie's death—Katie would babysit Aidan—completely missing the significance that the girl's death has had in Aidan's young life. In the car ride home Rachel cannot bring herself to ask Aidan about his feelings toward Katie's death or the disturbing pictures that he has been drawing at school. By way of this introduction maternity is presented in *The Ring* as unreliable, aggressive, and dismissive of the child's emotional state. Even though Rachel is the working mother, struggling to raise her son on her own, she is clearly a flawed parent that shows the need for a paternal figure in the family dynamic.

Ringu offers a comparatively pared down introduction for Reiko in which she interviews a group of schoolgirls about the cursed videotape for a news story she is working on. The noticeable presence of women with regard to the mythology surrounding the curse is essential because women serve as the primary distributors and consumers of the “Ring curse” myth with men occupying secondary roles—the

narrative of *Ringu* situates itself as a primarily feminist story intended for a female audience. *The Ring* complicates this feminist focus by removing this scene—therefore eliminating one of the narrative’s strong connections to femininity—in favor of introducing Rachel through her troubled relationship with her son.

The mother-son relationship in *Ringu* may not be ideal, but it is far from the emotionally distant relationship that Rachel and Aidan share. The closest that *Ringu*’s narrative comes to indicting Reiko as a bad mother comes through conversations she has with Yoichi on the phone while investigating the curse. However, even these lines of dialogue are ambiguous enough to not completely implicate Reiko as failing Yoichi. During a scene in which Reiko and Ryuji (her ex-husband) study the cursed tape late at night Ryuji asks if Yoichi will be alright being left alone. Reiko’s response, “He’s used to it”, is telling. On the surface this dialogue can be understood to be implying that, like Rachel, Reiko is neglectful toward her son, but the acting in the scene provides a subtler context. Reiko does not make eye contact with Ryuji when she responds and Ryuji briefly glances at her before returning his focus to the tape. Taking this into consideration Reiko’s response suddenly becomes a harsh jab at Ryuji’s abandonment—“He’s used to it [since his father isn’t around]”—and alleviates a lot of the blame that can be placed upon her as the neglectful career woman.

The Ring fails to provide any kind of satisfactory reason for Rachel’s neglect of Aidan, other than preoccupation with her career. The American narrative identifies the independent, career woman as incapable of providing adequate emotional support for the suffering of the (male) child due to her career-minded focus. If one were to read the narrative as a reaction against modern society—societal weakness attributed to the collapse of the family unit; the younger generation at risk due to the “sins” of the parents—*The Ring* clearly places blame on contemporary motherhood, whereas *Ringu* takes the opposite approach by situating paternity as the cause of society’s problems—Ryuji abandoned his family and Reiko is doing the best she can to support herself and their son.

The Ring further attempts to “rectify” *Ringu*’s emphasis on the maternal by redacting the mother as an emotionally weaker individual. In a scene shortly following the introduction of Rachel we see her getting dressed for Katie’s wake. Rachel is gratuitously shot in her underwear as she throws clothes on her bed. The needless inclusion of seeing Rachel in her underwear provides nothing for the narrative, but it does sexualize a female body, alerting us to Mulvey’s criticism of how the film freezes the narrative

action for “erotic contemplation” to structure the desire of the male audience. The camera cuts to a shot inside her closet as she frantically shifts through her dresses as her dialogue reveals her anxiety, “Oh, shit! Aidan... Goddamn it. Honey?! Have you seen my black dress? Aidan? Have you seen my black... dress?” A point-of-view shot reveals that Aidan has pulled the dress out for her, but did not bother to tell her. Cut to a shot of Aidan finishing getting dressed. Once again, the scene as it originally appears in *Ringu* is much more truncated and to the point—Reiko rushes up the stairs to her apartment, cut to an interior shot where Yoichi tells Reiko that he has already pulled her clothes out for her, cut to Yoichi zipping up her dress. One could argue that the American version of the film is simply providing additional emotion to Rachel’s character, but these added emotions weaken the character by rendering her more frazzled and short-tempered, traits that sabotage her resilience—if she begins to lose her grip over a black dress how can she possibly solve the curse of the Ring and protect her child?

In fact, *The Ring* seems intent on obliterating the mother-son relationship altogether. Aidan is shown to be more mature and well composed than his mother who over-reacts when she cannot find the dress her son has already picked out. Unlike the healthier mother-son relationship that Reiko and Yoichi share, the relationship between Rachel and Aidan constantly undermines the mother. Aidan almost exclusively calls his mother “Rachel”, even after she saves him from the curse, further detaching himself from the relationship and asserting his independence.

The mother-son relationship in both films is a result of the absence of the husband/father, but the narratives of *Ringu* and *The Ring* feature a begrudging alliance with the ex-husband, Ryuji, and the father, Noah, respectively, for the sake of the mother and son’s survival. The explanation that *The Ring* provides for Rachel seeking help from Noah—whom she is not shown to keep in touch with—is that Noah is an unspecified expert when it comes to video technology, the medium through which the curse proliferates. *Ringu* is far more ambiguous regarding its explanation as to why Reiko seeks help from Ryuji, but based upon the lack of male characters within the film it seems that Reiko has no one else she can turn to for help—the only other “prominent” male character, Yoichi’s grandfather, is too old to assist her as she tracks the source of the videotape. While this aspect of *The Ring*’s narrative is a bit more logical—Ryuji has no connection to technology, personally or professionally—it becomes yet another way through which the narrative undermines Rachel.

Noah's presence within the narrative implies that he possesses what Rachel, as a woman, lacks—in this case, knowledge. Rachel's lack of knowledge regarding video technology provides an odd moment of exposition when she brings a copy of the cursed tape to Noah's loft for further study. Noah acknowledges the unusual, and impossible, tracking number errors—an addition to the American narrative—causing Rachel to reply condescendingly, "Hey Noah, can you pretend for a second that I don't read 'Video Geek Magazine'?" Cue Noah's exposition of tracking numbers and control tracks that leads to the utterly pointless conclusion—Rachel: "Then how did this get recorded?" Noah: "I don't know." This dialogue provides no pertinent information and the mystery surrounding the tape is not alleviated in any way. Tracking numbers and control tracks do not figure into the denouncement and only confirms that the tape is mysterious and unnatural. The film infers that the audience needs to be given information because they lack the knowledge themselves. Rachel's implication that Noah's tech knowledge comes from reading "Video Geek Magazine" is meant to be humorous, but considering that she needs the information spelled out for her it is more of an acknowledgement of her own ignorance. The audience is thus compelled not to identify with the feminine because it is shown to lack the knowledge of the masculine. This specific rendering of femininity as inferior to masculinity is critical because it demonstrates that the woman as signifier of weakness. In "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema" Gaylyn Studlar criticizes psychoanalytic interpretations of the woman's place in cinema: "The female as cinematic image is often considered to be ambivalent spectatorial pleasure for the male because she signifies the possibility of castration. She represents difference, nonphallus, lack" (780). Femininity becomes a signifier of lack in *The Ring* as a result of Rachel's lack of knowledge that the man possesses.

The remainder of the sequence in Noah's loft seems designed to devalue Rachel as well. Analyzing the tape frame-by-frame Noah points out to Rachel the irregularity with which the images appear—the camera seemingly captures an image in a mirror, but there is no camera in the reflection. Conversely, in *Ringu*, it is Reiko that points out this aspect of the tape to Ryuji, demonstrating the aptitude that is missing from Rachel's character. When Noah tries to fix the tape's tracking Rachel insists on "helping" by doing it herself—despite not reading "Video Geek Magazine"—causing the tape to shut off. Rachel playfully smiles at Noah, but fixing the tape's tracking is necessary to unraveling its mystery and the momentary failure to do so, due to her stubbornness, is frustrating from the audience's perspective.

When Beth, Noah's "assistant", enters the loft and kisses him on the cheek Rachel immediately takes the tape and leaves, obviously jealous. Once again, *The Ring* expands the female protagonist's emotional range, this time imbuing her with jealousy over "the other woman"—inexplicable, considering that history has proven that Noah is not committed to Rachel, willing to abandon her and their child.

The Ring clearly attempts to reconcile their relationship, adding a romantic element to the narrative that is, at most, only vaguely hinted at in *Ringu*. It is odd that *The Ring* attempts to fix Rachel and Noah's relationship for two reasons: Noah, like Ryuji, dies from the curse (integral to the plot because Reiko/Rachel realizes that the curse is not lifted and the son's life is still in jeopardy); and Noah abandoned Rachel forcing her to have Aidan out of wedlock and care for him on her own. *The Ring's* coda to the romantic reconciliation subplot is Noah's insistence that Rachel calls him "tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that", after presumably exorcising the curse. Despite Noah's previous parental failure of abandonment Rachel is still attracted to him and willing to forgive him, thus exonerating him. This narrative strand implies that the father still holds a place within the family unit despite his previous abandonment, even if it is not fully realized—Noah still dies from the curse. *Ringu* treats the relationship between Reiko and Ryuji more equally with regard to the woman by having Ryuji's girlfriend, Tomoko, act jealous of Reiko—passive aggressively changing Ryuji's mathematic equation in his apartment without his knowing—rather than the other way around. Ryuji also acknowledges that Tomoko is a student of his (he is a university professor) alluding to his sexual and romantic illicitness, which is omitted from *The Ring*—Beth is a student, but Noah is not her professor. *Ringu* also does not resolve to reunite Reiko and Ryuji, only having Ryuji drive Reiko home and the two of them exchanging looks after they assume the curse has been alleviated.

The Ring's "tease" of a romantic reunion between Noah and Rachel promises a return of the man to the family unit, which—based upon Rachel and Aidan's problematic relationship—seems like a necessary improvement and provides an emotional core that the audience can attach themselves to. By establishing that Rachel still has latent feelings for Noah the audience is permitted to believe that they might get back together, consequently rendering that possibility as a "happy" ending, despite the obviously inherent problem with that outcome. The reinstatement of a traditional patriarchal family therefore becomes the outcome that the audience not only expects, but also desires. *The Ring* even

attempts to make the audience sympathetic to Noah's choice of familial abandonment in a private conversation between Noah and Aidan,

Noah: "Rachel and I were..."

Aidan: "Young. Mom's told me that story."

Noah: "The thing is, I... I don't think I'd make a good father. Maybe it was because my own was... such a... disappointment. Thing is, I don't want anyone else to do it, either. Be your father."

The film's attempt to explain away the father's abandonment is exclusive to *The Ring* and is indicative of its desire to exonerate the man for his previous parental failings, so that the audience can willingly accept him back into the family dynamic. This gives Noah's death at the end of the film an emotional weight that is absent in *Ringu* because it renders the possibility for the "happy" ending impossible and thus makes his death tragic. Ryuji's death in *Ringu* is similarly tragic, but for a completely different reason that allows for an altogether different reading. *Ringu* does not tease reestablishment of the family unit, so it is not the loss of Ryuji that makes his death tragic, it is that Yoichi's life is still in jeopardy—the curse has not been lifted after all! Although Aidan's life is still at risk in *The Ring* as well, Noah's death takes equal precedent because the audience knows that the family has no chance of being restored within the narrative now—a possibility not teased in *Ringu*.

Noah's death can also be read as a counter-argument to Ryuji's in terms of paternal sacrifice. Following Ryuji's death he appears reflected in a blank television screen in Reiko's apartment, pointing toward the copy of the cursed tape. The only way to save oneself from the curse of the tape is to physically copy the tape and show it to someone else—Reiko/Rachel saves herself earlier in the narrative without realizing it by showing the copy to Ryuji/Noah. With this last message from Ryuji his death becomes sacrificial in the sense that he is "sacrificed" by the *onryou* (femininity) so that the son can survive within the care of the strictly maternal family unit. Lacefield believes that Noah's death serves a similar purpose to *The Ring's* narrative by equating the copying of the tape as a metaphorical form of reproduction:

Rachel rushes home from Noah's apartment, and almost immediately it dawns on her that the key to negating Samara's curse is copying her video so that someone else can watch it. Thus, from

beyond the grave Noah makes a belated, typically minimal, paternal contribution to her next reproductive project. (20)

While it is true that Rachel realizes how to avert the curse after leaving Noah's apartment, he does not actually appear and gesture toward the copied tape in a way that would imply "paternal contribution"—Rachel seems to arrive at that conclusion in a solitary way.

By consequence Noah's death is not "sacrificial" like Ryuji's, it simply is. The positive nature of the father's death—for the sake of the son to be with the mother in *Ringu*—suddenly becomes negative since the audience's hope for a "happy" ending with the restored family is destroyed and the son is doomed to remain in a troubled, solely maternal relationship. According to Steven Rawle the *onryou* is a threat for the American conception of family, which is dependent upon the father:

[The] curse is revealed as a direct threat to the security of the American nuclear family. Whereas *Ringu* exposes the corruption and weakness of the dominant patriarchy, *The Ring* presents a course by which the negotiation and restoration of the family unit can be achieved. The dysfunctional Morgans [the *onryou*'s family] are replaced by the restored unit of Rachel, Noah, and Aidan, the investigation of the video tape facilitating the re-establishment of the family. As such, Noah's death at the hands of Samara constitutes a restatement of her evil and the threat she poses to conservative family values. (111)

The Ring transforms the *onryou* to a monstrous "other" that threatens the sanctity of the American family unit, rather than presenting her as taking revenge against the failed patriarchy that resulted in her tragic death—the curse, in *Ringu*, is created from the murder of Sadako by her father, Dr. Ikuma after her mother commits suicide.

Even if one were insistent upon arguing that Noah's death has the same positive effect as Ryuji's, *The Ring*'s omission of *Ringu*'s *second* paternal sacrifice clearly reconstructs the original's anti-patriarchal position. In the final scene of *Ringu* Reiko, having realized how to nullify the curse, drives to her father's house—"Dad? I have a favor to ask of you. It's for Yoichi." The camera cuts to a shot of the passenger seat with a VCR and a tape along with two girls in voice-over:

Girl 1: "I heard there's a way to lift the curse from the video. You have to copy it and show it to someone else within a week."

Girl 2: "Then what happens to them?"

Girl 1: "They have to do the same thing within a week."

Girl 2: "Then it never ends?"

Girl 1: "That's right. It goes on forever. But if you don't want to die, you'd do it, wouldn't you?"

As it was with Ryuji, the father (Yoichi's grandfather) becomes a source of salvation for the non-patriarchal family, but only through his death. The girls' voice-overs at the end suggest a bleak future in which the ring curse will spread indefinitely providing an apocalyptic vision of Japanese society wiped out—unless, of course, fatherly sacrifices are made. Reading *Ringu's* narrative from a socio-political standpoint reveals that prevention of total societal collapse is achieved by sacrificing the father for the sake of the family. It is the cursed tape—created out of the collapse of the family unit by the father—that poses the ultimate threat to society, therefore it is the father who can prevent it through his atonement (death). According to *Ringu* the only hope society has is located in the continued survival of family, and the only hope for the family's survival is through the "sacrifice" of the father and the ascendance of the mother.

It should come as no surprise that *The Ring* opted not to include *Ringu's* "apocalyptic" ending, which champions the woman-led family. After discovering Noah's body Rachel returns to her apartment and yells at Aidan to go to his room—why he should bear the brunt of her frustration and anger over Noah's death is inexplicable. Rachel physically breaks the tape—smashing it on the floor and even setting it on fire—all while screaming at it before crying. This scene confirms Rachel's character to be more overly dramatic and stressed out than Reiko, who is calm and collected following Ryuji's death because she realizes that her child is still at risk from the curse and is determined to save his life. Although Rachel is determined to save Aidan she allows her emotions to dominate her and becomes reduced to the stereotype of the hysterical woman, paralyzed by emotion. Reiko, meanwhile, exhibits a cool determinism that is typically attributed to masculinity (any male antihero character), she re-inscribes it as a powerful trait of femininity through maternal concern—the safety of her child. Rachel's reaction, on the other hand, exhibits the negative connotations often attributed to Western femininity—hysteria, panic, and inability to act.

The removal of the grandfather from *The Ring*'s narrative also allows the film's ending to avoid the original's concluding paternal sacrifice, choosing to incorporate the audience instead. Realizing the truth of the tape's curse Rachel helps Aidan to copy the tape—she holds his hand and uses it to push the buttons to make a copied tape. The voice-over is replaced with a brief conversation between Rachel and Aidan,

Aidan: "It's going to keep killing, isn't it. She'll [Samara] 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 camera then cuts to the final image of the tape as it occupies the entire frame. By ending the film with the copied tape occupying the entire frame *The Ring* implicates the audience as the next victims of the curse, and the ones who will consequently sacrifice themselves for Aidan's life. This ending was (most likely) chosen because it is "scariest" than *Ringu*'s, implicating the audience's death by breaking the "fourth wall", but it has the interesting consequence of vilifying Rachel's character. What is originally an act of necessary evil in *Ringu*—sacrificing the grandfather for the son—becomes a cruel act of sacrificing the many for the few, as Rawle points out, "Rachel's decision to show the video to any willing viewer in order to save her son...ultimately contradicts the sacrifice made by Reiko when she shows the video to her father" (112).

Rachel's silence following Aidan's question—"What happens to them?"—shows that she is willing to condemn the lives of total strangers (the audience) for her son, as opposed to Reiko's "request" of the paternal on behalf of Yoichi. Reiko's choice of sacrificing her own father comes with its own emotional weight for the character because it is *her* father who must die for Yoichi—Reiko will be forced to live with her decision for the rest of her and Yoichi's lives. Rachel's choice of using a stranger to save Aidan comparatively seems more callous because there is a level of detachment from the life that is sacrificed. One of the appeals of horror films is they permit a buffer between the audience and the disturbing content of the film by the separation created by the screen—the audience can enjoy what happens to the characters from the "safety" of the theater. The implication of the audience as Rachel's choice of victim, combined with the curse's proliferation through media screens and the film "becoming" the cursed tape, creates an uncomfortable closeness between audience and content. The audience is no longer as

detached from the film as they are with *Ringu's* ending because they become part of the narrative as the next victims due to the woman. The woman destroys the “safe” space of the movie theater through her decision to “show” the tape to the audience. *The Ring* rewrites *Ringu's* ending as justification to fear the woman because of her potential and willingness to kill.

As a final discussion pertaining to *The Ring's* ending it should be pointed out that Rachel saves Aidan's life, but only through his corruption. Unlike Reiko, who omits Yoichi from her plan to get the grandfather to watch the copied tape, Rachel directly involves Aidan in the process of physically copying it. The logic of *The Ring's* narrative is that, since Aidan is the one who is still cursed he is the one who must physically make the copy, however this detail is completely absent in *Ringu* and only vaguely hinted at in *The Ring's* narrative. Although the girl's voice-over at the end *implies* this—“You have to copy it and show it to someone else within a week”—it is never made specifically clear if the cursed person has to, or if the tape merely needs to be replicated and seen. Taking the endings as they are, *The Ring's* inclusion of the son in the process of copying and redistributing the curse allows for a critique of the fatherless family that is absent in *Ringu*. In *The Ring's* narrative the mother corrupts the innocent son following the father's death by implicating him in the future death of a total stranger, making him, by proxy, a perpetrator of patriarchal violence.

The Videotape and the Gaze

The moment when Reiko/Rachel watches the cursed videotape is a key moment in both films' narratives, not only because it sets the plot in motion, but also by the ways in which the women's gazes function. When Reiko watches the videotape the camera adopts her point-of-view and the entire screen becomes the videotape. *Ringu* allows the viewer to experience the female gaze first-hand through a point-of-view shot of Reiko watching the tape, providing a moment of identification with the woman by sharing her perspective and her experience of looking. According to Rawle, “Both Asakawa [Reiko] and the audience share the gaze at the tape—in this sense viewers are complicit in viewing the video, as though their lives were also at stake watching the cursed images” (102), subsequently making the viewer a victim of the tape as well.

The Ring complicates this possibility for identification by deliberately breaking the completely subjective videotape sequence by including a redundant shot of Rachel reacting to the tape and the television's borders. Rawle argues that despite these differences the viewer is similarly able to identify with Rachel:

One of the key ways in which the videos differ is in the framing of the look at the screen. In *Ringu* we share the same point of view as Reiko, where the images of the video fill the cinema screen as well as the television screen in the diegesis. When Rachel watches the video, we consciously share *her* point of view, as Verbinski [*The Ring's* director] chooses to include the edges of the television in the shot, forcing a conscious identification with Rachel instead of implicating the viewer in the watching of the video. (108)

Rawle's suggestion that the sequence allows for greater identification with Rachel is certainly plausible, however, he immediately invalidates this reading:

A shot-reverse-shot sequence between Rachel and the television screen at the beginning of the tape reinforces this identification; the audience becomes sutured to Rachel's point of view, but also, crucially, to the television, implying the doubled nature of the look *at* the screen and that which looks *back* from beyond [Samara]. In doing so, the text encourages the viewer to look, rather than look away; *there is no suggestion that the viewer's life could be at stake here—we're watching someone else watch the videotape*. Additionally, this perspective validates the spectacle of the video... The special effects and aggressive editing techniques of the American video testify to its big-budget. (108-109) [emphasis mine]

It is difficult to agree with Rawle's argument that the television point-of-view shots further identification between the audience and Rachel because *The Ring* features a double shot-reverse-shot sequence during the video that would seem to break the suture by acknowledging that the audience is "watching someone else watch the videotape"—during a grotesque scene of a nail piercing someone's finger the camera cuts to a reaction shot of Rachel grimacing with pain and disgust before cutting back to the videotape from Rachel's point-of-view. The shot is completely unnecessary and simply illustrates that Rachel (presumably) shares that same reaction as the audience. By cutting away from the video, identification with Rachel is broken for the exact reason that Rawle mentions: "there is no suggestion that

the viewer's life could be at stake here". The foregrounding of the events of the narrative as occurring to "someone else" removes the viewer from the woman's perspective of "victim" in favor of a detached perspective as a voyeur. Although *Ringu* excludes the television borders that force a "conscious identification with Rachel" it *does* feature the initial shot-reverse-shot of Reiko and the television when the video starts to play *without* interrupting the tape with a reaction shot of Reiko, thus suturing the audience to Reiko's point of view and permitting a greater degree of identification than with Rachel.

The "spectacle of the video" as Rawle refers to it, is another way in which *The Ring* disrupts the viewer's identification with the woman. By "[validating] the spectacle of the video... [with] special effects and aggressive editing techniques of the American video [that] testify to its big-budget"—compared to the more "banal", low budget video of *Ringu*—*The Ring* emphasizes the materiality of the video. Viewers of *The Ring* become consciously aware of its "spectacle" through the film's special effects laden tape and are no longer compelled to look at it from the perspective of the character, but from their own perspective that is not necessarily feminine. The low budget, "simplicity" of *Ringu's* video is aligned with the film's overall aesthetic style and thereby corresponds to the female-centric narrative more than *The Ring's* video, which corresponds more to the American horror genre's obsession with visual (and visceral) spectacle. Rather than seen from the perspective of the female victim, the videotape in *The Ring* becomes yet another site of visual excess that the audience is expected to marvel at through a perspective that is aware of its artifice, and consequently removed from identification with the character.

An integral element of the videotape is the presence of *onryou*, Sadako, and her function in relationship to the gaze. During the videotape sequence in *Ringu* one of the shots within the tape is an extreme close-up of Sadako's eye, which stares at Reiko/the audience who simultaneously stares back. *Ringu* is a film that, as Rawle explains it, "equates the cinematic gaze with that of the female... [Creating] a double articulation of the cinematic gaze—at the tape by the female protagonist, and *from* the tape by the female antagonist" (105). The doubling of the female gaze in *Ringu* reconstitutes the gaze from, what Mulvey describes as, a "split between active/male and passive/female" (750) to one in which the active and passive gazes are both female, in effect, erasing a male gaze completely from the narrative. In this moment the woman and the "monster" look at one another resulting in a connection between the two that Linda Williams refers to as, "recognition of their similar status as potent threats to a vulnerable male

power” (570). As a result, “the gazes of the woman and the monster identify with each other as articulations of potential threats to patriarchal order” (Rawle, 106). Even though the woman is the central figure of the film, patriarchy is actually the ultimate victim—a twist on the victimization of the woman in most American horror films. *Ringu* is therefore a horror film about the female gaze simultaneously observing and destroying patriarchy, victimizing men instead of women.

Although the videotape in *The Ring* similarly features a doubling of the feminine gaze—at and from the television—the emphasis of the female gaze is drastically downplayed. Rawle locates *Ringu*'s emphasis of the anti-patriarchal female gaze as the moment of the extreme close-up of Sadako's eye:

The centrality of the destructive power of the female gaze in *Ringu* is emphasized firstly by the shot of the eye in the video. The shifting looks of the video between that of the spectator at the screen and the eye of Sadako *from* the screen fractures the fourth wall of the video's space, emphasizing the gaze's destructive power. (106)

By “fracturing the fourth wall of the video's space” Sadako's eye directly engages the audience, placing them in the same position as Reiko, a potential victim of the repressed female—the *onryou*. Because the “destructive power of the female gaze” is a consequence of a woman's victimization, male viewers are implicated as representative of the repressive patriarchy that led to her death and created the curse. This extreme close-up shot of the eye is absent in *The Ring*, replaced with an extreme close-up of Rachel's eye following the conclusion of the tape. According to Rawle this focus on Rachel's gaze emphasizes the viewer's gaze *at the video* rather than Samara's gaze *at the viewer*:

From [the tape's last shot] we cut to static, then to Rachel's reaction as before. The reaction shot is followed by an extreme close-up of Rachel's eye—the pupil contracts. The focus on the eye at this point emphasizes the spectacular nature of the video and the ocular stimulation of the viewer reacting to the images they have just watched, rather than to the activity of the monstrous feminine gaze. At this moment, effective narrative movement is halted for the spectacle of the videotape. (110)

The emphasis of the *onryou*'s eye is a Japanese cultural specificity that McRoy notes is “frequently associated with vaginal imagery” (6-7), which subsequently reinforces the *onryou*'s gendered nature. The de-emphasis of the eye in *The Ring* is most certainly a result of the cultural adaptation process, but it

nevertheless results in a removal of the “monstrous feminine gaze”. As a result the power of the female’s gaze is reduced from being a signifier of destructive power wielded against patriarchy (Sadako’s gaze from the television) to being indicative of the woman’s status as a victim (Rachel’s reaction to the killer tape). The *onryou* of *The Ring* becomes stripped of her powerful gaze—representative of female genitalia/beauty—to be simply a monstrous presence within the tape.

What is the “monstrous feminine” in *Ringu* is suddenly transformed into the monstrous “other” so often found in American horror cinema. This “othering” of the *onryou* is by no means an exclusive alteration made to *Ringu*’s narrative, but is commonly found in many American adaptations of Japanese horror films. By focusing on Rachel’s reaction to the tape, as a viewer, *The Ring* situates the videotape as the primary cause of the curse instead of Samara. Rather than the tape being an extension of the *onryou*’s rage—the conduit through which Sadako projects the “destructive power of the female gaze” at patriarchy—Samara becomes an extension of the tape as the monstrous “other”, killing anyone who watches it.

Sadako/Samara, The Onryou

Unquestionably the most significant change that occurs in the Americanization of *Ringu*’s narrative is the alteration of the *onryou*, Sadako, from the “monstrous-feminine” to the monstrous “other”, Samara. McRoy identifies the *onryou*’s function in Japanese horror cinema as representative of “the return of a repressed feminine identity or as a creative barometer for social change at the turn of the millennium” and it is the *onryou*’s lack of cultural and social meaning within the context of American culture that results in its transformation into “the ultimate metaphoric representation of a seemingly irreconcilable alterity” (102). As Valerie Wee points out this cultural specificity is lost with the narrative’s Americanization due to a lack of similar traditions:

Ringu’s narrative is derived, in large part, from the established tradition of the Japanese female ghost story... This cultural narrative directly shapes the cinematic/stylistic conventions and character depictions in *Ringu*. Not surprisingly, these specific, distinctly Japanese, narrative components dealing with the vengeful female ghost are missing in the American adaptation,

replaced by familiar narrative elements borrowed directly from the classic American supernatural horror film tradition. (82)

The assumption that *Ringu*'s narrative—as a culturally specific product—requires a certain degree of cultural translation for American audiences in the adaptation process “justifies” the belief that it is easier to remold the narrative into more conventional, American cinematic terms rather than translating the film’s conception of horror as is. Rather than “struggling” to translate a ghost story about a wronged woman’s vengeful spirit—a concept that is apparently too difficult for American audiences to grasp—*The Ring*'s narrative relies on the tropes of American horror films. Instead of the “monstrous-feminine” struggling against the patriarchal system that produced it, *The Ring*'s narrative reduces the *onryou* to the typical American horror genre monster that is to be feared and (ideally) destroyed, rather than pitied. As noted by Rawle, “*The Ring* simply restates the norms of Western female centric horror films. *Ringu*'s otherness is doubled—both that of its status as cult J-Horror film remade and as a depiction of female wrath at patriarchal failure” (113).

From the outset of its adaptation from the Suzuki novel, *Ringu* is clearly focused on highlighting Sadako’s femininity, making it a core component of the narrative. According to David Kalat, “In the original novel of *Ring*, evil ghost Sadako is a girl with unusual properties. In addition to her [ESP abilities], what really sets Sadako apart is her ambiguous gender identity. She has ‘Testicular Feminization Syndrome,’ which is a fancy way of saying she has both male and female genitalia” (quoted in Lacefield, 8). Much like *Ringu*'s alteration of the novel's protagonist to a female character (Reiko), Sadako's “ambiguous gender identity” (Lacefield, 8) is changed to a strictly female one. Although it can be argued to be a consequence of the adaptation process—simplifying elements of the novel to reduce the need for narrative exposition—Lacefield explains that “narrative and visual echoes suggest that Nakata is intentionally referencing the traditional Japanese ghost story in *Ringu*” (85) through the total feminization of Sadako. By alluding to the traditional ghost narrative *Ringu* situates Sadako within a specific context, which Valerie Wee explains thusly:

A noteworthy aspect of these traditional Japanese ghost stories is the fact that the vengeful female ghost is not judged as evil. Although she becomes a terrifying, destructive force, she is overly presented as an innocent victim, who is transformed into a terrifying ghost by the selfish,

destructive actions of another. In Japanese culture, the female ghost... is predominantly aligned with notions of anger and vengeance. (85)

Ringu's narrative placement within the discourse of the traditional Japanese ghost story identifies Sadako as sympathetic victim, rather than simply a monster—"On the surface, she seems to be the personification of evil, destroying random, innocent, individuals. However... this may be too simplistic a view, particularly when we place Sadako within the established Japanese narrative tradition of the female ghost story" (Wee, 85).

Investigating the mysterious videotape brings Reiko and Ryuji to Oshima Island where they learn about a woman with powerful psychic powers, Shizuko, her husband, Dr. Ikuma, who experimented with her abilities, and their daughter, Sadako. As Ryuji, who also possesses ESP abilities, questions a local about Shizuko, both he and Reiko experience the local's flashback to a public demonstration Dr. Ikuma held to showcase Shizuko's powers. After Shizuko successfully reads a man's mind several times a disgruntled audience member—also a man—stands up and claims that she is a fraud and the entire demonstration is "just a magic show!" Another man from the audience stands up—"Dr. Ikuma, she's deceiving you, too!" The entire audience of men stands and begins shouting and pointing at Shizuko as she backs away and holds her head, their negative thoughts obviously affecting her. Suddenly, the camera cuts to the man who initiated the shouting as he falls over dead, his facing bearing the same horrified look as victims of the tape—"He's dead." "She's a monster!" As Shizuko attempts to leave the stage she stops, "Sadako! Did you do that?" Ryuji remembers the eye from the tape bearing the Japanese character for "Sada" and asks the local if she could kill just by willing it. The man replies, "She was a monster!" McRoy locates the origin of Sadako's rage in the male persecution of her mother:

The men are threatened by more than [Shizuko's] possession of a knowledge that exceeds that of paternal scientific community; it is her ability to vocalize this knowledge and, thereby, insert herself into the realm of public discourse that evokes a virulent fear from the male audience. It is the incredulity turned into fear and anger over [Shizuko's] skills that evokes Sadako's demonstration of her even more powerful... mental acumen. (87)

Shizuko's abilities allow her to know the dark truths of men, literally giving femininity a power that threatens to expose the weakness of man—Ryuji: "Shizuko was able to read people's minds, wasn't she?"

She must have known about things which people hid deep inside their minds. That must have been painful.” The resulting anger and fear toward Shizuko eventually drove her to suicide, making her a victim of a patriarchal system and justifying Sadako’s rage—not only did Sadako lose her mother, she too will most likely be persecuted due to her power. Sadako’s actions during the flashback are not simply the product of murderous intent, but a female survival reflex against an aggressive male society. As Valerie Wee correctly suggests Sadako’s act is one of resistance, “[*Ringu*] intimates that the murder is not unprovoked inasmuch as [Sadako] may be acting in defense of her mother” (86). The flashback sequence grounds Sadako’s murderous tendencies in a justifiable milieu that opposes male aggression and acts as a defense for the defenseless mother.

Unlike the tragic Sadako, the origin of Samara in *The Ring* situates her as far less sympathetic and more outright evil. Investigation of the cursed tape brings Rachel to a horse ranch that belongs to Richard Morgan, Samara’s adoptive father, who refuses to tell her anything about his daughter, or the tape. Talking to a local doctor Rachel discovers that Richard’s wife, Anna, was unable to conceive a child, so the Morgans chose to adopt Samara, whose birth mother died due to “complications”. After the adoption Anna began suffering hallucinations, brought about by Samara, and the two were sent to a mental institution for help and observation. Returning to the Morgan house late at night, Rachel finds a tape of Samara from the hospital—Samara’s file was stolen from by Richard—and watches it. The tape shows Samara confined to her room, never sleeping. During a “therapy” session Samara cannot adequately explain how she is able to create the strange drawings that frighten her parents—“I don’t... make them. I see them... and then... they just... are.” When the doctor asks Samara if she does not want to hurt her mother, or anyone, she responds, “But I do, and I’m sorry.” Following the conclusion of the tape Richard attacks Rachel and then commits suicide via electrocution in a bathtub with televisions, causing Rachel to scream hysterically before Noah valiantly arrives to calm her down.

Samara is not in control of her ESP powers—inadvertently harming her mother and unable to explain how she is able to create the psychic pictures. Whereas Shizuko and Sadako’s powers become signifiers of feminine power that men fear, Samara’s powers represent the uncontrolled evil of a “demon child” reminiscent of American horror films such as *The Omen* (Donner, 1976) and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin,

1973). According to Rawle, this reliance on generic American horror conventions undermines *Ringu's* depiction of the *onryou* as the “monstrous feminine” as Creed defines it:

Barbara Creed contends that the “monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order... through her evocation of the natural, animal order.” Although *The Ring* substantiates this contention by evoking the threat of the feminine, it is worth noting that the film’s *subversion* of the “natural order”—in both the otherness of Samara and the ambiguity surrounding her adoption—locates the female as an abject figure via Anna’s madness and murder of her daughter. Thus, the threat posed by the “monstrous-feminine” and the alterity of her opposition to nature stresses a crucial point of difference between the versions of *Ringu*. The Japanese film locates the monstrousness of the female in the culturally specific form of [*onryou*], whilst the American version falls back on generic elements that can be traced to the cultural and industrial standards of the American horror film. (113)

Samara is also directly responsible for her mother’s suffering due to her “evil” powers, as well as driving her father to suicide, removing *Ringu's* sympathy and social critique in favor of characterizing the child as pure evil. Rather than the mother and daughter sharing a power that can be understood as a simulacrum of their femininity—repressed by a patriarchal society—the mother is a victim of her own child. Anna’s maternal desire to have a child ultimately destroys her and the Morgan family, demonstrating the failure of the maternally led family.

The truth about Sadako and the origin of the curse is revealed when Reiko and Ryuji discover that her body is buried in a well underneath the cabin where Reiko first watched the tape. Touching the well’s lid Reiko once again experiences a flashback: Sadako approaches the well and looks down into it, Dr. Ikuma sneaks up behind her and hits her in the head with a bat, then dumps her body down the well. After several hours of removing water from the well using buckets, Ryuji and Reiko exchange places with Reiko going down into it. As Ryuji lowers her down Reiko looks up and the camera cuts to a POV shot of Ryuji looking down at her. A match cut transitions Reiko’s POV shot into a flashback POV shot of Sadako looking up at her father. The match cut creates a tripling of the gaze, in which Reiko, Sadako, and the viewer are all allowed to share the same perspective. The match cut also merges Ryuji and Dr. Ikuma into the same position, situating them as doubles of one another—both are responsible for their family’s

collapse. The matching POV shots locate Reiko and Sadako as victims of a patriarchal system with their respective ex-husband/father responsible for their descent into the abyss of the well—Ryuji tells Reiko to switch with him and Dr. Ikuma disposes of Sadako's body. At the bottom of the well Reiko comes face-to-face with Sadako. The camera keeps a tight close-up on Reiko's face as she cradles Sadako's skull, then cuts to a reverse POV shot of Sadako's skull as "tears" of ooze slowly drips out of her eye sockets. The camera cuts to a two-shot as Reiko embraces Sadako's body. The "tears" that Sadako's skull "cries" are given added significance from the gaze of Reiko's POV shot.

According to Rawle, "that this continued visual focus on [the gaze] does not result in the pacification of the monstrous female gaze at weak masculinity emphasizes the film's discourse on vengeful femininity" (106). In this shot Sadako seems to plead simultaneously with Reiko and the viewer for forgiveness. In his reading of *Ringu's* ending McRoy points out that the film's narrative is not specific to one case, but a universal warning:

Reiko's discovery of the logic behind the cursed videocassette may very well allow her not only to save her child... but also the lives of countless others, if only through a process of eternal deferment. It is no mere coincidence that the first to view the viral video will be Yoichi's grandfather, a clearly patriarchal figure. Hence, to break a contemporary cycle of literal (within the film's diegesis) and figurative (socio-cultural) fear, tragically and historically repressed woman must forever be acknowledged, their silenced voices perpetually recognized if never fully understood. What these women should never be, Nakata's film suggests, is forgotten or ignored. (87-88)

The embrace that Reiko shares with Sadako's body is one of motherly affection, as she all too well understands the failure of patriarchal systems. The audience too is able to forgive Sadako's "evil" actions because *Ringu's* narrative permits them to understand the source of Sadako's anger.

As it was with Samara's background *The Ring* alters many parts of the well sequence to better portray her as the purely evil monster that poses a threat to the American nuclear family. As Rachel looks down into the well the cabin's television set unhooks itself from its stand and knocks Rachel into the well, no doubt in an attempt to kill her. It is an odd narrative choice considering that Rachel has already broken the curse and is safe from Samara's wrath. At the bottom of the well Rachel experiences a flashback to

Samara's death, similar to Reiko, but detached from any POV. As Samara stands by the well her mother, Anna, approaches from behind and suffocates her, then dumps her body down the well. Following the realization Rachel similarly cradles Samara in a motherly way, but *The Ring* omits the oozing "tears" in favor of Samara's preserved body decomposing in Rachel's arms. Changing Samara's murderer from the father to the mother is an alteration that eliminates any critique of the patriarchal family that was in *Ringu*. It is hard to imagine that American audiences would have been distressed with the original, but the change nonetheless reflects the disturbing socio-political agenda of the American film industry—why blame the father for the female monster when the mother will do? Wee argues that *The Ring* not only situates Samara as a "victimizer", but also justifies her murder by her own mother:

In marked contrast to the problematic, ambiguous nature of Sadako's murder, Samara's murder almost seems to be rationalized or excused. Her evil nature is clearly established well before her mother kills her... This contrasts sharply with the more complex portrayal of Sadako, who exhibits only a single instance of her destructive power when she is provoked to defend and protect her mother... Samara's status as the embodiment of evil, [*The Ring*] suggests, justifies her destruction. And while *Ringu's* portrait of Sadako compels viewers to see her as a victim, her American counterpart is for the most part a victimizer who must be destroyed. (93)

In much the same way that Samara becomes a threat to the nuclear family of Rachel, Noah, and Aidan she is also a threat to her own family. Her birth mother's death due to "complications" clearly insinuates her involvement, while the Morgans' dialogue implies her monstrous "otherness" and her evil nature ("My wife was not supposed to have a child!" and as Anna suffocates Samara: "All I ever wanted was you"). While *Ringu* positions Sadako's evil as borne out of the sins of the father, *The Ring* "offers a much more straightforward representation of evil—embodied by Samara" (Lacefield, 14).

As a final discussion point to the conceptualization of *Ringu's onryou* as monstrous "other" in *The Ring* it is worth briefly mentioning Sadako/Samara's appearance when Ryuji/Noah dies. In *Ringu* when Sadako emerges from the television set she retains a very human-like appearance—her only "monstrous" visual traits are her removed finger nails (a result from trying to escape the well) and her large, gaping eye that she uses to kill Ryuji. The use of Sadako's eye as the primary means through which she kills Ryuji transforms the "traditionally passive female gaze... [into] a malignant threat to patriarchal

domination” (Rawle, 106). *The Ring*, however, relies on special effects to alter Samara’s appearance into a monster/ghost hybrid—she is pale and “static-y”, like the poor quality videotape, and even teleports like a tape with poor tracking. When she kills Noah the extreme close-up of the eye is replaced with a close-up of her face, displaying an *Exorcist*-like disfigured girl’s face. Samara’s unnatural visual manifestation—compared to the more human-like Sadako—“others” her and illustrates her pure evil conceptualization. If *Ringu* constructs Sadako as Creed’s “monstrous-feminine”, then *The Ring* clearly reconstructs Samara as the female monster.

Honogurai Mizu no soko kara and Dark Water

In many ways *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* ([*Dark Water*] Hideo Nakata, 2002) is a companion film to *Ringu*—a restless spirit plagues a single mother and her child, requiring parental sacrifice in order to save the child's life—however, *Honogurai Mizu*'s narrative focuses almost entirely upon the mother/child relationship. The narrative opens with Yoshimi (Dahlia in *Dark Water*) in the middle of a bitter divorce with her ex-husband with both parents fighting for custody of their daughter, Ikuko (Ceci). Yoshimi's capacity as a mother and mental state are called into question because she was abandoned by her mother as a child and suffered a mild breakdown at her previous job—proofreading novels that deal with murder and masochism. Intent on proving her abilities to raise Ikuko on her own Yoshimi moves them into a new apartment near an elementary school and gets a new job. However, strange incidents begin to occur after the mother and daughter move in—water relentlessly leaks from the apartment above, a child's bag constantly reappears after being thrown away, and Yoshimi keeps seeing a strange girl in the apartment block despite being told that there are no other children living there. Yoshimi finally discovers that a young girl, Mitsuko (Natasha), used to live in the apartment above with her family, but like Yoshimi, she too was abandoned by her mother. Left all alone, Mitsuko went to the apartment block's roof, fell into the building's water tower, and drowned. Her restless spirit now haunts the apartment above seeking a new mother, whom she has apparently found in Yoshimi. Switching places with Ikuko, Mitsuko latches on to Yoshimi in a child-like embrace and refuses to let go. Scared that Ikuko's life is in danger if she refuses Mitsuko as her daughter, Yoshimi sacrifices herself to become Mitsuko's new mother, leaving Ikuko behind. In the film's coda, 10 years later, Ikuko, now 16, returns to the apartment and sees the ghost of her mother and the two reconcile.

Honogurai Mizu's focus on the mother-daughter relationship and its theme of maternal struggle and abandonment situates the film as even more invested in femininity than *Ringu*. The film caters to a female audience in its content, which K. K. Seet sees as “evinced an increasing generic exchange between the horror genre and the family melodrama and leading to a convergence or even conflation of the two into a new Asian variation of the domestic gothic (140). The folding of these two genres together allows for the horror film to gain access to a female perspective of melodrama allowing for a more complex depiction of femininity that is not often found in American horror films—a male oriented genre, in

which the woman either occupies the role of victim, or monster, or both. Seet believes that Asian horror films, like *Honogurai Mizu* also reinforce a patriarchal order, “[The] current Asian horror film is ultimately conservative and functions as a form of narrative containment, the modern purification ritual that emphasizes the need for recuperation into the male order of things” (143). While *Honogurai Mizu* does deal with a cycle of maternal abandonment and sacrifices the mother for the sake of the daughter, to say that the film exhibits “the need for recuperation into the male order of things” is far too simplified a reading of the narrative and does not address the film’s visuals. It is not until *Honogurai Mizu* is remade in the U.S. as *Dark Water* (Salles, 2005) that the film narrative exhibits the kind of “recuperation” that Seet discerns.

The Male Presence

Unlike *Ringu*, *Honogurai Mizu* is a film that entirely privileges a female point-of-view. With the exception of a few close-ups the *Honogurai Mizu*’s whole narrative plays out from the perspective of Yoshimi and, in a few brief scenes, Ikuko. Men are not on screen for long, nor is there any depth given to their characters. In her review of the film Amelia Cook writes, “The unworthy men in this story are very minor characters, used mostly to provide the context for the actions and emotions of the female character, rather than the motivation” (184). Men are not the motivators of the narrative—they are inconsequential figures that only exist to serve the (narrative) needs of the woman. Seet, however, contends that it is this lack of a strong male presence in *Honogurai Mizu* that makes the film conservative and evocative of American horror films’ patriarchal obsession with destroying women:

Since the female as abject is underlined in [*Honogurai Mizu*], the implied male gaze does not take the form of fetishistic aestheticization, which according to Mulvey facilitates visual pleasure by investing the women in narrative cinema with an excess of perfection, thereby mastering the threat of castration. In [*Honogurai Mizu*], the male viewer is still equipped with the requisite specular detachment, primarily because there is no male protagonist whose perspective he is asked to share. Nor do any of the women characters reciprocate with a look of desire or challenge, which would thereby bridge the necessary gap between them. This safety of distance

affords him a sadistic voyeurism... the primary pleasure of which is derived from peering into a private world that remains unaware of spectator's existence. (150)

There are two inherent problems with Seet's argument, the first of which is the insinuation that the female characters must "reciprocate with a look". Not only does this argument discount the presence of female spectators and how their gaze functions—which, in and of itself, exposes the fallacy of strictly phallogocentric analyses of the cinematic gaze—but it also demands that the female characters yield to the male gaze. By acknowledging the male gaze as a source of (patriarchal) power over the female form one subsequently ascribes it with the very power that it is condemned for—why should the male gaze be inherently understood as holding power over something that it can never possess in the real world? It should also be pointed out that following the film's opening flashback of Yoshimi, as a child, abandoned at school waiting for her mother to pick her up, the camera cuts to Yoshimi in the present staring directly at the camera. Yoshimi's look can be argued as "[reciprocating] with a look" by directly challenging the male spectator to bear witness to the neglected female and her ability to survive abjection with a gaze of her own.

The other problem that emerges from this argument, as addressed by Studlar, is the assumption that male spectators are completely incapable with identifying with female characters:

When opposite-sex identification has been considered, it has most often been regarded as a problem for the female spectator rather than as a potential pleasure available to both sexes. The "masculinization" of the feminine spectator has been discussed by Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey in terms of the female spectator's identification with the male position. In their view, this trans-sex identification is the result of the female's lack of a spectatorial position of her own other than a masochistic-female/object identification. Neglected are the possibilities of male identification with the female... (789)

The neglect of "opposite-sex identification" is especially detrimental to a reading of *Honogurai Mizu* given the film's distinct privileging of the female characters over the male. Seet's position that identification is strictly aligned to same-gender identification demonstrates a close-minded logic that betrays any objective approach to reading these films. The irony is that Seet further grounds his argument regarding

Honogurai Mizu's conservative nature by blindly analyzing *Honogurai Mizu* with the American voice dubbing:

This safe distance [between the male spectators and female characters] is doubly inscribed by the filtering consciousness that mediates the male spectator's glimpse of the phenomena of horror in the films. In [*Honogurai Mizu*], the grown-up Ikuko as narrator provides another frame... Therefore, the twice-removed male spectator is asked to view the bodies of the female victims as the only visible monsters in these films. (150)

Watching *Honogurai Mizu* with its native Japanese voice soundtrack reveals that Ikuko's narration is a complete invention on the part of the DVD's American production company, ADV Films, added to the dubbed soundtrack for reasons that are beyond anyone's guess. Seet's argument loses credibility when one realizes that the male spectator is only "twice-removed" from *Honogurai Mizu*'s narrative when watching the film with American voices. Instead *Honogurai Mizu*'s American remake, *Dark Water*, does validate Seet's argument by making the narrative's male presence even more pronounced at the expense of the female-central story of the original.

The first major male character in *Honogurai Mizu* is Yoshimi's ex-husband, who is never addressed by name. Both he and Yoshimi are at a divorce mediator's office being interviewed separately. When the ex-husband is first seen there is no information provided about him, the camera simply cuts to a shot of him taking a seat far from Yoshimi—it is not until the mediators refer to him as her husband that the audience becomes aware of who he is. Visually, *Honogurai Mizu* maintains emphasis on Yoshimi's character throughout the entire sequence in the divorce office. As the estranged husband walks toward the camera it simultaneously tracks away from him until Yoshimi is framed in the foreground of the shot, marginalizing his presence on the screen. Yoshimi neither acknowledges her ex-husband, nor does she divert her gaze from the camera until the mediator calls her into the office. When Yoshimi returns to the waiting room from the office the shot of the two of them is reversed with the ex-husband occupying the foreground and Yoshimi in the background, however, Yoshimi is framed in the center of the shot—still bringing attention to her despite being in the background. The two-shots of Yoshimi and her ex-husband demonstrate *Honogurai Mizu*'s focus on the woman at the expense of the man. Yoshimi is always given visual priority in the shots with the ex-husband—first in the foreground, then in the center—and it is she

that initiates his dialogue. The narrative also omits his meeting with the divorce mediators, subsequently showing the entire divorce from Yoshimi's perspective and situating the woman as the only source of information the audience can believe. When Yoshimi criticizes her ex-husband's neglect toward Ikuko it is difficult not to believe her because her perspective is the only one that the film offers.

Conversely, *Dark Water* offers a far less woman-centered sequence in the divorce office and is an early prelude to the increased masculinization of the narrative. Following the flashback of Dahlia waiting afterschool to be picked up by her mother the camera cuts to a close-up of her looking out the window of the divorce office hallway and toward the camera—similar to *Honogurai Mizu*—however, the camera then cuts to a POV shot showing her ex-husband, Kyle, running toward the building. The camera cuts back to Dahlia—who diverts her gaze from the camera—then cuts to a long-shot of the two of them. Despite being a two-shot, which would give equal visual emphasis to each of their characters, Dahlia is seated while Kyle stands looming over her. The dialogue between the two of them highlights their tension:

Kyle: "Did you ring the bell?"

Dahlia: "It's not eleven."

Kyle: "You didn't ring." (He rings the office doorbell)

Mediator: "Good. You're early. You can come right in."

The mediator's dialogue is a moment of humor at Dahlia's expense that undermines her character by "rewarding" Kyle's tendency toward taking control of the situation—an element that will appear numerous times over the course of the film's reconfigured narrative. Dahlia's submissiveness is shown to be a weakness when compared to Kyle's active/impulsive nature. The sequence continues as the camera cuts to the interior of the mediators' office where Kyle dominates the scene with a great deal of dialogue explaining his living situation and questioning Dahlia's decision to not move to Jersey City—where he currently lives—so he can see Ceci more often. The camera cuts to the hallway where Dahlia sits with her head hung low and Kyle exits the office. He once again stands over her and questions her ability to be a good mother—"Be honest with yourself. You can't raise Ceci alone. You can't handle it. Just be honest with yourself." The camera alternates between close-ups of Dahlia and Kyle during this scene—looking down at Dahlia, upset and vulnerable, and looking up at Kyle who is rigid and tough.

Unlike the sequence in *Honogurai Mizu*, *Dark Water* does not give make Dahlia the primary focus. Visually, Dahlia is diminished by Kyle's standing position while she sits. Numerous times she hangs her head like a scolded child, while he always seems rigid and strong, physically imposing. *Dark Water* foregrounds Kyle's defense against her accusations of bad parenting, encouraging the viewer to doubt Dahlia's accusations. Kyle is also given a great deal of dialogue during the mediation scene, none of which is prompted by Dahlia. Whereas the ex-husband in *Honogurai Mizu* only speaks *after* Yoshimi initiates the conversation by talking to him, Kyle is the one who prompts every dialogue exchange in the sequence—his words opens *and* closes the sequence. *Dark Water's* privileging of the male perspective is further exemplified by Dahlia addressing Kyle by name, an element not present in the original film, subsequently making Kyle more of a distinct character, rather than just a nameless, unreliable ex-husband. As with *The Ring* the man is given much more agency than in the original film. By emphasizing Kyle's character to a much greater degree than in the original film *Dark Water* achieves precisely what Seet criticizes *Honogurai Mizu* for: the male viewer's "specular detachment" (150). While Seet situates this detachment in *Honogurai Mizu's* lack of a "male protagonist whose perspective he [the viewer] is asked to share" (150)—neglecting consideration of "opposite-sex identification", *Dark Water* fulfills this detachment through the increased presence of a male character. *Dark Water's* narrative offers an opposing male perspective that counter-points the feminine one, thereby destabilizing *Honogurai Mizu's* female-centered narrative.

Kyle is not the only male character whose role is expanded in the Americanization of *Honogurai Mizu's* narrative. The roles of the real-estate agent, Murray, the building superintendent, Veek, and Dahlia's lawyer, Platzer, further function to undermine Dahlia's centrality. From the moment that Dahlia and Ceci arrive at the apartment to look it over Murray dominates all of the scenes he is in. Unlike the real-estate agent in *Honogurai Mizu*, like the ex-husband his name is not given, Murray talks relentlessly during the apartment sequence in *Dark Water* he is the focal point of many of the shots as well—his character dictates much of the camera's movement. During the apartment sequence in *Honogurai Mizu* the camera pans and tracks in relation to Yoshimi as she moves through the rooms—the camera follows Yoshimi as she enters the bedroom and pans as she enters and exits the kitchen with the real-estate agent following behind her. She is the focal point throughout the sequence even though the agent is the

one showing her the apartment. Conversely, it is Murray's character that prompts the camera's movement in *Dark Water*—the camera tracks away from the front door as Murray leads Dahlia and Ceci into the apartment and cuts to a medium-shot of Murray in the living room / second bedroom as Dahlia enters the frame from off-screen. By having the camera's movement based upon Murray's character, combined with his constant dialogue, the sequence detracts from the narrative's (supposed) emphasis on Dahlia.

Similar privileging of the man is found when Dahlia calls Murray regarding the leaking water coming from the upstairs apartment—a sequence that is expanded and altered from the original scene in *Honogurai Mizu*. The conversation, as it appears in *Honogurai Mizu*, is very minor—the scene takes place in the apartment and the camera never cuts away from the apartment to the real-estate agent; his voice is only heard coming through the phone. In *Dark Water* the scene is expanded into a parallel action sequence as the camera cross-cuts between Murray in his office and Dahlia walking to the subway. The inclusion of Murray via editing is unnecessary to the scene and deemphasizes Dahlia. Much like the earlier sequence in the divorce mediators' office, the inclusion of a male character does not further develop the narrative of *Dark Water* in any significant way. The framing of Dahlia and Murray also demonstrates *Dark Water's* understating of the female protagonist, changing Dahlia's positioning while leaving Murray's placement within the composition the same—Murray is kept in tight medium-shots at his desk throughout the exchange, but Dahlia moves further and further away from the camera until she is a tiny figure in the background. By moving Dahlia further away as the conversation progresses she literally is diminished.

What is even more startling is the denial of the final cross-cut in the sequence that would have ended with Dahlia on-screen. In the final shot of the sequence—in which Murray tells Dahlia to tell Veek to fix the problem and Dahlia agrees—the reverse-shot is not fulfilled. Despite Dahlia having the last line of dialogue in the conversation the camera *does not* cut back to her, leaving the image of Murray as the final shot of the sequence. Not only does this decision break the established editing pattern of the sequence, moreover it allows for a moment of humor at the expense of the woman—after Murray hangs up the phone he rolls his eyes to mock Dahlia's appeal for help. Although the real-estate agent in *Honogurai Mizu* similarly dismisses Yoshimi's request to have the apartment fixed, the inclusion of Murray's reaction doubles the man's insensitivity—it is not enough that Murray shifts responsibility to

Veek, like the agent does in *Honogurai Mizu*, he must also visually register his coldness to the audience. It could be argued that Murray's reaction is meant to generate sympathy for the woman, but what does this change add to an already sympathetic narrative? In short the inclusion of Murray's reaction deflates the seriousness of the situation—a single mother struggling to raise her daughter—by presenting the audience with a man who sees the dilemma of the woman as an inconvenience. Furthermore, by having Murray alone in his office when it occurs his reaction is strictly intended for the audience—Dahlia is not given a chance to defend herself and fight against Murray's insensitivity, she can only accept it.

Though the conversation may initially succeed in creating sympathy for Dahlia, the repetition with which her circumstance is treated harshly by the male characters, the more it is turned into a joke for the audience. *Honogurai Mizu* presents the building's superintendent as an old man who is bordering on senility—passively recording Yoshimi's complaints about the leaks, but not doing anything. On the contrary, the superintendent in *Dark Water*, Veek, is rewritten to be far more confrontational and unsympathetic toward Dahlia's circumstances. When Dahlia tells Veek about her conversation with Murray, and his insistence that he should fix the leak, Veek becomes quarrelsome and slams his door in Dahlia's face. Shortly following this there is a *second* conversation between Murray and Dahlia about the leaks—exclusive to *Dark Water's* narrative—that further exposes the film's intent to derive humor from Dahlia's distressing circumstances. During the second conversation between them Murray is at a gambling bookie. After informing Veek about the leaks Dahlia once again attempts to plead her case, telling Murray that Veek told her it is not his responsibility. Murray, again, deflects blame from himself by citing problems with the union should he intervene and lies to Dahlia—saying he is with a client—so he can get off the phone. By the second conversation with Murray the repetition of disrespect shown toward Dahlia has become a cynically humorous running joke in *Dark Water's* narrative—the film even invents a single scene featuring a male night doorman to simply reiterate the point that no one is willing to help Dahlia. It is difficult for the audience not to laugh at Dahlia's situation, if for no other reason, because the narrative is so thorough in its portrayal of male contempt toward the woman that it demonstrates all the subtlety of a sledgehammer to the viewer's face. The disrespect that is shown toward Dahlia is so frequent throughout the narrative of *Dark Water* that it evolves beyond thematic purpose and simply becomes a cruel parody of the original film.

Even Dahlia's lawyer, Platzer—a character who *should* be sympathetic to her predicament (and is in *Honogurai Mizu*)—perpetuates *Dark Water's* repetition of men's disregard toward women. As is the case with the other male characters in *Dark Water* the lawyer's role is needlessly expanded and only functions to further undermine Dahlia, as opposed to Yoshimi's lawyer. The most immediate difference between Yoshimi's lawyer and Dahlia's is their investment in the case and how they treat their respective clients. The lawyer who helps Yoshimi in *Honogurai Mizu*—yet another unnamed man—does so out of pity after a particularly nasty fight between Yoshimi and her ex-husband. As his office the lawyer makes Yoshimi coffee because his secretary has the day off—blurring the line between man/lawyer and woman/secretary—and gives her advice about her case, agreeing to act as her lawyer by simply saying, “Let's do our best together.” The lawyer's willingness to represent Yoshimi, despite her not asking him to, and his use of “we”, “our”, and “together” during their conversation is indicative that he is especially committed to helping her.

Platzer, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of Yoshimi's lawyer—he only helps Dahlia because she is a paying client and during their first in-person meeting immediately presents Dahlia with the harsh facts, “Your husband's claiming you're mentally unstable because your father was physically abusive and your mother was an alcoholic who abandoned you.” Platzer's dialogue, despite being a strict business-as-usual approach that is devoid of any personal sympathy is not a negative characteristic when taken by itself, however, a later scene illustrates just how unsympathetic he is to Dahlia's case. When Dahlia calls Platzer late at night regarding dirty tactics that Kyle may possibly be using against her he tells Dahlia that he cannot talk because he is with his family, after their conversation ends the camera cuts to the interior of a movie theater where Platzer sits back down alone. In much the same way that Murray and Veek are featured in extra scenes that visually undermine Dahlia, Platzer is completely uncaring of his own client's problems. *Dark Water* rewrites the one male character that is able to sympathize with the woman as yet another uncompassionate man and offers one more scene where the woman's problem is turned into a visual joke. The lack of sympathy Platzer affords Dahlia would not necessarily be a problem—the film is still about a woman's struggle—if *Dark Water* also made him an ineffectual character, but (as in *Honogurai Mizu*) he proves to be a substantial help to the woman. When Yoshimi finds Ikuko unconscious in the upstairs apartment her lawyer visits her and, without Yoshimi's insistence—she plans

to move somewhere else—convinces the real-estate agent to fix all of the problems with the apartment immediately. The lawyer's ability to solve Yoshimi's ongoing dilemma is not only a cynical critique of society—only the man can get things accomplished—but also speaks to his sympathy toward Yoshimi—his actions are motivated by concern for her and he takes it upon himself to get the apartment fixed.

Dark Water retains this plot point, but Platzer's previous indifference toward Dahlia's plight and the structural changes made to the original narrative further divulge *Dark Water's* privileging of the male character. The motivation for Platzer to see Dahlia at her apartment does not derive from an impulse to check on her, as it does in *Honogurai Mizu*, but is the result of Dahlia's panicked call to him following Ceci's hospitalization at the hands of Natasha and disappearance from the hospital (she is discharged into Kyle's care). After Dahlia returns to her apartment she breaks down while on the phone with Platzer—"I don't know how to be a mother. I don't know how to be myself."—and begins crying uncontrollably. When Platzer arrives with Murray both men discover just how serious the damage is to the apartment and Platzer demands that Murray fix everything. Whereas Yoshimi's lawyer helps her due to unmotivated concern for her well-being, it requires a nervous breakdown that reduces Dahlia to the cliché hysterical woman—doubtful of her own ability to be a mother—that forces Platzer (and Murray) to take her situation seriously. Despite his apathetic attitude toward her case Platzer is still made to be Dahlia's "knight-in-shining-armor" rescuing the woman-in-distress from her own frailties—Dahlia even refers to him as a "prince" near the film's end. When Dahlia and Platzer discover the cause of Natasha's death—parental neglect—and Veek is arrested for knowing about it, but not doing anything, he thanks Dahlia for "[accomplishing] the impossible Mrs. Williams. You actually made me glad I went to law school." *Dark Water's* narrative therefore allows Platzer to "have it both ways"—he is able to act condescending toward the woman, while also being her hero, and because of this he is able to achieve personal growth and newfound purpose as a lawyer. By the end of *Dark Water* it is Platzer who demonstrates significant character development diverting narrative importance away from Dahlia, who is still left to sacrifice herself so her daughter can live—Dahlia still dies, but at least she helps out Platzer before doing so.

However objectionable the male characters are rendered in the reworking of *Honogurai Mizu's* narrative none speak to *Dark Water's* impenitent amplification of the male presence quite as much as the characters Billy and Steve. Before a formal discussion of how these characters function within *Dark*

Water's narrative it is important to stress that Billy and Steve—two troublemaking teenagers who live in the same apartment building as Dahlia—are complete and utter inventions of the American narrative. These characters do not appear in *Honogurai Mizu's* original narrative in any context and their creation and inclusion would imply that they were added to serve some narrative significance in *Dark Water*—specifically that they are yet another physical representation of the woman's struggle. As with Murray, Veek, and Kyle, Billy and Steve are meant to be representatives of the flawed patriarchy that Dahlia is forced to live within, subsequently making her struggle all the more authentic and literal for the audience, however, their inclusion does not function in this way. As with the other male characters Billy and Steve's inclusion ultimately detracts from the woman by adding more unnecessary male characters to the narrative. Billy and Steve's actions towards Dahlia are also needlessly cruel because Dahlia's struggle against the patriarchal system is unsuccessful.

Both times that Dahlia encounters Billy and Steve in the apartment building the young men tactlessly accost her: "Hey, pretty lady. What's happening?" ... "I got some dirty things I'd like you to clean." ... "I'd like to notch that [referring to Dahlia]." "Oh yeah, man." The boys' presence in *Dark Water* is minor—only occupying three scenes—which begs the question: why bother creating them for the narrative in the first place? What can their characters add to the film? In short the addition of Billy and Steve does not affect *Dark Water's* interpretation of *Honogurai Mizu's* narrative in any important way. Both films explore the parental struggles of a single-mother and her interactions with her ex-husband and the various other male characters—Kyle, Murray, Veek—expressly demonstrate that. *Honogurai Mizu* is able to generate sympathy for the woman by closely following her struggle and showing her interactions with the uncaring, unsympathetic men in her life, but *Dark Water's* narrative is compelled to include yet another example of male cruelty towards the woman—Billy and Steve's literal sexual objectification of Dahlia. As with the other male characters this element *could* help to make the woman more sympathetic, if the narrative did not leave their characters as a loose strand that is never resolved. Other than calling attention to Dahlia's (obvious) sexual presence in the film—similar to *The Ring's* gratuitous shots of Rachel in her underwear—Billy and Steve only serve to make Dahlia more paranoid than she already is. After seeing Kyle giving one of the boys a light for his cigarette Dahlia begins to suspect that Kyle hired them to drive her crazy by making the apartment above her leak water constantly. Platzer dismisses

Dahlia's accusations as paranoid, which, as it turns out, they are. The function that Billy and Steve consequently fulfill within the narrative is to confirm that Dahlia is an over-reactive paranoiac. Worse still, they are able to sexually harass Dahlia without any comeuppance within the narrative—Dahlia never stands up to them and she still dies in the end, leaving her daughter with Kyle.

Weakened Women

Vulnerability is a key aspect of Yoshimi's character because femininity itself—in reality and as a construction within cinema—is considered to be a weakness and Yoshimi is therefore presented as a woman with a history of mental illness who was also abandoned by her mother as a child. During the first meeting with the divorce mediators Yoshimi confirms that she suffered a nervous breakdown due to her previous job as a proofreader of violent and sadistic novels. Balmain acknowledges this aspect of Yoshimi's life as part of *Honogurai Mizu's* "critique of the prevalence of sadomasochistic pornography in Japanese society, in which women are repeatedly violated, raped and objectified" (138). Despite the specificity of the origins of Yoshimi's breakdown they are nonetheless the result of a societal disorder, thereby making Yoshimi an avatar of the general suffering of women within a repressive society. Even Yoshimi's abandonment by her mother can be read as indicative of a flawed society in which the sins of maternity are spawned from a society that represses its women. It is by no coincidence that Yoshimi's mother is not given a face because her mother is not a specific individual, but representative of a societal sickness and perversion.

What is critical of a sexist culture in *Honogurai Mizu* becomes a case of a specific woman's maternal failure in *Dark Water*. The film could be read as legitimately concerned with the plight of its female protagonist by linking the past trauma of maternal abandonment with the present-day failures of men if Dahlia occupied a role other than that of being a victim, but she does not. Of course, the woman's ability to overcome such hardships is dependent upon her inner strength of character, but *Dark Water* sabotages this by reconfiguring Yoshimi's past traumas—mental instability and breakdowns—as current issues that plague Dahlia throughout the film's narrative. Early in *Dark Water* when Dahlia arrives home and finds the ceiling leaking she enters the bathroom and takes pills (it is later explained that they are for her migraines), her face reflected and fractured in the mirror, while the soundtrack fills with a piercing

noise that mimics her headache. Although Yoshimi visually expresses weakness in *Honogurai Mizu*—collapsing to the floor following a particularly ugly confrontation with her ex-husband, screaming at the sight of Mitsuko’s reappearing bag—she is not presented as being as physically inhibited by them as Dahlia. Dahlia even confirms her growing inability to function due to the pills during a conversation with her friend Mary, “I lost a day, Mary. I took a pill, just one pill, and it knocked me out for 24 hours. And that’s never happened before. And I’m tired, really tired. It’s like I haven’t slept at all.” In the same way that *The Ring* rewrote Rachel to be a flawed protagonist, *Dark Water* similarly makes Dahlia significantly more damaged than Yoshimi, thereby realizing the stereotype that women are fragile need the help of a man.

Dahlia’s migraines and her treatment of them become evidence of her inherent weakness—a weakness that is reinforced by the preceding scenes involving men. The initial scene of Dahlia taking pills is immediately followed by her second plea for Murray’s help with the leaking apartment and the second time she takes a pill (looking even more weary and drugged) is after her first encounter with Billy and Steve. Taking pills therefore becomes a preparation for, and response to, dealing with unreliable men—however, it is ultimately a crutch that underlines Dahlia’s lack of inner strength. Yoshimi struggles through *Honogurai Mizu*’s narrative without the need for pills to deal with the (obviously) defective world around her because of an unstated personal strength (her femininity). In *Dark Water* femininity is not a signifier of strength, but of weakness—the woman is reliant upon pills in order to cope.

Dahlia’s established dependence on pills also affords the audience to question how reliable she is as the film’s protagonist. Balmain believes that Yoshimi’s background renders her unreliable, but his assertion is more applicable to Dahlia:

[It] could be argued that she is situated as an unreliable narrator, the sort of character that is commonly found in the gothic, who is unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. It also implies that her version of events in terms of her marriage is not one on which we can rely. Just as Yoshimi is portrayed as someone who confuses fiction and reality, [her husband] is obsessed with facts and details, rather than their interpretation. In [*Honogurai Mizu*], femininity is associated with superstition, the supernatural and the subjective, whilst masculinity is linked with the rational, the observable and the objective. (138)

Balmain's assertion that Yoshimi is the "unreliable narrator" is difficult to agree with primarily as the evidence is not wholly present. The breakdown is backstory and Yoshimi freely admits to having had one. Additionally nothing else that occurs in the narrative that implies her judgment is impaired in any decisive way, or that she is incapable of taking care of Ikuko. *Honogurai Mizu* allows the audience to identify and sympathize with Yoshimi without providing reason to doubt to her credibility, enabling one to easily accept her perspective as truth. Conversely, it is Dahlia whose reliability *Dark Water* seems intent on complicating. The combination of pills, migraines, nightmares, and hallucinations in the apartment upstairs prompt the audience to question Dahlia's ability to act rationally and to question her perspective regarding the failed marriage. Kyle's semi-plausible reason for missing Ceci's birthday (brought up during the first meeting in the mediators' office) in conjunction with physical reasons to doubt Dahlia's perception of events situates her femininity as (unreliably) subjective, while Kyle's masculinity becomes reliable.

If the ambiguity of Yoshimi's childhood abandonment allows it to become a metaphoric representation of societal instability, then *Dark Water's* explicit portrayal of Dahlia's abandonment locates her past trauma as existing within a specific (and personal) vacuum. In a revealing sequence Dahlia experiences a nightmare in which she sees her mother in the upstairs apartment, heaving into the toilet. The mother turns to Dahlia and verbally abuses her, "I told you. I told you to leave me alone." ... "Get away from me, you little bitch." ... "I hate you." ... "I hate you. Do you hear me? I hate you." The dream concludes with Dahlia sitting on the floor sobbing. The revelation that Dahlia's mother was a drug addict (invented for the remake) and her interaction with Dahlia provides a specific context for her abandonment—drug addiction and personal hatred toward her daughter. By showing the audience Dahlia's mother *Dark Water* puts a specific face on Dahlia's abandonment that personalizes her childhood trauma to make the mother solely guilty—society is exonerated from Dahlia's abandonment because her mother was a drug addict hence all the blame is hers to take. The verbal abuse that is leveled against Dahlia also provides another moment in which the film victimizes her. Dahlia's subjugation by the film's various male characters is not surprising given that *Dark Water* is an Americanized horror film that is about a woman's suffering, but to make her a victim of her own mother/insecurity is a significant alteration that obliterates the social critique of *Honogurai Mizu*. Yoshimi's struggle is successful (from a narrative standpoint) because it functions metaphorically as the struggle of women in general

against patriarchy. Dahlia's struggle is a result of her personal unfortunate circumstances—a drug addicted mother with little self worth.

Despite all of the hardship that Yoshimi endures there is never any self-doubt that she is incapable of raising Ikuko. Even when she is late picking Ikuko up from school, recalling the abandonment that she suffered as a child, there is still a clear resolve to do better by her daughter and ensure that she never neglects Ikuko—Yoshimi actually runs out during a job interview in an attempt to not be late picking Ikuko up from school, thereby sacrificing her own needs for the daughter. However, as evidenced in the nightmare sequence, Dahlia suffers from low self-esteem due to her childhood, which in turn makes her doubt her own ability to be a good mother to Ceci.

The true extent of Dahlia's weakened femininity reveals itself when Natasha attacks Ceci at school: Kyle picks her up from the hospital and Dahlia—unable to get in touch with either of them—experiences a nervous breakdown at the apartment. Sobbing uncontrollably, Dahlia paces around the apartment talking to herself—"I can't be her mother, I don't know how to be myself."—then finally collapses onto the floor where her mother's words fill her head once again—"I hate you. Get away from me, you little bitch. I hate you." Angry, Dahlia begins pounding on the walls and shouting at her unseen mother—"Fuck! I hate you! I hate you! Bitch!"—before once again collapsing on the floor in tears. By having Dahlia's breakdown occur in the present—onscreen, but not as a flashback—the audience has no choice but to believe that Dahlia really is not capable of caring for Ceci because she cannot properly care for herself. Dahlia confesses doubts about her ability to be a good mother, something Yoshimi never does, and based upon the imagery the audience is compelled to agree, subsequently questioning her capabilities and suggesting that the daughter should be in the care of the father.

The closest scene that mirrors Dahlia's breakdown in *Honogurai Mizu* occurs when Yoshimi is late picking Ikuko up from school. Arriving shortly after everyone has left Yoshimi spots her ex-husband walking with Ikuko off in the distance. Catching up to them Yoshimi pulls Ikuko away prompting the ex-husband to question her, "What are you doing? You didn't even go to pick her up! ... "Waiting there all alone... Do you know how that feels?!" Yoshimi leads Ikuko away and the camera cuts to a scene of a family (mother, father, and children) playing together as the two of them look on, as they near the apartment Ikuko tells her mother, "I'm okay with being with just you, Mama." Yoshimi bends down to

embrace Ikuko and apologizes to her. Emotionally and mentally Yoshimi is portrayed as a more stable conception of femininity than Dahlia, despite similarly experiencing a mental breakdown in the past. The scene also shows that Ikuko is happy being with her mother over her father allowing for a strengthening of the mother-daughter relationship. Yoshimi's apology also heals the mother-daughter rift, an event that does not take place in *Dark Water*—Ceci never outright says that she is happy being with just Dahlia.

The exposure of motherhood as structurally weak in comparison to the father's rigid stability is not the only criticism that *Dark Water* makes with regard to the single-mother, it also locates the mother as a source of domestic conflict as it relates to the child. Unlike *Honogurai Mizu's* portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship as healthy, if not strong, *Dark Water's* narrative reconstructs the relationship between Ceci and Dahlia to be more confrontational due to Ceci's "imaginary" friend, Natasha—in actuality the ghost child from the apartment above. Ceci's interaction with Natasha frequently gets her in trouble at school with Dahlia taking the blame. An "unhealthy" home life due to the divorce and the implication that Dahlia is passing her mental instability on to Ceci identifies the female child as deficient due to the mother, while the father does not receive any of the blame, despite Dahlia citing Kyle as the reason for the divorce and Kyle's continued interaction with Ceci (seeing her on weekends). The continued problems that Natasha creates for Ceci, reflecting poorly on Dahlia, cause Dahlia to lose her patience with Ceci and scold the child, even though it is not her fault—the reappearance of Natasha's backpack causes Dahlia to confront Ceci, demanding that she stop lying about the bag, in spite of Ceci telling her the truth (a truth that she does not want to believe). When Yoshimi similarly confronts Ikuko about the reappearing bag she is more concerned with trying to understand what is happening;

Yoshimi: "I won't get mad. I won't get mad, so just tell me the truth. Did you go up to the roof?"

Ikuko: "I didn't!"

Yoshimi: "Okay. I'm sorry."

Whereas Yoshimi expresses patience in an effort to uncover the truth, Dahlia, like Rachel in *The Ring*, is quick to alarm and panic. From Ceci's perspective, and that of the audience who knows that Natasha is real, Dahlia is unreasonably confrontational compared to Yoshimi and therefore becomes the site of domestic problems—"why won't the mother just believe her?" Although the father is not a constant

presence within the narrative it slowly becomes a more appealing alternative to Dahlia's increasingly confrontational reactions to Ceci's behavior.

As with *Ringu* and *The Ring* the *onryou*—Mitsuko/Natasha in *Honogurai Mizu* and *Dark Water* respectively—is made to be more antagonistic and less sympathetic. The confrontation between Yoshimi and Mitsuko occurs in the elevator of the apartment building as Mitsuko, having switched places with Ikuko, embraces Yoshimi in a death grip, refusing to let go and squeezing Yoshimi's throat tighter as she reaches out to Ikuko. With a pained look on her face Yoshimi agrees to become Mitsuko's mother, subsequently sparing Ikuko from any harm. Despite her death grip on Yoshimi, Mitsuko's intention is not to kill, or harm. Her trading places with Ikuko is indicative of her desire to substitute herself as Yoshimi's daughter out of a desire for motherly love and when she is finally alone with Yoshimi her emotions overwhelm her—just before grabbing on to Yoshimi she cries out, “Mama!”

Whereas the confrontation between Yoshimi and Mitsuko is tragic from both Yoshimi and Mitsuko's perspectives—Yoshimi has to “abandon” Ikuko, and Mitsuko just desperately wants a loving mother—Dahlia's confrontation with Natasha is considerably more callous. Natasha attempts to drown Ceci in the bathtub while Dahlia watches, pleading with her to spare her daughter. Natasha's face is harsh and it is only when Dahlia agrees to be her mother that Natasha lets go of Ceci. Natasha seeks to kill for what she wants, thus there is no sympathy that is afforded to her by *Dark Water's* narrative. Rather than emphasizing the tragedy of an abandoned girl left to die, *Dark Water* reconstructs her as a malevolent force that should not be pitied because, in the end, she is evil. The ambiguity of Mitsuko's actions are reinterpreted to vilify the female ghost and make Dahlia's sacrifice all the more bitter—at least Yoshimi sacrificed herself for a spirit that was not nearly as malicious as Natasha.

Opposing Endings

Unlike *Ringu* and *The Ring* it is the mother rather than the father that is ultimately sacrificed in *Honogurai Mizu* and *Dark Water* so that the child can live—in both films the mother sacrifices herself to save the daughter by agreeing to become the surrogate mother to the ghost child, effectively leaving the daughter in the care of the father. While the sacrifice of the mother seems to challenge the narrative of her struggle to support and care for the child *Honogurai Mizu's* ending does offer a silver lining to this

parental sacrifice in the form of a final meeting between Yoshimi and Ikuko as an emotional coda for the daughter. *Dark Water's* ending is similar, however, there are several key differences that demonstrate the opposing social position that the film takes—namely the celebration of the daughter's permanent return to a patriarchal household.

Honogurai Mizu's coda takes place 10 years following Yoshimi's sacrifice. Ikuko (16 now) is on her way to a friend's house when she notices that she is passing by her old kindergarten. Watching various mothers pick up their daughters, Ikuko's expression turns into a frown as the camera cuts to a point-of-view shot revealing the source of her disquieted look—a young girl, alone, waiting for someone to pick her up. After a few moments the child's mother runs over to her and apologizes for being late. Ikuko smiles, but the unease returns as she realizes she is now the only one at her old elementary school, no doubt recalling her similar experiences with her mother. Returning to the apartment Ikuko sees her mother and they share a final moment together. Ikuko asks if she can live with Yoshimi again—her father has apparently remarried and had more children—but Yoshimi apologizes and says they cannot be together as Misuko stands behind Ikuko, watching the two of them. As Ikuko turns to look behind her both Mitsuko and Yoshimi disappear. Ikuko leaves the apartment, framed against a bright blue sky—the only time the weather is clear in the film—and delivers a brief narration: "My mother was here all that time, protecting me."

Motherhood is the primary concern of *Honogurai Mizu's* ending. Even before Ikuko and Yoshimi see each other for the last time maternity is vindicated through the young girl and her mother Ikuko sees at the kindergarten. The girl's presence recalls the cycle of mother-daughter abandonment that ran throughout the film's narrative, however, the cycle is finally broken in this scene when her mother arrives to pick her up—bringing a smile to Ikuko as acknowledgement of the cycle's end. In spite of the mother-daughter reunion Seet posits that *Honogurai Mizu's* ending reinforces the "law of the father" through Ikuko and her return to the kindergarten:

In [*Honogurai Mizu*], the realm of the mother is the realm of the repressed, which the grown-up Ikuko... revisits during a school trip. The dreary apartment building stands in stark relief to the bright kindergarten, which works as a symbol of the realm of language and socially signifying practices. It is therefore significant that [Mitsuko] jettisons her schoolbag, emblematic of schooling

and socialization into the law of the father, when she craves reunion with Yoshimi as her surrogate mother... the teenaged Ikuko, now living with her father and aptly clad in a school uniform to denote her socialization into the phallogentric order, begs to live with her mother and betrays a nostalgic longing for the dreary building that signifies the latter's abject world. (146-147)

Although it is true that Ikuko has grown up with the father her willingness to reject him to return to the mother is indicative of a certain independence from the "law of the father". Even though she is dressed in a school uniform Ikuko, like Mitsuko, does not have a school bag and thus lacks that which is "emblematic of schooling and socialization into the law of the father" and the father's visual absence in the film's ending is further emblematic of the absence of his law, unable to exert control over Ikuko because she does not need it and is beyond its reach.

The final element that strengthens Ikuko's independence from the law of father is his "abandonment" of her through his remarriage to another woman and fathering of more daughters. Ikuko has thus escaped (or has been discarded) from the "law of the father", able to seek out the mother who, though unable to stay with the daughter, nevertheless continues to protect her in spirit form—"My mother was here all that time, protecting me." The realm of the father is therefore yet another site of paternal abandonment, while the mother—even in death—reassumes the role of protector for the daughter. It should also be pointed out that the "bright kindergarten" that Seet sees as opposing the "dreary apartment building" is actually shot with an overcast sky. It is not until Ikuko leaves the apartment—after reconciling with the mother—that the sky is shown to be bright blue, indicating Ikuko's "potentially bright future" (McRoy, 91) in conjunction with her concluding voice-over that acknowledges the mother's protecting spirit.

Of the various changes that are made to *Dark Water's* narrative none reinforce the patriarchal system more so than the alterations made to the film's ending. While *Honogurai Mizu* clearly focuses on a final meeting between the mother and daughter *Dark Water* emphasizes the young girl's return to the patriarchal system that has previously undermined her and her mother, while simultaneously denying the final face-to-face reunion between the mother and the daughter.

Prior to Dahlia's sacrifice to save Ceci—after Dahlia's traumatizing discovery of Natasha's body in the apartment building's water tank—is a conversation between Dahlia and Kyle in which Dahlia relents and gives in to his demand that her and Ceci move closer:

Dahlia: "So, I've been thinking... I don't want her to have to choose between us."

Kyle: "What do you mean?"

Dahlia: "I want to look for a place in Jersey City so that shared custody would be easier for both of us. And we can do, you know, one week with me, and one week with you. Or maybe split the week. We can see what works best."

Kyle: "You serious?"

Dahlia: "Yeah. Yeah."

Kyle: "Hey, you know, you were right about the school here. I checked it out. It's good. Maybe I could get a place..."

Dahlia: "No, it's fine." After this we'll get a... a place in Jersey City."

Dahlia's decision to give-in and move closer to Kyle after all of his cruelty during the meeting with the divorce mediator does not make any logical sense within the context of the narrative and thoroughly destroys any credibility of Dahlia being a strong, independent woman. Considering that the film continues with Dahlia's sacrifice illustrates how misogynistic *Dark Water's* narrative is. Not only does the woman give in to the spiteful ex-husband's demands, even refuting his half-hearted offer to move instead of her, but she still dies to give the father total custody over the daughter.

The remainder of the ending sequence further emphasizes the reassertion of the patriarchy. Rather than occurring 10 years later *Dark Water* ends a mere three weeks later with Ceci and Kyle moving the last box out of the apartment. As Kyle leaves the elevator the door slams shut, trapping Ceci inside. Dahlia appears before her—though the audience only sees her hands and the back of her head—hugs and kisses Ceci for the last time and tells her, "Whenever you need me, I'm here." As Kyle forces the door open Ceci steps out and happily leaves the building—"Ok Daddy. Let's go."

Dark Water's ending seems to serve the same function as *Honogurai Mizu*, however, the key differences point to the film's pro-patriarchal view. By ending the film only three weeks following Dahlia's sacrifice *Dark Water* focuses on the return of the child to the father rather than showing the grown

daughter's independence from paternity. The daughter's desire to once again live with the mother is never teased as a possibility in *Dark Water*, which shows the spirit of maternity incapable of raising the child—*Honogurai Mizu* conversely, does not rule out the ghost-mother's ability to raise the daughter, but implies that Mitsuko continues to deny that bond. After a final meeting with the mother *Dark Water* portrays Ceci as happily entering into the realm of the father. Even though Dahlia's spirit is still watching over Ceci there is no guarantee of her return to seek out the mother because she is still a child under the custody of the father. While Ikuko actively sought out her mother, Ceci experiences the final meeting with her because it is Dahlia who refuses to let go—literally holding on to Ceci by entrapping her within the elevator. *Dark Water* also exorcises the final appearance of Natasha so that Dahlia's "rejection" of Ceci is not continued motivation to protect her from the ghost-child, but a willing acceptance of the daughter's return to the father's care.

Conclusion

Japanese horror films are not specifically feminist works, however, they do offer a certain progressive attitude with regard to the women portrayed in them. Rather than presenting women as purely aesthetic objects, films such as *Ringu*, *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara*, *Kairo*, and *Ju-on: The Grudge* are constructed as female-centric narratives. These narratives focus on the struggles of single, career women and *onryous* that lash out in response to their mistreatment at the hands of men—who are relegated to the background as objects that exist solely to propel the narrative. More than any other genre Japanese horror films can be viewed as women's films because they almost exclusively take a female perspective that is not stereotyped, or undermined by the male filmmakers. Unfortunately this aspect of J-horror films was not translated when these films were remade in America.

The alterations made to *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara*'s narratives reveals the disturbing extent to which the American film industry is willing to continue promoting regressive portrayals of women. The process of foreign film adaptation requires cultural translation to allow the culturally specific themes and aesthetics to be made legible for its foreign audience, but the remakes of these J-horror films demonstrate a clear intention to conform to the gender stereotypes of the American film industry. While the narratives remain largely unchanged the essential characteristics of the films' female leads are altered, undermining the progressive portrayals of the Japanese originals to re-inscribe a masculinist perspective.

The Ring and *Dark Water* in particular reveal the systematic process through which films are reconstructed to align with Hollywood's patriarchal ideology. The strong female protagonists of *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* lose a great deal of their assertive independence in the American remakes subsequently turning them into stereotypically weak women who find themselves more reliant upon men—Rachel looks to reenter a relationship with Noah; Dahlia must be rescued by Platzer. Although the women are still presented as hard-working single mothers, the narratives clearly emphasize the virtues of the nuclear family despite the father's previous failings; the mother is shown to be incapable, while the father—regardless of his past sins—is forgiven. The progressively strong femininity in *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* is reinterpreted as a weakness in *The Ring* and *Dark Water*, which aligns the films with Hollywood's perspective of masculine superiority.

Although the undermining of the female protagonists makes these narratives conform to the American genre of horror films, analysis of the *onryou* reveals the extent to which these films are re-conceptualized to absolve patriarchy. The *onryou* is the simulacrum of female oppression within the J-horror narratives—wronged by the violent acts of men—vilifying the dominant patriarchal order. However, when these narratives are translated for American audiences the *onryou* becomes the monstrous “Other” typical of most American horror films—Samara in *The Ring* is justifiably murdered by her mother rather than her father; Natasha actively tries to murder Ceci instead of assuming her place as Dahlia’s child. One could argue that this change is due to the *onryou*’s illegibility as a culturally specific concept, however, at its core the *onryou* is simply motivated by revenge—a concept that is far from illegible for American audiences.

One could naïvely dismiss the various alterations to *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara*’s narratives, but to do so would overlook the methodical way that femininity in these films is systematically undermined in their American remakes. *The Ring* and *Dark Water*’s narrative changes indicate the American film industry’s interest in maintaining the status quo of a dominant patriarchy. The progressive portrayals of women by these Japanese narratives are discarded as Hollywood’s masculine-ist perspective is forced upon the audience. These are films about strong women, but the strong women are nowhere to be found.

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