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Ringu/ The Ring: Tracing the Analog Spirit in a Digital Era – Michael Fisch

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Media matters, Friedrich Kittler reminds us. Without media the world is senseless, or rather we are senseless before it. More importantly, media matter in different ways such that the world mediated via pen and paper is essentially different from a world mediated via the typewriter or film. The digitalization of media, in this context, presents as many possibilities as it does causes for anxiety. Digital media matters, that is, in a way that is different from the analog media that dominated the twentieth century. Or as Kittler suggests, "before the end, something is coming to an end," where the former "end" is an end of media anticipated by the latter "end" of a culture that has been the byproduct of analog media's incommensurable formats (Kittler, 1999: 1-2). While digital media reduces previously discrete sensory data channels into a single stream of zeros and ones, it does not, Kittler emphasizes, stream effects directly into the brain such that we can take leave of our senses. The consequence is that "there are still media; there is still entertainment." But, we need to add, it is a different kind of entertainment.

There may still be "entertainment" but are there still ghosts? For the ghostliness of analog media was the very premise of the ghosts that haunted it. The question is actually more complicated than it seems as what is at stake in the ghost of analog media is not simply an analogous manifestation of media but rather a marker of a semantic beyond from which culture of the twentieth century drew its captivating power.

Reiterating the question, are there still ghosts with digital media? And if there are, what kind of ghosts are they? In seeking an answer to these questions, this article turns to the Japanese horror film, *Ringu* (1998) and its Hollywood remake, *The Ring* (2002). While Kittler claims that ontological discourse since Aristotle may have excluded a consideration of media, popular culture certainly never forgot its significance.[1] *Ringu* and *The Ring*, which concern a haunted videotape that kills its viewer seven days after watching, are perfect examples. The films engage with uncanny timelessness just about every conventional twentieth century premise concerning the ghostliness of analog media. *Ringu* appeared two years after the advent of DVD technology, but one year before a reduction in the consumer cost of the technology propelled its rapid diffusion. [2] The visual climate for which *Ringu's* director, Nakata Hideo, adapted Koji Suzuki's 1991 publication for film was thus decisively still analog and consistent with the videotape and analog based motifs of the film. By 2002, however, when Hollywood released a remake of the film the DVD (digital videodisc) had nearly superseded the videotape in the consumer market and the digital revolution was well underway. *The Ring* complies, in part, with the expectations demanded by this shift by substituting, for example, a digital camera for a Polaroid that appears in *Ringu* but the videotape, remains central in both films.

A film about a haunted videotape was still feasible in 2002, but just barely. Another year would make the theme highly improbable, with the viewer likely to ask "who in the world still owns a videotape machine," or "why not just disseminate it on *Napster* or *Emule*?" In another three years the question would be why not just upload it to *youtube*? By virtue of the theme and historical context, *Ringu* and *The Ring* thus provide a unique opportunity to look at the shift from cultural modes of representation dominated by analog storage media to those informed by digital media. Specifically, the passage from *Ringu* to *The Ring* enacts the transition from analog to digital such that when viewed in relation to one another the films bring into focus what is at stake in the onset of cultural expressions dominated by digital media. Borrowing language from Kittler, we can say that a juxtaposition of the two films expresses the notion that "before the end, something is coming to an end," in which the latter "end" amounts to a loss imminent to the embrace of digital media. The following argument attempts to understand the nature of this perceived loss by tracing the passage between *Ringu* and *The Ring*. In so doing, it looks initially at the staging in *Ringu* of twentieth century themes of the supernatural and analog media before turning to the articulation of these themes within the framework of the premise of a digital culture that constitutes the environment of *The Ring*. It will be suggested that in the translation of *Ringu* into *The Ring* for an audience already accustomed to a digital logic, the latter exposes the loss that is already anticipated in the subtext of former.

Ringu and the Analog Paradigm of Discourse Networks 1900

Ringu commences in conventional pop-horror film fashion with two teenage girls sitting alone in an empty house on a dark night. Even before any dialogue there is a time stamp: "September 5, 10:49 p.m." Henceforth, this says, all that occurs is subject to time. Time is both a condition and limit in the ensuing plot. Moreover, time is at stake. With their school textbooks open and the television at center screen tuned to a baseball game, one girl tells the other a rumor:

> A grade-school boy is on vacation with his family at a country lodge in Izu. He wants to go out and play but he also does not want to miss his favorite television show. So he records it on the video machine in the lodge. But he does not realize that the channels in Izu are different than in Tokyo and the channel he sets to record is blank. Only, when he returns to Tokyo and plays the tape, where there should have been just static, a strange woman appears on the screen. She points at him and says, 'you will die in one week.' Terrified, the boy stops the video just as the phone rings. 'You've seen it, haven't you,' says a voice on the phone. Exactly one week later the boy dies.

After this, everything happens as expected, or almost. The rumor is of course more than hearsay and one of the girls is suddenly dead after the television comes on of its own accord. The second girl survives, albeit in a near catatonic state and confined to a mental institution. When the dead girl's aunt, Asakawa, who is a newspaper reporter and heroine of the film, hears of the mysterious circumstances of the death and the rumor of the cursed videotape, she determines to investigate. Following the rumors, Asakawa discovers the cursed videotape at a lodge in Izu, which is where the girl stayed with her friends seven days before her death. Hesitant but curious she watches the tape. However, the less than one minute of odd and disjunctive but otherwise innocuous images on the video seem hardly commensurate with the terrifying rumors surrounding it, let alone shed light on the nature of its origins or supposed power. True to the rumors, though, the phone does ring after the heroine has watched the tape and the voice of a girl (not woman) informs her that she has seven days to live. With the clock ticking, the quest to determine who made the video and where it came from propels the film towards the first conclusion via a repertoire of motifs drawing on the relation between analog recording media, the body, the unconscious, and time.

The indexicality of analog recording media coupled with its perceived capacity to penetrate reality provides the initial premise behind the haunted videotape in *Ringu* (and *The Ring*) and determines that the search for the origin of the videotape will conclude (or so we think) with the discovery of a body. In this context, the films are

similar to countless other tales of media hauntings that have arisen in the twentieth century. As with all analog media, the images and sound stored on conventional videotape are the manifestations of traces left by a physical presence. They are the imprints of actual bodies or events, as well as proof that someone was present to activate the recording technology. By virtue of the ambiguity between presence and absence that marks the ontology of the trace, however, even without the plot of cursed videotape, there is always already something ghostly to the re(presentations), the doubling performed by analog recordings. Since the first experiments in photography and audio recording allowed human beings to manipulate the time of the real and see things that had theretofore remained beyond the register of the human eye or ear, analog recording technology has been attributed the ability to see and hear into the dimension of the dead and capture the presence of spirits supposedly always hovering about us (Kittler, 1999; Virilio 1989). The result of this correlation between modern media and specters is summed up in Kittler's observation that "the realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture" (Kittler, 1999: 12).

The Real

Analog indexicality establishes the discovery of a body as the inevitable (first) conclusion of *Ringu*, but it is through motifs that draw specifically on what Kittler observes was the novel capacity of analog recording technology to store time that the story creates its uncanny affect. Specifically, the film builds on affinity between the temporal architecture of the videotape and the phonograph, and the relation of the latter to the Real.

When the first phonographs recorded sound and the cinematograph captured images circa 1900, Kittler explains, they accomplished what had theretofore remained impossible under the monopoly held by writing in the selection, storage and production of data – the storing of time (Kittler, 1999). Phonographs recorded sound on their plastic media as vibrations whose frequency (oscillation/second) determined pitch and film recorded movement in a sequence of frames per unit of time. A critical difference was that whereas phonographs recorded, sound and time as indivisible and coherent phenomena, the cinematograph spliced time according to the apparatus's 24-frames per second standard. It was, and remains, that the impression of seamless movement in film is achieved only by tricking the eye. The decisive corollary that Kittler makes by means of this distinction is to show that in the context of twentieth century discourses, the proximity between inscription and event determined by the disparate recording principles translate into questions of readability and degrees of consciousness. Consequently, he observes that there is a consistent parallel between the structures of

consciousness designated in the Lacanian trinity, the Real, imaginary and symbolic and the gramophone, film and typewriter.[3] In the simplest terms, the phonographic is aligned with the Real on account that its sounds were the result of physical waves that appeared as scratches indecipherable to the human eye etched into a medium. Like the Lacanian Real, its writing is resistant to abstraction into representation. Film, by contrast, stored the "chemical effects" of waves on negatives in the form of recognizable images (Kittler, 1999: 119). The initial inscriptions of images were thus already once removed from the real in abstraction. When projected on a screen as bodies, they also allowed for an obvious correlation with what Lacan describes as the mirror stage of the imaginary.

Even more important, at least in terms of the discussion that will be brought up at a later point, is that until digital processing, audio inscription remained unreadable and resistant to editing techniques. The result was whatever sound erupted during a recording was captured. This meant that the phonograph recorded regardless of, or rather despite meaning, all the "interruptions and paralalia, nonsensical words and puns" by which psychoanalytic theory determined pathological symptoms were made manifest, which for Freud was evidence of the device's ability to access a realm of mental activity resistant to expression (Kittler, 1999: 87). It also meant that phonographs accomplished what no inscriptive media had ever managed before, namely, they recorded not only noise, but noise that had theretofore been imperceptible to human ears.

The recording of noise, Kittler observes, was a central accomplishment of modern recording technology and a corollary of its unprecedented capacity to store time. Before the technologies of automatic inscription of Discourse Networks 1900, sound (and image) could only be transcribed via the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. Noise sequences were not only beyond the expressive range of the alphabet, but also eliminated by the intervention of a conscience sublimated via social and censorial imperatives that made writing always an "unintentional" selection of meaning. The referential premise, moreover, was that writing embodied the inner voice of a human mind in communion with a transcendental infinite Symbolic, which readers "hallucinate[d] as meaning" Kittler, 1999: 14).[4] When technologies of automatic inscription take over the task of writing, permitting the "recording of vibrations that human ears could not count, human eyes could not see, and human writing hands could not catch up with," that premise subsides and access to the real, previously accessible via the human sensorium and mind, becomes contingent on technological mediation (Kittler, 1999: 118). Subsequently, meaning in the representational order of Discourse Networks 1900 is also no longer intertwined with a transcendental infinity but rather constituted in a technological logic as the separation of meaning from

meaninglessness, or in Kittler's terms, signal from noise. Comprehension, that is, becomes a kind of sieving process whereby what is not recognizable as meaningful is designated background noise – often emanating from just the technology itself (the blurring of film or sound of the needle) – and separated from that which is meaningful (Kittler, 1999: 45). Noise, in the parameters of discourse networks 1900, is thus not just an inevitable effect of imperfect technology, it forms its condition of possibility for meaning.

What seems implicit in Kittler's writing is the idea that noise that is just noise leaves no place for an outside. Hence noise that is translatable into nonsense, "paralalia, nonsensical words and puns," ends up pointing to an unconscious while uncannily impenetrable noise ends up gesturing to something unspeakable, irreducible to representation. In other words, despite, or perhaps because of, the signal-to-noise surface effect of meaning in discourse networks 1900, something exceeding technological determinacy, some excess, that in being announced through noise is contingent on the apparatuses' relation to time, seeps in to undermine an otherwise hermetic system of surface-effect meaning. Fantasy, magic and literature are thus still possible. But the media logic of discourse networks, whereby the real is the effect of the technologies that (re)present it, dictates that they are dependent on mediating technologies and their recording and amplifying thresholds.[5]

Videotape

Koji Suzuki, the author of the novel *Ringu* (1991), could not have chosen a better medium at the time than the videotape for a vehicle of horror. It was a medium of media, an embodiment of in-betweens. Propelled into existence within in an analog regime by the temporal interval between television broadcast zones, it also served also as an initial data storage medium for digital recording devices before the CD or flash-drive appeared.

Video cassette tape technology was developed first as a replacement for costly and inefficient kinescope cameras used for time-delay broadcasts in the United States. Prior to the advent of videotape, a live performance of a program produced on the West Coast, for example, would be filmed on a kinescope in order to be re-broadcast for an East Coast audience three hours later. Not only was the method costly, but it was also highly impractical, with studios having to rush to have a film developed in time for re-broadcast. With the invention of the videotape, programs could be recorded cheaply as well as played back immediately. Along with the content of the program, what videotape stored was an interval constituted in the temporal and national-cultural imperatives of television broadcasts, for which the "real-time" transmission was the

ideal.

In terms of its architecture and operation, a videotape recorder is much like a phonograph. Like the first phonographs, it debuted as a read-write (play and record) technology. More importantly, despite its movie camera-like visual register, it captures images as vibrations per second, just as a phonograph records sound, only at a much higher frequency. Similar to the phonograph, the resulting inscription on videotape's magnetic ribbon is also unintelligible to the human eye, which meant that until certain technological breakthroughs, editing was an extremely tedious and time consuming task involving a special solution to make the inscription visible (although not comprehensible like an film frame image), a microscope to see it and a razor blade to cut at approximate points. True editing did not become possible until late 1967, after most television broadcasting stations had been using videotape recording technology for time-delay broadcasts for almost a decade. With the advent of a technique for including a machine-readable signal on the tape control track, the temporal interval stored on the medium became identifiable in units of seconds, minutes and hours via a time code reader, which allowed for accurate cutting and splicing. Because videotape could store digital code, as well as audio and light waves, it has remained an important medium for digital recording devices that is only now losing ground to the built in hard-drive and flash-drive.

Noise

Considering the similarity between the phonograph and videotape, it is not surprising that an analysis that looks specifically at the role of the videotape in *Ringu* and *The Ring* would find opportunity to apply a Lacanian interpretation. In a reading mainly of *The Ring* – but also of *Ringu* – Matthew Sharpe (2003) suggests that "everything is there (but not right until the end, unfortunately!) to suggest a water tight (*sic*.) reading of *The Ring* according to the principles of the strictest Lacanian orthodoxy, at least if we limit ourselves to everything said before 1960." The thrust of the argument is that the film's female heroine initially subscribes to Freudian psychoanalytic assumptions when she determines to interpret the flickering and seemingly unrelated images on the cursed video as "rebuses, or hieroglyphs, or some other form of writing" that do not tell a story but rather "represents a signifier pictorially." The Lacanian turn then rests on the notion that the video in the film is analogous to the Lacanian letter that always returns to its destination. It constitutes symptoms that are going to make themselves heard, repeatedly, by some means or another. Or, as Sharpe puts it, the videotape is a "letter-video" of a repressed story that demands to return/arrive at its proper destination at any cost.

The stories revealed through the tape in *The Ring* and *Ringu* are slightly different, but the basic premise is the same. The video is the product of Sadako, or Samara in *The Ring*, a girl who possessed threatening supernatural powers. In *Ringu* she is attributed the ability to kill a man with just a thought, and in *The Ring* she is said to have conveyed mental images that drove her mother, as well as her family's horses, insane. After Sadako's mother in *Ringu* is driven to suicide, the father determines to kill the girl by throwing her into a well, (in *The Ring* it is the mother who tries to kill her). The plan fails insofar as she does not die right away but only after seven days at the bottom of the well. Worse, her restless spirit reaches out from her improper grave to torture and kill anyone who has watched the videotape after seven days. In the diegetic contemporary, the lodge where the videotape is found covers the well in which Sadako (or Samara) where thrown. Following the clues extracted from their interpretation of the videotape, about which I will say more below, the heroine newspaper reporter returns with the aid of her estranged husband to search for the submerged remains of the girl. Their situation is complicated by the fact that the heroine's son (from her estranged partner) has also watched the tape and is thus also on the clock. With the seven-day countdown expiring for the heroine just as she descends into the depths of the well, she discovers the girl's body and the threat is lifted, or so it seems.

Despite the recovery of Sadako's (or Samara's) body, the curse of the videotape continues. On the day following the discovery of the body, Asakawa's (Rachel in *Ring*) ex-husband, who watched the videotape a day later than the heroine, becomes the next victim. He is alone in his apartment when the television suddenly comes on of its own accord, showing the well from which the girl's body was exhumed. As the ex-husband moves inspect the image a figure of a girl can be seen crawling up out of the well. She then passes through the television screen and into the room. Still flickering, as if some kind of ambiguous object caught between the material and electronic world, she advances in a series of jerky leaps, propelled it seems by cut-and-splice effects. Her victim is immobilized by fear and then dead with his face frozen in a horrific contortion.[6]

Part of the horror of the *Ring* films is that there is no way to stop the curse of the videotape. It can only be displaced: one has to make a copy of the tape and pass it to someone else to watch – which the heroine learns when she realizes the only thing she did different from her husband was to make a copy of the tape and have someone else (her husband) watch it. On one hand, we can say that videotape thus presents us with what might be called the modern dilemma of the everyday: Most of us know only how to work the technology that we depend on in our everyday lives, but we don't know how or why it works. It just does, and if we want to live we have to comply to its functional demands. On the other hand, the videotape in the *Ring* films is simply

analogous to (and the analog version of) the chain-letter curse, which performs the same function, albeit by a slightly different logic, as that which the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1990) famously identified with the gift. Gifting, in Mauss's writings, is a social institution in which the gift acts as a medium for the perpetuation of social relations over space and time. If a gift is given, Mauss tells us, it must be received and reciprocated – which begins the gifting cycle anew. But one must not reciprocate immediately. The logic of the gift determines that a certain amount of time must pass between reception and reciprocation. And it is within this temporal interval that the magic of the gift takes effect, securing the promise of a continued relation of reciprocity in place of war. Whereas the chain-letter reveals the bureaucratic character of modern social relations by circulating text through the post office medium, the videotape in the *The Ring* films bespeaks of the spectacle nature of our contemporary mass mediate society in which text is supplanted by image and government institution by television. It takes to the extreme the notion that the capacity, empowered by the ubiquity of television, to reference common images and television shows constitutes the adhesive mechanism of the social. While the theme is central to both *Ringu* and *The Ring*, the latter makes it evident in a scene in which the heroine's gaze as she looks out from her balcony comes to rest on the televisions playing in every apartment in the building across from hers .

More important than the social critique to which it points, the analogy between the gift, chain-letter and cursed videotape draws attention to the role of time in the story. Time is significant in both *Ringu* and *The Ring* not only as a narrative device – seven days of the story – but also as a technological phenomenon from which, like the temporal interval of the gift emanates the power of the video. Furthermore, just as *The Ring* articulates the social critique inherent to the notion of the cursed video more clearly than *Ringu*, *The Ring* also foregrounds the significance of time. In order to explain, however, this we have to return to the moment in the film when the heroine and her ex-husband are attempting to analyze the tape for clues. Although Sharpe's argument that that the characters in the film read the images on the video in a psychoanalytic mode as clues into the workings of an unconscious is convincing, he overlooks the most important step in the process. Deciphering the video commences *not* via interpretation of its content but by manipulation of its material apparatus in a way that references the intrinsic relation between time, modern technologies of recording, and orders of representation that have imparted meaning since the turn of the century.

When Asakawa in *Ringu*, and Rachel in *The Ring*, first determine to analyze the video with the aid of their ex-partners, who happen to have expertise in technology, its content remains steadfastly impenetrable. The initial, and pivotal clue arrives in a way

that it can only within the temporal specificity of phonographic-like recording technology – via noise and time-axis-manipulation. The temporal constituent of phonographic recordings provides the principle for time-axis-manipulation, determining that if the recording speed is different from playback speed, "there is a shift not only in clear sounds but in the entire noise spectra"(Kittler, 1999: 35). Because of the direct correlation between the real and phonographic recording, the result is that when the playback speed is changed, "what is manipulated is the real rather than the symbolic," allowing ears can hear what was previously inaudible.

In *Ringu,* when Asakawa and her partner are struggling in vain to decipher a section on the video in which the characters of a newspaper article entitled, 噴火 (Volcanic Eruption) appear to be crawling around the page, they notice a strange background noise. Once amplified and slowed down, the noise emerges as a barely perceptible chant in the regional dialect of Oshima Island that says, "Frolic in the brine, goblins be thine." Faithful to the conviction that the medium is the message, Asakawa and her partner search the libraries newspaper archive for articles concerning a volcanic eruption on Oshima in order to find a readable version of the article. The article, it turns out, is from many years prior and also tells of a woman who was outcast for demonstrating supernatural powers by predicting the event. Following the clue to the island, the two eventually learn that the woman was Sadako's mother and that Sadako was the product of an affair with a professor researching her mother's powers.

The equivalent scene in *The Ring* is obviously not able to exploit the doubly haunting affect produced in *Ringu* when the background noise emerges as a message and in a dialect – an uncanny particularity within the supposed homogenous nation-state. But it succeeds nonetheless in creating a similar affect by situating the noise in the tape's visual register as a disturbance at the edge of the image on the screen. *The Ring* capitalizes, that is, on the specifically uncanny technological architecture of the videotape – a storage medium in which what Kittler identifies as the correspondence between the phonograph and Real carries over into the image by virtue of the similar inscription processes for both audio and visual recordings. When Rachel manipulates the visual noise at a technology lab, in a scene about which I will say more below, it reveals the hidden image of a lighthouse. Just as the clue from the noise in *Ringu* sends the characters back to the archive to retrieve the newspaper article, in *The Ring*, Rachel discovers the location of the lighthouse by matching the image from the tape with photos from a reference book on lighthouses that she finds in the library. In concurrence with the increasing digitalization of culture at the time of *The Ring*, she then augments her search through the Internet.

Analog Beyond

The difference between these two scenes is indicative of the decisive difference between *Ringu* and *The Ring*, which is a result of the contrasting technological assumptions of the films' respective eras. According to Matthew Sharpe (2003), a significant difference between the films is that while *Ringu* invokes Japanese myths of the supernatural to explain why Sadako's spirit continues to kill even after receiving a proper burial, in the Hollywood version, *The Ring*, there is an absence of any such semantic, cultural framework. The result is that the Hollywood version, *The Ring*, is far more terrifying than the Japanese film *Ringu*.

I would argue that the reverse is true. Not that one film is more terrifying than the other but that *The Ring* provides explanations where *Ringu* does not. Whereas *Ringu* tacitly allows for the assumption that the videotape is a medium of supernatural forces, *The Ring* displays a persistent compulsion to either emphasize the analog facticity of the tape and explain the specifics of its operation vis-à-vis its preternatural phenomena. One example comes from the scene described above in which Rachel takes the video to the media lab in order to manipulate the visual irregularity she discovers. The lab attendant informs her that the machine she is going to use is "totally analog, she'll read to the edge of your tape. Just don't force her or she'll get pissy with ya." A more important example emerges from yet another comparison between two pivotal scenes from *Ringu* and *The Ring*.

When watching the cursed video in *Ringu* with her ex-partner and observing that the production camera is not reflected in a shot of a mirror, Asakawa concludes that there is something "strange" about the tape. She suggests to her partner that the shot might have been altered with professional special effects technology, but quickly adds that it is highly improbable. Despite an even higher improbability, the implication is that the image on the tape is not simulacra but the real – not recording of reality but a reality itself. By remaining unarticulated, this possibility provides an eerie suspense and provocative discomfort. What could produce such an anomaly? The answer *Ringu* offers is that it is an expression of the supernatural mediated through technology.

The same scene in *The Ring* is preceded by reference to the phenomenon vis-à-vis its temporal instantiation when Rachel notices, in a close-up of the videotape machine, that the time-code track display fails to show proper numbers as she is copying the videotape. What is expressed tacitly in her glance is articulated clearly in the next scene by her ex-husband, Noah, who declares in bewilderment that "the numbers are all screwed up." Pressed by Rachel for an explanation he adds, "when you record a tape, the make-up of the tracks is like a signature for whatever did the recording like a camcorder, VCR, whatever, so the control track could tell us where it came from. But to not have one, that's like being born without fingerprints." The allegory is ultimately

appropriate, pointing to the inherent indexicality of analog technology, As a result of such emphases and explanations of the analog modality of the videotape, the technological conditions of the supernatural are foregrounded in *The Ring* such that analog technology begins to displace the supernatural. Thus where *Ringu* attributes the power of the video to the supernatural, in *The Ring* analog technology itself begins to look like the supernatural. Insofar as analog technology has always been attributed a certain ghostliness, what is unusual about what takes place in *The Ring*, vis-à-vis *Ringu*, is that its role as medium to the supernatural appears to subside. In *The Ring*, the medium appears to finally come into its own as the message. In place of the supernatural, behind the technology of the tape in *The Ring*, there is only more technology. So while the diegetic past concerning the creation of the tape is conveyed through supernaturally induced flashbacks in *Ringu*, in *The Ring* it is told through yet another videotape, entitled "SM0015." In addition, in this second video, which is a visual record of the Samara's treatment at a psychiatric facility, Samara is allegorically and thematically equated with technology.

We learn from the video that she has the ability to burn pictures on material with her mind, which is a technique known in studies of the supernatural as "projected thermography" and explains how she was able to create the video. In the same scene, she also appears to be literally plugged into an electrical socket, as if she herself is some kind of technological apparatus. Sitting on a chair alone at the center of a cold and septic white tiled room, an electrical chord snakes conspicuously across the floor from the socket to her feet.

The point, it deserves emphasizing, is not that *The Ring* and *Ringu* present different notions of the supernatural, but rather that *The Ring* articulates the assumptions that lurk in the subtext of *Ringu*, and which are the source of its captivating power. For some, this contrast is simply proof of Hollywood's lack of subtlety in comparison to the artful expressions of Japanese cinematic tradition. If we can suppress for a moment the urge to appeal to notions of cultural uniqueness, and focus on the role of media – which, after all, is the central problematic of this discussion – the question this prompts is why *The Ring* displays the need to belabor the fact of analog technology vis-à-vis the supernatural to the point of eclipsing its function of medium when *Ringu* did not? One obvious answer it that in 1991, and still in 1998, *Ringu* is able to exploit the videotape as a prop within the conventional motif of haunted analog media. In 2002, *The Ring* cannot present this motif without addressing the already incipient disappearance of the videotape. If this were all, however, the present discussion could have been much shorter. Another answer to the question is found in the difference between the uncanny behavior *Ringu* attributes to Sadako and *The Ring* to Samara. "Don't you know, she never sleeps," Rachel's son in *The Ring* tells her, and we see a

Samara standing beneath a clock as the hands spin in rapid motion through the hours of night and day.

In key scenes throughout the film, time is also audible in the form of a quiet ticking of a clock in the background – imperceptible, of course, to viewers without headphones, or subtitles activated on the DVD. The message in these temporal instantiations of the supernatural is the same as that which is conveyed by the focus on the irregular time-code display when Rachel is copying the video, and the visual disturbance that reveals the key to tracing the tape. Time, or rather the temporality particular to analog recording media has become a problem: anticipation of its imminent passing in the face of a digital revolution engenders its premature ghostly resurrection in *The Ring*.

If in *Ringu* the temporality of analog media provides the haunting premise, in *The Ring* it is the perceived disappearance of this temporality in the anticipated obsolescence of the videotape that is horrific. Its disappearance portends to the end of the possibility of the ghost story, which is tantamount to the relegation of meaning to signal-to-noise ratio, or language to simply information – in other words, the death fantasy and the story. For what the films demonstrate is that the point of the story of the cursed videotape is not the conclusion of the story, but the eerie affect developed over the course of *Ringu's* 96 minutes and *The Ring's* 115 minutes. While we, like the characters of the film, obviously desired to know the truth behind the tape, the enthralling part of the story derived entirely from the evocation of the supernatural by means of the peculiar temporal affinity between the technology of the videotape and the phonograph and the conduit opened to the Real therein.

Borrowing from James Siegel's argument on the "truth of sorcery," we can say that the truth of the videotape "rests in the demonstration of its miraculous power—not, of course, in the actual workings of it, because this is at best a failure, but in the fabrication of its story with its accompanying artifacts" (Siegel, 2003). Just as the supernatural power of a boy accused of witchcraft in the Zuni village that Siegel's discussion visits by way of Levi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss lie in the boy's captivating confession of his power, the power of the cursed video emanates from the story of its curse. But Siegel is not simply saying that the truth of sorcery is a good story. Rather, his argument draws attention to the supernatural as an instantiation of semantic limits from which issues the power of language. The power of language, which is exemplified in sorcery, has no origin, no "fixed center," but instead issues forth from "obscure and seldom visited places." In the world mediated by analog media since circa 1900, that "obscure and seldom visited" place is embodied by the noise that gestures to the supernatural via a desire to maintain a beyond. Noise, within the logic of discourse

networks 1900 is contingent on the temporal architecture of analog recording media, which separates a section of time away from the flow of history and the everyday. Without this structure of temporality, there is no beyond and no story, at least as we know it.

Full Circle

In the spirit of these films, the end brings us back to the beginning and the questions posed therein: Are there still ghosts in the digital age? Or rather, now we can rephrase the question better to ask is language still capable of gesturing to something beyond information in a digital era? What *The Ring* suggests by way of its translation of *Ringu* for a digitalizing era is that the loss of the temporal structure specific to analog recording technology is trouble for the supernatural. Without the peculiar indexical relation between time and the real that characterizes analog audio recording, there seems to be no possibility for the supernatural. And the supernatural, as we have seen, is more than just an enthralling motif. It bespeaks of semantic limits, gesturing to a realm from which language draws its power to do things in the world, to be more than just data.

Kittler's remark, cited in the introduction, that since effects are not streamed directly into the mind such that we can take leave of our senses there is still entertainment suggests that the supernatural must still be possible even in an era dominated by digital media. Meaning, there are still ghosts but, as the *The Ring* films establish, they cannot be the same kind of ghosts that have been haunting us for over the last century. What then do these ghosts look like? To offer just one possibility, the film, *Matrix Reloaded* (2003), explains the presence of ghosts in a digital world as exiled programs that emulate myths of ghosts. Despite this difference between spirits of analog and digital worlds, there is a similarity to their logic. Just as the analog ghost bespeaks of the quintessential quality of analog media, its capacity to store time, the algorithmic irregularity of the digital ghost denotes the essence of digitality.

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1. In an opening talk at the conference *Ubiquitous Media: Asian Transformation* held in Tokyo from July 13-16, 2007, Kittler suggested that until Martin Heidegger, Western philosophical inquiries into ontology were unable to "conceive of media as media." Kittler's talk appears in the 2009 (2-3) special edition of *Theory, Culture and Society*.

2. The first DVD players and discs were available in Japan in November 1996, in the United States in March 1997, in Europe in 1998, and in Australia in 1999. By the spring of 1999, the price of a DVD player in the United States had dropped below three hundred dollars, see Taylor (2006). DVD rentals first topped VHS rentals during the week of June 15, 2003. Circuit City stopped carrying VHS players in stores in 2002, and Best Buy stopped carrying the technology in 2003 (Jen Chaney, "Parting Words For VHS Tapes, Soon to be Gone with the Rewind," The Washington Post, Sunday, August 28, 2005, Special to the Washington Post).

3. In so doing, Kittler is not adopting psychoanalytic discourse for the sake of its analytic capacity, which would be contrary to his post-hermeneutic mode. Rather, his treatment of Lacan, and Freud, points to the coalescence between material effects of media and psychoanalytic theory, which is manifest in the spectral, phantasmagoric quality of the unconscious in psychoanalytic discourse and ghostliness of media in culture Kittler's premise is that whether Freud's notions of the unconscious and its manifestations, and later Lacan's Real, were born of phonographic effects or superimposed retrospectively on the technology is both impossible to determine and ultimately irrelevant. More significant is how these associations inform contemporary

cultural sensibilities, which he demonstrates, for example, in the link between psychoanalysis and the phonograph that appears already in Bram Stoker's popular novel from 1897, *Dracula*. The strength of Kittler's writing lies in his eschewal of analysis for examples and an attention to the particulars of technology such that there emerges a logic declaring discourse inseparable from its mode of transmission

4. What Kittler is referring to here is an institutional structure brought to bare on the mother and her role of bringing a child into language. In the effort to cultivate and populate the bureaucratic structure, focus was placed on standardization of language through standardization of mothers speaking, with particular attention being paid to training the mother to move her mouth correctly. In this way, (male) children were to be read to by mothers speaking a standardized national tongue.

5. While pointing to numerous examples of spirits perceived to be haunting analog media, Kittler never addresses the question in the context of the post-hermeneutic premise of Discourse Networks 1900 of why there are still ghosts. That is, on one hand, the presence of ghosts in analog media is explained as a result of the inherently ghostly character of analog indexicality, as explained earlier in the text. But on the other hand, Kittler's argument is concerned more with the nature of writing and construction of constitution meaning through analog based inscription. Theoretically, if the automatic writing of analog recording technology undermines the possibility of a hermeneutic reading and meaning emerges simply within a signal-to-noise ratio, then writing (by typewriter, film or phonograph) should not gesture to a beyond populated with spirits. But ghosts persists in Discourse Networks 1900, just as we persist in imposing a hermeneutic reading upon automatic writing. The question this begs is why?

6. Sensing that something is wrong with his Lacanian reading, Sharpe, suggests that perhaps it seems to work *"too smoothly"* at first, thereby "domesticating" the film and failing to account for its "sheer sense of diabolical, uncanny horror." To compensate, he offers a second reading that by departing from the optical logic of cinema's apparatus, recognizes the affect of something beyond representation. This second reading rests on what Sharpe identifies as the difference between the Japanese film, *Ringu*, and the Hollywood version, *Ring* – which also determines for him why *Ring* is ultimately more terrifying. *Ringu*, Sharpe explains, invokes Japanese cultural mythology to explain how that which is forbidden for us to know, and which is the condition of possibility our being, namely the time of our death, becomes determined in its doubling with the fate of the girl who died after seven days in the well. By contrast, in the American version, *Ring*, there is an "*absence* of any such accepted semantic framework within which the trouble with Samara could be signified." Samara, Sharpe adds, "is not the herald or harbinger of some supernatural beyond"

because in *Ring* "*There is no such beyond, at least that we can know anything about*." Such a realm, impenetrable to signification, coalesces unequivocally with the Lacanian Real in the final paragraphs of Sharpe's argument. He explains that all we can know of this realm is via its uncanny phenomena. These exist as what Lacan designated *sinthommes*, persisting beyond the interpretation of symptom to "embody, at the level of the flesh, *the points where symbolisation has failed in the constitution of the subject's self-understanding*."

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