Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing: Comparing Ringu and The Ring

by VALERIE WEE

Abstract: This essay examines the video images central to the supernatural events in the Japanese horror film Ringu (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and its Hollywood remake, The Ring (Gore Verbinski, 2002), exploring the intricate ways in which both video sequences offer insight into the cultural distinctions and inevitable intersections that exist between Japanese and non-Japanese/Hollywood cinematic aesthetic traditions.

When a culture is markedly different from our own, we can and often do misinterpret the film. Our viewing is partial or incorrect because we are not aware of common meanings given what we are seeing.

Every image embodies a way of seeing.

Donal Richie

John Berger

Images and the search for their meaning play central roles in the Japanese horror film Ringu (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and its Hollywood remake, The Ring (Gore Verbinski, 2002). Both films revolve around a female reporter investigating reports of people dying exactly seven days after watching a mysterious videotape. After finding and watching the videotape herself, the reporter—named Reiko in Ringu and Rachel in The Ring—begins to suspect that the fragmented images on the tape offer vital clues to the events behind the persistent cycle of death, and a possible means of ending it. When her son watches the video, she tries to uncover its origins in the hopes of saving them both. With the help of her ex-husband (Ryuji in the Japanese original, Noah in the American remake), she discovers that the videotape


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is connected to a malevolent female entity who had been brutally murdered and who is now avenging her untimely death by haunting the video and killing anyone who watches it. To understand the deadly horror she is up against, she must uncover the deeper patterns, symbols, and organizing principles that shape these images.

This essay argues that just as the video images offer crucial information to each film’s female protagonist, they also serve as “road maps” to the underlying attitudes and values that structure their respective cultures’ evolving treatment of horror and the supernatural. While both films share the premise described above, they offer vastly different images in their deadly videos, images that differ at the level of visual form and style, as well as at the level of narrative organization. The similarities and differences between the two films reflect the complex realities that govern the practice of cross-cultural adaptation that involves competing commitments to absorbing and retaining textual and aesthetic elements from the original text, while upholding culturally distinct aesthetics and perspectives.

These opposing instincts have long structured the history of cross-cultural exchanges and mutual influences between national cinemas. The relationship between Hollywood and the Japanese film industry, for instance, can be traced back decades, from Hollywood’s various remakes and adaptations of Akira Kurosawa’s films, to Japanese-American coproductions, and the numerous interactions between Japanese anime and American science fiction and fantasy texts. Despite these cross-cultural connections, Japan has also long sustained and preserved its unique and distinct cultural practices and aesthetic beliefs, even as American filmmaking has itself evolved in response to its own shifting modes of production, changing audiences, and other industrial and commercial exigencies. These conditions are certainly reflected in Ringu and The Ring. In fact, each film navigates the tension between reflecting its own culture’s specific aesthetic traditions and perceptions of the supernatural, and embracing and adopting the influences that characterize the continuing cultural exchanges between Hollywood and Japanese cinema.

This study fills a particular research gap within existing studies of Ringu and The Ring. While a fair amount of research on the films has been produced, the available scholarship tends to ignore the relationship between the original and its remake, with little attention paid to comparative analysis. Rather, extant work tends to consider each film solely within its own specific cultural and national context. One of the more popular approaches adopted in examining Ringu and The Ring involves the interrogation of each film’s treatment of gender and its intersection with horror. While Ruth Goldberg and John Lewis consider the horrific depictions of mothers and mothering in the Japanese Ringu and Hollywood’s The Ring, respectively, Jay McRoy traces the horror in Ringu to modern Japanese society’s growing anxieties resulting from


increasingly destabilized gender roles. Another branch of research centers on interrogating how horror and technology merge in these films. Both Eric White and Reimi Tateishi interrogate the deep-seated technophobia expressed in *Ringu*, linking this development to Japan’s rapid shift to modernity, and the subsequent impact this has had on traditional Japanese life and values. Of the more limited work that examines the relationship between the original Japanese version and its American remake, Denis Meikle’s *The Ring Companion* stands out as a sustained attempt at tracing the multiple media texts that have evolved from the original *Ring* novel. In examining the complex range of *Ring*-related media texts, including several television series, the various parts of the Japanese film franchise, the American remake, and Korean reinterpretations of the original narrative, Meikle provides considerable historical insight into the many *Ring*-related texts currently in existence, offering extensive information on the various production and creative decisions related to *Ring’s* transformation across this wide range of media. Like Meikle’s work, this essay is also comparative in interest, while being distinctly narrower in its coverage. While offering a fairly comprehensive overview of the *Ring* phenomenon, Meikle’s study does not engage with the culturally specific aesthetics of the video images in *Ringu* and *The Ring*. My interest lies in exploring the intricate ways in which both video sequences offer insight into the cultural distinctions and inevitable intersections that exist between the Japanese and non-Japanese/Hollywood cinematic aesthetic traditions.

**Japanese Cinema, the Horror Tradition, and *Ringu***. Cultural expressions of horror and the terrifying take many dimensions. In most cultures, one subset of such explorations features the supernatural, of which ghosts are a key component. This is certainly true in both Japanese and American traditions. Within Japan, one popular strain of horror focuses primarily on the figure of the vengeful female ghost. In Japan, this particular tradition finds popular expression in centuries-old folktales, classical art forms including no and kabuki theater, and in cinema. As cinema is the “youngest” of the three cultural forms, its treatment of the female ghost tradition is directly influenced and shaped by the other older, more established art forms.

Tsurei, or female ghosts, are central figures in numerous myths and folktales dating back to the Edo period (1603–1867). *Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan (Ghost Story of Yotsuya)*, *Bancho Sarayashiki (The Story of Okiku)*, and *Kuroneko (Black Cat)* are just three of the

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8 In this popular Japanese folktale, a young Japanese wife, Oiwa, is murdered by her husband, lemon, so that he can marry another woman. Oiwa’s ghost returns for vengeance and haunts her faithless husband to death.

9 In this tale, a housemaid, Okiku, is murdered by her samurai master, Tessan Aoyama, who throws her corpse into an old well. Okiku’s ghost returns nightly to haunt Aoyama, finally driving him mad.

10 This story features a woman and her daughter-in-law who are robbed, raped, and murdered by samurai. These women’s spirits return as vengeful demon cats, killing any samurai they encounter.

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more popular *kaidan* (literally "supernatural tale" or Japanese ghost story), many of which feature innocent women who are victimized and brutally murdered by men. In all these tales, the vengeful spirits of these dead women return to wreak vengeance on their murderers, and in some instances, on society as a whole. Though hundreds of years old, these narratives continue to resonate in contemporary Japanese culture, appearing time and again in *nō* and *kabuki* performances and on film.\(^\text{11}\)

Traditional Japanese theater forms, which include *nō*, *kabuki*, and *bunraku*, reflect the classic Japanese aesthetic that privileges a nonrational, emotion-centered perspective, and consistently emphasizes artistry, and hence artificiality, while disregarding most aspects of realism. These cultural aesthetics would significantly influence the development of Japanese cinema. Consequently, Japanese cinema reveals a similar tendency to eschew realism in preference of its own aesthetic commitment to the presentational aspect of art, where stylization and artifice are emphasized and valued, and where the nonrational and the suggestive are accepted and valued over the literal.\(^\text{12}\) Alongside this privileging of art and artifice was an accompanying neglect of narrative coherence.\(^\text{13}\)

It must be acknowledged that even in the earliest days of Japanese cinema, its aesthetic elements evolved alongside, and were likely influenced by, larger aesthetic trends developing outside Japan. The turn toward the overtly subjective, psychological anxieties associated with German Expressionism, the emphasis on stylized, increasingly disorienting, and fragmented visuals, the growing disruption of linearity embraced by the French avant-garde, and the broader shift toward a modernist mood characterized by a heightened sense of ambiguity, dislocation, self-reflexive questioning, uncertainty, and alienation, had an influence on Japanese art and cinema as early as the 1920s.\(^\text{14}\) These early developments indicate the long history of cross-cultural exchange and ideological negotiation that characterizes Japan’s relationship with the rest of the world.\(^\text{15}\) It is against this historical backdrop of mutual and multiple cultural influences, alongside the enduring popularity of traditional Japanese culture and aesthetics, that contemporary Japanese horror films, including the *kaidan*, or supernatural ghost story, have emerged.

Some of the most popular and notable *kaidan* films emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, including *Tales of Ugetsu* (*Ugetsu monogatari* [Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953]), *Jigoku* (Nobuo In addition to the many *nō* and *kabuki* performances of *Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan*, there are no less than twenty-five film versions of the same tale. See Peter Tombs, "Oh, Noh . . . Japan Has the Horrors Again," *Guardian Unlimited*, August 18, 2000, http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,356916,00.html (accessed February 17, 2009).


\(^14\) See William O. Gardner, "New Perceptions: Kinugasa Teinosuke’s Films and Japanese Modernism," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 59–78. Gardner traces how Western modernist and avant-garde perspectives were introduced to, and embraced by, Japanese culture in the 1920s, and highlights how these Western aesthetics directly influenced silent Japanese cinema.

\(^15\) I would like to thank my second *Cinema Journal* reviewer for highlighting this point.
Nakagawa, 1960), *Onibaba* (Shindō Kaneto, 1964), and *Yotsuya kaidan* (Shiro Toyoda, 1964). Many of these films draw directly from popular *kaidan* myths and folktales in which faithless or murderous men experience chilling, terrifying encounters with angry (female) spirits and demons, retelling these culturally familiar narratives in a cinematic medium. These films embrace aesthetic patterns in which beautiful, dreamy visual scapes depicting the natural, physical world are abruptly and shockingly disrupted by nightmarish, grotesque images enhanced by harsh, chiaroscuro lighting and a reliance on visual distortions and gore when the supernatural invades or is revealed. These aesthetic elements, along with the larger disquieting and alienating atmosphere pervading these films, reflect the dual influences of both a broader modernist, avant-garde tendency, as well as the enduring power of traditional Japanese mythology, classical no, *kabuki*, and more recent forms like *butō*.

This intermingling of traditional and external aesthetic movements continued as the *kaidan* film evolved. By the late 1970s, the traditional *kaidan* narratives had been replaced by more contemporary tales, many of them reflecting the influence of popular non-Japanese horror films from Hollywood and Europe, at a time when Japan itself was experiencing deepening sociocultural anxieties over the encroaching impact of modernity and Western ideas. Nagisa Ôshima's *Empire of Passion* (*Ai no bora*; 1978), in which an adulterous wife and her lover are haunted by her husband, whom they murdered, and Toshiharu Ikeda's *Evil Dead Trap* (*Shiryo no wana*; 1988), in which a female reporter and her crew, lured to a warehouse to investigate a gory snuff film on a videotape, are decimated by a mysterious, deadly entity, represent a shift away from the traditional *kaidan* narrative. In addition to reflecting the significant influence that Western directors including Tobe Hooper, Dario Argento, and David Cronenberg were having on Japanese horror,16 these films also exposed the larger sociocultural anxieties of the period, which were grounded in gender shifts that saw the emergence of a generation of more independent, modern females, increasing anxiety over technological progress, and growing concerns over a perceived loss of traditional values and identities, fears that have continued to resonate through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Yet it is worth noting that even though traditional theater's influence on Japanese cinema has diminished over the decades, and globalization has encouraged even greater cultural convergence, “there [remain] latent stylistic and thematic influences from the classical theatres” in contemporary Japanese cinema in general, and in horror films in particular.17

Whether on the theatrical stage or the cinematic screen, depictions of popular *kaidan* regularly revolve around familiar, iconic images and conventions. In these stories, *yurei*, female ghosts, are often motivated by anger, seeking vengeance for their untimely and undeserved deaths. Often these murder victims are buried in dark, damp graves such as swamps and wells. When they emerge, these *yurei* are consistently depicted with long, black hair starkly contrasted to a pale, often disfigured face set off by staring eyes. All of these features are overtly referenced in *Ringu*, most directly surfacing

17 Ibid., 19.
in the cursed videotape’s images that are a direct link to Sadako, the malevolent spirit at the heart of the film. Furthermore, the central features of Japanese art, namely, the dominance of emotion over reason, mood over coherence, form over narrative, and presentation over representation, also surface in the videotaped images.

When Reiko watches the video, she encounters static that dissolves into an image of the moon on a dark, cloudy night. This image is replaced by one showing a mirror positioned on the lower left corner of a blank wall. We see a woman combing her hair in the mirror, which is clearly lit, while the top half of the frame is obscured by a dark shadow. There is then a brief shot in which the mirror now appears in the lower right corner of the screen, with the top half of the frame again shrouded in darkness. In the mirror is another female figure with long, dark hair and a malevolent look on her face. The shot then returns to the previous image, where we see the first woman in profile as she looks over to the right of the frame. The next shot features words in black Japanese newsprint, wriggling against a white background. This dissolves into a medium-long shot of several people who appear to be staggering up a hill. Then, a man standing in front of the ocean with a towel over his head appears, pointing toward something unseen. This is followed by an extreme close-up of a seemingly deformed eye, with the Japanese word “Sada” etched in white against the black pupil. Finally, the video cuts to a grainy shot of an abandoned well surrounded by fallen leaves.

Considering the lethal nature of this videotape, the images themselves, while fragmented and strange, appear relatively benign. This string of seemingly unconnected shots lends a fragmentary incoherence to the entire sequence. There are no visual or logical connections between the images. There is no apparent link between the woman combing her hair, the people struggling uphill, and the man whose face is obscured by a towel. A quick survey of the cinematic techniques used in this short sequence reveals a distinct rejection of any attempt at continuity or coherence. The shot of the malicious-looking female, sandwiched between shots of the woman combing her hair in the mirror, implies some relationship between the two, yet the featureless, half-shadowed, blank space/wall behind the mirror(s) induces a degree of ambiguity about their association since the only similarity between the shots is the emptiness of the mise-en-scène. The use of straight cuts between these images heightens the sense of fragmentation, disrupting any attempt to organize the shots. The discontinuous editing, the juxtaposition of unrelated shots that overtly disrupt any clear narrative linearity, and the seemingly distorted nature of several images recall the broader modernist aesthetic tradition, and experimental, avant-garde cinematic practices, even as they simultaneously reference traditional Japanese aesthetic principles. Notably, the ambiguity of this video sequence also dominates the film’s larger narrative.

In fact, despite the video's central role in the film, the larger narrative makes little effort to contextualize and explain its content. A key characteristic of these video images is that they appear only obscurely relevant to the events that have occurred or will occur within the larger narrative. In nearly every instance, although the images may be linked to external events, the links are often tenuous and unconfirmed. For instance, as the narrative progresses, we discover that Sadako has been brutally murdered by her
father, apparently because she had unnatural powers that enabled her to will a person to death. While we can link the image of the eye with the word “Sada” etched on it to Sadako, this connection is never made explicit or confirmed. Also, “Sada” translates as “chaste.” Yet, within the film, Sadako’s chastity is not an issue. Thus, the appearance of the word in the video remains obscure. In the same way, as Reiko’s investigation evolves, she learns about Sadako’s psychic mother, Shizuko, who apparently predicted a volcanic eruption. While the shot of the people struggling uphill may reference this eruption, this connection remains purely speculative and is never actually confirmed. We may assume that the woman combing her hair and the young girl are Shizuko and Sadako, yet the images are fleeting and offer no insight into the greater events that led to Sadako’s death or to the relationship between mother and daughter.

While it is possible to trace the modernist, avant-garde influence on the videotape’s disjointed, often distorted, and alienating images and the film’s larger narrative, it is equally important to consider the enduring impact of traditional Japanese aesthetics. Indeed, the latter offers a notably rich and complex subtext to the interpretation of Ringu. Like the modernist tradition, the Japanese narrative tradition is built on ellipsis, with the latter often extending the elliptical to the point of obscurity. As Richie notes, “the kind of narrative tightness so prized in the West is not found in Japanese films. The idea that each unit or scene should push the story through to its conclusion is not one to which Japanese literature, drama, or film subscribes.”19 Rimer similarly notes that “narrative does not play a central role” in the Japanese aesthetic tradition.20 Reflecting the Japanese acceptance of a looser cause-and-effect narrative structure, the images in the video are largely unexplained and only tangentially relevant. Rather than privileging narrative coherence, Ringu emphasizes the emotion of fear and a mood of anxiety/insecurity founded on ignorance and the inscrutability of the supernatural. This reflects the Japanese aesthetic commitment to exploring ideas and possibilities that extend beyond what is known.

In its discussion of aesthetics, the Kôdansha Encyclopedia of Japan notes that Japanese mimesis has traditionally “value[d] symbolic representation more highly than realistic delineation. . . . [M]imesis meant not an imitation of outward appearance but a suggestion of inner essence, for true reality lay under the physical surface.”21 Japanese cultural texts, therefore, retain openness toward the unknown, and acknowledge that there are things beyond human understanding and perception. The images on the supernaturally tainted videotape in Ringu function on a symbolic and evocative level, a tendency commonly exercised in “[s]ymbolic [nô] theatre, in which the most important actions were not represented but suggested.”22 Indeed, symbolic suggestions play a significant role in Ringu, where the visual images of the deadly video exist as echoes and form patterns that reach beyond the film’s textual limits to find

19 Richie, Japanese Cinema, 8.
20 Thomas Rimer, “Film and the Visual Arts in Japan: An Introduction,” in Ehrlich and Desser, eds., Cinematic Landscapes, 150.
their origins in other popular Japanese cultural texts. Significantly, several images in the video reference images drawn from traditional kaidan. Those familiar with these folktales will realize that Sadako's story is the latest incarnation of the long-established Japanese ghost narratives I discussed earlier. This link is consciously expressed in the image of the woman combing her long black hair in the mirror, a visual that evokes the culturally iconic image of the yurei, a young woman with long, black, unbound hair who appears in numerous earlier cinematic interpretations of these stories, including Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan (Ghost Stories) [Kwaidan [Masaki Kobayashi, 1964]], and Onibaba.23 The image of the well in Ringu's video similarly references the traditional folktale Bancho sarayashiki (The Story of Okiku), as well as other cinematic predecessors including Onibaba and Empire of Passion.24 If we consider the enduring power of these narratives, and acknowledge the tremendous influence that traditional Japanese art and aesthetic traditions continue to have on contemporary Japanese cinema,25 it is clear that these earlier ghost stories are directly being referenced in Ringu's depiction of Sadako as a vengeful spirit. These visual citations provide additional information that is likely to influence the film's interpretation, particularly when they are reinforced by narrative repetitions. Sadako, like Oiwa and Okiku, is a young woman brutally murdered by a man who later appears as a revenant seeking revenge. Consequently, Ringu's narrative and key images subtly point to preexisting cultural narratives that are likely to be familiar to Japanese audiences. These intertextual references lend the film a symbolic richness that extends well beyond the boundaries of the film's own, often ambiguous, narrative.

This commitment to ambiguity both within the videotape and the larger narrative is reflected in various story elements that are left obscure. For instance, there is a suggestion that the murderous Dr. Ikuma is not actually Sadako's father, and that Sadako was in fact the spawn of a sea demon. Yet this piece of speculation is not pursued or explained any further after it is raised. Similarly, the seven-day delay between watching the videotape and death is not explained, and the existence of the videotape remains a mystery throughout, because we never learn how it was created or how it is linked to Sadako. These narrative gaps can be related to the Japanese Buddhism-derived aesthetic concept mujō, which can be translated loosely as the practice of "leaving things incomplete."26 In Japanese art, mujō encourages deliberately leaving images unfinished so that individual viewers are free to "complete" the images according to their own subjective aesthetic preferences. Mujō can be applied to various images on the video, including the seemingly "incomplete" nature of the shots depicting the woman in the mirror, where almost half the screen consists of a flat darkness—perhaps the "missing" parts of these images parallel the missing, unexplained elements in the film's narrative.

23 For a discussion of the hair-brushing sequence and the various cultural influences that helped shape Ringu, see Meikle, The Ring Companion, 114.
24 In both Onibaba and Empire of Passion, the corpses of innocent murder victims are thrown down wells and deep pits in the ground. Thanks to my second reviewer for bringing Ringu's cinematic reference to Oshima's Ai no borei to my attention.
25 See Noel Burch, To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and Geist, "Playing with Space."
From the perspective of *mujo*, the numerous unexplained narrative “lapses” in *Ringu* are part of Japanese aesthetic convention, which prefers to emphasize by suggestion and often elides the obvious, conforming to “traditional Japanese dramaturgy . . . [where] there is no strong tradition of informing the audience of what they do not see.” According to Richie, in Japanese films “the collection of scenes which makes up the sequence is sometimes . . . empty in that narrative information (in the Western sense) is missing—‘nothing’ occurs, though this nothing may be filled with another kind of information or something other than information.”

In *Ringu*, this “something other” may be reflected in the spatial considerations that structure many of the images on the cursed video. For instance, the image of the woman in the mirror is spatially organized so that it encompasses, within a single image, an acknowledgment of opposites that appear to be held in a kind of balance: the shot includes both darkness and light, with the resulting boundary dividing the frame into a top and bottom section, the darkness suggesting an empty space and the lighted section—showcasing the woman in the mirror—depicting a filled space. Rather than offering narrative information, this image proffers symbolic and ideological clues. Specifically, these mise-en-scène elements reflect the prevailing Japanese commitment to achieving balance, harmony, and equilibrium in life, a view that is shaped by Japanese religious ideals, which filters through to the culture’s cinematic and aesthetic practices.

Buddhism, one of the dominant religions in Japan, embraces the view that reality and life are structured around a notion of dualism, and advocates a worldview in which oppositional forces coexist and hold each other in balance and order. This acknowledgment of dualities, coupled with a quest for equilibrium, finds visual expression in the blending of opposites. The combination of light and dark in a single image, or the positioning of a complex, three-dimensional image against a flat, empty space, reflects the Japanese aesthetic tradition that values balance above all else. Thus, “the Asian scene (scroll, screen, movie frame) is divided into two areas of space: positive, which is filled, and negative, which is not,” and “it is the combination of the empty and the full which creates the [Japanese] aesthetic experience.” This aesthetic propensity for combining “the empty and the full” structures several of *Ringu*’s video images: in one shot a blank, “empty,” white background is “filled” with black wriggling Japanese words. This shot is replaced by an empty darkness that resolves into a “full” central image of people apparently moving with difficulty, even while this “full” image is itself framed by an empty darkness. In these shots, the positive compositional use of empty space is linked to the Japanese concept of *mu*, which “implies that empty space contributes actively to a composition. . . . [I]n traditional painting the empty space is used to suggest a world lying beyond what the painter shows us.”

Similarly, *Ringu* looks beyond the natural, material world to acknowledge and contemplate the existence of a spiritual, supernatural one, “lying beyond” what we can

29 Ibid., 19–20.
30 Geist, “Playing with Space,” 287.
see. In *Ringu*, the natural and supernatural worlds coexist, just as light and dark, and empty and full spaces coexist in the images on the videotape, reflecting the Japanese belief in the existence of the occult, spirit world, and the acceptance that spirits can cross the permeable boundary separating the spiritual and physical realms, a view embraced by dominant Japanese religions, including Buddhism and Shinto.31

*Ringu*’s attempt to look past the physical world and consider what may exist beyond is expressed in one of the video’s most obscure images: the man who appears to be standing in front of the sea, his face shrouded by a towel. This image is particularly significant in that it bears no relation to what we know of Sadako’s past. The image’s ambiguity is further enhanced by the fact that it reappears later in the film, outside the boundaries of the videotape, and plays a crucial role in helping Reiko realize how her son can be saved. The very nature of this image is odd and unnatural, and its intrusion into the “real” world introduces a sense of the impossible and incomprehensible. In fact, this image cannot be understood from a rational or logical perspective. However, we may benefit from considering its aesthetic organization. The image recalls *nihonga*, a particular form of traditional Japanese prints and paintings where space is deliberately flattened out.32

In the image, the man, in medium shot, appears to be standing with the sea in the background. Yet the relatively large details of the waves and ripples in the water suggest that the sea in the background is actually nearer to the camera than the man pictured in the foreground. Furthermore, there is no horizon in the image, thus suggesting that the position and angle of the camera in relation to the man are different from the position and angle of the camera in relation to the sea in the background.

The pictorial organization and the incongruity of these visual details lend a flat, two-dimensional quality to the image, even while the illusion of depth is implied. The “artificiality” of the image, the idea that the human figure has no space or place in which to exist in the image (even as the figure clearly does exist within the image), and the uncanny evocation of both flatness and depth all suggest the concurrent existence of the possible and the impossible, the natural and the unnatural within a single space/reality. This again reflects the Japanese openness to, and acceptance of, the irrational, the impossible, and the incoherent alongside the logical, the rational, and coherent, which is a distinctly Buddhist view.

Achieving balance between opposing forces, between “the active and passive, the yin and the yang,” is essential to achieving “the Buddhist ideal of spiritual equilibrium and enlightenment.”33 It is a worldview that embraces opposites and that values the notion of counterbalancing forces. Thus, the logical and illogical, the rational and irrational, are equally accepted, as are the coexistence of the supernatural and the natural. Interestingly, supernatural forces are not necessarily considered “evil” or shunned by Buddhists. Rather, the Eastern view of the supernatural is also dualistic,

31 In mid-August every year, the Japanese celebrate Obon, a ritual festival in which ancestral spirits are remembered and acknowledged as they make their way between the spiritual and physical worlds.
32 According to Kathe Geist, *nihonga* is a traditional Japanese painting style in which images often appear two-dimensional. Geist notes that “implicit in the examples of flattened space . . . is an ambiguity created by the presence within each composition of objects and figures that are rendered three dimensionally and yet are denied a three-dimensional space in which to exist” (“Playing with Space,” 290–291).
33 Contreras, “Kobayashi’s Widescreen Aesthetic,” 249.
with supernatural forces encompassing the potential for both good and evil. This view is consistently reflected in traditional myths and is found in earlier cinematic depictions of the supernatural, including *Ugetsu monogatari, Kuroko* (*Yabo no naka kuroko*; Shindô Kaneto, 1968), and *Kwaidan,* in which ghosts, demons, and unnatural spirits can exist alongside humans without necessarily doing any harm; often, these supernatural beings only become dangerous and malevolent when they are thwarted or betrayed. While the contemporary *Ringu* deviates slightly from this tradition by depicting Sadako's destructive supernatural power from her earliest appearances even before her death, perhaps reflecting the influence of modern, Hollywood horror traditions in which ghostly demons are often unambiguously marked as evil (a point I will return to in my discussion of *The Ring*), echoes of the earlier tradition's duality persist as Sadako's malevolence is balanced by Shizuko's own supernatural power, which the latter uses to save lives by predicting an earthquake. Similarly, while Sadako's ghost emerges from the video to kill, the man whose face is hidden by a towel emerges from the video to give Reiko the vital clue to saving her son.

This commitment to seeking and achieving a sense of symmetry and balance extends to a larger narrative symmetry, where the existence and actions of a destructive and murderous father, Ikuma, are balanced by the existence and actions of protective fathers, including Ryuji and Reiko's own father. Also, Sadako's use of the videotape, which is a form of modern media, to exact her revenge may be linked to the fact that her mother, and by extension Sadako herself, are victims of the media, since the key event that culminates in Sadako's murder is the press conference in which the reporters turn against her mother. Interestingly, these narrative links are never explicitly expressed but remain entirely implied. Yet this very obscurity may in fact suggest significance in light of the Japanese cultural preference for leaving "the most important actions" suggested, rather than clearly represented.

While the features examined above show that the video images are linked to traditional Japanese narratives and aesthetics, the challenging compositions, ambiguity, and disquieting mood of the visuals simultaneously suggest the influence of a modernist, avant-garde perspective. The fact remains that *Ringu,* and indeed contemporary Japanese horror films in general, have been directly influenced and shaped by other national cinemas and artistic trends as well. Besides the modernist echoes identified above, other sequences in *Ringu* offer further evidence of Hollywood's influence on the film. Perhaps the most overt reference to the Hollywood horror tradition occurs in *Ringu* 's opening scene. As Richard Hand observes, the sequence in which two teenagers, Tomoko and her girlfriend, Masami, talk about a mysterious, cursed video just moments before Tomoko suffers a mysterious, unexplainable death, replicates

34 In *Ugetsu,* for instance, a man who had abandoned his wife to have an affair with a wealthy woman discovers that his mistress is a ghost. He leaves her, despite her pleas, and returns to his wife, spending a night with her only to discover that she too is a ghost. Despite these supernatural encounters, the man is not harmed and survives to be reunited with his son.

35 At the press event, the reporters turn against Sadako's mother, Shizuko, after the latter offers definitive proof of her psychic/supernatural abilities. When one of the reporters suddenly dies with a horrified look on his face, Shizuko accuses Sadako of killing him. Sadako is then killed by Ikuma.

The familiar conventions of popular American teen slasher films. The slasher film's influence also emerges in Ringu's larger narrative, in which Ringu's depiction of Reiko as the sole (female) investigator who recognizes a threat, and her survival at the end of the film, resonates with the slasher film's Final Girl, even as the failure to contain and neutralize Sadako's rage echoes the continuing survival of the evil force or monster of many post-1960s American horror films. Hand also identifies the link between Ringu's female reporter protagonist and her earlier Japanese cinematic predecessor, Nami, the female reporter who battles a deadly entity in the Western horror-influenced Evil Dead Trap.

The complex negotiations between traditional Japanese horror and Western influences also surface in perhaps the most frightening sequence in the cursed videotape—when Sadako finally emerges on screen. Her appearance is both shocking and disturbing on two counts. First, it occurs after her corpse has been found and removed from the well, when both Reiko and Ryuji assume that her curse has been lifted and that they are safe. Second, the visual spectacle of a contorted figure crawling toward the television screen and then emerging out of that screen into the "real" world is deeply terrifying. Again, this particular sequence reflects the influence of both traditional Japanese aesthetics and contemporary Hollywood horror concerns. Hand equates this cinematic image, this "[moment] of irrational display," with kabuki's keren staging, which involves "the practice of unorthodox acting and staging technique aimed at achieving novel effects." Alongside these classical influences, the depiction of a threatening video image, the uncanny merging of the biological with visual technology, and the startling instance in which an image breaks through the television screen and takes physical form evoke ideas and fears previously explored by David Cronenberg in Videodrome. Despite the visual echoes, however, the notions of horror expressed in Ringu and Videodrome diverge in distinct ways. Interestingly, where Cronenberg's vision explores a paranoid reality of altered states, and situates terror in the collapse of bodily integrity and wholeness and in the loss of previously existing boundaries between the self and what lies outside the self, Ringu's moment of body horror is predicated less on Sadako's uncanny ability to cross the highly permeable boundary between the natural and supernatural world than on her destructive and malevolent quest for vengeance. Where Videodrome explores a terror founded on the collapse of culturally established boundaries between self and other, between biology and technology, the horror in Ringu is differently situated within a worldview in which supernatural manifestations of anger and vengeance can invade the natural world to wreak destruction.

40 Ibid., 23.
42 Thanks to my first Cinema Journal reviewer for highlighting the similarities between Ringu and Videodrome.
In yet another nod to the Japanese commitment to balance and duality, in *Ringu*, crossing the boundary between the natural and supernatural world is not simplistically coded as evil. It is worth noting that immediately following Sadako’s terrifying appearance, the man with the towel obscuring his face also “escapes” the confines of the tape and appears to Reiko, but unlike Sadako, his quest is to protect life. Significantly, unlike the man’s mysterious but unthreatening appearance and disappearance, Sadako’s emergence from the television is coded for terror—she is visually disturbing, possessing the long, dank hair and swollen, deformed face historically associated with the terrifying, vengeful female ghosts of Japanese mythology, folktales, and cinema. In Japanese culture, and in *Ringu*, wandering spirits are not normatively coded as evil or terrifying; rather, these negative associations are reserved for malevolent, vengeful spirits.

Although *Ringu* borrows from, and pays homage to, classical *kaidan* in its narrative, characterization, and visual imagery, it also deviates from the traditional Japanese industry’s practice of simply retelling a familiar ghost story. Instead, *Ringu* reinterprets these traditional narratives, immersing the ghost story within a contemporary structure and plot that reflect influences from other national cinemas. These complex intertextual echoes and references highlight the intricate matrix of influences across textual and cultural boundaries that characterize not only the history of horror cinema, but also the process of filmmaking in general.

**The Hollywood Horror Tradition and The Ring.** In contrast to the Japanese perspective, the mainstream Hollywood aesthetic is largely committed to the literal, the realistic, and the representative. Historically, Hollywood conceptualized film as an extension of photography, “as a new way of taking pictures.” Just as photography’s ability to mimetically capture “reality” was valued, so too was film hailed as a means of recording and representing the familiar, the lifelike, the “real,” prompting Classical Hollywood to embrace realism as a fundamental cornerstone of its cinematic tradition. This is reflected in Hollywood’s commitment to a “goal-oriented protagonist” and the need for a clear (read “rational”) cause-and-effect progression culminating in neat narrative closure. The traditional American horror film of the 1930s and 1940s conformed to these Classical Hollywood conventions within a traditional narrative trajectory that moved from a state of order, to chaos, and a final return to order reinstated with the neutralization of the evil threat.

Contemporary horror has deviated from Classical Hollywood and the conventions of traditional horror in a number of ways. Beginning in the 1960s, and continuing into the 1970s, horror films expressed a growing tendency for ambiguous, open endings. Beginning in the 1960s, and continuing into the 1970s, horror films expressed a growing tendency for ambiguous, open endings in

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44 Richie, “The Influence of Traditional Aesthetics on the Japanese Film,” 155.


46 On the horror film’s evolution, see Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989). The return to order was arguably less secure in a number of pre-Code horror films.
which humanity's efforts to defeat the monster fail and the evil threat endures, a development that reflects a heightened degree of anxiety and loss of confidence.\textsuperscript{47} While this shift can be read as reflecting a deeper degree of cultural "paranoia,"\textsuperscript{48} it can also be interpreted as part of a broader tendency within American cinema's adoption of art cinema storytelling that culminated in Hollywood's turn toward the New American Cinema movement in the 1970s. The contemporary horror film's break from its classical roots is expressed in the propensity for open-ended narratives, minimal plot developments, and the creation of unappealing characters who challenge audience identification, features associated with modernism, art cinema, and, to some extent, the New American Cinema.\textsuperscript{49} Contemporary American horror films continued to transgress classical horror conventions by increasingly supplanting rational, logical responses to evil, monstrous threats, with a greater reliance and emphasis on protagonists' emotional and intuitive reactions.\textsuperscript{50} The Ring conforms to the contemporary Hollywood horror film's shift from earlier conventions of narrative clarity, logic, and closure, to its embrace of a heightened tolerance for ambiguity, open endings, and an increasing tendency to position horror within familiar, commonplace environments, a tendency also apparent in Japanese horror cinema. Yet the film's displays of the irrational, emotional, and instinctual are countered by attempts to offer a greater degree of narrative clarity, coherence, and rationality than is found in the original Japanese version. This struggle between the obscure/irrational and logical/coherent structures the series of images found on the deadly videotape. This conflict reveals a significant comment on supernatural evil and its relationship with the rationally inclined natural world, a point I will explore later.

The Ring's videotape sequence is notably longer and more complex than its Japanese counterpart, and it showcases aesthetic and stylistic elements that reveal influences beyond the Japanese original to include borrowings from other cinematic conventions and media formats. It begins with a ring of bright light set against darkness. After some brief television static, a swirl of churning water tinted red is seen, followed by a chair set against a bare, white wall. This is followed by an extreme close-up of a comb running through long, black hair, and a cut to a woman combing her hair in a mirror while looking at the camera before looking off to her left. A series of shots follows showing the mirror "jumping" across the screen from right to left. Pictured in the mirror during this sequence is a shadowed image of a younger girl. A montage of shots follows, beginning with an external shot of a house with a man standing at a window, and then a cut to a shot over a cliff as a fly seems to crawl over the top right corner of the shot. Next, we have an extreme close-up shot of what appears to be rope or intestines extending out of a deformed mouth, replaced by an image from within a well, etc.

\textsuperscript{47} Tudor, \textit{Monsters and Mad Scientists}, 19, 21, and 94-95. Thanks to my first \textit{Cinema Journal} reviewer for highlighting this point.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{50} Isabel Pinedo, \textit{Recreational Pleasure: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). I would like to thank my first \textit{Cinema Journal} reviewer for highlighting Pinedo's point.
as its mouth is slowly being sealed. We then see a tree in flames and a fingertip being impaled on a nail. Wriggling maggots fill the screen, dissolving into writhing figures in water, that are then replaced by a shot of a glass of water on a table with a chair drawn up. A huge millipede is seen crawling out from under the table. A quick glimpse of an animal running into an open barn is followed by an extreme close-up of a horse's eye. We then return to the well, with the well mouth further diminishing. We next see a box containing seven dismembered fingers, then another shot of a flaming tree. We return to the shot of the woman in the mirror, then the external view of the house, this time with the window empty. A chair is shown spinning upside down, followed by a cut to a ladder propped against a wall. A number of dead horses lying on a beach are then seen, followed by a shot of the woman in the mirror falling off the cliff with a match cut to the ladder falling as well. The mouth of the well is fully sealed, leaving a brief halo of light around the rim, intercut with the ladder finally landing on the ground, and a final shot of the well.

Though the images described above are different from those found in the original video in Ringu, both versions are similar in their incoherence, fragmentation, abstraction, and reliance on visual patterns and mood for organization. Like the original, the video images in the remake recall the aesthetic tradition of experimental art cinema. In fact, The Ring video's close-up images of eyes, farm animals (particularly dead horses), and various shots of maggots, insects, and dismembered body parts directly recall similarly discomforting images in the surrealist film classic Un chien andalou (Luis Buñuel, 1929), a film that deliberately harnesses editing, mise-en-scène, and cinematography to disrupt the development of a linear narrative.

In addition to the influence of surrealist cinema, it is also possible to recognize the stylistic and aesthetic practices of a more contemporary media form, the popular music video. Like experimental, avant-garde cinema, music videos, with their reliance on disjointed images, also "tend to come off as failed narratives." The brevity of the images in The Ring's video, the stylized nature of the shots, and the tendency for one visual to morph and merge into another, all reflect the aesthetic conventions of music videos, in which objects and images "tend to shimmer, change continually, and threaten to fade away." Despite the characteristic fragmentation, however, music videos offer a measure of coherence by supplanting an absent narrative with a reliance on "a set of relations." Similarly The Ring's video seems structured by an element of internal logic based on implied relations between different groups of images, offering a kind of "coherence" that also surfaces in experimental art films such as Un chien andalou. If we consider the stylistic aspects of the highly fragmented video images in The Ring, we can identify the use of continuity editing techniques and the manipulation of mise-en-scène to organize the images and establish links and relationships between and across several shots. As Bordwell and Thompson note, "(I)ooking is purposeful;
what we look at is guided by our assumptions and expectations about what to look for.\(^{55}\) Thus, while the close-up shot of a comb running through hair may appear disturbing because it is initially difficult to make out the distorted image, the next cut to the medium shot of a woman combing her hair contextualizes and clarifies the first shot, thereby adhering to the familiar Hollywood technique of continuity editing.

The shot of the woman combing her hair, then turning to look off-screen, followed by subsequent shots of the young girl in the mirror, evokes continuity via the traditional Hollywood technique of the eyeline match, suggesting that the woman is looking at the younger girl. While these shots do not, ultimately, add up to a narrative, a relationship is implied, since they appear to be cinematically linked. Furthermore, a number of the images on the videotape feature human figures that are linked by mise-en-scène across shots. The woman in the mirror and the little girl appear to be in the same room; the same mirror, which is mounted on a wall above the wood paneling, frames them both. Later in the sequence, we see an exterior shot of a house with a shadowy figure standing in a window. Within the conventions of Hollywood continuity editing, it seems plausible to assume that the woman and girl live in this house, further implying a possible familial relationship between the individuals. We also have a later shot of the woman in the mirror falling off a cliff, again suggesting a narrative trajectory, one that seems to have evolved from a seemingly benign point (the shot of the woman in the mirror) to a potentially disquieting one (evoked by the unidentifiable, shadowy person in the window), culminating in tragedy (with the shot of the woman apparently falling to her death).\(^{56}\) Another sequence of seemingly related shots involves images featuring different views of a small, enclosed room. These images, that variously depict a chair pulled up to a table, a water glass sitting on the same table, and another shot of the chair spinning unnaturally, again imply a shift from the seemingly ordinary to something odd and disturbing. This shift from the ordinary to the malign is reinforced by the sequence involving livestock. Early in the sequence, there is a shot of an animal running into a barn followed by a disconcerting close-up of a horse’s eye and, several shots later, dead horses lying on a beach.

More significantly, the images achieve a degree of coherence and narrative significance in terms of the larger narrative of the film, a development that is absent in the original Japanese version. In fact, if we place the images in the videotape within the larger film narrative, most of what is seen on the tape takes on a relevance and coherence that is entirely missing from the original Japanese version. In \textit{The Ring}, the video’s images point to the significant events in the narrative or offer information vital to Rachel’s investigation. In this remake, we learn about Samara, a strange child adopted by successful horse breeders, Anna and Richard Morgan. Samara’s arrival incites a series of strange, ominous events: the horses on the farm go mad and need to be destroyed; Anna begins to complain of terrible visions. Increasingly fearful of Samara, the Morgans send her for psychiatric evaluation and isolate her in a barn when she


\(^{56}\) Vernallis notes that “in music video, the disposition of figures and their movement . . . often takes the place of plot and character development in a traditional sense.” “The Aesthetics of Music Video,” 176.
comes home. However, Anna’s mental well-being continues to deteriorate. One day, while Samara is standing in front of a well, Anna sneaks up behind her, wraps a black garbage bag over Samara’s head, and pushes her into the well. Anna then commits suicide by throwing herself off a cliff.

Once these narrative events are revealed, the videotape’s images gain narrative meaning, as they apparently depict events in Samara’s short life. Thus, the video images in The Ring follow conventions of art cinema narration, which “gives us information piecemeal and retards our compete understanding of the situation.” Indeed, Bordwell’s assertion that “much of art film’s appeal rests upon a tantalizing narration that plays a game of gaps with the viewer” can also be applied to the way in which the video images function within The Ring’s larger narrative. In The Ring, this “game of gaps” revolves around unpacking the narrative and informational value of the various video images. Consequently, the shots of the table and chair in the small room may reference Samara’s imprisonment and isolation in the psychiatric institution and barn. We discover later in the film that the picture of the flaming tree has an actual counterpart painted on a wall in the barn that is her prison. The image of the woman falling off the cliff portrays Anna’s suicide. The dying animals on the farm are also captured in the video, as are the plastic bag used to kill Samara and the well she is buried in. The images on the videotape reference key events that have taken place, or point to significant pieces of information uncovered by Rachel and Noah during their investigation. Though some of these links are confirmed while others remain ambiguous, these relationships offer a measure of narrative coherence that further aligns the film with Western art cinema, for as Bordwell notes, “the ambiguity of the art drama is of a highly controlled and limited sort, standing out against a background of narrational coherence not fundamentally different from that of the classical cinema.” Thus, The Ring’s images are organized in a way that acknowledges “the dominant Hollywood film tradition, which ... demands a coherent illusionism.”

These hints at coherence, at an underlying explanation and logic behind the video images, can also be viewed alongside the film’s other attempts at clarifying narrative elements that are left unexplained in Ringu. The mysterious seven-day lag between watching the videotape and death is explained when Rachel notes that it would have taken Samara seven days to die after being trapped in the well. The fact that a television set provided Samara sole access to the outside world when her adoptive parents locked her in their barn offers some explanation for Samara’s use of the television as an instrument of vengeance.

How can we read these attempts at clarification and realistic narrative motivations against contemporary American horror’s growing acceptance of ambiguities, breakdowns in rationality, and open endings? I propose that these attempts at logic and explanation ultimately serve to intensify the degree of anxiety and paranoia at the heart of The Ring. Horror films have always been credited with articulating the

58 Ibid., 219.
59 Ibid., 222.
60 Geist, “Playing with Space,” 295.
dominant fears and concerns of their respective periods. Douglas Kellner, for instance, asserts that horror films reveal the “hopes and fears that contest dominant hegemonic and hierarchical relations of power” by displaying “both the significant dreams and nightmares of a culture and the ways that the culture is attempting to channel them to maintain its present relations of power and domination.” Notably, in *The Ring*, the explanations, clarifications, and scientific rationalizations uncovered by Rachel and Noah are ultimately irrelevant and immaterial in combating the ambiguous, unknown, irrational power of Samara’s evil. By emphasizing reason, information, and knowledge, and subsequently undermining their power and consequence, the film reflects a declining confidence and sense of security in humanity’s ability to harness our intellect to control and determine our reality and destiny. What *The Ring* dramatizes is the failure and inconsequence of humanity’s ongoing reliance on logic, science, and reason against a destructive supernatural force. In its portrayal of Rachel and her son Aiden’s uneasy survival, despite their inability to neutralize the evil forces against them, *The Ring* reflects the paranoid outlook of contemporary horror films.

According to Noel Carroll, “the objects of art-horror violate the culture’s standing concepts and categories: they present figures that cannot be (cannot exist) according to the culture’s scheme of things.” While alive, Samara’s ability to trespass on her mother’s mind and “share” her sight/visions with her mother is one indication of her refusal to respect borders and rules. The fact that the dead Samara appears as a television image that can leave its technological confines, enter the “real world,” and then kill is yet another indication of her transgressive abjection. *The Ring*, like *Ringu*, evokes Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, yet compared to the Japanese original, *The Ring*’s depiction of horror is much more closely aligned with the horror in *Videodrome*, where the boundaries ensuring bodily integrity and personal identity are vulnerable to assault by the abject. Even death cannot contain Samara’s abjection. Samara disregards the boundary between life and death, returning to torment, haunt, and destroy the living. Where *Ringu* envisions Sadako’s threat primarily in terms of her uncontrollable rage, Samara’s horror encompasses both her rage and her refusal to respect borders. *The Ring* defines horror in traditionally Western terms of abjection, where any entities that flout culturally defined boundaries and categories are viewed as abominations. Furthermore, its underlying structural framework actively works to equate good

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62 While some might argue that the “solution” Rachel uncovers, where one can ostensibly survive by continually “passing on the curse” via copying the tape and having someone else watch it, offers a resolution of sorts, it is worth noting that in *The Ring’s* sequel, this solution is undermined when we learn that Rachel and Aiden continue to be inexplicably haunted by Samara.


64 Significantly, unlike in *Ringu*, there is no attempt to “balance” Samara’s boundary transgressions with a more benign instance of a helpful spirit stepping forth to help Rachel.

with rationality, logic, and reason, and evil with the supernatural, the unexplained, the irrational, and the unknown. While this traditional organizing structure remains intact, The Ring does follow in the contemporary horror tradition in which the supernatural and the unknown triumph at the end. Reflecting a contemporary anxiety suggested in the open endings of many contemporary horror films, even though Rachel and Noah “solve” the mystery of the videotape, they are ultimately unable to exorcize or neutralize Samara. Despite the answers and rational explanations of Samara’s abilities, the clarifications of how and why she uses the videotape and television to exact her vengeance, the film ends in uncertainty. Though we learn that Samara’s curse can be escaped by having someone else watch a copy of the video, the film ends with Rachel getting Aiden to make a copy of the videotape, without disclosing what they plan to do with it.

**Conclusion.** Close attention to the aesthetic and stylistic elements of the cursed videos central to Ringu and The Ring reveals the complex ways in which both films have been shaped by the historical, sociocultural, and aesthetic traditions of Japanese and American horror cinema. Ringu’s and The Ring’s reliance on a female protagonist, their overt technophobia, and their adoption of avant-garde aesthetic styles and visuals—alongside similar inclinations toward ambiguity, uncertainty, and despair—hint at shared cultural concerns and anxieties, issues that transcend national and cultural boundaries and that perhaps reflect the concerns of most modern, highly developed nations. Yet, amid these instances of increasingly globalized attitudes, indicative of cross-cultural similarities, there remain certain key elements that ground each film in its own specific cultural, ideological, and aesthetic contexts.

According to Thomas Rimer, Japanese art’s influence on cinema is primarily visual, where the visuals are structured to function suggestively rather than simply or strictly literally. This is to allow for “the play of the viewer’s own free imagination.” This commitment to visual suggestion rather than literal representation has led Japanese cinema to construct images that “suggest the essence, rather than imitate the outer appearance of what is being portrayed.” This explains the highly fragmented and seemingly obscure nature of the images on the Ringu videotape that serve to convey a sense of mystery and disquiet, evoking a sense of the unnatural and the unexplainable, even as they suggest the possibility of the seemingly impossible. The video’s significance, therefore, lies in the creation of mood, the evocation of an otherworldly and nonrational essence. Japanese culture’s acceptance of the unknown and unknowable alongside the known, the unnatural amid the natural, is clearly expressed in Ringu’s narrative and visual style. Yet Ringu’s obvious reliance on traditional Japanese aesthetics is not absolute. As I have shown, the film also reveals the influence of the Hollywood horror tradition, perhaps most clearly in the visual and narrative borrowings in the film’s opening sequence and in the inclusion of narrative developments that privilege the female survivor and the enduring power of the monster.

66 Rimer, “Film and the Visual Arts in Japan,” 150.
67 Ibid.
While Ringu adheres to a presentational aesthetic in which images are stylized, where form has a higher priority than logical narrative, where ambiguity and the unknown are both accepted and embraced, the video images in The Ring, despite retaining a measure of the unknown and uncanny, continue to adhere to a cultural preference for coherent patterns, some of which appear to hint at a narrative trajectory of sorts. If we compare the organization and nature of these images to those in the original Japanese film, we can see that each version is meaningful and significant in culturally distinct ways. The Ring borrows from a range of Western aesthetic traditions and practices, negotiating the tension between traditional Hollywood's preference for realism and clarity, contemporary American horror's increasing tolerance for ambiguity and open endings, and the adoption of art cinema and music video aesthetics in the visual structuring of the deadly video. All of these contribute to the creation of a cinematic world in which even when the supernatural can be explained, it cannot be defeated. In its adoption of experimental, art cinema, and video aesthetics, The Ring reflects the tendencies of post-1970s New Hollywood, an era characterized by the shift to multimedia conglomeration within an increasingly globalized world in which traditional boundaries between media formats, national cultures, and aesthetics have been steadily collapsing.

Each culture's dominant aesthetic concerns have shaped the images captured on the deadly videotapes in Ringu and The Ring. Understanding the evolving cultural attitudes underlying these images reveals the larger implications that these aesthetic interests have for the narrative and ideological concerns expressed in each film. Despite the many distinctive features that define Japanese and Hollywood aesthetics, both industries have a historical tradition of cultural exchange and mutual influence, and this can be traced in the various aesthetic and narrative elements in both films.