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Creepy Crawlers: Animality and Ghost-humanism in Horror

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Abstract

Posthumanism has largely focused on non-human entities in the effort to decentralize the human. Ghosts, meanwhile, have been read symptomatically as codification of various social and, more recently, ecological anxieties. This paper interrogates how the ubiquitous horror trope of the crawling woman does more than signify. With Derrida's The Animal that Therefore I Am as an intertext, this paper takes an ontological and phenomenological approach to the crawling woman and proposes a ghost-humanist reading of this figure as boundary-breaching in more ways that the physical.

Keywords: *horror, posthumanism, gender.*

Introduction

What are the edges of a limit

that grows and multiplies

by feeding on an abyss?

—Jacques Derrida

The abyss breeds strange spaces. What lives in them? Cats, says Derrida (2002), cosmic boundary creepers. But something else is also rattling "on the other side of silence" : the guttural croak of a crushed windpipe, the crackle of loose joins and broken bones, an ashen face amid a tangle of black hair, a pair of bloody arms slithering forward, dragging an abject body; limbs angular, head lolling awkwardly on a snapped neck, the crawling woman evokes a strange breed of animal, at once arachnid and tentacular.

This is Kayako, resident crawler of 2002 Japanese horror Film Ju-On: The Grudge; preferred spaces: attics, stairs, other women's blouses—promiscuous creeper that she is. Kayako is one manifestation of the creeping, crawling female ghosts that have become ubiquitous as a cinematic horror trope, especially in a cluster of late-1990s to mid-2000s Asian horror films and their Hollywood remakes. The spread of this trope stems from the success of 1998's Ring, which is often also credited for the rise of global interest in Japanese horror film (Balmain, 2008, p. ix). Whatever cultural or industry-related forces fed into Hollywood's fascination with "J-Horror"—a question too complex and multifaceted to undertake in this paper—it is clear that these films ushered in a novel genre distinct from the "body horror" that dominated late 20th century Western horror cinema.

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The term "body horror" was coined by Phillip Brophy in 1986 to describe a trend in contemporary horror films, such as David Cronenberg's nightmares of reproduction (Shivers, 1976; The Brood, 1979) and Ridley Scott's 1979 classic Alien, that "tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it… by conveying to the viewer a graphic sense of physicality, accentuating the very presence of the body on the screen" (p. 8). As Kelly Hurley (1995), looking back on the tradition over a decade later, elaborates, "The narrative told by body horror again and again is of a human subject dismantled and demolished: a human body whose integrity is violated, a human identity whose boundaries are breached from all sides" (pp. 205).

Although both Ring and Ju-On employ visceral representations of the female body in pain—bodies that embody their violation—to incite a fear of death, the link between the monstrous body and the threat of death is never made clear, even deliberately obfuscated. In Ring, the ghost of Sadako is able to stop her victim's heart through a psychic gaze, while Ju-On's prostrate yet alarmingly nimble Kayako drags people to ambiguous deaths in shadowy recesses. The mechanism of horror deployed in the form of these crawling women, therefore, exceeds that of mere bodily or spectral fear. However, this is not to suggest that such a device excludes an appeal to body horror. In fact, what is likely the earliest cinematic manifestation of the creeping woman is the now iconic spider-crawl scene from the classic body horror film The Exorcist. Originally deemed technically defective, this spider-crawl was filmed in 1973 but not included in the movie until its re-release on DVD in 1998 (and is moreover a reinterpretation of a markedly different scene in the novel on which the film was based), thus complicating any attempt to draw a neat line of influence between these different cinematic traditions. The opportunity presented here, rather, is to explore what makes these creeping, crawling female bodies so affectively effective across diverse cultural platforms.

Ghosts and monsters lend themselves to symptomatic readings, and, unsurprisingly, much of the past criticism on these three films follows this paradigm. The Exorcist has been an especially felicitous text for feminist psychoanalytic theory. In her seminal book on the "Monstrous-Feminine" in film, Barbara Creed (1993) interprets Regan's possession as the daughter's desire for her mother, a desire that is essentially abject and threatens the cleanliness of the symbolic order. Both Ring and Ju-On have been read as symptoms of anxiety about social disintegration, brought upon by technological modernity in the former and failure of benevolent patriarchy in the latter. Although such readings have been rewarding, they have also assumed that the work of horror is ultimately the recuperation of the subject. As Botting (1996), working off of Foucault, explains, "Monstrous exceptions allow structures to be identified and instituted, difference providing the prior condition for identity to emerge. As exceptions to the norm, monsters make visible, in their transgression, the limits separating proper from improper, self from other" (p. 8). This approach to horror, however, tends to do to monsters and ghosts exactly what they, as beings of hybridity and alterity, are supposed to resist: pin them down within an order-oriented taxonomy. Additionally, interpreting the monstrous other allegorically places focus on diagnosing what the monstrous body means rather than what it performs.

To this end, I am focusing on three texts in which monstrosity is a performance. The possessed Regan and ghostly Sadako and Kayako are neither the phantasmic projections of Pepper's ghost nor the sublime CGI spectacles of later horror films. Albeit aided by technology, these are material female bodies performing uncanny feats of movement. It is the kinetic logic of this critically overlooked trope that this essay is invested in. Focusing on the movement of the body in space will take us beyond what can be revealed by symptomatic readings that overlook the surface in anticipation of plumbing the depths. Although this may sound like a call for a surface reading that "sees ghosts as presences, not absences, and lets ghosts be ghosts" (Best and Marcus, 2009, 13), what's at stake is not privileging surface versus depth but acknowledging that presences, too, can signify. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) succinctly puts it, "Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds" (vii).

Grosz's inversion is central to my posthumanist reading of ghosts. Whereas the boundary-breaching monsters of body horror and the cyborgs of 20th and 21st century science fiction have been privileged sites of interpretation in posthumanist discourse , ghosts have been largely excluded from the conversation, perhaps understandably so. For one, neither Judeo-Christian theology nor scientific secularity allow for the material presence of spirits in the human world, thus banishing them to the unconscious. More importantly,

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for posthumanist thinkers, ghosts may simply seem all too human, an anthropocentric fantasy of subjectivity that transcends death. But what is a ghost if not, quite literally, the post-human?

If Derrida (2002) sees in the animal's eyes a "bottomless gaze… the abyssal limit of the human" (p. 381) because Man is always following after it—in order of creation, in predatory pursuit, in philosophical inquiry—what do we see in the gaze of the ghost that crawls after us? Using Derrida's reflection on the limits of subjectivity in The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow) as a framework, I will explore how the creeping, crawling women in The Exorcist, Ring, and Ju-On expose us spatially to the horrors of the limits of the human. In choosing to follow Derrida's gaze, I hope to refract away from rather than restrain myself to its limitations. As Susan Fraiman (2012) points out, Derrida accords the animal "provisional subject status in implicitly humanist terms" (96) and the inquiry very quickly become all about his shame before the cat rather than the cat itself. Despite these shortcomings, the gaze Derrida establishes with his cat opens up a space of generative plurality that takes us from the animal to the computer virus to the apocalypse. Into this crawl space I enter, pursued by my creeping train.

The Creeping Things that Creep

The animal is there before me, there next to me, there in front of me—I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me… It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other

—Derrida

William Friedkin's filmic interpretation of William Peter Blatty's novel The Exorcist was released amid quite a splash of publicity and pea soup in 1973 to an American audience already jittery after emerging out of a decade marked by the violence of a ruinous war, high-profile assassinations, and the incomprehensible Manson murders. The new decade, heralded by political unrest and state killings, must have seemed more like a nosedive into catastrophe than a fresh start. In the context of this social unease, Pope Paul VI's address to a general audience in 1972 that "Evil is not merely an absence of something but an active force, a living, spiritual being, perverted and perverting" (L'Osservatore Romano) is a crucial background for an analysis of The Exorcist's forceful presence—both the evil represented in it and the film's own legacy within cinema history.

The exorcism on which the film is centered is that of Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair), a young girl whose budding adolescence is hijacked by the Assyrian and Babylonian demon Pazuzu in a possession that manifests itself in murder, self-mutilation, and motherfucking. Contemporary reactions to the movie were as polarized as the Manichean struggle it portrays. On the distribution front, rampant talk of banning and censorship trailed its release. Politically, it was embraced by radicals and condemned by conservatives, but perhaps most surprising were the reactions of religious leaders, many of whom commended the film for its "profound spirituality" (Kermode, 2003, p. 10). It might seem bewildering that a movie notorious for its graphic depiction of a thirteen year old girl forced to mutilate her own genitals with a crucifix (often called the "masturbation scene," but there is nothing auto- or erotic about it) inspired Catholic priests to speak out in defense of its spiritual core. But these disparate reactions speak to what I would describe as the movie's essential unruliness. For both Friedkin and Blatty, there seems to have remained a lingering sense of indeterminacy about the project long after its official completion, and the film's unexpected success and subsequent rise to icon status only served to heighten their dissatisfaction over various decisions made in the editing room. Together, they would eventually decide to recut and rerelease the film in 1998 (The Exorcist: 25th Anniversary Special Edition), and again in 2000 (The Exorcist: The Version You've Never Seen).

The film's shifting, protean shape is crucial, but it complicates the question of what constitutes my object of study. However, because my goal here is not to offer a comparative analysis, an account of the film's reception, or a historically specific diagnosis of the anxieties and fears reflected in each particular version, I will take advantage of the opportunity to probe at its gaps and excesses rather than privileging one variant or attempting to wrangle its many limbs into a singular, cohesive text. For all my talk of spirits as presences

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rather than absences (the same logic expressed in the Pope's address) I will essentially be investing interpretive energy into two scenes which were not included in the original release and reading them against the collective fabula rather than the syuzhet of any one version. For these so-called "missing scenes" were not vacuums in the first place: that they were referred to as "missing" by both the production and fans in various interviews and publications shows that their absence was noted. In a way, these cut scenes haunted the film's legacy from the beginning. They certainly haunted Friedkin and Blatty, compelling the two to return to the editing room again and again as though possessed.

The first of these episodes is a rather implausible bit of half-time soul-searching which takes place while the titular exorcists, Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) and Father Karras (Jason Miller), are sitting on the stairs recuperating after their first confrontation with the demon and preparing for another. This is the entirety of their brooding exchange:

KARRAS: Father, what's going on in there? What is it? If that's the Devil, why this girl? It makes no sense.

MERRIN: I think the point is to make us despair, Damien—to see ourselves as animal, and ugly—to reject our own humanity—to reject the possibility that God could ever love us.

While Blatty considered these two lines of dialogue "the entire moral center of the movie" (qtd. in Kermode, 2003, p. 81), Friedkin initially found the exposition overstated and redundant and would only include a silent shot. Ultimately, however, he conceded its necessity to the film's moral cohesion over a quarter of a decade later and reinstated the scene complete with dialogue in the final version of the film. For Blatty, it was crucial to make clear to viewers that they were being made to feel, along with the characters, "so vile and bestial that even if there were a God he couldn't possibly love us" (qtd. in Kermode, p. 103). This scene, therefore, positions the film as an attempt to subject the audience to the disgrace of animality.

By equating animality with worthlessness, bestiality with vileness, Friedkin and Blatty are clearly establishing a relationality between the human and the animal based on bifurcation and subordination. More insidiously, however, this mechanism is also structured around a conflation of Man's superiority over animals with female sexual purity. By locating contamination and sacrilege in an adolescent girl's body, the film attempts to convert her emerging sexuality into an engine of contagious animality. By this logic, when salvation is ultimately delivered by the hands of a priest who sacrifices his own body to the demon before throwing himself out of Regan's window, his fall to death is in fact a fall to grace that thus functions as an androcentric corrective force for the bestial disgrace suffered by the girl and, by extension, the audience as voyeurs of her violation. There is, of course, nothing truly "animal" about any of this. Rape, profanity, sacrilege, and torture porn are the unique purviews of humans. While Regan may be associated with animality through her possession by Pazuzu, a human-beast composite (pointedly endowed with a serpent-headed penis), this does not carry the logic of animal contagion. She may be inhabited by a human-beast hybrid, a categorical error, but how is her dehumanization then passed onto viewers? The other essential "missing scene," this one considered by Blatty and Friedkin to be sensational but dispensable, functions as the true locus of animality in the film, but in a way that undercuts its androcentric logic of salvation.

Regan's mother Chris (Ellen Burstyn) is still reeling from news of her friend's death, fraught with the implication of murder, when something off-camera stops her mid-sentence. Here Friedkin makes use of a repeated technique in the film—priming the audience for a visual shock with a close-up of Ellen Burstyn's fearful expressions before cutting to the object of horror. But in a cruel betrayal of the viewer, whose gaze is still fixed on Burstyn in anticipation of a reaction that never quite develops, the camera cuts suddenly to a worm's eye view of the stairs leading up to Regan's dreaded bedroom door, and against the discordant shrieks of a violin, our first glimpse of the thing looming at the top is nothing short of disorienting: a distended abdomen mounted on two clawing arms, between which dangles a head fringed with dark hair. This frontal shot lasts for less than a second. The next reveals a side view through the balusters of an inverted female body clad in frilly pink pajamas. But this innocuous familiarity only serves to heighten the unassimilable strangeness of the body's movements as it scuttles down the stairs headfirst, upside-down and arced in a bow. As she reaches the bottom of the stairs, the figure is shown reverting into a crouching

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position before the camera cuts to a shot of Blair on all fours flicking out a long, reptilian tongue several times before crawling rapidly after her nanny Sharon.

In writing, especially, there is something ludicrous about this spectacle, and given the less-than-seamless transition between shots of the stunt double (contortionist Linda R. Hager) and Blair, it's not a surprise that Friedkin initially deemed the attempt a technical failure. And yet the scene eventually crept from periphery into canonicity when Friedkin integrated it into the 1998 cut, a decision that achieves much more than stuffing in yet another shocker. By evoking such associations as "crawling is how animals move" or "tongue flicking is something animals do," this scene may seem to play right into the film's anthropocentric discourse of animal contagion. But, in fact, such an interpretation would only reaffirm the boundary between the human and the animal that this scene threatens. As Foucault (1966) puts it, the categorization of entities, no matter how fantastic or transgressive, "localizes their powers of contagion" (xv). The spider-walk, on the other hand, works against this immunological taxonomy and mobilizes the film's contagious animality in a way that ultimately undermines Blatty and Friedkin's humanistic moral. Unlike the kinetic violence of thrashing bodies and rioting furniture; the abjection of grotesque wounds and projectile vomit; and the moral revulsion of desecration and rape, this scene does not threaten the integrity of the human body and soul. Rather, it operates by the breaching spatial logic of creeping itself and, in doing so, presents the horror of incongruity through a movement that dethrones the human as subject.

First of all, incoherence and rupture are coded into the visuals of the scene. The very first shot of the crawl is spatially disorienting. The viewer is suddenly thrown from a position aligned with Ellen Burstyn's upright face into a confusing relational position to the inverted figure. We may be looking up a flight of stairs, but because the body we see is thrust upwards, hair floating away from the face, it gives the sense that we are actually at the top of the stairs looking down onto a falling figure. Moreover, the entire sequence takes place in less than three seconds, during which time the camera cuts back and forth between the frontal and side view four times, thus making it difficult for viewers to orient these startling images into a cohesive picture of the human body. But even in the shock of the scene's momentum, it is quite obvious that the body performing the crawl is not that of thirteen-year-old Linda Blair but the wiry, fully developed body of an adult woman. This may be an unintended technical defect, but the effect it gives is all the more unsettling. In the second frontal shot, the figure looms large on the screen, and the dangling face that is almost pressed up against us is unfamiliar, the face of a stranger, an infiltrator among the known cast of characters. As she glides down the stairs, her angled body disrupts the neat frames along the wall. Although we can't see the actual images, we can assume that these are family photographs and, perhaps, favored artwork. The orderly boundaries of these spaces of familial memory and aesthetics are visually breached and fragmented by the unruly, unfamiliar body that slices through them as it makes its unnatural downward progression.

The spatial disruption that the spider-crawling figure creates for the audience functions on the level of affect in triggering unease and perhaps even disgust—it is creepy in both senses—but this is not quite the same as spreading the contagion of animality. A more abstract reflection on the kinetic effect of creeping in a human/animal taxonomy is necessary to get at how the mechanism operates. Consider this passage from Genesis: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' " (1:26). The dominion granted to Man, however, is not essentialist but performative. It is predicated on breeding and naming—a sovereignty that establishes androcentrism as the matrix of classification and reiterates the act of creation through procreation.

A challenge to this upright taxonomy is, however, coded in the dynamics of creeping itself. Whereas other lifeforms are categorized neatly into the trifecta of air, water, and earth, "every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" is fluid and unruly. Grammatically, it creeps out of, and breaches, syntactic orderliness. As the sentence moves from the specificity of a type of animal in a circumscribed space to the summation of "over all the earth," a sense of completion is reached, only to be disrupted by the addendum of this ambiguous species. Earth being the only repeated spatial category, creeping things are presumably the undomesticated double of the other earth dwellers, livestock, but what about it requires particular emphasis and punctuation? Why does the category occur out of order semantically? "Creeping things," I argue, codes a challenge to the androcentric logics of nomenclature in a movement that is elusive. Unlike the fish of the

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sea, the birds of heaven, and livestock, creeping things can only be defined by their creeping, a movement that is intrinsically slippery and intractable. In other words, creeping is a slippage, a glitch in the matrix of classification.

If Man recapitulates the limit between human and animal through the propagation of man-in-God's-image, the creeping thing that "sprouts or grows at the limit" (Derrida 398) breeds a contagion that both maintains and menaces the boundary. Like Derrida and his cat, when we come face to face with the woman crawling towards us, there is no recognition, only an abyss that reminds us how dependent we are on the gaze of the other to acknowledge our own humanity. It's no surprise, then why Blatty and Friedkin struggled to articulate the film's salvific ending (Kermode, 2003, p. 83-5); many viewers were simply not to be convinced that "it would all be all right in the end" (Blatty, qtd. in Kermode, p. 113). Towards the climax of the exorcism there is a moment that tips into the farcical: Fathers Merrin and Karras are casting holy water and holy words at Regan's levitating body, stretched out in the cross-like position of the hysteric's attitudes passionelles (Didi-Huberman, 2003, Figure 46). Calling upon God to save Regan, Father Merrin pleads resemblance: "Hasten to our call for help and snatch from ruination and from the clutches of the noonday devil, this human being made in your image and likeness." Then, at her catatonic body, the two men shout the infamous line "the power of Christ compels you" fifteen times in less than one minute. The effect is absurd. But perhaps what this scene captures, rather than the power of good over evil, is that Christ, as the categorical guarantor of Man-made-in-God's-image, has no power to compel this unresponsive and unmanageable body; the creeping woman has her own kinetic logic.

Is Woman, after all, made in God's image? Or is she, as Milton's Adam accuses, "all but a Rib / Crooked by nature, bent" (Paradise Lost 10:884-5)—in essence, serpentine? By raising these questions, I'm not entertaining essentialist notions but referring specifically to the category Woman within Judeo-Christian taxonomy. One of the most intriguing aspects of the creeping woman trope is that it only seems to work with markedly female bodies. So how does difference enable boundary crawling? Derrida (2002) reminds us that it "isn't the man-woman of the first version [of the creation story] but man alone and before woman who, in that second version, gives their names, his names, to the animals," this act of naming being performed "before the creation of Ishah, the female part of man" (pp. 384-385). As a non-participant in Adamic taxonomy, does Woman exist in negotiation with, rather than to subjugate, the animal? Rosi Braidotti (2013) seems to think so:

[T]hat in me which no longer identifies with the dominant categories of subjectivity, but which is not yet completely out of the cage of identity, that is to say that which goes on being different, is at home with… the post-anthropocentric subject… As such, I am a she-wolf, a breeder that multiplies cells in all directions; I am an incubator and a carrier of vital and lethal viruses; I am mother-earth, the generator of the future... The becoming-posthuman speaks to my feminist self, partly because my sex, historically speaking, never quite made it into full humanity, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable. (pp. 80-81)

Braidotti is clearly anxious that her embrace of a female-earth alliance may be verging on a gender-based, humanistic appropriation of nature. Although I share this anxiety, I am drawn to her emphasis on body-world crossing—how subjectivity is formed through engagement with the world. I find this to be a felicitous approach as I turn from a text that operates within Judeo-Christian theology to ones structured around a world-ordering concept with much more permeable borders. Moreover, only a reading that questions categories of subjectivity without effacing embodied difference can adequately probe at a trope that has proliferated problematically racialized sites of fear.

Circuitry: The Ghost in the Machine

This animal-machine has a family resemblance with the virus that obsesses, not to say invades everything I write. Neither animal nor nonanimal, organic or inorganic, living or dead, this potential invader is like a computer virus. It is lodged in a processor of writing, reading and interpretation.

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—Derrida

"Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that." Braidotti (2013) clearly means to cause some whiplash with this opening, but she goes on to qualify the human as "that creature" of "the Enlightenment and its legacy" (p. 1), thus making her provocation a matter of ideology rather than materiality. Braidotti is, of course, writing primarily for a Western audience, and her investment in zoe as an egalitarian code for Life as "a transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains" (p. 60) is firmly anti-dualistic and secular. Yet the essential leakiness of humanity that this statement appeals to on an individual (rather than categorical) level is a helpful way of thinking about belief systems structured around rebirth. Many Buddhists, for example, would say they know with certainty that they have not always been human. Perhaps this accounts for why East Asian horror doesn't have in its repertoire comparable tropes that appeal to the fear of becoming animal. I'm not suggesting that the human/animal hierarchy doesn't exist in Buddhism—it does, and it is often also coded in moral terms. However, because existence is perceived as more of a continuum carried by the causal force of karma, one is, to a certain extent, in control of one's progression through the hierarchies of being. It is where one loses control, on the other hand, that certain anxieties manifest themselves.

Kaidan (ghost story) is a subgenre of Japanese horror dating back to the Edo period that often center on vengeful spirits (onryō) who have met wrongful, violent deaths, and because they had so little control over their suffering, return to wreak havoc on the living as uncontrollable forces of vengeance. That these spirits are primarily female perhaps tells us something about power and suffering, but what I want to emphasize here is the perceived permeability between the world of the living and the dead. As Colette Balmain (2008) explains, "When someone dies, his or her spirit moves from kono-yo (the world of the living, or this world 'here') to ano-yo (the world of the dead, the world over yonder, 'there'). As such, the two worlds exist simultaneously, occupying the same space and time, with permeable boundaries between the two" (p. 48). Both Ring and Ju-On fall within this tradition of kaidan, but the women who haunt these films are wayward crawlers, veering way from conventions and, thus, creating new spaces of meaning.

Hideo Nakata's 1998 film Ring explores themes of mediation and proliferation at the cusp of the digital era, anticipating in many ways the phenomenon of "going viral" that the following decade would see integrated into the machinery of everyday social media interactions. Ring centers on a mysterious video that kills viewers within seven days unless they somehow break the curse—instructions not provided. Reiko Asakawa (Nanako Matsushima), a reporter brazenly devoted to the cause of journalism who watches the tape and accidentally puts it in the hands of her young son, goes on a quest to save both their lives. She and her ex-husband Ryuji (Hiroyuki Sanada) follow a series of clues that lead to Sadako, an enigmatic girl with malicious psychical powers, who they discover had been entombed alive in a well by her father. They rush to recover her body in hopes that a proper burial will appease the restless spirit. Believing that they are saved, Reiko and Ryuji return to Tokyo only to fall prey to a plot twist of epic contortions: the only way to break the curse is by copying and distributing the footage, an act Reiko had fulfilled almost from the start by passing it on to the ill-fated Ryuji. The movie ends with the implication that Reiko's father will watch the video to save his grandson, thus ensuring the spread of the footage in a widening "ring" of contagion.

Onto the viral logic of this film I'm mapping Derrida's dispersion of "the animal question" as an ever-sprouting index for the multiplicity of issues within posthumanism:

Beyond the edge of the so-called human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than "The Animal" or "Animal Life" there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely (since to say "the living" is already to say too much or not enough), a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead, relations of organization or lack of organization among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the organic and inorganic, of life and/or death. These relations are at once intertwined and abyssal, and they can never be totally objectified. (p. 399, second set of italics mine)

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The particular abyss that I'm concerned with in this section is technology, especially the way it is overlaid onto the porous boundaries between the realms of the living and the dead. I will argue, very simply, that Ring is centered on the misreading of surfaces and a false faith in its materiality.

Like The Exorcist in its time, Ring was considered to be one of the scariest movies ever made, in large part because it attacks when the audience least expects: during the supposed denouement in the last ten minutes of the film. In retrospect, however, this terror-inducing technique also contributes to one of the film's most absurd elements—the futile animatedness of the human characters. As I mentioned previously, the protagonist, Reiko, unwittingly breaks her curse the day after watching the video. Therefore, in terms of plot, the main conflict is resolved within the first thirty minutes—a fact that the film works hard to occlude. After Reiko activates the curse, the camera pointedly delivers a close-up of a clock with its hands at a few minutes before 7:10, and from this point on, each segment of narrative corresponding to a new day is heralded by a date stamp and a threatening electronic twang—anxiety-inducing reminders that she is fighting against the clock. But all of this is an artful feint. If we look again at clock's face, presented to us at an angle that favors the digits 2 through 7, eclipsing 1 almost completely in shadows, perhaps there is a visual clue about the narrative space in which we will be thrown. Because Reiko breaks the curse on herself at the beginning of the second day, the time between that moment and day seven is already a tangent that breaches the structure of the plot we are set up to expect—a narrative crawl space of sorts. In this erratic space, the characters' hypermobile action take on a sinister absurdity.

The film triangulates action among three major sites: Tokyo, where the main characters live; Oshima Island, where Sadako was born; and Izu Peninsula, where she died. Together Reiko and Ryuji travel an approximate total of 150 miles in their quest to break the curse, and, significantly, the journeys themselves are not ellipses. The film deliberately draws attention to each leg of their multi-terrain expedition, privileging shots of them in various vehicles. For example, as they head to Oshima, the scene opens with a high shot of frothy waves rolling past, as if from the perspective of someone on a boat, and sure enough, the next shot shows Reiko and Ryuji conversing at the prow of a ferry, thus "suturing" the audience's gaze into the filmic discourse. The effect I want to emphasize here is the feeling of having physically traversed a distance, which the audience is invited to share in with the characters.

This spatial adventurousness is taken to hysterical heights—or, rather, nadir—in the false climax of the film. Having "solved" the mystery of Sadako's whereabouts, Reiko climbs into a well to find the girl's body. Unlike the strangely unnerving scene that will come later, this sequence makes use of conventional horror devices: shadowy spaces, claustrophobia, distorted, subliminal sounds, and abjection. From the dark water, Sadako emerges, nothing more than a shiny mass of hair covering a slimy skull. But Reiko reacts against expectations, speaking to the body tenderly and drawing it into a motherly embrace. We are clearly invited to see this moment as a catharsis—a corrective for social transgressions. Sadako, unloved, feared, and abused, finally receives maternal comfort from Reiko, a careerist who routinely neglects her own child. But the mommy issues that live inside this well are, again, a diversion. While Reiko and Ryuji have been clambering frantically around Tokyo and its peripheral islands and in and out of wells, the clues to their salvation have been embedded all along in the video they left at home. The problem is they have been trying to read beyond the surface. As Ryuji puts it while watching the tape, "Whoever made this video left a clue subconsciously." It is this compulsion to unearth and excavate that prevents him from understanding the true spatial logic of the video—its crawling circuitry.

The cursed video begins with a pregnant burst of static, which soon gives way to a luminous orb, presumably the moon, curtained by moving clouds. An odd metallic reverberation, like a blade sweeping across a surface, begins to sound as the film cuts to a reflection of a woman in an oval mirror hanging on the leftmost edge of a wall. The woman brushes her hair serenely until, in an unsettling, nearly subliminal ellipsis, the first mirror disappears and another materializes about a foot to the right—lingering for just one second. In it looms a sliver of a figure in white, her gown glowing against a mass of black hair. The fleeting appearance of this second mirror occurs within the blink of an eye, so fast one could easily miss it. What draws attention to it, however, is that when the first mirror reappears, the reflected woman is looking to the viewer's right, where the ghostly mirror had been, frozen in consternation. This unnerving sequence is followed by an image of newsprint, with kanji (Japanese logographic characters) figures wriggling like

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bacteria on a petri dish. The only legible characters spell the word "Eruption." The creeping letters are, then, replaced by a clip of men crawling jerkily up and down a hill, some inching forward, some backward towards the audience. Then, a man with a cloth over his head appears against a backdrop of rippling waves, his finger pointing to something beyond the left of the screen. Next is an extreme close-up of a blinking eye, in which is reflected the kanji letter "sada," followed, finally, by a wide shot of a low, circular structure in the middle of the woods.

To solve the "riddle" of this mysterious video, Reiko and Ryuji are shown engaging with an exhaustive catalogue of contemporary communications technology, from phone and video to mass media and the Internet. However, as I've prefaced, they treat these devices as surfaces on which to receive and deliver information rather than structures with their own spatial logic. For example, they try to order the fractured images into a narrative when, in fact, they code a way of seeing. As phenomenologist David Morris (2004) asserts in his reading of Merleau-Ponty's work on perception, "vision depends on styles of movement, and… things themselves teach us how to look at them so as to see them" (p. 42). When Ryuji sees letters on a surface, he tries to read for meaning, assuming that their movement is irrelevant and growing frustrated at the resulting lack of clarity. He and Reiko latch on to the only legible word, "eruption," and head to the library to do more reading in search of a volcanic eruption. They are not wrong, necessarily. This clue does lead them to a report about Sadako's psychic mother, who had predicted the disaster, but even though it accurately unveils the past, this narrative-oriented thinking ultimately does them no good in the present. This is because the logic of the present—and their presence—demands pairing motion with meaning. Perhaps "eruption" is the only decipherable word because it is the only essential piece of information. Paired with the other restless and ambulatory letters, it tells us that there will be an eruption—of something that creeps and crawls.

The same misunderstanding applies to the materiality of spaces. Here, I return to the two mirrors. Orb-like shapes are a repeated motif in the cursed video. The penultimate shot of Sadako's eye is the locus tying together the moon, the mirrors, and the circular structure in the last shot, which is later revealed to be the mouth of a well. By this image logic, each mirror functions like an eye. Although the viewers cannot see both mirrors at once, the woman in the first can clearly see the other. Therefore, they must somehow coexist within the same space, the logic of which is beyond the viewer's perception. Each mirror is also a mise en scène of flatness: a reflection, in a mirror, hanging on a wall, displayed on the viewer's screen. This sequence, then, codes a challenge to depth. What I'm arguing, however, is not that the spaces of technology have somehow acquired depth in the way that we define it. Quite the opposite: the characters are betrayed by their investment in material depth. For example, after the video ends, Reiko, as if in a stupor, continues to stare at the blank screen. In a moment that mirrors the mirror scene, she catches a glimpse of Sadako in a white dress behind her own reflection in the TV. She interprets the apparition as a presence behind her, whipping around in a panic only to find herself alone in an empty room. But this scene is, in some ways, already a revelation of Sadako's spatial logic and the futility of looking for her in the material world.

In the penultimate scene that has itself been proliferated in countless reiterations, Sadako crawls out of a TV screen and frightens Ryuji to death. While it may seem like the terror is located in the perverse depth of a surface that should be two-dimensional, I argue to the contrary that it is flatness that poses a threat. The moment Sadako breaches the screen, she does so, significantly, with her hair. As a curtain that hides her face, leaving its grotesqueness to the fecundity of imagination, Sadako's hair is where the film localizes suspense and fear. However, it is simultaneously also a screen and a camera shutter. Unlike in the well, where it is wet and shiny, contoured to her skull, Sadako's hair in this scene is a dense black mass that absorbs light, an almost two-dimensional strip of darkness running from head to chest that accentuates her awkwardly shifting shoulders as she performs her upright crawl. Although Sadako also slithers out of the TV on her hands and feet, I'm much more interested in what she manages to do on her feet. Leading with her unstoppable hair, Sadako inches forward with tiny steps, but the slow, understated progress of her feet is counterbalanced by the exaggerated jerks of her shoulders up and down. The effect is of an uncanny side-seeming movement that somehow results in forward progress. Even when traversing material space, Sadako is able to maintain her unsettling flatness. Additionally, Sadako's exaggerated animacy "activates new theoretical formations that trouble and undo stubborn binary systems of difference, including

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dynamism/stasis, life/ death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg" (Chen, 2012, p. 3).

When Sadako's impenetrable hair finally parts, it reveals one bulging eye, digitally inverted to look more disconcerting. The significance of this eye, however, is not in how it looks so much as how it looks. As soon as it is exposed, Ryuji, who up until now has been struggling on the ground, his body oriented upside down in the audience's perspective, dies immediately, his face frozen in a scream of terror as it turns black and white, like an inverted negative. The significance behind Sadako's camera eye is that it renders spaces into two-dimensional surfaces, thus overthrowing the logic of material depth. As Braidotti (2013) puts it, the logic of technology is such that "we have to run twice as fast, across automated replies or transcontinental phone lines, just to stay in the same place" (p. 59). Ultimately, despite the geographical circuit that Reiko and Ryuji traverse, the logic of the virus which can be active and mobile in non-spaces—as evoked by Sadako's animated side crawl—serves to remind us that "[o]ur machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 1991, p. 152).

Skin Crawling

And in these moments of nakedness, under the gaze of the animal… I am like a child ready for the apocalypse, I am (following) the apocalypse itself… I identify with it by running behind it, after it, after its whole zoo-logy.

—Derrida

What are the creatures of the apocalyptic zoology? Dolly and the oncomouse are

among them, according to Braidotti (2013):

A copy made in the absence of one single original, Dolly pushes the logic of the postmodern simulacrum to its ultimate perversion... Because the oncomouse breaks the purity of lineage, she is also a spectral figure. Not unlike Dolly, it is the never dead that pollutes the natural order simply by being manufactured and not born. S/he is a cyber-teratological apparatus that scrambles the established codes and thus destabilizes but also reconstructs the posthuman subject. (pp. 74-75)

The logic of the simulacrum carries me to the final section of my paper, for what is Kayako but a manufactured "never-dead," made largely in the image of the viral Sadako and, more subtly, Regan? In making this leap, I must echo Braidotti's point that "Dolly and oncomouse are no metaphors." But I am not talking about Kayako as a metaphor either. She is, literally, quite the production. In fact, the Kayako we see in the 2002 film is already a copy thrice removed from her own original— as Takashi Shimizu rose from film student to a veteran in the horror industry, he made and remade Ju-On four times, using his widening appeal to transform his straight-to-DVD projects into a film that secured national, followed by international, release. Hence, Kayako (and her feline brood) is an apt vehicle for returning to the question of what sprouts and grows at "the abyssal limit of the human" (Derrida, 2002, p. 381).

Ju-On was released the wake of the global hype over Ring, but although it clearly didn't escape the Sadako contagion visually, narratively this film does something entirely different. Unlike Ring's tightly structured, audience-hijacking plot centered on one primal scene, Ju-On is, simply put, a series of vignettes of people getting crawled at and killed. The film opens with the definition of ju-on: "The curse of one who dies in the grip of a powerful rage. It gathers and takes effect in the place where the person was alive. Those who encounter it die, and a new curse is born." Although the narrative logic of the entire film is laid out pretty clearly in this opening statement, the first few vignettes tease at more conventional expectations of the haunted house.

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First, we are introduced to the "one who died": Kayako (Takako Fuji) as a bloody body wrapped in plastic-but in whose "grip of a powerful rage"? Her own anger as a victim, or her husband's as he snapped her neck? This ambiguity will haunt the film just as much as the devastated throat that refuses to stay silent. The first sequence of haunting is that of Rika (Megumi Okina), a social worker sent to care for an elderly woman at a suspiciously derelict house. Rika is taken aback to find the woman seemingly abandoned in such squalor and witnesses a series of strange phenomena, culminating in her charge's death. As Rika loses consciousness, another sequence begins, and the narrative quickly becomes very disorienting: suddenly, the old woman whose death we just witnessed is alive again, although in a near-catatonic state, as her family mills around unsuspectingly in the house viewers now know will be unkind to them. The film makes frequent and increasingly complex use of such chronological jumps, sometimes moving between periods of several years. Incoherence ensues, but, with it, also the sense that each character's life is already foreclosed. In this way, the vignettes are strung together by the certainty of death-by-crawling (and slight variations thereof, such as creeping black mist).

Because very little opportunity for empathetic identification with the revolving cast of characters being fed into Kayako's crawl space is offered, especially since each death seems like a certainty, suspense is located mostly in where Kayako will show up. And her spaces are

profuse and intimate: under a café table, in a shower, under a woman's blanket—these are all fair game—even culminating in a scene in which she erupts out of Rika's blouse. If Exorcist and Ring work hard to materialize their crawl spaces, especially in Sadako's courting dance with surfaces, Ju-On dethrones all of that spatial logic and works on a phenomenological level. The situation of the body in space is, after all, the most intimate ordering system for a subject. As Sarah Ahmed (2006) puts it, "the body is "here" as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there" (p. 8).

At first glance, an approach as subjective as phenomenology might not seem to sit well with my posthumanist framework. However, as confined as correlational philosophy is to the subject position, it nevertheless codes an inherent leakiness between subject and object. As Morris (2004), elaborating on Sartre, explains, "The other is perceived as a constitutive alteration of my ordering of space... the other introduces his own order. I encounter the other in the experience of an alien order that commands my space" (p. 25). Spatial engagement with the other, then, necessitates an exchange "between being a subject who objectifies the other, and an object objectified by the other... One's relation to the other is thus an openness to something that exceeds oneself" (p. 175). However, what happens when the openness of the self is pressed upon by a body that refuses to recognize one as subject?

In the final death vignette and most bewildering scene in the film, Rika is attempting to flee the crawling Kayako when she becomes fatally derailed by a glance in a wall mirror.

As Rika walks past it, we see Kayako's reflection instead, a sight that stops Rika cold in her tracks. For some reason, she decides this is an opportune moment for further self-inspection, and this proceeds to the moment when a specter of Kayako (not the lively, thrashing one upstairs) crawls out of her shirt. As Kayako winds her way down the stairs, Rika has a series of flashbacks to their many previous encounters, but in which she meets rather than evades the other's gaze. After this vision, Rika seems sympathetic to rather than fearful of Kayako, who has dematerialized, and we are invited into the salvific optimism that through their connected gaze, the women have finally recognized each other as subjects and are, therefore, no longer spatially threatening or threatened by the other. However, in a cruel twist, the grudge materializes as Kayako's murderous husband instead and puts an end to the romance of subject recuperation.

Like The Exorcist's animality and Ring's cursed video, the logic of the grudge is viral.

It absorbs the subject and animates the remainder as an object given to affect. The most remarkable aspect of this film is how it doesn't hedge its own abyssal logic and, instead, looks straight into the apocalypse. In the penultimate scene, the audience is shown a series of shots of Tokyo as a ghost town, devoid of all life and movement except for the fluttering

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of yellowed posters, on which the faces of the missing have faded away. Perhaps what it means to follow the apocalypse is to come face to face with the fact that "Because humans our mortal, death, or the transience of life, is written at our core: it is the event that structures our time-lines and frames our time-zones, not as a limit, but as a porous threshold" (Braidotti, 2002, p. 132).

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