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*Capturing Ghosts and Making Them Speak: Genre and the Asian Horror Film Remake*

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## Abstract

This thesis takes up the genre of the “Asian horror film remake” as a nexus for the illustration of the intersection between two significant theoretical perspectives that inform contemporary film theory: Lacanian psychoanalysis and Deleuzian transcendental empiricism. It employs concepts such as Lacan’s registers of the Real and Symbolic alongside Deleuze (and Guattari’s) theories on the actual present and the virtual past to interrogate terms such as ‘originality’, ‘authenticity’, ‘repetition’, and ‘difference’ in an attempt to account for the role of genre in the production of meaningful reality, both within the bounds of the text and in cultural life more generally. It first deconstructs the term genre as it has been employed throughout classical, structuralist and post-structuralist genre theory, in order to reveal its ephemeral nature, and to show it to be worthy of investigation in its own right as a central component of language, more than simply a critical tool. It goes on to elaborate the contingency of discourse that constructs verisimilitudinous reality, and explicates these ideas through analysis of the Asian horror remake films. It then turns to Lacan’s division between the registers of the Symbolic and the Real in order to explore the function of the repetition that is visible in generic film in relation to the subject’s experience of a coherent and authentic reality. Finally, it proceeds to engage with Deleuze’s ideas regarding virtuality and asignification and argues, with reference to the Asian horror remake, that it is the perpetual tension between sameness and difference that sustains meaningful life.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Media and Cultural Studies in the Graduate Programme in the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

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### **DECLARATIONS**

I, SARAH DAWSON declare that

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain text, data, pictures, graphs or other information obtained from another person or source, unless specifically acknowledged as being so obtained.
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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

As the supervisor, I acknowledge that this research dissertation/thesis is ready for examination.

Name: ANTON VAN DER HOVEN

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## INTRODUCTION

I

The traditional approach to a postgraduate work such as this would be to select a sample object of interest within the broad domain of the discipline within which one works, and a set of theoretical principles that seem likely to be able to provide an account thereof. The expectation exists that one should then progress through a pre-ordained, systematised process involving a review of the literature, a justification for the use of certain established methodologies, and the application of these to the sample. Certainly, this work began with the earnest intention of this kind of orthodoxy – it was meant to be a simple genre study that might shed some light on the phenomenon of the proliferation of the “remake”, and my interest in the theoretical approaches to genre was never especially complex. However, as I began synthesising the various components of this study into one work – the sample texts, the theoretical text, the institutional requirements of academia – it wasn’t long before the dissertation veered towards a more self-reflexive meditation on available theoretical perspectives as much as the sample texts, and the nature of performing research in the broad domain of culture altogether.

To be very honest, I can’t really be certain of what it was that drew me to the idea of taking up the subject of the “Asian horror film remake” as a topic of research. In retrospect, it does seem a little silly. At the outset, it didn’t seem a bad idea at all. A lifetime in the digital age and an education in critical theory instilled in me an insatiable urge to excavate “low culture”. Since my rebellious teens, I’d had a taste for the subversively gory, and had been an unashamed fan of the lowest grades of horror film. It wasn’t long into my university education before this aesthetic interest was swept up into an emerging interest in things like identity politics and feminist theory, and I became intrigued with theory on horror that engaged with the interrelation between the body and signifying practice. As I progressed in the education that has brought me to this point, my personal interest in global cinema increased – most likely because the pull of an academic specialisation, but also driven by my own sheer curiosity and love for cinema, as well as, admittedly, a desire to become “cultured”. As such, my taste in foreign horror fare also increased, and therefore my discussions on the topic in the world generally. Around this time, there had been a recent spate of films that had originally been produced in South East Asia, and especially Japan for

South East Asian audiences, which were remade as Hollywood-based productions for (primarily American) western audiences. I had heard often amongst friends and fellow fans of the horror genre that, for some ethereal reason, the original was always “so much better” than the remake, and every time I heard, or sometimes even uttered, this claim, it niggled at something in the recesses of my mind. Why was it better? How would one measure such a thing? What are the implications of a distinction between an “original” and an “imitation”? Is a “better” horror film one that achieves a greater effect of horror, and how could one possibly compare two unique experiences in this way? Why does Hollywood need to remake the films at all? What happens to the common narratives when you culturally transpose them? How do we even relate them to each other? Do the original and the remake belong to the same genre? What connects them at all? Such questions floated about in my thoughts until, eventually, they timeously crystallised into loose topic for this research.

This is the abbreviated, chronological, narrative account of how I arrived at the point of writing this thesis on such a very particular thing; it includes some of the key narrative turning points of my academic career thus far, which have presently culminated in my writing this introduction to a thesis that holds “the Asian horror film remake” as its supposed object of analysis. But there exist other possible accounts for why I am currently doing what I am doing: for example, a different account might acknowledge more strongly the fact that the choice to settle on this area of research emanated simply from an ideologically fuelled notion that having an overtly “postmodern” research specialisation would make me a more valuable citizen in the contemporary age. Another totally valid account might state that the reason I embarked on this study was simply that I thought it might be rather fun. Perhaps, even, the reason might be that I wholeheartedly believe that incorporating chance and contingency into theoretical engagement offers ample possibility for expanding one’s thinking around what it is to be a living subject in shifting culture, and if this was where my attention had alighted, it might prove fruitful to explore how it interacted with my critical thinking. Or maybe it was as flippant as not being able to find a good reason not to probe a subject which both sparked my intellectual intrigue and seemed as full of interest, meaning and truth as any other potential object of study I’d ever encountered.

All this possibly trivial information isn’t something that’s being provided for the sake of entertainment (though it does help create a nonchalant tone), but rather it serves the purpose of highlighting the extent to which any object of study, a locus of symbolic interest, is as simultaneously arbitrary and specific as that which was recounted above, and will, perhaps, on some deep level always be trivial. A series of random, disparate, contingent

events in a variety of different spheres have resulted in this moment of my engaging in a mode and producing a work, both of which are at once highly specific and highly generic. This spark of interest in the so-called “Asian horror film remake” (a term that is gleaned from discussion amongst fans, who also use terms such as “J-Horror” and “K-Horror”, for example) was along the lines of a very general curiosity as to why indeed these remake films existed. It seemed to me that there would be something at least faintly interesting about this phenomenon to a young theorist of film if it were to be probed in the kind of detail required for a dissertation.

I took up three of these such films, *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002), *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004) and *Dark Water* (Salles, 2005) on the basis of their being the earliest and most favoured of the genre amongst fans, and upon the preliminary round of “taking a closer look” at these I quickly realised that I did not want to engage in any kind of comparative, formal analysis between the original and the remake films and to looking for clues in the transpositions themselves. There were two reasons for this: one was that I do not have the depth of cultural knowledge to perform this kind of comparative research – I live western discourse and know barely anything about the cultural existence of a Korean person, for example; and the other was that I didn’t think that it would be terribly interesting to place excessive formal emphasis on the isolated text itself, because I was far more curious about the new phenomenon of this cluster of films having emerged as a subgenre, and how people like myself, a being in culture, interact with it.

In order to start breaking down the issues that would be related to the phenomenon of this emergent subgenre, I began with its qualifying term, which was, at that point, the most significant thing that held these films together as a compound-object of a “genre”. It could be broken down into three distinct categorical terms, which are “Asian”, “horror film” and “remake”. In approaching the problem of establishing what theoretical frameworks would be appropriate to the task, each of these would need to be explored in unique detail. I considered that: the “Asian” component of the term would foreseeably entail looking at ideology, transnational cinema and the political economy of the film industry, for example; and the “horror film” component would require looking at the notion of genre and the formal text, as well as perhaps the notion of the horrific and abject in cinema; the “remake” part would perhaps incorporate the ideas explored in the other two parts to arrive at some understanding of how and why this relatively small cultural phenomenon had occurred and what it meant.



However, while the subgenre of Asian horror film remakes can be broken down, it still stands autonomously as the sum of its parts, and a singular grouping-together of texts. A “group” is an object in itself, as a thing that has multiple other possible things folded into it, and this “thing” also seemed to be growing, perhaps as a result of increased flows of symbolic material and capital between cultures in the postmodern age. Remakes and sequels accounted for 27% of the films that reached the US box-office Top 50 from the period of 2001 to 2010 (Redfern, n.d.). And within this context, this small cluster of Asian horror remake films seemed to be emerging as a popular trend in themselves, with multiple sequels and other remakes such as *The Uninvited* (Guard and Guard, 2009), and a later remake of the South Korean film *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Jee-Woon, 2003). In other words, this cluster of films was a notable grouping of texts based on some connection that was more than simply the fact of being incidentally linked as remakes of Asian horror films. And with more textual instances of itself emerging with regularity, it could be said that the Asian horror film remake was forming a legitimate “subgenre” of horror, as my superficial impression had indeed been. And this impression was vindicated by the way in which the films are discussed among self-professed fans of the “genre” in these kinds of terms. It seemed, therefore, that exploring these films in relation to the concept of genre as it has theoretically been elaborated upon by theorists of genre, would be as good a place as any to begin.

The first, seemingly banal, question to ask was, what exactly is a genre? What kind of thing would I be looking at specifically? It seemed obvious enough, but it would be necessary for me to ensure that I was certain of my research’s most foundational terms. If one were interested in philately, for example, it would work to one’s advantage to know what a stamp is. So the first step in this exploration was to turn to the theory to establish what a “genre” is, to ensure that I did not take anything for granted at too early a stage. To say that this turned out to be more complex than expected would be an understatement: Is a genre the sum of its parts, or is it something that exists autonomously from the texts that comprise it?; are texts defined by the terms of the genre to which they belong, or is it the texts that define the terms of the “genre”? This chicken-and-egg paradox was immediately apparent when I began to engage with contemporary genre theory, which rapidly unpicked all stability from the term “genre” itself.

## II

Beginning with the poststructuralist genre theory of scholars like Steve Neale and Andrew Tudor, I initially approached the problem of this emergent subgenre with vague

preconceived notions (or what we might term an “hypothesis”, to be discursively appropriate) regarding the kinds of answers that would emerge from the films when the kinds of questions asked by this particular theoretical framework are posed. Perhaps I imagined that I’d learn something interesting about how horror is evoked, or how it is created in a mechanical, formal sense, or more broadly, something about how meaning is created in culture more widely. What I ended up discovering was nothing like the kind of satisfying answer I had been expecting, but rather what seemed to me to be a theoretical dead end, because a strange thing happened as I sought a clear definition of my research topic: the closer I came, the more opaque it became.

Within the field of contemporary genre studies, the textbook definition of genre is broadly accepted as being a “system of expectations” in culture, a set of agreements that the textual terrain in a culture will remain to some extent familiar and cohesive and what Neale, in the tradition of Stephen Heath, describes as a “structuration” not a structure. (Grant, 2012, p. 107) But there didn’t seem to exist anywhere in the literature any satisfactory account of what precisely was meant by “system” or “expectations”, and both terms were used rather loosely or perhaps in frustration with the inadequacy of the available terms, which don’t really seem to offer terribly much of striking interest beyond asserting claims that are fairly self-evident. Given that the “expectations” part of the term is a qualifier, and a vague one at that, the true object of a study of a “system of expectations” should be the “system” itself, not the very specific and idiosyncratic “expectations” within it.

The primary contribution that contemporary genre theory made towards my thinking, then, was that genre doesn’t in fact exist as finite thing, but rather that it is discursive and highly historically specific, and functions as a central structure of language that orientates the subject within a meaningful world. A genre is a system of discursive constructs that extends beyond the films themselves and that sets up versions of reality, genre realities, or “verisimilitudes” (Neale, 2012) that operate on the terms of a particular generic logic. This means that the original films (belonging to their own culturally specific discursive context) and the remakes (also belonging to their own culturally specific discursive context) are equally discursive, and therefore produce equally valid, different and complex structures of meaning which constitute valid, different and complex worlds of nameable objects out of the same sets of signifiers. Discourse is a central component in being able to (at least to some extent) share in an (at least vaguely) stable meaning of a text with others, and all meaning and recognisable objects are constituted out of meaninglessness in relation to the discursive

arrangements surrounding them. And this indeed is what poststructuralists have been saying about our own “original” version of reality all along.

My question then became: Why does that very structuration, the fact of film genre or discourse in itself, continue if the content that is subject to this “structuration” is ultimately entirely contingent and therefore arbitrary to the “system” itself? How does a “system of expectations” perpetuate itself if what’s within it does not drive its continuation? And what value does it hold to continue to focus only on the content of these systems, looking at patterns in narrative structure and iconography, and the ways that these shift, without also looking at what creates the very fact of shifting-ness in the first place? The best genre theory had to offer was to lean reflexively on some highly contingent definition of a particular genre for a particular study, which is admittedly all that it is possible to do within a framework that takes the notion of a “system” entirely for granted. Although I knew I would need to venture beyond the offerings of poststructuralist genre theory, I realised it would be necessary to outline these contingent definitions in an analysis of their discursive conventions in practice if I was to be equipped to understand them and their function.

However, I also found unsatisfactory the way in which much of the genre theory, and perhaps poststructuralist theory more generally seemed to acknowledge but shrug its shoulders at the implicit paradox of seeking to speak about things that are fluid processes as “things”. It resorts (because it has to) to language’s structural requisite of speaking about anything, including something that’s not delimited, in a way that’s implicitly delimiting. In a sentence, the term “structuration” still functions as a “thing” about which we can speak. Which means that genre, despite being something immeasurable, immediately becomes a stable “thing” the second you try to write about it, to ascertain something about “it”. Because it is being described within discourse. We will always need nouns like “thing”, “discourse” and “it” to be able to think and write about it at all. The attributes of the discrete object of genre turned out to be far more ephemeral upon closer investigation. Genre theory didn’t offer much in the way of trying to understand the nature of systems and “things” or objects – so at this stage, the question remained: If not a thing, what is the nature of the existence of this not-thing thing of a “structuration” that is a genre?

Two unformed insights had begun simmering in my mind. Firstly I was struck by how highly discursive the nature of the very emergence of meaningful objects (and subjects) is, planting the seed for a more ontological question in my mind regarding the role something like a film genre has in relation to the emergence of people and things as subjects and objects in culture

broadly. The second insight was centred on how there seemed to be some kind of metonymic relationship between what Neale calls a “verisimilitude” (a generic world that functions entirely according to contingent discursive logic) and our own reality, a world that according to post structuralism functions (surprise, surprise) entirely according to contingent discursive logic. This suggests that perhaps it is impossible to speak about those discursive structures that orientate the viewer subject in his or her engagement with a film separately from the discursive structures that orientate the subject in his or her world more generally. Further, if our fictional realities operate along the same lines as our “real-life” reality, down to the very emergence of objects (and subjects), perhaps our entire reality is a verisimilitudinous simulacrum no different from any other simulacrum. In this context, the term “original” began to take on a much more interesting meaning, when it was defined as something that doesn’t take anything as its reference (or, perhaps, something that takes *nothing* as its reference) and isn’t constituted by reference to any alter index, and simply exists. What are the broad ontological dynamics of a division between “original” and “remake”? And, if our reality is supposedly more “original” than that of our films, what is the ontological status of a generic film event versus a “real” event if they are both structured in relation to the same discourses, something which is made evident by the compulsion to remake an “original” film within discourses that align to the cultural space in which it is being received? If we interact equally discursively with these “genre realities” as we do with our own realities, how can it be said that the “original” of our world is more actually there than the copy of “reality” that is the verisimilar event of a horror film? The “remake” reveals the extent to which discursive familiarity is essential to the experience of authenticity, which gives reason to wonder about the extent to which discourse is implicated in holding together the subject’s very sense of ontological authenticity and agency?

These latent ponderings soon began to push themselves into the fore of my mind and began to shape my thinking going forward around the very object of my study. Methodologically, it occurred to me that I would need to reach beyond the notion of “system” within the genre theory, and therefore I would have to reach beyond the methodologies it had to offer. For me, “genre is discourse” was an inadequate point at which to stop. Certainly analysing the ideological content of a text is entirely noble, but I was intrigued by the very occurrence of a “system” in which such social dynamics occur. I still wanted to know about the thing-that-is-not-a-thing that is the box into which these films are put, the machine itself in which the genre and its texts are mechanical components. I realised I would need to embrace a more experimental approach.

Chance exists as something one can choose either to be open to or limit. But one's personal orientation notwithstanding it continues to exist as a realm of potentiality that will exert itself outside of human agency, like the chance factors I listed at the beginning of this introduction that involved me and surrounded me, and pushed me towards this contingent moment of writing. Being at a loss as to which way to turn theoretically (not for lack of options, but for lack of any convincing guiding criteria), I found myself in a mode of being unusually susceptible to chance connections. I extended mental tendrils to seek out and locate connections by being constantly open to new explanations and, in this way the methodological mode became also more exploratory, following possible theoretical leads, for no reason other than discovering what might emerge in its juxtaposition with the sample texts. This mode turned out to have the strange effect of validating itself as a mode teleologically (as you will see later) Rather than seeing this as producing a closed circuit of explanation, I believe it should be viewed as evidence of the way in which constant symbolic feedback is central to the emergence of a discursive text such as this dissertation. But this will become clearer later on.

The questions that had emerged as most pressing were: From where do all these cultural systems of meaning, (like we see in the microscopic example of the "Asian horror film remake"), emerge? Why do they seem to disappear whenever they are approached to be defined? How can the symbolic content be totally contingent and therefore in some sense arbitrary, if this system exists to contain all the symbolic material we use to make meaning out of ourselves and the world? How can something so essential to the subject in culture that it forms part of a set of symbolic structures that provides something on which to anchor meaningful reality, also be so ontologically ambiguous, so contentless, yet so persistent? Why would such highly historically specific discourses or "systems of expectations" keep emerging in precisely the same ways and fulfilling the same purposes as entirely different "things" composed of different symbolic content, in entirely different historical contexts, if there wasn't something active about "structuration" itself that was exerting itself?

### III

Of course, the natural lead for the well-read scholar would be to do exactly as I did and follow the path of psychoanalysis in attempting to answer these kinds of question. It is a natural lead because it has concepts like the realm of the Real, the empty signifier, the distinction between the symbolic subject and the organism. Obviously, I wasn't at the time anything like a well-read scholar, nor do I profess to be now – the unexpected applicability of

the theory was this fate intervening once again. I was attracted to this body of theory because I was faintly familiar with texts that cited texts that cited Lacan, and these texts (the ones with which I was familiar) were usually on the topic of horror, and it was the adjective of horror that appealed to me, not the ghost of Lacan. Or was it supposed to be “chance”, perhaps, that I mean here, rather than fate? It is in the gap of the distinction between these two things that lies the question of a certain kind of feeling of predestination, that somehow our worlds have been laid out for us to fall into before we had anything to say about it. And this feeling of predestination and its relationship to signifying practice, in an *Inception*-like loop (because hybridising the scholarly genre with bewildering, high-budget Christopher Nolan thrillers could only open the door to new worlds of “original thought”), turned out to be very usefully explored within the discipline of psychoanalysis.

The strongest image that emerged from the connection between these films and the Lacanian theory was that of the “purloined letter”. In another serendipitous moment, the image happens to emerge from a story by Edgar Allan Poe (2013), perhaps one of (if not the) most notable names in the literary horror canon, was taken up by Lacan, and later critiqued by Derrida, one of the central figures in post-structuralist genre theory. In the story, an important letter, whose contents remain unknown, circulates amongst a group of aristocratic characters, functioning to bind them together into an “intersubjective” network, and Lacan sees this as illustrative of the functioning of the Symbolic. “The letter” or *la lettre* can be conceived of at various levels – the grapheme, the word, the text, the narrative, the discourse, even history, and not one of these scenes of the letter can legitimately lay claim to any “truth” in signification above any other. Even so, the letter is central to the constitution of the social subject with a “life” of which sense can be made. The contents of the letter are irrelevant (similar to the Hitchcockian “MacGuffin<sup>1</sup>”), but the fact of the subject’s continued

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock explains the MacGuffin in this way: “A McGuffin you see in most films about spies. It’s the thing that spies are after. In the days of Rudyard Kipling, it would have been the plans of a fort on the Khyber Pass. It’d be the plans of an airplane engine, and the plans of an atom bomb, anything you like. It’s always called the thing that the characters on screen worry about, but the audience don’t care. Someone asked, what is a MacGuffin? And there’s a, it’s described in a scene in an English train, going to Scotland. And one man says to the other opposite him, he says, ‘What’s that package above your head there?’ And the other man says, ‘oh, that? That’s a MacGuffin.’ And the other man says, ‘Well, what is a MacGuffin?’ He says, ‘Well, it’s an apparatus for tracking lions in the Scottish Highlands.’ The man says, ‘but there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands.’ He said, ‘then that’s no MacGuffin.’” (“Alfred Hitcock’ Appearance on the Dick Cavett Show,” 1972)

This description explains how the MacGuffin is a device that exists purely on which to hang the tension of the narrative bears remarkable similarity to the notion of the “letter” which will enter the discussion in the next chapter, dedicated to psychoanalysis. Indeed, Hitchcock was famously interested in this discipline.

transaction within the symbolic network of signifiers is essential to its survival as an ordinary member of society. (Lacan, 2001)

This seemed a very interesting starting point from which to think about the autonomy of a thing such as genre. If genre is indeed a “system of expectations”, perhaps the dynamism of a genre’s “structuration” could be accounted for not by understanding either the nature of “structures”, or the arbitrary, transient “expectations” or conventions themselves, but rather by looking at the subject that is so fixated on familiarity. What is so appealing about being able to hold “expectations” in the first place? Why is the viewer so drawn to the kind of repetition evident in genre films? In particular, why would he or she desire to see the definitively horrific kinds of death and chaos represented in the horror genre, over and over again? The absence of any kind of easy visual pleasure and the intention to cause displeasure in the horror film suggested that it might prove to be interesting territory for understanding how generic repetition in film might be explained by something other than ordinary aesthetic pleasure.

Lacan, as a post-structuralist psychoanalyst, provides a nice bridge from the world of language into the world of the phenomenological being within society, clearing the way for an understanding of the complex flow of influence between signification and subject. For though something like a genre as a symbolic formation exists in an unnerving autonomous alterity from the subject, it is also something that exists only in its engagement and perpetuation by the subject in culture. From this point it became clear that understanding the relation of the subject to genre would be integral to understanding genre and the function of discourse in relation to the cultural subject.

#### IV

Trauma is the experience of that which lacks a meaningful account and which intrudes upon the boundaries of the subject in language in a way that at once threatens and stimulates. The “repetition compulsion”, for which “the letter” functions as metaphor, is the phenomenon by which the psyche repeatedly re-enacts and re-exposes itself to traumatic experience. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the observation of the seemingly irrational unconscious repetition of traumatic material in either dream or reality (think about a schoolteacher who experienced corporal punishment in his youth going on to hit his own students as an adult, for example, or an accident victim that sees the scene over and over in his dreams) is accounted for by explaining that the repressed trauma will continue to be asserted by the subconscious out of a need for symbolic mastery, a need for the senseless to make *sense*. The

goal in psychoanalytic therapy is to help individuals *articulate* their trauma, to speak about it, to tell its story, and in so doing bring it into the realm of delimited meaning and neutralise it as an attack on the foundation on which the definition of an individual's subjectivity and the world of objects around them rests (Freud, 2011).

Traumatic experience is, by definition, something in relation to which "Why me? Why do I deserve this?" can never be answered, because it exceeds account within the structures on which "me" depends. It is the moment at which the alterity of language becomes apparent, and the authenticity and agency of the circumscribed, unique self is brought frighteningly into question. It seemed to me that there may exist a connection between the repetition compulsion and the construction of narrative – whether in film or in life – which narrativises using recurrent arbitrary, transient, yet definitive symbolic signifiers that tie the meaning of a subject's life into larger symbolic narratives that define culture. Perhaps generic repetition would turn out to be directly a function of keeping at bay the frightening realm that is the meaninglessness both within and beyond "the letter". It seemed that it may be implicated in the covering-over of the thinly veiled and terrifying possibility that language can never account for reality in its entirety – that there is no "original" language, no master index, to provide an ahistorical, all-encompassing, stable, unambiguously truthful account of life.

Lacan also explains that venturing into the register of "the Real" (the dimension beyond that of language, or "the Symbolic") also bears a kind of masochistic enjoyment for the subject, who is motivated by the desire for what has been lost in the world of language. The subject seeks out the painful pleasure of experience that exceeds language, but not so much that it threatens to obliterate the terms on which the subject is defined or alienated him or her from society. This moment of painful pleasure is called *jouissance* (Jean-Michel, 2003, p. 106) and, so far, this concept seemed to come closest to accounting for the Asian horror film remake and its fans' counterintuitive wilfulness to repeatedly expose themselves to frightening imagery. Why would such imagery as the ghost or violent death need to be continually revisited? In the Asian horror film remake, the *jouissance* of the traumatic only occurs in and through highly specific discursive re-interpretation, which might also reveal something interesting regarding how the subject maintains his or her sense of an authentic or original reality. Meaning inheres in the assumption of a certain stability of reality, and so is enabled by the expectation of repeated discursive elements. We know that when we order a hamburger from a drive-through restaurant menu, "hamburger" can be depended on to mean an edible meat sandwich every time, even though this will be an entirely new instance of edible sandwich to the one that was ordered last week. We take for granted that when we



arrive at the next counter, the signified “hamburger” has not suddenly changed to the signified that is ordinarily associated with the signifier of “old sock”, or “beach umbrella”.

Pursuing this line of enquiry, parallels had begun to emerge in both the question of how and why the narrative diegesis of a genre film undergoes “structuration”, and of how and why meaning in culture is generated and perpetuated. If the same contentless letter constitutes diegetic and “original” reality, what is the basis on which we mark any fundamental difference between the two as far as the cultural subject is concerned? If we are talking about the nature of a genre film, it will always also be a question of the nature of how the subject makes meaning in culture, and cannot be seen in isolation. Perhaps, thus, the emphasis on the autonomous text in the earlier section’s theory of genre precisely accounts for the dead-end it seemed to reach. Psychoanalysis allowed for the possibility of examining the operation of the arbitrary signifier at all levels of experience equally, and for seeing the Asian horror film remake as more than a primarily textual phenomenon. The letter is constitutive of subjects in culture and the letter is again inscribed in popular narrative and constitutive of fictional subjects therein, and both are instances of the Symbolic functioning to produce sensible, authentic reality through discourse. In this context, perhaps the Asian horror film remake, and its repositioning of the image of the murderous foreign phantasm within familiar discourse – manifesting a non-thing as a “thing” about which can be familiarly spoken (much like the ethereal “thing” of genre itself) – is very much an instance of the symbolic rationalising the threat upon the symbolic subject of the asignifying realm. Because the original films are structured along “strange” discursive terms, the threat upon the subject’s very reference point – a symbolic account of reality that is assumed to be authentic – is neutralised by bringing into discursive familiarity that which is “from beyond” the bounds of the symbolic – whether it be alien discourse in alien language (filmic or linguistic) laying claim to originality, or the making meaningful through narrative of an unaccountable ghostly apparition, or the theoretical circumscription of something that begins as an unanswered question, like the Asian horror film remake.

V

In the course of engagement with the various texts I have mentioned, not only did the relationship between the “original” and the remake films become more complex, but so too did the relationship between the sample films and the theoretical texts to which I had turned to illuminate the issue. Indeed it became increasingly difficult to place any hierarchical supremacy on the supposed “primary” versus “secondary” text in terms of the “sample”

versus the “theory”. The theoretical text cannot be said to fall outside the economy of signifier-exchange in culture, and cannot be held above something like a genre film as a more reliable locus of truth. The assumption of some intrinsic kernel of truth to be found in theoretical engagement is itself highly discursive, more so since the generic structures of philosophical engagement haven’t really moved that far from those of the Enlightenment era, even if poststructuralist linguistics has turned this into something of an acknowledged conundrum. Traditionally, the theory is employed as a means of illuminating a particular cultural phenomenon. However, what is the use in analysing one genre text on the basis of another highly generic text just in order to produce another highly generic text? Isn’t critical theory just as arbitrary a cultural phenomenon as the Asian horror film remake? Is it not equally founded on the repetition of elements across a canon of works, constructing a generic discursive account of reality? But just as we juxtapose the Asian horror film remake with its supposed “original” to discover something about genericity in culture, surely the Asian horror film remake has the potential to illuminate critical theory just as much as critical theory is able to illuminate the Asian horror film remake? Neither can function as a proof of the other since each is implicated in discursive frameworks of the culture in which it is embedded. This does not mean that nothing fruitful could come from juxtaposing the two sets of discourse, especially if one is seeking illumination rather than comprehension, but the directionality of flows would naturally become two-way. The films had begun to tell me about the theory as much as the theory was telling me about the films, as the object of my study expanded to a larger question on the role and nature of genericity in the production of meaningful reality.

## VI

The contents of the letter are meaningless because the letter ultimately means nothing, because there is no locus of truth – no point of understanding that would not also fundamentally obliterate the symbolic subject. In Zizekian terms, the obliteration of the subjectivity of the organism would plunge it into a meaningless autistic space in which objects are not distinct from each other, and self is not separate from other (Zizek, 1999). Language is itself Real, or empty of meaning at an essential level, and there is a *jouissance* implicit in simply engaging with it. This is the painful enjoyment of the emptiness of the signifier itself. However, the subject is itself constructed around the signifier, which must therefore mean that surely there exists a *jouissance* in the meaninglessness of the subject’s own body and material reality too? Even within the bounds of psychoanalytic theory there appeared to be a point at which it stopped short at certain generic boundaries, and didn’t

factor in a crucial aspect to which it alluded within its very own framework – that there does exist an experiential domain beyond the symbolic, and that this must exert some influence. This is overcome within psychoanalysis by characterising this domain as a radical negativity, a deep nothingness. But the fact that the register of Real is conceived only *in relation to* the symbolic means it refuses to acknowledge the active, autonomic exertions of the body upon the experience of culture.

## VII

According to the conventions of narrative, it wouldn't be right for me to give away the ending at this stage. It would take all the life out of reading this work, all the dynamic pleasure of frustrated desire that is central to the unfolding of a story. As such, I will not at this stage outline in detail the final chapter of this work, which seeks to resolve, utilising primarily the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, and prominent Deleuzian, Brian Massumi, the way in which the materiality of the film medium interacts with bodies to become meaning. The enclosing of the argument contained in this work is performed along the lines of generic expectation, and given that the narratively climactic moment usually occurs in the third act of the tale, this story has turned out to be structured in a fairly traditional way. It is in the third chapter that I purport to have arrived at some fairly conclusive account for the Asian horror film remake, the quality of conclusiveness being asserted more as a result of the constraints of genre than any real, legitimately circumscribable understanding of an aspect of reality. Essentially the final chapter herein contained will, for all intents and purposes, constitute the conclusive third act of this particular generic work, and is to be found in its proper generic place – the end.

# CHAPTER 1: The Asian Horror Remake and Genre Theory

## INTRODUCTION

In seeking to find a definition of genre, the first part of this chapter introduces the sample texts and discusses some of the main arguments that exist in the area of genre theory, illuminating current perspectives on study of film genre. It explores and rejects the tenets of contemporary film genre theory based on structuralist thinking, and elaborates some more favoured ideas that have emerged in poststructuralist genre scholarship, particularly those put forward by Steve Neale. These advocate an understanding of genres as fluid discursive practice, rather than as circumscribable artefacts.

The second part of this chapter looks at the history of the horror film in order to contextualise the generic nature of the Asian horror film remake, and then goes on to discuss the particular discursive developments of the Asian horror film remake in order to highlight the contingency of the discursive reality of the genre. This in order to simultaneously define and denaturalize them in service of arguments that will be made at a later stage.

## PART ONE

### I

It would seem wise to take a closer look at the process of generically categorising texts in the first place, in order to understand exactly what one is looking at when one is describing an “Asian horror film remake” as opposed to something else. What in fact is a genre in the first place? Given that this term is very much in popular usage, it might seem a fairly simple question. But as is the case with most things with seemingly self-evident meanings, ‘genre’ becomes increasingly complex the greater the magnification. The more closely one examines the notion of genre, the more paradoxical and slippery it seems to become. Even experts in the field provide little to hold onto in terms of a definition that is delivered with any kind of conviction. It is however important to a study such as this (which takes “genre” as its very subject) to interrogate the term and to explore the complexities of taking a film genre as an object of study. This entails considering some of the main points of contention that exist in contemporary genre theory, and in particular the shift from structuralist thought to poststructuralist thought.

Genre theory owes a lot to literary criticism of the last 2000 years, but many of its hindrances up until the latter part of last century hinged upon the Romantic foregrounding of authorial primacy, which emerged in the form of auteurism in the theory of film. By developing a means of interrogating signification across all texts on the common basis of linguistic structures rather than authorial intent, structuralist thinking overcame the idea held by Romantic critics that the formulaic nature of genre texts made them unworthy of serious study. This allowed for the drawing away of critical emphasis from the authorial humanist perspectives that were dominant prior to midway through last century onto structures of signification, and the destabilising of the distinction between the popular and the serious, allowing for critical investigation of something as trashy as the Hollywood horror film.

From a purely methodological point of view, structuralism has a problematic empirical leaning in its approach to genre as can be seen in works such as Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Propp, 1968), which are concerned primarily with nominological and typological issues. Theirs was primarily empirical epistemology, and this still to some extent underlies some of the assumptions present in much recent work. It is problematic because, to begin with, there aren't any usefully consistent sets of criteria for the application of a generic category to any particular text. To adopt a genre as a fixed category of empirical study is a

nonsensical thing to do. For example: a musical may be defined as such on the basis that it makes use of the device of song to facilitate exposition, interaction between characters and narrative development; a horror film could be considered to be just that according to its elicitation of a particular horrifying emotional affect; and a Western is defined as such largely (but not exclusively) on the basis of a particular iconography. On the other hand, an opera, despite its reliance on song, is largely not considered to be a 'musical'; a horror may also be intentionally funny; and the significance of the wild, open space of the American West may be transported into an entirely different iconographic environment and still be considered in some sense to be a Western, like the vastness of outer space in the Star Wars series (Neale, 2000). A taxonomically rigid approach to genre is therefore neither appropriate nor useful to its study, because to consider "genre" an umbrella term similar to "genus", consisting of a number of discrete "species" is as scientifically perverse and illogical as grouping mammals into supposedly distinct categories such as Those with Four Legs; Those That Make Loud, Scary Noises; Those That Can Be Found in Warm Places, for example. While there may be truth to each definition in relation to its object, the overlaps, partial truths and inconsistencies make comparison impossible, render the system of categorisation somewhat arbitrary, and raise unavoidable questions about the project itself. There is nothing essentially commonly true about each film within a particular group of films in the same way as "mammals have warm blood", for example.

Bordwell (1991) shows the arbitrary particularity of the use of genre terms in culture by providing a list of various other possible criteria on the basis of which films could be grouped – by period or country of origin; by director, star, producer, studio etc.; by technical process; by cycle (as in "fallen women" films); by series or franchise; by style or movement; by narrative structure; by ideology; by venue (like the drive-in, or TV movies); by purpose (e.g. home videos); by audience (teen movies); or by subject or theme. Any number of categories could be added to this list, such as length (short film/feature film), locality ("foreign" film), "seriousness" as "art" (along high/low culture lines), and so on. While each of categories does not necessarily directly correspond to specific generic categories as such, they are frequently substituted for, or used in addition to, generic categories, and serve to illustrate the extent to which the application of a categorical term to a group of films is largely defined by the objectives of its application and should not be regarded as a finite, coherent definition of the film to which it's being applied. Jane Feuer puts it simply: "A genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world" (Feuer, 1992).

So while structuralist perspectives on genre already pose significant methodological

problems, so to do problems emerge when one asks more substantial theoretical questions such as, for example, to whom does this abstract conception belong? Tudor describes traditional, structuralist-informed application of genre labels as having “put the cart before the horse”, in that it doesn’t incorporate into its analysis the means by which these labels come about and their use in society (Tudor, 1974, p. 10). Structuralism’s definitional approach ignores the ways in which the wider public put generic terms to use in varied and idiosyncratic ways that pay no heed to any critically orthodox generic labels. One hypothetical example that would illustrate this would be the viewer who might say that they like watching “Jim Carrey” films. They are not referring necessarily only to their fondness for the actor when they make such a statement. They are referring also to the specific mode of filmmaking that has developed around that actor, to the point that the actor could possibly be replaced by someone else and still be regarded as largely the same “kind of film” which will draw the very same audience. This can be illustrated in the example of the comedy film *Bruce Almighty* (Shadyac, 2003), and its sequel *Evan Almighty* (Shadyac, 2007), in which Steve Carrel replaced Jim Carrey as the clumsy, fallible leading man. Further, when an audience member says that they like “Jim Carrey films”, they probably don’t mean the more serious, cerebral films *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004), or *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998), because rather than meaning “any film that has Jim Carrey in it”, they are actually describing a very particular comedic subgenre defined by a particular brand of goofball, slapstick comedy epitomised by Jim Carrey. It is, however, very unlikely that one would find “Jim Carrey movies” as a listable entry in any traditional critical encyclopaedia of genre. In this context, there is no point in attempting to articulate the formal mechanics of horror film supposedly invisible to the average cinema-goer. Rather look to understand how these terms are employed in culture, and to discuss the “structuration” of genre, to understand genre as a ‘process’ (Klinger, 2012).

## II

Poststructuralist genre theorists have done a fairly thorough job of refuting some of their predecessor’s theoretical shortcomings and so complicating the study of genre. One such scholar is Robert Stam, who outlines four major problems with the employment of generic labels in much traditional genre theory. These are: “extension”, “normativism”, “monolithicism” and “biologism” (Stam, 2000), and provide a useful starting point for discussing not only some of the primary misgivings inherent in dominant structuralist approaches to genre theory, but also for elaborating some of the primary ideas that underpin the poststructuralist point of view:

### *Extension*

Firstly, the question of “extension” relates to how broad or narrow the definition of a genre is considered to be. Such parameters are largely taken for granted by structuralist genre theory. “Extension” asks: what is included and excluded in the canon, and on what basis? Any ease in making this distinction depends on the genre theorist’s having naturalised these generic labels. Rick Altman (2012) describes two possible methods for compiling a list of films within a genre's canon which illustrates the need for critics to be aware of the elasticity of genre. Firstly the “unwieldy”, inclusive means of listing of films employed by encyclopaedias of cinema, for example includes any film that responds to the slightest, simplest definition of a genre within its ranks. So a western is a film that takes place in the American west, and a horror film is a film that horrifies, for example. An exclusive list, on the other hand, is the kind of list employed by critics who seek to whittle down the corpus of a genre until they have discovered the few “pure” examples of the genre, the examples that “somehow seem to represent the genre more fully and faithfully”. This would then enable the critic to conduct an investigation into the “overall meaning or structure” of a genre (Altman, 2012). There is no real basis for decisions on how wide to cast the generic net. Clearly, there is no 'proper' way to establish the canon of a genre and it is dependent upon the task at hand.

### *Normativism*

Stam’s “normativism” rehearses what Andrew Tudor describes as an “empiricist dilemma” (Tudor, 1974,) in the study of genre in film in that it is necessary to define a film as being within a genre in order to study it as an example thereof, but that it cannot possibly be considered to be part of that genre until it has already been studied in such terms. This makes analysing the characteristics of a genre “redundant, since the conventions have already been arrived at by analysing films already distinguished from other films by virtue of their being in that genre” (Tudor, 1974, p. 138). So, in order to have isolated the “Asian horror remake” as my object of study, I must already have decided on the common criteria for their inclusion in such a category. So then how do I know that one of the conventions of the genre are not being constituted by the collectivisation of texts, and that I am not constructing an object just by the act of studying it?

Tudor as a poststructuralist embraces the social character of language and offers two solutions to the structural dilemma. These are: to classify films according to one's critical purpose or to “lean on the common cultural consensus of what constitutes a genre and analyse it in detail” (Tudor, 1974).



It is this very process of arriving at a “common cultural consensus” that will be of more concern. Neale expresses the need to move beyond a structuralist perspective which seeks to define a “semiology of the cinema” by critiquing the structuralist film theory’s conceptualisation of genre as ‘consensus’. He points out that theory that sees genre as agreement “seeks to distance itself from the ideology of high art” but nevertheless “remains complicit in its conceptualisation of the artistic subject”. (1980) He admits the importance of semiotics’ contribution to genre theory of a “politics of signifying practices”, but advocates rather for an Althusserian-Marxist perspective that sees cinema as a sociocultural institution defined by broader discursive practices in which critic, producer and audience all participate. (Neale, 1980)

### *Monolithicism*

“Monolithicism” is the view that a film belongs to only one genre. A monolithic approach is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly it is clear when surveying the landscape of contemporary cinema that almost no film can be said to be a pure example of a single genre. The possibility of pure examples presupposes that an objective original template exists against which all other texts should be measured. But firstly, any assumed pure example of a pure western, or pure melodrama, for example, can only be recognised retrospectively, once it has spawned imitations of itself, meaning that it is not inherently “pure”, but rather becomes “purer” as it is referenced. The original becomes more authentic the more copies that are made. Secondly, even supposedly pure examples are always in some way indebted to the films that preceded them, and this intertextuality is essential to its meaningfulness. Often an “exemplary” genre text has a direct relationship with a text that belongs to a different mode, such as literature or theatre. For example, horror films that are considered to be seminal, such as *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1929) or *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931), which, as seminal horror films, have seen multiple remakes, borrow their narratives, conventions, and many of their aesthetic qualities from gothic literature, for example. To settle on an exemplary instance of a genre requires the imposition of dubious frames on the history of film. Think, for example, of the example of science fiction. It might be possible to say that Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) is one of the “great” science fictions. But this would be looking at the history of the genre through lens that seeks films that helped “found” the genre and that influenced its direction from its earliest stages. Another critic might argue that *Star Wars* is at the apex of the genre's development, because of its massive box office success, fan following and enduring popularity. Another may argue for a film like *Solyaris* (Tarkovsky, 1972), or perhaps *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968). Genre is intrinsically transient,

and M.T.C. Cronin illustrates this in a poem dedicated to Derrida's argument in the Law of Genre, showing it to be a constantly evolving, and intrinsically "impure" system:

as soon as I was born I exceeded my mother  
  
yet implicitly, explicitly, I bore her mark  
  
it was a matter of mention as well as use  
  
I was said to be her child/yet no-one meeting me could tell  
  
it always seemed to me that I was inside and outside her  
  
at the same time  
  
regardless, it remained impossible  
  
to know who or what she was  
  
and now people remark the same of me  
  
meanwhile, my own children  
  
have sprung from this genre  
  
like abhorrent possibilities  
  
like fascinating, incorrect nodes in my brain  
  
they go off the edges of me and continue to disturb me  
  
with signals directed to me alone[...] (Cronin, n.d.)

The poem tells of the way in which types or genres come to exist, in the same way as children do, as mutations of their parents, but which belong to a family in which membership, it later says, "is contingent on its lack of determination". As stated above, one of the very few things that can be said to be essentially true about genre is that change is fundamental to its existence. A genre only comes about as a result of change from an already existing body of texts. Neale (1980) describes an "economy of genre", in which difference is as important as repetition.

*Biologism*

The final problem of generic labelling identified by Stam (2000) is that of “biologism”, which lead to an essentialist view of the life cycle of a genre. Tudor outlines three aspects of the “evolution” of a genre: Firstly, it is “cumulative”, in that innovations are introduced to an existing corpus of texts; secondly, it is “conservative” in that these innovations must be consistent with the other elements of the corpus, and thirdly it involves “differentiation” in that it crystallises into different subgenres (Tudor, 1974). This may be illuminating in a very broad sense, and while some genres may follow a predictable path, a biologicistic view of genre obscures information that could arise out of the being able to integrate chance anomalies into the analysis effectively.

### III

While structuralist genre theory assists in coming to terms with genre's textuality (the structures, symbolism and patterns of genres and genre texts), it gives disproportionate importance to these elements, considering that the genre labels themselves are, in fact, always vague and ill-defined. Post-structuralism moves away from the text itself. It desanctifies the labels and loosens the fixity and allows for a notion of genre as something that is in constant flux, always subject to negotiation. In other words, poststructuralist theory allows one to posit “the dynamic fluidity of genre without stating the demise of it as an interpretative [framework]” (Chandler, Daniel, n.d.).

In the *Law of Genre* Derrida cites Genette, saying that “there are no arch-genres that can totally escape historicity while preserving a generic definition” (Derrida and Ronell, 1980). In other words (applying this to modern cinema), all genres, including the genres familiar to modern audiences, are historically contingent rather than given or fixed. If genre is a system of expectations (Feuer, 1992, p. 144), those expectations vary at different cultural moments. A film might be considered by audiences to be part of one generic corpus at the time of its creation, and then to be considered part of an entirely different one twenty years later, for example, because both the historical context and the intertextual landscape that provide systems of reference for both interpretation and classification have changed. A clear illustration of this lies in the assignation of the term “classic”, which pre-empts any possible alienation of the viewer by the text on the basis of temporal displacement. It could be said that in some way a film text eternally interpellates the viewer as being part of the particular historical moment of its production. It presumes its audience to be *au fait* with the cultural references, intertextual landscape, technical capabilities/limitations of the modes of production etcetera, of the temporal period in which it originated, which explains the refrain

of viewers of old films that “It must have been scary at the time!”, for example. In order to be immersed in the experience of viewing a “classic” film, without being distracted by the distance between the experience of viewers contemporaneous to its production and one's own, it is necessary to insert oneself into an imagined cultural moment or, at the very least, to consciously take into account the discursive difference between that moment and the one in which the viewing is taking place.

In this sense, poststructuralist genre theory posits that the truer object of study when looking at genre is discourse. Genre is dependent on intertextuality to be meaningful, and this intertextual moment is thoroughly discursive. “Expectation” pertains an assumption not only that the text will have significance, but that this significance will be in relation to a specific framework that pre-exists its creation. This framework interconnects with discursive practice in a broader cultural context. The viewer of a text approaches the text with a particular trust that a film bears relation to wider discourse and reality, and that there must exist a certain trust in the producer of the text that the text is going to be interpreted by the viewer in relation to the same discursive framework of creation. It is discourse through which expectations of coherence of narrative find particular, plausible articulation.

#### IV

The contemporary globalised, free-market-driven West, has created an historical context in which “all forms of artistic production in capitalist social formations take place within conditions provided by capitalist economic relations and practices, and hence the ways in which the production and consumption of all artworks are conditioned by commodity forms” (1980). If this is true, then one might say all texts have become commodities. The coding of genre films as commercial cinemas seems to indicate that they are especially subject to these pressures of a capitalist social system. Certainly the conventions that exist in genre film are a means of maximising the profitability of a textual product by exploiting existent expectations. However, the idea that this applies only to mainstream genre films as “commodity films” and not avant-garde or art-house productions, for example, implies that there exist other modalities which are transcendent of this pressure. But all instances of signification are subject to the pressures of the “conditions of their production and consumption”. (Neale, 2000, p. 160) Profitable mainstream genres are just one variant of the modalities that emerge from the exertions on film of the ideological pressures of the cultural context. Mainstream genre film is manufactured, packaged, sold and consumed as part of the economy, on the basis of its possession of certain predictable characteristics like, for

example, the romantic comedy that can be predicted to be a neatly contained ideologically heteronormative love story. But an “independent film” (now generically identifiable in the term “indie film”) succumbs to a different but equal ideological pressure in pandering to what topics or styles might be trending at international film festivals, or adhering to the ethos held by a funding body, for example.

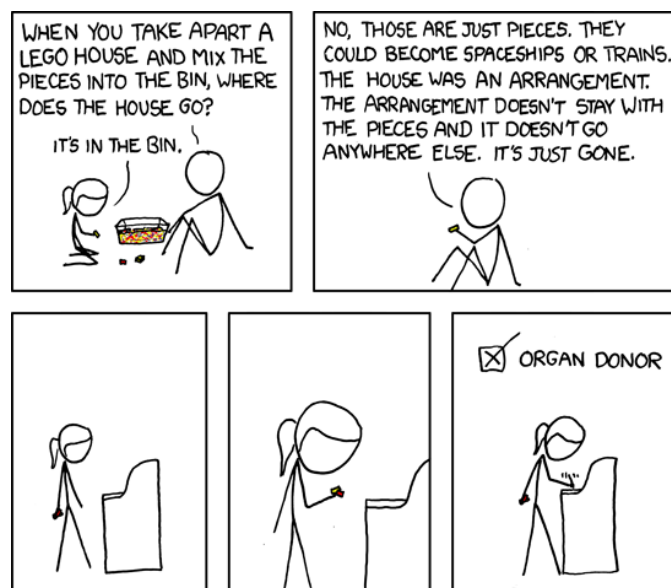
Accounting for the formulaic aesthetic of Hollywood film, Neale points out that certain institutionalised constraints are imposed upon directors there, but that these constraints should be regarded as the institution of the economic as an instance of the social formation (2000, p. 173). Christian Metz says that “the cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry (which works to fill cinemas, not empty them), it is also mental machinery [...] which spectators ‘accustomed’ to the cinema have internalised historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films” (Metz, 1982, p. 7). From this perspective, it is then important to include within any analysis of genre the non-cinematic discursive elements – that is, marketing strategies, fan literature and so on, that exist outside the theatre and runtime of the film – that nevertheless pertain to genre (or any film within it) as a broader commodity. This links back to Tudor's point mentioned earlier, that “common consensus” can be utilised by the critic in deciding what constitutes a particular genre. When evidence for “common consensus” regarding what horror film is, for example, is sought in the labelling of shelves in DVD stores etc., what we are in fact looking at are instances of extra-filmic discursive articulations of the horror genre. This reiterates the point that genres are discursive structures more than formal structures, and that those discursive structures exceed the filmic text itself, and this means the generic text is “attached” to a cultural context, in that its genre adheres to textual and non-textual elements within a context.

V

Adopting a poststructuralist perspective entails placing as much emphasis on the subject in culture as it does the text, because discourse is a negotiation of shared meaning within culture inhabited by individual subjects. The fact the genre is discursive means that it can be understood as being a mechanism in the larger machine of meaning production, and to come to understand in more detail the function of genre in the generation of authentically meaningful reality. The centrality of discursive structures in creating meaning at the level of the subject is evident in a certain kind of ‘meaning slippage’ that occurs when a subject from within one cultural context does not recognise in one object the same thing as a subject in another cultural context. Take, for example, this Monty-Python-esque, real-life encounter of

my pet-loving mother with a dog owner with little knowledge of English while on holiday in Vietnam: Coming across a man with a dog on a leash, she was aware that dogs are bred for eating and, not wanting to offend, she questioned local man with vigorous gesticulation: “Excuse me...! May I play with your dog? Is this dog a friend? Or is he food? Friend ...? Or food ...?”

The webcomic XKCD has a strip that is pertinent to the illustration of the function of discourse in creating meaning out of the world around us:



(XKCD and Munroe, n.d.)

The Lego house is constituted as a “house” only inasmuch as it is consistent with the existing symbolic structures of the society in which it comes to be meaningful, because there are discursive conventions that exist that enable us to recognise its significance. Once language recognises the Lego house, it becomes itself, which it wasn't before. Before the house was named as such, the house did not exist. An arrangement of plastic bricks existed, but the house did not. It could be argued in this case (which is not always the case) that the material object came into existence defined from the start, because it was likely that it was built from the start with the intention for it to be a house, and this could be considered evidence that the meaning is inherent in the object. However, this only serves to indicate two things: that the idea of the house in fact preceded the material object in the mind of the builder, which created the conditions for its existence as a “house” once materially realised; and secondly that the idea or, more accurately, the sign of the Lego “house” does not necessarily require materiality to exist, whereas the material object does require the word and the idea (or the

signifier and signified that equal the sign) of “house” to exist as a house, rather than an arrangement of bricks. Thus, the sign precedes the empirical object.

The girl figure applies the other character's deconstructionist argument to her subjectivity, causing her to come momentarily to understand her existence as being dependent only on the *idea* of selfhood, on its particular arrangement as a named entity within language, rather than on the material arrangement of her body parts. Clearly, this shows that what is important if we want to understand anything, from Lego houses to notions of subjectivity, is that everything exists primarily as a construct of language, as a convention. The cartoon functions in many ways as a four-frame summary of much of Derrida's argument in *Structure, Sign and Play*. (Derrida, 1993)

The remake film is transnational in nature, and the way in which discourse functions within to rationalise such discursive discrepancies in relation to transnationality can be illustrated by continuing to play with Lego houses. If I were to ask a certain person living in rural Transkei, for example, to build a representation of a typical habitation from Lego (i.e. a representation of a habitation that draws upon the communicative frameworks of his or her cultural and physical environment), he or she would likely build a “house” that a suburban mid-Western American, for example, would have trouble recognising as such. It would (if I'm permitted to suspend geometric disbelief) be a round home with a conical roof. The American might posit interpretations like: a circus tent, or the top of a space rocket, for example. Alternatively its existence as a “natural” object might remain unstable, or it could possibly be regarded simply as an abstract shape, or even rejected as “nothing but a bunch of bricks stuck together”, as nonsense, as being meaningless. There are two possible resolutions to this scenario:

Firstly, an American could be provided with information regarding the proper framework for recognising it as a house, that is, by providing a contextual statement even as general as “you would find this in Africa”, in which case he or she might suddenly recognise the object. It might suddenly acquire meaning, or come into focus as a sign, simultaneously hailing the meaningful existence of its referent by giving it a name. The important element to note in this scenario is that the house would not be understood simply as a house, but as ‘not-an-American’ kind of house, a house that always needs the discursive qualifier of “African”. In other words, an American house is the thing that is authentic, without need of a qualifier. The “African” home will exist at all in a category that excludes it from symbolic “ordinariness”. This resolution could be said to equate to the process of the ascription of the

designation “foreign film” to, in the case of this study's object, an original Asian horror film. The film could then be found to be meaningful in a way that acknowledges discursive rifts. In other words, contradictorily becoming meaningful by being named as being to some extent non-meaningful within the culture of reception. This then permits, for example, the finding ‘funny’ of an earnest Chinese melodrama, in both senses of the word.

Secondly, another American might break down the African house and rebuild it from scratch, including perhaps such features as window boxes and a front porch that would help it cohere with the discursive reality felt to be authentic. This resolution could be considered analogous to the process of remaking a film. The film's various elements – plot, character, language, cinematic conventions, setting etcetera – must be aligned with the discourses of mainstream western film by remaking it. This means the film can be found meaningful according to the discourse that pervades cultural life. Discourse is indeed becoming increasingly transnational thanks to the confluence of international cultures through primarily digital media, but it would be naive to believe that we have could, would or should ever arrive at global, transnational discursive homogeneity. The function of remaking a ‘foreign’ film is to bring it into line with the culturally specific and well established discursive structures of horror film, becoming authentic as a diegetic world through its relation to a pre-existing world. (Its protagonists speak the appropriate language, and possess recognisable characteristics and habits). A text whose diegetic reality does not conform to discursive logic will always be fundamentally ‘illogical’ (Neale, 1980) to the genre, since it is not attached to its interpretative framework.

## VI

Neale uses the term “verisimilitude”, drawing from Todorov’s *Poetic of Prose* (1977) to elaborate on the way in which verisimilitude is created by generic conventions. This verisimilitude is constituted of pro- and extra-filmic elements, including those constructs that cumulatively develop in the mind of the viewer. Verisimilitudes create “systems

and forms of plausibility, motivation and belief. ‘Verisimilitude’ means ‘probable’, ‘plausible’ or ‘likely’. In addition, it entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and therefore probable (or probable and therefore appropriate [...]) Regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre, bursting into song is appropriate, therefore probable – therefore believable – in a musical, but not in a war film or a thriller [...]) As such these regimes entail rules, norms and laws. Singing in a musical is not just probable, it is obligatory; it is not just likely to occur, it is bound to (Neale, 2000, p. 158).



This notion of plausibility and probability in terms of what is appropriate and what is “bound” to occur, and how this is related to the experience of authenticity in reality more broadly, will be revisited throughout this work. But remaining focused for now on the film text itself, it is possible to see the autonomy and idiosyncrasy of such logics of plausibility in, for example, the “reality” of the Western (to use Neale’s example), which has as its referent the social/historical reality of the American west, in fact the “reality” constituted by the Western films largely autonomous from the historical reality to which it refers. In other words, they construct imagined realities that may as well exist empirically, and are inhabited by viewers through their identification with filmic subjects who assume its regimes of plausibility. But these regimes are not required to be true to other aspects of reality. Todorov says “the verisimilar

is not a relation between discourse and its referent (the relation of truth), but between discourse and what the readers believe is true. The relation here is established between the work and a scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership” (Todorov, 1981, p. 19).

This means that the diegetic verisimilitude of the war film that is “inspired by” (to use a familiar opening phrase) actual historical events is afforded the same truth and affective legitimacy in the interaction between the viewer’s subjectivity and the onscreen events, as the futuristic dystopia seen in films such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982). It could be said, then, that the relationship of the latter with empirical reality should be considered to be that of “might” – as in might happen – and of the former, “might have” rather than “did”, since the viewing experience requires us to award a certain conditional validity to both these parallel filmic universes. They do, however, interact and overlap with the lived social realities of the viewer, in that genres and their meanings have an active role and a social effectiveness of their own, to the extent that they function actively as components within the construction of sociohistorical reality. They are determining factors, not simply determined ones.

Though horror film does not refer (necessarily) to a particular historical reality, it does maintain a relationship with experienced, 'non-filmic' reality. The interaction described above can be seen in relation to horror film in the common need of the terrified viewers to assert, in a way that betrays an uncertainty, that “It's only a movie!” The viewer knows the existence of monsters is contained in the separate diegetic reality of the horror film, but is nevertheless likely to check behind the curtain before they go to sleep after having watched a scary film. The verisimilitude of the horror film 'world' is therefore afforded, on an affective and discursive level, legitimacy as an alternative reality, with its own coherent symbolic

structures and rules, and to the extent that it has the potential to threaten to overlap with the material reality of the viewer. This is reinforced by the repeated appearance of this generic verisimilitude in multiple texts over time. Each film that is created in generic relation to the existing corpus elaborates on, complicates and verifies this “genre reality” by expanding the imagined space it occupies. Each text adds more characters that inhabit this other world, and more events and landmarks, more complexity, so that it is continually expanding its borders and history, making it increasingly possible for the viewer to perceive it to be as limitless as his or her own material reality, and for it to simultaneously become more familiar and authentic.

## PART TWO

### I

Having taken Neale’s notion of genre as discourse into serious consideration, we can move towards a more specific look at the sample films which may seem idiosyncratic when viewed apart from each other, but which when viewed in juxtaposition reveal themselves to “horrify” along strictly codified generic lines. When viewed as a grouping of texts, certain patterns emerge that illustrate the cumulative nature of the construction of its generic verisimilitude that come to be accepted as authentic. If the larger verisimilitudinous world of the Hollywood horror film were a haunted house, the particular verisimilitudinous world of the Asian horror film remake is just one dark and eerie corridor. It exists as just one node in the ever growing tree of the horror canon, but as such shares many of its traditional conventions, from gloomy *mise-en-scène*, to the use of the “Lewton Bus” device<sup>2</sup>. Indisputably, given the name of the genre, the discourses of horror film are unusually defined by the feature of existing primarily to elicit the experience of terror and disgust in the viewer. Notions

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<sup>2</sup> The “Lewton Bus” ‘derives from a scene [in *Cat People* (Tourneur, 1942)] in which Irena, is following her love rival, Alice. At the height of the scene, just as the audience is expecting Irena to turn into a panther at any second, the camera focuses on Alice’s terrified face, and a hissing sound breaks the silence. It is a regular bus pulling up front of screen. It is a false shock, which completely dissipates the tension and has become a widely imitated technique that is used to this day.’ (Blake and Bailey, 2013, p. 15)

Similarly, and consistent with the conventions of the genre, in *The Grudge*, Karen approaches an ominously taped-up cupboard (which later turns out to be the entrance to an attic full of corpses). Suspense is carefully built up until she finally opens the cupboard to be startled by a loud, terrifying hissing, which turns out to be nothing but a cat – albeit a black, panther-like domestic feline.

regarding the nature of the horror genre are constantly shifting, creating new conceptual categories in order to keep on scaring the audience. We might therefore think about horror as an umbrella term encompassing several different sub-categories of horror film, all united by their capacity to horrify, rather than their formal conventions. This already suggests that if we want to know more about genre, we ought to find out more about the subject. But the *need* to be horrified by horror film will enter into this discussion at a later stage, and we will remain with the text for the time being, and look at the discursive particularities that work around this lust for awful pleasure. Because even though the only significantly common factor across the broad spectrum of horror subgenres is indeed the experience of “horror”, it is nevertheless a genre that, despite its vague qualifier, has developed along quite particularly rigid aesthetic lines. The Asian horror film remake is no exception to this, and it ought to be considered in context. The lineage of most horror subgenres is easily traceable, and the conventional structure and tropes (within each subgenre) are quite robust and identifiable, perhaps more than most genres. (Comedy, for example, is equally founded upon the elicitation of a particular emotional effect, but its iconographic, narrative and stylistic conventions are less rigid than those of horror.) The codification of horror and its subgenres is particularly ritualistic, being perhaps as much a tradition as a genre; when viewed through the lens of discourse, simply means horror has more firmly established discursive foundations than other contemporary film genres. Indeed, the strong tendency towards franchising, serialisation and remakes in the genre of horror points highly specific and familiar lines along which the genre is codified. The evolution of these discursive lines can be cursorily illustrated by a brief look at the history of horror texts leading up to the production of these Asian horror remakes, which represent the intersection of these discursive conventions with a different national horror cinema.

A remake is not a copy, but a reworking of a text with which it has an explicit relationship and which preceded it chronologically. Each of the remakes at which I am looking have explicit links to and overlaps with the films that are termed “original”, and there exist concrete interconnections between all of the sample films. Gore Verbinski’s Hollywood version of *The Ring* (2002) is a remake of the 1998 Japanese film *Ringu*, directed by Hideo Nakata. The original film was based on a novel of the same name by Koji Suzuki, which draws on Japanese folklore, particularly the story of *Bancho Sarayashi*. The sequel to the American version, *The Ring 2* (2005), was directed in Hollywood by Nakata himself, who also directed the Japanese sequel, *Ring 2* (1999). A year after the first Japanese version was released, a South Korean film entitled *The Ring Virus* was released, not as a remake, but as an alternative adaptation of the novel. *Dark Water* (2005), directed by Walter Salles, is a

remake of *Honogurai Mizu no soko kara* (2002), which was also directed by Nakata, and also based on a short story by Koji Suzuki. *The Grudge* (2004) is a remake of the Japanese film, *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002), both of which were directed by Takashi Shimizu. All the “remake” films are “official”, inasmuch as they acquired the legal film rights from the original producers.

As stated in the introduction, I will place more analytical emphasis on the Western adaptation than the Japanese or Korean counterparts, because this will not be a comparative study. What might prove to be rather more interesting than looking at what the Western horror film looks like in relation to the Asian horror film is the transposition of narrative from one to the other. In Jose Luis Borges fictive literary review of a line-by-line, identical “remake” of Cervante’s *Don Quixote* (Saavedra, 1997), called *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (Borges, 1964), the reviewer describes how Menard, the second author of the *Quixote*, must have felt: “To be, in some way, Cervantes and to arrive at *Don Quixote* seemed to him less arduous – and consequently less interesting – than to continue being Pierre Menard and to arrive at *Don Quixote* through the experiences of Menard.” Later, Menard continues in his own words, “to compose *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary and perhaps inevitable undertaking; at the beginning of the twentieth century it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have passed, charged with the most complex happening – among them, to mention only one, that same *Don Quixote*.” The reviewer’s conclusion is that (even though the texts are identical twins), “In spite of [this], the fragmentary *Don Quixote* of Menard is more subtle than that of Cervantes”. He goes on to discuss the details of this subtlety, all based on the foundational point that for Cervantes, historical reality is itself the supposed locus of truth, while for Menard, Cervante’s history is the point of reference for measuring the quality of authenticity. Though these particular remakes are not precise copies, the inextricable relationship of the text to its discursive home and supposed point of origination across time and space is apparent from the example of Borges story.

Rather than 300 years between “original” and “adaptation”, in this case it is the Pacific Ocean that separates the cultural location of the two texts. It is in this kind of subtlety in the relationship between authenticity, originality, context and intertextuality that I will be interested. It would therefore be useful, for contextualisation’s sake, to look briefly at the history of the horror film in a Western context, to understand the territory into which the original Japanese and Korean films are introduced to produce the remake films.

## II

The simultaneous particularity and diversity of the conventions of horror is a result of its longevity (Jancovich, 2002). One of the earliest film genres, horror has also been, from the very start, an especially transnational genre. However the borrowing and exchange of narratives is a process that long predates cinema. Stories and ways of telling them have never respected geopolitical borders, and the history of the horror genre was complex long before even the invention of the film camera. Taking a simple teleological view of the textual histories of either America, Japan or Korea (the nations from which all the sample texts emerge), rather than understanding the centuries-long intertwining story traditions across various media over time would be unwise. There is no “original” cinema, in terms of national cinemas; in fact, the first French horror film and the first Japanese horror films were made at roughly the same time, with Méliés’ film *Le Manoir du Diable* in 1896, and both *Bake Jizo* and *Shinin no Sosei* in 1898 (Dixon, 2010, p. 4.). And while the notion of “originality” will come to be complicated later, at this stage in the argument, the only distinction I make between the “original” and “remake” is in very specific and pragmatic terms.

The broadly accepted account of the journey the Western horror film began, as mentioned, with early forays into “the shocking” by early directors such as Georges Méliés. But the genre only really took flight with the emergence of Expressionism in Germany around 1916. A dark movement, the imagery of expressionism was inspired by the horrors of the Great War, and the filmic manifestation of Expressionism was characterised by a highly stylised moodiness, created through chiaroscuro lighting, jarring geometric lines, stark graphic imagery, jarring angles and so on. Films like *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1929) and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Wiene, 1921) pioneered the Gothic-inspired horror aesthetic of early horror cinema. The aftermath of the First World War and the rise of the Nazis in Germany meant that many directors migrated to Hollywood in the 1930s, taking with them this dark, frightening imagery. This imagery had great appeal to a downtrodden American market, which was suffering the effects of the Great depression. Gothic literature-inspired films like Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) took hold of the popular imagination and spawned numerous spinoffs and memorable horror stars like Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. This formative time for the horror film is considered a “golden age” of horror, in that it represents the classic, founding aesthetic that remained for the most part conventionally rigid as a result of the Fordist Hollywood structures of the time which preferred audiences to be completely orientated as to the kinds of film they’d be viewing.

Horror film of the 1950s, with the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki fresh in the popular imagination, and post-war acceleration of technology, was characterised by the proliferation of apocalyptic “monster” films featuring mutant or generally deviant creatures of varying kinds and a marriage between the science fiction film and the horror to create dystopian visions of the future. The Second World War also brought Japanese culture to the fore of the Western imagination; we see early transnationality in the genre in films such as *Gojira* (Honda, 1954), the giant reptilian protagonist of which is entrenched in Western horror discourse, having been re-released in 1956 in the USA as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (Honda). In 1960, the “master of suspense”, Alfred Hitchcock, initiated the slasher genre with the psychologically intense, but also viscerally affective, *Psycho*.

The late 1950s saw the decline of the studio system in Hollywood, technological developments occurred in the medium that made it far cheaper to produce films, and the advent of television changed the face of horror film dramatically. Late night weekend TV slots known popularly as “Creature Features” helped develop audience tastes and horror film literacy from the sixties till the eighties. During these slots, TV aired classic and cult Hollywood horror from the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese giant monster movies, the British Hammer films (named after Hammer Studios), slashers and so on, which contributed significantly to the intertextual, transnational aesthetic of the genre, particularly among teens. In 1968, George Romero released the first zombie film *The Night of the Living Dead*, which gave birth to one of the better favoured genres of the present day. It was with Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* in 1968 and *The Exorcist* (1973) that the occult film really took hold as a subgenre of horror in Hollywood. Hauntings and ghosts and other such supernatural entities had made appearances before, but it was during this era that the figure of the devil and demonic possessions took a central thematic position in the horror genre. (*A History of Horror with Mark Gatiss*, 2010; Cherry, 2009; Dixon, 2010)

Gore as a feature of the horror came into its own following the Vietnam War, during which the press coverage had become more realistic and visceral than any other. It was followed through the 1970s and 1980s by a wave of corporeally violent films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977), *Halloween* (1978), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) and Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* films. The large number of low-grade slasher films proliferated throughout the eighties and into the nineties, leading to what seemed to be the decline of the genre, until it took on a more ironic, self-reflexive and intertextual tone in films such as Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996). This reflexivity continued into the 2000s, accelerated in various ways by the development of

digital media and increases in global cultural flows and, since the turn of the century, horror film has largely comprised remakes (of both foreign and classic horror) and franchised films made by large studios that didn't really extend the conventions of the genre in any significant way but invested larger budgets than had been seen in the genre for decades. Perhaps the only really significant new development in the genre in recent years is that of the "torture" film, a wave of extremely explicitly violent films, initiated by texts such as *Saw* (Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Roth, 2006).

Other national cinemas have developed their own styles and genres in relation to their own cultural contexts, and while the focus in Western genre theory is on Hollywood cinema, genre is also an integral component of other national cinemas. Spanish, Russian, Brazilian and South African cinemas, to name a few, possess their own horror canon, with their own culturally relevant monsters. "J-Horror" is the term applied in Western film-fan discourse to describe horror that has originated in Japan. It is, obviously, not a term that is used in Japan to describe its own horror cinema, and the conceptions of the makeup of the horror genre within the country that are brought under the umbrella of "J-Horror" in the West mostly do not encompass the complexity of the genre within its own cultural context. The horror genre in Japan is at least equally idiosyncratic and mature as that of Hollywood's, having existed for equally long, and having intersected with it over the course of film history. Thematically, Japanese horror is strongly characterised by the presence of ghosts, which are popular in Japanese folklore. While Gothic literature was likely one of the strongest textual traditions that lay the foundations for the genre in the West, it was largely out of the traditional theatre traditions of Kabuki and Noh that the imagery and conventions of the Japanese horror originated (McRoy, 2005, p. 16).

### III

Filmmakers likely began turning to the remake film as a means of escaping the aesthetic deadlock of horror cinema around the turn of the century, which, having been very enthusiastically embraced and regurgitated throughout film history, had seemed to exhaust its own potential. It seemed to have run out of variables to stimulate the economy of difference and repetition. Gore Verbinski, the director of *The Ring*, mentions in an interview that "the horror genre has just been reinvented so many times that it's hard to set a shot, and not feel like it's a shot in someone else's movie when you're making a horror film." ("Gore Verbinski - Biography," n.d.) Despite the success of the genre as a highly codified system of expectations, the necessity for newness in the first-degree experience of authenticity, meant

that filmmakers turned towards successful narratives from elsewhere and else-when to introduce new variables to the genre which had attained cult status in the US.

The centre of many subgeneric shifts in the horror genre lies in the manifestation of the “monster” – whether it be the creature feature, the vampire film, or the zombie movie, the discursive reality of the film orientates itself around the particularity of the monster, and then structures the plausibility of the verisimilitude around its existence. In the slasher film, the discursive structures are oriented around the threat of murder by a deranged human being, and this occurring within a self-enclosed logical world in which people unflinchingly make the ordinarily “illogical” decision run towards the threat, instead of away from it, for example, or to always choose to run in stilettos instead of removing them, for example. The most reliable connection between a set of horror films lies inevitably in what kind of threat is being presented, what space this threat usually inhabits, and how this threat is interacted with by the characters.

I will now look at the specific ways in which the logical reality of the Asian horror film remake is constructed based on certain conventional, common structures of meaning. The first act in seeking out the rules, or broad discursive connections, should be to examine the recurrent “themes” or motifs – narrative, visual, sound themes – in *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and *Dark Water* to establish on what basis the objects and subjects therein are named or represented. If we are shown a house, what kind of house is it? Why a house? Why this house in particular? If we find ourselves looking at a table, what kind of table is it? By what rules does this reality operate? What regimes of plausibility generate the authenticity of the horrifying world in which strange ghosts are out to get you?

All three films that form the basis of this study are essentially focussed in the notion of a curse, which is enacted in the form of the haunting presence of a vengeful female ghost who has a strong attachment to particular physical spaces and objects. The discursive rules of this reality in which such ghosts exist are defined by assuming plausibility and authenticity for their existence within the logic of that reality. The emergence of any particular monster is interconnected with wider discourses in the society. It articulates primal fears in discursive forms, and if we seek out the discursive patterns across the three films, we will know more about the features of this discursive logic and how it goes about realising the events, objects and subjects of the films as sensible to a viewer embedded in a cultural context defined by quite contingent values and expectations.



A main feature of these three films is the presence of the fulfilment (or non-fulfilment) of maternal responsibilities as a major narrative theme. Each ghost is motivated in her vengefulness by failed motherhood: Samara was murdered by her adopted mother. Kayako's emotional unfaithfulness to her husband brings about her own death as well as that of her child, Natasha was forsaken by her mother. Each of the female protagonists is similarly preoccupied by her own maternal function. Dahlia in *The Grudge* desperately seeks to retain custody of her daughter Cessie. In *The Ring*, Rachel is a single mother who struggles to be present in her son Aidan's life. In *The Grudge*, Karen works in the maternal position of a home carer. I will interrogate in more depth the relation of familial formations to narrative in the next section, but it suffices to say that the three films collectively, through the repetition of this image of mother and child, constructs a common reality in which a purgatory-type dimension exists that is populated by dead women and children, and which is discursively constituted as authentic with each iteration thereof. This does not happen spontaneously or in isolation, but in relation to a long tradition of occult horror, as well as more generally religious or spiritual discourses, which cumulatively adds to the legitimacy of the underworld in the mind of the viewer, who will not find it unexpected and therefore implausible.

Another strong narrative opposition that binds the films together is that of sanity versus madness based on the progressive believability of the ghost. In *The Grudge*, Karen sees the ghost of Kayako and is mistakenly understood to have been traumatised by witnessing the death-by-haunting of the aged Emma, as she is found shivering, wide-eyed and silent in a corner. In *The Ring*, Katie's friend, Becca, is institutionalised after becoming distant and detached from reality, gazing at the world with blank disinterest. In *Dark Water*, Dahlia fights a custody battle for Cessie, the anxiety around which is increasingly aggravated by her supposedly delusional experience of Natasha's ghost. The tension between the supernatural and the pathological is central to Asian horror film remake, and the viewer is encouraged to share this psychological/ontological instability through visual style that is characterised by sympathetically disorienting shots that are characterised by the glance, Dutch angles, blur and other similar devices that unsettle the viewer's ability to explain the events of the narrative. Ironically, despite being regarded as one of the more terrifying of recent Hollywood horrors, *The Ring* only received a PG13 rating in the United States, because so much of its terror takes place off-screen. The drama of the Asian horror film remake narrative follows the exposition of the ghost as increasingly plausible by providing an account for its motives as a human subject, and we move from a sense of madness to a sense of privileged knowing. This privileged knowing is something that is, in *The Ring* and *Dark*

*Water*, initially the preserve of children, who are less immersed in the structures of language than mature adult social subjects. It is the destabilisation of what is *supposed* to be there in the mind of the adult that causes distress, the unfamiliarity, the disruption of expectation. However, the *onryō*<sup>3</sup>-inspired Hollywood ghost is slowly given plausibility both within the text, by discursive explication, and across the three texts through its recurrence, which generates expectation and therefore a place within western discourse.

The particularity of the manifestation of the ghostly form is perhaps the strongest common visual motif across the three films. Natasha, Kayako and Samara are all signified most strikingly by long, wet dark hair. Although each is made plausible via different means, as a body of films that explicitly reference original texts from Japan, there can be no mistaking the aesthetic carry-over from the image of the *onryō* in Japanese folklore and related texts. Ringletted blonde women and children wouldn't do because they are familiarly associated with discourses of the angelic in the west, rather than the demonic - along the discursive lines of light and dark being associated with good and evil. (Though in other horror films, such as *The Orphanage* (Bayona, 2008) or *Children of the Corn* (Kiersch, 1984), the cherub-like representation of possessed and demonic children functions to unsettle by subversion and reinterpretation on the familiarly harmless, in order to shock.) Each of the *onryō*-inspired Hollywood ghosts is made plausible within native discourse in a different way, though nevertheless resulting collectively in the one generic convention. Natasha, a ghostly resident of Roosevelt Island in New York City, is an olive skinned child from an Eastern European family. Samara, whose biological heritage is not known, possesses the pale-skinned gothic appearance of a brunette child who does not enjoy much time in the sunshine. The Grudge is set in Japan around the lives of US ex-pats, so Kayako is authentically Japanese, and has the dark locks and fair complexion ordinary to her ethnicity. This frightening new ghost captured the imagination of the Hollywood audience, spawning sequels and franchises, because of uncanny strangeness that both intrigues and frightens. Although this iconography was not so new that it could not be pulled back into the realm of meaning, or familiar discourse. Certainly, for example, the ghost of Regan MacNeil (the protagonist one of the most memorable Occult horrors of the last century, *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), can be seen in the dark bedraggled hair and strange contorted movements

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<sup>3</sup> The “onryō is a mythological spirit from Japanese folklore who is able to return to the physical world in order to seek vengeance. While male Onryō can be found, mainly in kabuki, the majority are women. Powerless in the physical world, they often suffer at the capricious whims of their male lovers. In death they become strong.” (“Onryō,” 2013)

of Kayako as she descends the stairs to come after Karen. This connection subtly functions to associate it with, and therefore rhizomatically expand, the Occult horror verisimilitude by adding to it a place for ghosts that look like Samara, Natasha and Kayako. Ozawa discusses the appeal and origin of the *onryō* as it emerged into popular western culture: He says that besides her appearance:

Sadako's (and *Ringu's*) popularity in Japan, and the origin of the terror owes much to her bodily movement, the grotesqueness in her way of crawling into the room. This style of movement has been strongly associated with ghosts in the Japanese horror films made in the past decade. It originates in the Japanese experimental avant-garde dance performance style, "Ankoku Butoh" ("Dance of Darkness") which was founded by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno around 1960s. (Ozawa, 2006)

The discovery of this particular dance style in the west, according to Jean Viala, has

been a great shock for many Westerners - and in no way comparable to what the Western dance revolutionaries (such as Merce Cunningham or Pina Bausch) are offering [...] The movement began in the spirit of revolt [...] They did not want to speak through the body, but instead let the body speak for itself, to disclose truth, to reveal itself in all its authenticity and depth, rejecting the superficiality of everyday life. A great deal of emphasis was placed on transformations, the only way to sublimate the body, whose meaning seemed lost in the banality of ordinary existence. (Viala and Masson-Sekine, 1998)

This quote not only highlights how the generically foreign can cause ruptures in the fabric of discursive meaning by exposing the arbitrariness of native meaning, but it also suggests that the body indeed possesses a pre-signifying meaning, which in relation to poststructuralist linguistics, it does not. For poststructuralism all meaning emerges from autonomous and anterior structures of meaning, and that meaning inheres to no object. However, the dancers' creative manifesto and Viala's uncritical validation thereof, unwittingly reveals that they see the body as indeed having some form of essential meaning. This strategy betrays both the centrality of the pursuit of the empty signifier of intrinsic, non-referential meaning in and from the body to the life of a speaking subject, and illustrates the way in which the libidinal forces of the subject to create/express/communicate are driven by a sense of having lost some original authenticity. It does, however, also point to an intuition that the body can indeed, in some way, express itself on its own terms. These ideas will gain traction as this work moves through other theoretical paradigms.

Architectural structures, and the attachment of ghosts thereto, are also integral to the iconography of the Asian horror film remake. The haunted house is one of the more ancient tropes of the horror film, which extends into extra-filmic events, such as the fairground house of horrors. The fixation on haunted houses is related to the defamiliarisation of the

notion of “home”, which, as illustrated in the example of Lego houses, which are essentially meaningless physical structures onto which are imposed notions of safety, familiarity and comfort. This poem by Elizabeth Jennings (1955) illustrates beautifully the fearful emptiness that lies beneath the surface of the spaces that signify home to us:

Moving House

Soon the house will be filled again,  
Our boxes have been carried off,  
The walls are bare, we only leave  
White patches where our pictures hung.  
Dust settles widely now among  
The places where we used to move.

And though we were most glad to go  
We want to leave some hint behind,  
Nothing so powerful as a ghost  
But some part of us to remind  
New tenants whom we do not know  
That the old house is not resigned

To wind and dust and spaces cut  
Clean where our furniture was put.  
We want to flourish our old selves  
And frighten the new owners, but  
We quite forget that they will be glad  
To find some trace upon the shelves  
Of our own past, that what they dread,  
Like us, is space untenanted.

In both *The Grudge* and *Dark Water*, moving house and finding ones sense of homeliness under contestation by strange beings from another dimension who lay equal claim to the same space, is a strong narrative feature. According to Curtis, the project

of architecture is to create structures, spaces and surfaces in which the past can dwell, while at the same time deploying the aesthetic and functional imperatives of the present. [...] The dialectic of past and present is a structuring principle of architecture and closely resembles the tensions of starting anew and being haunted that have been popular cinematic themes since the earliest public screening of moving pictures. (Curtis, 2009, p. 7)

Homes become sites of the battle for ownership and familiarity, which functions to avoid the acknowledgement of the essentially “bare walls”. In *The Ring*, there is no moving of houses as such, but Samara’s ghost is indeed fixated on the physical space of the farm that was her home and also the scene of her death, particularly the source of the image of the ring itself, which is revealed ultimately to be the location of Samara’s final resting place, a deep stone well covered over with a heavy circular stone. In an interestingly relevant scene, Rachel discovers the tiny barn loft that was Samara’s childhood bedroom, or rather, prison. At first it seems a dusty and forgotten space until Rachel begins to tear away at the bland wallpaper to reveal the shape of a burning tree etched into the wooden walls. An image from Samara’s subjective experience of life, the tree serves to say to any visitor that “I was here. This space is mine. I belong here.” The home is associated with the notion of family. The ghosts refuse to leave the building because these spaces are permeated with the expectation of fulfilment of the desire for familial bonds. But although structures that are homes are permeated with humanity, they remain, at their essence cold and static, animated and warmed only by the discursive interaction of human beings. In this contradiction lies the ever present possibility of the experience of the uncanny. Curtis goes on to say that,

the house is at its most mysterious when it is most familiar. Like film, architecture juxtaposes incompatible elements into a fragile but plausible unity that is held together by points of view and familiar narratives: an uneasy perspectival reality that is brought into crisis by the onset of a ‘haunting’. [... The haunted house is] a structure within which familiarity and extreme anxiety come together, where ‘doubling’ is brought to a crisis through reflections, encounters and repetition.... (Curtis, 2009, p. 9)

This observation of plausibility being held together by familiar narratives is precisely the nature of Neale’s notion of verisimilitude in genre, and this point by illustrates fragility of the quite arbitrary discursive structures that create the experience of authenticity. The broader notion of the anxiety is produced by an intrusion of different discursive articulations of a familiar signifier. Genericity neutralises contestation over meaning so as to preserve the authenticity of a particular experience of reality and exorcises the ghosts, so to speak.

In *Dark Water*, Natasha remains attached to the block of flats in which she lives, having been “left behind” by her family. It emerges later that, as a result of parental neglect, she drowned in a water tower on the roof of the building (a death not dissimilar to Samara’s). The Brutalist architecture of Roosevelt Island is a central aspect of the narrative in the film. The apartment block is represented as a claustrophobic, highly structured space in which functionality far exceeds any aesthetic considerations. On the horizontal axis, the building is characterised by harsh geometric lines which recede down corridors to interior vanishing

points, while on the vertical axis, the movements of the elevator emphasize the sameness of each floor (with the uncanny experience of seeing the same figure standing on the other side of the glass every floor it passes), which creates the sense of gridlines or fencing, which emphasises the rigidity of the structures of daily functionality. This intertwines with Dahlia's sense of societal entrapment as she battles (literally) with the figure of the father in the house of the law, the courtroom, to keep her daughter Cessie. These inflexible structures are however saturated by another of the more significant tropes of the genre, the increasing flow of water that seems to emanate from some other, dark feminine space of maternity into which Dahlia is ultimately absorbed. Water is a strong feature in *The Ring*, being thematically linked also with maternity and death, as opposed to paternally rigid structures. The ghost disrupts the clearly the defined discursive and structural notion of the home by leaking out and seeping through its arbitrary constructions.

#### IV

These examples ought to suffice as a means of explaining the ways in which these films connect with each other to construct expectations, and therefore plausibility, which is essentially nothing more than reality living up to (or being worked into) a set of pre-existing expectations. There are indeed numerous other such examples of pattern that could be drawn from the texts, but this would see me repeating myself, and in order to keep this generic work alive, I need to introduce a change. This discussion has thus far remained focussed on the texts and the patterns that dominate its structures, without much mention of the viewer subject as the entity who engages therewith, and little why these kinds of repetition are so fundamental to the experience of a verisimilitude. The complexity of the subject's interior desires seems an interesting new monster with which to engage, to introduce into this narrative. How do these patterns relate to the life of the subject beyond its interaction with film genre? Surely if the subject has need of repetition for plausibility in film, the same must be true of other experience in the life of the being in culture? The reason that the question of the subjects desires cannot be answered from within poststructuralist genre theory, because it does not venture into such territory, remaining focussed on the centrality and dynamism of language in creating meaning in culture. In order to know more about why the social subject has such a fetish for repetition, the discipline of psychoanalysis is likely to be a more appropriate framework to apply, and it is to psychoanalysis that I will now turn in looking for more answers.

## CHAPTER 2: The Asian Horror Film Remake and Repetition

### INTRODUCTION

Following on from the argument that genre is discursive in its construction of verisimilitudinous realities, the first part of this chapter works through some of the main principles of psychoanalysis. It seeks to establish the function of discourse on the level of the subject in culture, as a potential angle in coming to terms with the phenomenon of the Asian horror film remake. By using the psychoanalytic division of experiential registers of the Imaginary, Real and Symbolic, this section intends to establish a connection between the genre film, the way in which meaning is generated and perpetuated, and the subject's experience of an authentic, or original, reality in culture, if culture is defined as an intersubjective network of shared meaning.

The second part of this chapter juxtaposes some of these central notions more specifically with the texts in question, at various levels of diegetic reality. It seeks to explore the ways in which symbolic material is repeated in and around the texts themselves, and to what end, as a means of seeing the Asian horror film remake in context and as an instance of meaning-production in culture. In displacing the centrality of the text itself in the analysis of the function of genre onto the discursive subject, so too is the primacy of the theoretical text since the scholarly work is equally generic, and equally constitutive of generic verisimilitude in its articulation of reality. If neither is proof of the other, this means moving towards a juxtaposition of theory and text in order to examine how they react to each other in context.

## PART ONE

### I

The previous section's description of the disparity between two different cultural subjects' making sense of the same simple Lego house, could hold the quite severe possibility of shaking the subject's faith in the verity of reality. If one were to discover that a house one has always taken for granted as being a house has in fact existed all along as something entirely differently meaningful in relation to another subject, how then could one ever be certain of one's ability to call anything a meaningful name at all – including oneself? The very idea that “I may not be what I think I am” is frightening, and arises from a deep intrinsic human need to maintain a coherently meaningful reality, and, like all other discourse, genre works to regulate the intrusion of the fundamentally meaningless into culture. The purpose of this chapter is to look towards that which lies outside, underneath and at the heart of the structures of language – the infinitely chaotic, traumatic and unfathomable universe that is beyond comprehension, and which is walled off by discursive signification in, for example, the Asian horror film remake. Discourse exists as a means of ensuring that meaning can be to some extent shared, and turning to psychoanalysis offers the possibility of investigating that which lies beyond discourse, and how genre might be implicated in the need to name the unnameable.

It might first be worthwhile to clarify some of the fundamental terms in Lacanian theory, beginning with the three registers of human experience, which form the foundation for the majority of his assertions. According to Lacan, there are three primary registers at play in the realm of human experience: the “Imaginary”, the “Symbolic”, and the “Real”. The centrality of language to the process of subjectification should become clearer as these registers are outlined below.

#### *The Imaginary*

The Imaginary is the domain of visual recognition, in which the subject becomes able to recognise him or herself and objects in the world around him or her. In order for infants to master their bodily functions, it is necessary that they come to recognise themselves imaginatively as entire, whole agents, rather than as fragmented beings whose physical reactions to material stimuli are independent from one another and outside of their command. However, this requires them to create an image of self that is outside of themselves. It is alienating because it is specular. The nature of seeing is outward-looking. A



visualisation of self implies the mechanism of the creation of an image of self that is away from oneself, because it is impossible to see something from the very same point at which it stands, which explains why the Imaginary is associated with the metaphorical image of the mirror. So, one is always outside of oneself. “Me” is always representative of an imagined idea of wholeness and autonomy that is apart from the fleshy organism made up of component parts. The constitution of a “me” also sets the organism apart from other fleshy organisms, as a result of the circumscription of the self. This imaginary, unified visualisation of self is equivalent to what Freud termed the Ego. But this ego is formed on a fundamental alienation from self, and a *meconnaissance*, or misrecognition of an external image as self that will form the basis of the interactions of the subject with reality for the duration of their lifetimes (Bailly, 2009; Evans, 2002).

### *The Symbolic*

The misrecognised selfhood of the Imaginary is then initiated into the register of the symbolic. This is the location of the Superego, and the domain into which a human steps, irrevocably as he or she enters the social world, filled with other “selves” – the world of language. It is the register in which the visualisations of the imaginary become laden with meaning beyond simple familiarity for the subject. It is the process by which the imaginary idea of self acquires a differential cultural identity. What has become recognisable in the Imaginary, including the self, is named and articulated, and therefore becomes a sign in the realm of the symbolic. The object's visual materiality itself becomes a signifier, at the same time as it becomes associated with other symbolic signifiers in the form of words or symbols, while the idea of each object is irreversibly transformed into a signifier that is implicated in a system of differential meaning. Catherine Belsey describes it in this way:

In Lacan's account, the meanings that give us our sense of reality are always acquired from outside. We learn to mean from other people, from a language that exists before we are born into it or, in Lacan's terms, from the irreducible Otherness of the symbolic order. As the subjects we become by means of our subjection to the symbolic order, we gain access to social reality, but we leave behind the real of the human organism in its continuity with its surroundings. From now on language will always come between us and direct contact with the real. But the loss will be made good in the end: we shall rejoin the real in death, which we can name, but not know. (Belsey, 2005)

### *The Real*

Belsey's quote names the third Lacanian register, which is that of the Real, which cannot be described in any single way, since it is in itself a slippery idea, as well as having various

evolving implications throughout Lacan's seminars over the years. Most simplistically, what it refers to is everything that lies outside of language, everything that is excluded by the Symbolic. This makes it implicitly difficult to characterise, because the activity of characterisation necessarily employs language, a faculty of the symbolic. According to Lacan, the Real is “what does not depend on my idea of it”, for ideas belong either to the realm of the imaginary or, in their articulation – whether mental, verbal or visual, to the symbolic. It is simultaneously a positivity and a nothingness. So if we were to say it were any particular thing in any definitive terms, we would be looking at something else, something symbolic. The Real evades us as we approach it, and what we find in its place is its empty placeholder, the signifier. What it is can only be inferred (in a way that is theoretically analogous to sonar) from a variety of different angles that are entirely contingent upon our reasons for and ways of looking. (Bailly, 2009; Evans, 2002)

Zizek outlines some of these various descriptions of the Lacanian Real. In ways that exceed the very word, the real can be conceived of as being, in one sense, everything. It is, perhaps, a kind of “dark matter”, in that it simultaneously “doesn't exist” in observable reality, and also constitutes everything that is material reality. Though it is, somewhat inconceivably, a full void, and it “has a series of properties [that exercise] a certain structural causality; it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects.” (Zizek, 1987)

According to Zizek, the Real can be considered to be the “hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolisation [...] which has in itself no ontological consistency ... the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds” (Zizek, 1989, p. 169), in other words, the elusive centre or unsymbolisable fullness and essence of the symbolised. It is, at the same time, that which exceeds the symbolised object, that which is surplus to any articulation of it. The Real is the location of what Lacan calls “*jouissance*” – a sexually inflected term for “enjoyment” (Evans, 2002, p. 92)– which is the experience of pleasure becoming pain when it exceeds what the subject is able to bear, perhaps most evident in the act of sexual intercourse, for example, which is, Lacan argues, an intrinsically traumatic experience. We can bear only that which we can articulate to ourselves, so in other words, pleasure must remain bounded within the symbolic in order for it to remain pleasurable.

Thus, the Real is both inside and outside of the symbolised object. Further, the Real can be considered to be “the fullness of the inert presence [...] a positivity in which nothing is lacking,” (Zizek, 1987) since lack is created by the process of symbolisation. On the other hand, it can be considered to be the gap in the middle of the symbolic order, an emptiness

that is encircled by the symbolic. So, in another paradox of the Real, it is simultaneously and absolutely both an absence and a presence. This paradox is made clear in Žižek's words:

[T]he Real is something that cannot be negated, [something that...] cannot be caught in the dialectics of negativity. But we must add at once, that it is so because the real itself, in its positivity, is nothing but an embodiment, a positivation of a certain void, lack, radical negativity. It cannot be negated because it is already in itself, in its positivity, nothing but an embodiment of a pure negativity, emptiness. That's why the real object is a sublime object in a strict Lacanian sense, i.e., an object which is just a positivation of the lack in the Other, in the symbolic order. (Žižek, 1987)

The reason for the Real's defiance of the logic of language is evident in these paradoxes. It is because “the real comes into being for us only retrospectively, only after its primordial unmarked fullness has been irretrievably lost among the icons and inscriptions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic signs”. (Levine, 2008, p. xxvi) Žižek describes it thus:

[T]he word is a death, a murder of a thing: as soon as the reality is symbolized, caught in a symbolic network, the thing itself is more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality. More precisely, we cannot return to the immediate reality: even if we turn from the word to the thing, from the word “table” to the table in its physical reality, for example, the appearance of the table itself is already marked with a certain lack. To know what a table really is, what it means, we must have recourse to the word, which implies an absence of the thing. (Žižek, 1987)

## II

As a discursive construction, genre is an institution of the Symbolic, but the genre of horror in particular seems to submit to the sexualised drive towards *jouissance* in its portrayals of the unspeakably grotesque. Ultimately this mission to venture beyond what Freud calls the “pleasure principle” fails because the horror film is, after all, itself always only a discursive articulation. The horror film can only evoke an experience of the abject through the representation of the abject as it is constituted by language. It seems (although this may come into question later) that the filmic image cannot be in itself abject, for it is always only the indexical trace of something else – just a ghost, a flickering over a screen. There is something particular about horror in that it does seem to be particularly fascinated with these representational traces of the morbidly exciting. Its representations do seem to tread especially closely to the periphery of language via constant allusion to that which cannot be named. To reiterate Belsey's words above, death is something “we can name, but not know” (2005), because, since knowledge occurs in the domain of the Symbolic (Ragland-Sullivan and Milovanovic, 2004, p. 64), we can only know that which we can name. However, there remains, at some level of human consciousness, an awareness that how we name death far

from adequately expresses its absoluteness, and that the term is unconvincing as a differential opposite of “life”, one of our most treasured signifiers. “Death” as a purely destructive inertness is *ex post facto* brought into existence by the linguistic separation and circumscription of “life” as oppositionally vital and creative, for the fullness (and emptiness) of the universal Real preceding and subsequent to the advent of the human subject contains no such division. The only divide is a linguistic one. The difference between life and death lies in our ability to imagine ourselves as “whole selves” and to be able to articulate ourselves from this position, as well as to recognise the imaginary projections of the ego that are the “whole selves” of others. Life, symbolically, lies in our ability to say the word “Life” and for this to be heard and understood by others. Lacan asks:

“How can man, that is to say a living being, have access [...] to his own relationship to death? The answer is, by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form. It is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against that fact that he might be lacking from the chain of what [he] is.” (Lacan, 1992, p. 195)

Zizek elaborates this by saying:

“the Symbolic is precisely our emphatic encounter with death as *real*. It introduces death into life [...] Our way of entering speech and becoming subjects of the signifier is what constitutes our experience of death and also provides the frame or paradigm of our relation to it.” (Zizek, 2006, p. 192)

“Life”, in the most literal sense, is therefore nothing more than a word. The obsessional relationship between this quite artificial divide is evident in the non-gradability of the adjective “dead” in the English language. Though death and life are considered absolute, even the symbolic institution of the Law is somewhat vague in providing finite points of reference, as can be seen in debates regarding abortion (When is a foetus considered to be “alive”?) and legal death (When is a person to be pronounced dead? – When cardiac activity is not revivable? When there is no longer any brain activity? etc.). This centrality of language in the preservation of “life” accounts for the kinds of repetition of patterns and structures that are evident in film genre, for example.

The interaction between the three registers in the subject can be illustrated by returning to the XKCD cartoon that I used in the last chapter (page 29). The female character’s decision to donate her various component parts (her organs) comes about in a moment during which she is confronted with the Realness of herself as an organism. This threatening glimpse of the Real shows up the arbitrariness of the constitution of the symbolic self. It opens the space for a regression to a pre-imaginative state in which the self is not recognisable as such,

thereby disabling the agency of the subject. On a symbolic, linguistic level, the definition of her selfhood is brought into crisis, as is this selfhood's separation from the positive Realness of her organism's component parts. In the moment during which the Real threatens to undermine the ego, the symbolic reflexes of the subject step in immediately to rationalise this threat in symbolic terms. In this case, the threat is medicalised, and the act of signing a form represents the entering into a contract with "the Other", which is involved with various, often morally-implicated, altruistic discursive expressions like "saving another's life", for example. The crack that has allowed for the momentary intrusion of the Real is efficiently and automatically plastered up by the symbolic subject's reflex to maintain discursively a coherence of the reality on which their very subjectivity depends.

The horror film orientates itself towards the Real, submits to it to some extent by permitting the threat of death and the unknown to become an intrinsic, implicit part of the viewing experience. The experience of the real is rearticulated symbolically at the point at which the experience needs to be related to or understood in relation to the broader social world, when the experience finds itself needing to be understood or contextualised. It permits the Real into its symbolic structures, but only within precise, familiar and bracketed terms, which functions paradoxically to bring it within the bounds of the symbolic. This mechanism of sublimation, of diverting unconscious, impossible, *jouissant* drives into socially comprehensible, acceptable, symbolic modes of expression is an integral part of the subject's existence, if one is to be able to understand oneself or be understood as a functional member of society. However, in horror film, unlike certain other modes of language and other genres, it admits implicitly to some extent the limitations of its own structures. Much of the ghostly action takes place off-screen, revealing an implicit understanding that such things can't and shouldn't be articulated by the camera if they are to be frightening, that is, if they are to remain in the register of the frightening real. However, at the end of the horror film, there is almost certainly a full reveal, at which point the evil is named and tamed, and if not tamed, dispelled completely from the fringes of the visual, articulated realm, and sent back into the realm of the imperceptible to the characters. The ghost appears only in a form relevant to the person who encounters it, meaning that they are unpredictable and lost to recognition once the contact with the protagonist has been severed. Contingent glances of the Real take place by allowing important action to happen in momentary camera glances into a parallel, limbo-type realm that seems to overlap with the world of the living etc. In other words, the sublimation is never quite complete, for the signifiers through which this linguistic sublimation of Realness and death occur are never satisfactorily circumscribed. However, this very Realness is systematically denied as the films are inescapably discursive, and a

name is ultimately always found. This naming amputates the infinite, morbid-vitality of even undead spectres by delimiting their bounds into that which can be expressed within the finite mode of language. To illustrate, though a particular ghost's form may be multitudinous within a film, and the infinite possibilities for a spectre's manifestation are implied, the viewer will still encounter only a finite number of ghostly forms, which may be as ethereal as a weather phenomenon, as in *The Fog* (Carpenter, 1980), or a nightmarishly disfigured humanoid, like Freddy Krueger, as in *A Nightmare on Elm St* (Craven, 1984). Further, the particular symbolic manifestation of the spectral will depend on the discourses of language within the symbolic register at play: a mother will be haunted by a child, a boat full of seamen will be haunted by a long-vanished ghost-ship. It is clear in this that any attempt at an expression of the Real will find itself stopped short at the perimeter of the symbolic frameworks that make any communication possible, since it will always be, ultimately, discursive.

This mechanism can perhaps be most clearly understood in terms of religious belief, and although it might seem like we are digressing to some extent, a short interrogation of these mechanisms will be very useful in the analysis of the horror remake, not least because the discourses of religion quite frequently overlap with those of the horror film, in the figures of demonic apparitions, the supernatural and the category of “pure evil”, for example.

### III

Religious signifiers, as highly established and ritualised symbols pertaining to metaphysical existence, are very useful in highlighting the way in which signifiers exist fundamentally to express a not-knowing, and to assert mastery over this not-knowing by affirming the primacy of the symbolic over the Real, and in so doing create discourse and a community, or intersubjective network, in which the subject can find itself meaningful and oriented by a signifier as arbitrary as a cross. Belsey explains that while the Gods belong to the Real, the Real “has nothing whatever to do with the supernatural, a realm devised to comfort or scare us, and variously explained or mystified by theologians and visionaries”. (Belsey, 2005, pg. 29) So the Real is not a transcendent, supernatural realm, but the Gods belong to it inasmuch as they are thought of in terms of the absolute, and 'pre-symbolic', or to use the biblical formulation, “the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” (Revelations, 22:13-14) (2004, p. 602). This particular biblical reference is a nice one, for it expresses neatly the paradoxical limits of linguistic expression, as well as the way in which the Real (and “death”) is in itself constituted by the symbolic (and “life”). The author (thought to be the apostle

John) turns to the metaphor of the range of the Greek alphabet to characterise an omniscient God. But this is a God who, in Christian belief, explicitly stands for a fullness of knowledge and experience that exceeds that of humans' ability to comprehend and express – the Creator and originator of all reality. God is said to be “in the word”, but also precedes “the word”. The relationship between God and word is multifaceted, and the various formulations of this relationship illustrate much about the relationship between the symbolic and the Real. There are three ways in which the two terms may find themselves within one expression, and seek to describe what it is that underlies each: God is in the word; the word of God; the word, “God”.

Of course, the exercise of listing these expressions is immediately open to clutter and confusion because of the ambiguity of “word”, which is as indeterminate as that of “God”. In the same way that all the above formulations are true of God at the same time, none of the multiple meanings of “word” can be held to be truer or more relevant than the others. We cannot say that the biblical “word” is distinct from the “word” of everyday spoken language, nor from the printed word on the page of a bible, or any other text, for example. The ambiguity is unavoidable, and should not be avoided, since the doubling of meaning is very much a part of its use within the religious discourses in question.

God being in the word expresses a sense that the biblical word is channelled directly and without obstacle from the domain of the godly, such that it is itself sacred. It's an indicator of the Real as “unsymbolisable kernel” that the symbolic encircles, the “primordial fullness” that remains present as a central lack in the symbolic, and a void that is protected and carried by the word. It could also be rephrased, perhaps, as the word contains God, or, even more interestingly, God is contained by the word, which adds to the formulation a simultaneous meaning that the notion of God is delimited by the meanings present in the available symbolic frames.

The “word of God” turns God from an unfathomable, unsignifiable force into a speaking position which is occupied by figures of authority, such as the priest or the various authors of the bible. Coupled with the conventional Christian image of God as a paternal, phallic figure, it is clear how the subject position of speaking the “word of god” is that of the Lacanian Other. The “big Other”, is not to be confused with the little “other” in Lacanian theory. The little “other” is inscribed in the imaginary, since it describes the subject's alienation from itself - it is the external specular manifestation of the ego to the subject. However, the big Other precedes the existence of the subject, and represents the radical alterity of the

symbolic order, to the point that it assumes a subject position of its own, though this subject position is particular for each individual, in particular instances, interacting with it. Figures such as one's parents, institutions such as “the Law” and “medicine” and their representatives (judges, police officers, doctors), or school teachers and university lecturers, for example, can variously occupy the position of the Other, in that they embody the Symbolic as subjects who can speak and articulate the demands of the symbolic. These demands are not innate in the subject, but are necessary to participation in society, they need to be heard, learned and internalised, and therefore have to find a speaker and teacher. In Christianity, the word of God contains these demands, and it is the “godly” paternal figures who recognise themselves as those whose responsibility it is to circulate the “letter”. Further, believers are required to perpetuate and speak the word of God. The ways in which they behave and act must be within the framework made available by “the word”. This is a useful illustration of the radical Otherness of language – the nagging sense that language, in some inarticulable way, speaks us, or at least speaks for us in a way that seems to be somehow inadequate, unavoidably overdetermined, not from within.

We should not forget that “God” is a word in itself, and it is the signifier of God that encapsulates the mystification of which Belsey speaks. The “supernatural” is the point within language at which a peripheral, momentary glance at the unsymbolisable Real comes to be named, defined within a symbolic system – when the sublime is rationalised and provided with a justification that is articulable, and this justification is usually articulated in the naming of the inexplicable force or entity that has originated or controls that which is outside of human knowledge, whether it be “the Universe”, “the deities” or “science”. This is the moment at which “God” stops being the ethereal, unthinkable texture of the borderlines of human consciousness, or alternatively the subject of the symbolic, and becomes a proper noun, a name, implicated in a system of differential meaning. Rather than being either Real and inarticulable, or the speaking subject of the Other, “God” becomes something about which we can speak. At this point “God” becomes a special signifier, equal to the painted image of a humanoid, a figure in white, a word in a song, a crucifix, a figure in a stained-glass window etc., whose signified is not the vastness of that which is outside our range of comprehension, since this is impossible, but instead the very line around this vastness, or the line between that vastness and our finite reality – the very point at which the symbolic meets the Real.

Here, the word ‘God’ becomes a signifier for the Real in the same way as the limits of the



horizon are a signifier for infinity. It becomes an “*objet petit a*”, or the unattainable object that drive libidinal desire. Crownfield states that in language:

the Other is split, barred, unattainable, signified by various objects *a*: the enigma of the Other corresponds to the incoherence of the self, is displaced and masked and misconceived in the symbolic play of signification. For Lacan, the Other is not to be read as God. [...] It is not that Lacan means the Other to signify Mother of Father, or the unconscious; it is rather that mother, and father, and the otherness of myself to myself, are signifiers of the Other: of the Real as necessity, of *jouissance* (orgasm, ecstasy, immediacy of life – chronically barred and displaced), of death. [...] God is an objectification, a fantasy signifier of the Other, another object *petit a*. Only if God can be shown to signify, or be, the Other in some way not reducible to such objectification and distortion could the equation be sustained. (Crownfield, 1989, p. 117)

All the materiality of an institution such as the Church is designed to support this, and the chalice or tabernacle, for example, become the holy objects, though they are themselves only the boundaries that enclose the “supernatural” God – the God who has the power to answer prayers or exorcise demons.

In Hollywood film, the imagery of the horror film does precisely the same thing. The fright lies, in fact, beyond the signifying images that house the truly frightening, which is itself not visible or articulable. The fright lies in the piercing *jouissance*, the autistic experience of the viewing subject who is thrilled and nauseated and entirely isolated by a moment of leaning over the precipice of meaningful reality, from which one could easily fall to one’s death as a social subject, but which seem to offer some (illusory) chance to come closer to the authentic meaning of reality beyond the signifier.

The Asian horror remake film juxtaposes very particular signifiers of Asia with those more conventionally recognisable as “supernatural” in order to draw the line around the Symbolic limits of western society, and the Real, and “life” and “death”. The only lifeline back to symbolic Life is for the rigidity of ritual to assert itself, for the signifiers to be enclosed according the naming functions of familiar discourses of western culture – to close the door so that ghosts do not creep in and threaten to unravel the threads with which the Other has knitted us together as social beings.

#### IV

This knitting together constitutes what Lacan calls the “intersubjective network” in which subjects relate to one another and come to occupy a particular subject positions in relation to

the contingency and alterity of the Other - its emptiness of signification. The subject misrecognises itself in the structures of the symbolic, which allows the subject to have an identity in relation to other subjects within a community. We can see how this *meconnaissance* (misrecognition) of self in the Symbolic structures of culture quite easily in relation to cinema, which is a particularly subjective experience. The viewing of a story related via film is a deeply personal one, in that enjoyment requires emotional investment based on a very subjective process of identification, peculiar to every viewer. Even a brief look at the characteristics of the physical space of the traditionally darkened and silent movie theatre supports the notion that film is to a large extent a private experience, at least for the duration of its runtime. The experience of viewership is phenomenologically unique and enclosed. (Cohen, 2001, p. 248) In the same way as the Lego house can be made to be meaningful by performing some discursive gymnastics (as described in the first part of the last chapter), every viewer who encounters a text finds, at the level of the subject, a way to understand it as meaningful in relation to the discourses that define that individual's life. This means that the text must come, somehow, to pertain directly to that subject's existence, such that, in some way, they come to understand themselves as being in some way the very subject of the text. Even if the viewer finds the narrative to be hostile to their discursive reality, they will find a means of including it within the structures of their meaningful life. For example, one might imagine an audience member who is a conservative male viewer with very conservative suburban values, who is most familiar with mainstream action/adventure films and who regards such films as being "his kind of film". This imaginary viewer might, in the course of things, stumble upon a film such as *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 1999) - a self-consciously issue-based, independent film preceded by a generic framework that encourages cerebral engagement with the interior life of the protagonist. The protagonist is a young transgendered man involved in a relationship with young woman, who is raped and murdered upon the community's discovery of his anatomical sex. The film is clearly not generically packaged by the producers for a viewer who is averse to engagement with social issues, is homophobic or is interested only in the spectacular aspects of cinema. Nevertheless, the film will find a way to make sense for our imagined viewing subject, such that the experience is one in which something is being said *to* him. In other words, his own subjectivity will remain the primary axis of the meaning-making process. He might, for example, find enjoyment in the violent spectacle of the final events of the film and enjoy a sense of 'just deserts' for what he might regard as deviant behaviour. He may find the very existence of a film such as this - one that is sensitive to the subtleties of gender identity - to be offensive in itself. The term "offensive", as the opposite of "defensive", reveals a lot about this mechanism, as it suggests an active "attack" upon a subject who and of which he

perceives himself to be the intended target. This phenomenon is described by Lacan as being the way in which a “letter always arrives at its destination”. (Jean-Michel, 2003, p. 170) These words are taken from Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allen Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (Lacan, 2001), which he uses to describe the way in which a letter always arrives at its destination, because the symbolic subject is defined by its participation in intersubjective exchange, and will therefore always come to recognise itself as its addressee.

Briefly, the story of *The Purloined Letter* is simple. Amateur detective, Dupin, is approached by the Prefect of the Police with a problem. He has been petitioned by an important individual, presumed to be the Queen, to retrieve an important and incriminatory letter which has been removed from her possession by a sly Minister D \_\_\_\_\_. The Queen was interrupted in her reading of the letter by a character presumed to be the King, and the minister, and was forced to place the letter on a table in plain sight, in the hope of it evading the attention of the King, because his coming to know its contents would be compromising for the Queen. This does not escape the minister, who places a letter of his own beside it, and removes the Queen's a little later. The Queen sees this happen, but is powerless to do anything about it without incriminating herself in the presence of the King. The minister retains the letter and uses it to manipulate the Queen to his own political ends.

The Prefect of the Police, upon the Queens' discreet request, rigorously and meticulously searches the Minister's hotel room in his daily absence, removing chair legs looking for secret cavities, and leafing through every page of every book, but finds nothing. He is convinced, however, that the letter cannot have been stowed elsewhere, because of the Minister's need for access to it at a moment's notice.

Dupin memorises the description of the letter, and when the police chief returns a month later with the offer of a reward, Dupin immediately produces the letter, to the amazement of the Prefect. Dupin then recounts how he managed to acquire the letter, using the story of a childhood game of Odds and Evens, in which a boy was able to outwit his opponents by determining their intelligence by the plays they made. He suggests that the Minister was able to outwit the police by predicting their thorough search, and therefore hiding the letter in plain sight. Dupin then paid a visit to the Minister, and immediately noticed the letter, turned inside out, on a rack above the fireplace. Having established the location of the letter, he leaves the Minister's room, intentionally forgetting his snuff box, thereby giving him excuse to return later. On his second visit, he arranges for a commotion to be caused outside

the Minister's window in order to distract the Minister long enough to swap the letter for one of another, and leave with his crime unnoticed.

The contents of the letter are never revealed.

V

The notion of “the letter” is useful in the study of genre because the seminar in which it was elaborated by Lacan was done so to describe a psychic mechanism he calls the “repetition compulsion” (Felman, 1987, p. 42), which may go some way to explaining genre’s fascination with recurrence. Incidentally, it is also an apt point of reference in that it draws from the genre of horror, since Poe himself is a figure of great importance in the historical development of the genre.

The letter in Poe's story functions as an arbitrary signifier, the contents of which are irrelevant, but whose status becomes utterly central, in that it sets up a variety of scenarios in which the various actors inhabit particular roles within an intersubjective network, based on their position in relation to this signifier. (Lacan in Johnson, 1977. p.115) He describes the three-way intersubjective model of the position of three partners in this way: “the second [believes] itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting the third calmly pluck its rear”. The first (or primal) scenario sees the Queen inhabit the second role, believing the first person (implied as the King) to be unaware of the presence and danger of the letter, which is not missed by the Minister who takes the opportunity to remove the letter. This model is then repeated once the letter is in the Minister's possession, only this time the Minister finds himself in the same, second position as the Queen, believing that his secret is safe, since the police, when now in the position of the first, oblivious partner, leaves himself vulnerable to the actions of the third partner, Dupin, who is able to calmly remove the letter from his apartment. All of this occurs around the central letter, whose contents is never known. Each scene of this triadic model finds each subject displaced within the structures of intersubjective repetition. Lacan says “Their displacement is determined by the place which a pure signifier – the purloined letter – comes to occupy in their trio. And that is what will confirm for us its status as repetition automatism” (Johnson, 1977, p. 117).

The “repetition compulsion” is linked to the idea of the “Death Drive” which was posited by Freud as being a compulsion by the patient to expose him or herself repeatedly to traumatic and distressing situations, having forgotten the very origins of the trauma. (Evans, 2002, p.

167) (This seems to be particularly interesting when thought of in relation to the counterintuitively awful images of the horror film.) While the notion of the death drive has largely been rejected in contemporary psychology, it remains useful in the discipline of cultural studies. This is because the death drive as elaborated by Lacan, increasingly as his work progressed, is a drive towards symbolic, rather than literal death. The signifier, Lacan argues, represents a certain *jouissance* in its very arbitrary materiality (the emptiness of the letter), which motivates the subject to continue to repeat and perpetuate the signifying chain. The drive towards symbolic death represents a desire for an impossible return to the stasis of the pre-lingual Realness of the signifier, escaping the perpetual debt of the symbolic articulation of objects, which are always characterised by lack, unable to capture their fullness and emptiness.

## VI

Psychoanalytic thought therefore distinguishes between Symbolic life and the Real existence of the being, understanding the subject to exist only inasmuch as it continues to interact with the letter, pointing to the threatening possibility of the subject to die Symbolically before the literal cessation of one's organic life. In interviews, Žižek sometimes illustrates the difference between the two deaths by using the example of the roadrunner cartoon. As the coyote runs off the edge of the cliff, he falls upon the realisation that he is suspended in mid-air only when his consciousness catches up to the laws of gravity. This separation of the physical and symbolic death is also evident in another story by Poe, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (2004), who is hypnotised upon death and remains, for months, in a suspended death-life until such time as he is brought out of the hypnotic state that disallowed an acknowledgement of his own death, at which time he immediately and rapidly decomposes to the state of a long-dead old corpse.

Perhaps a more relevant example in contemporary South Africa is that of Nelson Mandela, whose physical deterioration is rapidly approaching death, but who is still enormously symbolically vital. His signifier has become increasingly detached from his material existence, as his image walks the earth on the T-shirts of young bodies and his foundation continues to work towards his humanitarian goals, while he rests at home in a wheelchair<sup>4</sup>. It

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<sup>4</sup> This point has become even more relevant in the months since this was written, with controversy arising in relation to the circumstances of Mandela's health. The sense of the "zombification" of his symbolic image has only intensified since his ill health has forced him out of public view. Conspiracies about his vitality have proliferated in even mainstream media, that propose such ideas that he may currently be being artificially kept

could even be argued that the fascination of the world with his imminent death (to the extent that eulogy-type documentaries have already been prepared, and premature rumours of his death have abounded in the last few years) represents an anxiety in the collective psyche of the population related to a latent awareness of the autonomy and arbitrariness of his signifier. Once he dies, the symbolic representation of Mandela will no longer be burdened with an increasingly dissonant physical Mandela, and the pressing debt of symbolic lack will no longer be so apparent. The image of Mandela in a wheelchair, suffering from age-related dementia, works as an alternative, conflicting signifier to that of the 46664 logo, and destabilises the coherence and dependability of the symbolic. The symbolic is only as flimsy as it is believed to be, and if cracks in the barriers between the symbolic and real are not quickly justified in symbolic terms, the very difference between life and death threatens to collapse, the subject fears he or she is vulnerable to ending up in a state such as that experienced by the eponymous character of *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, who is stranded in a strange limbo state between life and death. Open-mouthed and incapacitated, M. Valdemar releases unearthly sounds from the dark cavity of his chest, until, months later, he is released from his hypnosis. Only when his consciousness is released by the Other as it articulates itself through scientific/medical discourses, is his death completed. The question is, then, which is the authentic self, and is this different from the “original” self of Mandela? The Mandela of the 46664 brand is authentic in relation to the index of dominant discursive reality that sees him as a strong leader. This former version of Mandela is the one that crystallised into discourse, while the “original” Mandela, the Mandela as a body from which the signifier emerged and which it reference, has withered into another thing altogether.

The maintenance of the difference between life and death is therefore a constant, exhausting, anxiety-ridden process that involves the perpetual imperative to negotiate signification, towards a symbolic stability which, because of its limitations in accounting for the vastness of positive reality, in its fundamental lack, is ultimately unachievable. The death drive is therefore about an unconscious compulsion towards a kind of restful, complete stasis that is only possible in the register of the Real, and entails the destruction of the symbolic self, which itself is only possible in death. This entails the repeated, wilful exposure of the self to *jouissant* experiences, the painful, convulsive experiences of the sublime that seek to escape and complete language, such as the death of an adored head of state, sexual intercourse, or an unspeakably beautiful sunset, which is always missing some essential (phallic) part.

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alive for nefarious political purposes, Another even more frightening (if quite absurd and in fairly bad taste) image that has risen from the popular imagination is that he may in fact have been stuffed by a taxidermist.

However, the subject is unable to free him or herself from the symbolic at the same time as remaining a subject at all. This state in which the subject does not have any kind of relationship to the other is considered in Lacanian theory to be an “autistic” state – a dire and terrifying limbo outside of meaningful reality – a fate equivalent to or worse than death. Such a state occurs when the infant does not properly separate from the mother, does not escape the phallic role for the lacking mother, and is therefore never initiated into the Symbolic register of sublimation of desire driven by phallic lack and castration anxiety. (Leader et al., 1995) Such an autistically *jouissant* state can also be induced through the use of drugs or trance states, for example. Trance states and even the use of drugs are often highly ritualised, and entering these states is most frequently performed on the basis of the presumption that they will end, and that symbolic reality can and must be returned to. The drive towards stasis, a spatial and temporal moment that does not move, because it is whole, not driven by lack, is displaced, and transferred – sublimated – onto (often obsessively ritualised) symbolic activities, like funerals, sadomasochistic sexual practices and the strictly generic conventions of horror movies, for example. The observance of ritual involved in these activities functions to protect the subjectivity of its participants, as their unconscious desires seek to venture beyond it into the fullness of the Real, because this static moment is related very closely to death. The high degree of order usually imposed on these activities enables them to have meaning. It represents the intrapsychic conflict of the symbolic subject's need for a self-preservatory failsafe mechanism, with its unconscious desire to exceed its limits and destroy itself.

## VII

Lacan argues that psychoanalysis has allowed us to understand the ways in which the human organism, in the most intimate recesses of its being, is only able to understand itself meaningfully in relation to the symbolic dimension in which it is caught and to articulate itself using words that long preceded its genesis and therefore cannot be truthful of its fullness and particularity. Looking at these symbolic understandings of self, rather than highlighting any true essence of human experience, in fact “reveal[s] only what in it remains inconsistent unless ... related to the symbolic chain which binds and orients [the subject]” (Lacan, 2001). It is the “symbolic order that is constitutive for the subject” (Lacan in Johnson, 1977, p. 113). The subject is given “its itinerary” by the signifier, and the repetition compulsion, therefore, has its basis in the signifying chain: the signifier must be repeated in order for the subject to remain itself.

This means we can put aside any simple account of genre that might suppose that market-oriented motives are the primary driver in the production of genre films, which presumes the producers have total subjective agency. They are participants in an intersubjective network of signification, whose position is defined by their particular, momentary relationship with the “letter” of the discourses of genre. The subject in the position of the producer would not be able to articulate this question to him or herself, since “repetition is the general characteristic of the signifying chain, the manifestation of the unconscious in every subject” (Evans, 2002, p. 167) The insistence of the signifier, (as Lacan comes to call the “repetition automatism” in his later work) (Evans, 2002, p. 162) will always be transferred onto a symbolic goal. This is because the signifier or “letter” (or in this case the structures involved in generic discourse) is, in its arbitrariness and cold materiality, the property of the Real. Therefore, rather than acknowledging the repetition of generic structures as being for their own sake, or for the sake of the *jouissance* of the Realness of the letter, the subjects of this repetition, the subject positions of both the creator and viewer, understand this repetition in the symbolic terms of an economy of expectations. The producers create what they expect will sell tickets, and the viewer expects to get what he or she has paid for, but this is a symbolic transaction that masks the very arbitrariness of the signifier being transferred, by symbolically articulating it as a commodity being sold. This contingent symbolic articulation of an ultimately arbitrary *jouissant* drive to engage with the signifier extends to the elaborate entirety of the commercial cinematic institution – from its trailer reels and popcorn kiosks to its distribution strategies and production crew roles and hierarchies. While this is particularly true in mainstream film, whose symbolic articulation is largely and unashamedly on the terms of money, it is equally true of arthouse film or independent film. Less commercial cinema masks this same insistence of the signifying chain by symbolically articulating it as an exchange of things like an “artistic message” or “visual innovation”, or “insight into a different culture”.

Zizek explains this *jouissant* interaction with the Other by saying that:

A letter reaches its true destination the moment it is delivered ... – its true addressee is namely not the empirical other which may receive it or not, but the big Other, the symbolic order itself, which receives it the moment the letter is put into circulation, i.e., the moment the sender externalises his message, delivers it to the Other, the moment the Other takes cognizance of the letter and thus disburdens the sender of responsibility for it. (Zizek, 2013, p. 12)

In this sense, any act of symbolic communication is always performed by the subject for the sake of the affirmation of Other, the keeper of meaning and the adjudicator of authenticity.



## VIII

In relation to this work, the “letter” of Lacan’s seminar could be taken to have at least three levels of metaphorical significance, all of which serve to indicate the centrality of language in Lacan’s theorising of subjectification, all of which are equally artefacts of the symbolic. The first is the story’s more literal letter of correspondence, but there are two further interpretations of the term ‘letter’, which are of parallel, metonymic importance in the context of the “repetition compulsion”: the alphabetical letter, or the Real meaningless grapheme that precedes and comprises any meaningful unit of language; and the letter, or “*la lettre*” which speaks of “literature” broadly, that is the textual canon. The multiple levels at which “the letter” could be seen to be in circulation means that a genre could be seen as a letter in itself. A genre is also composed of films that are themselves letters, and so contains other “letters”. On top of this, within the diegesis of the narratives, the fictional subjects are constituted by letters within their own verisimilitudinous worlds, and all of these act to constitute subjectivity in relation to the Other.

The letter is also present in even the theoretical texts being employed in this work, as well as this thesis itself. The circulation of the letter is allegorised even *within* the fictional reality of the Asian horror film remake. Within each of the films relevant to this study, there is an element which bear a strong echo of the letter in Poe’s story in that their plot structures involve the “passing on” of an (often somehow purloined) signifier that brings its holder to inhabit particular subject positions in relation to patterns within an intersubjective network: a videotape, child’s backpack, or a haunted apartment or house, for example. This uncircumscribability of the “letter” constitutes one of the primary conflicts between Lacan and Derrida, who published a deconstructionist response to Lacan’s original analysis of “The Purloined Letter”. In Derrida’s work (Muller and Richardson, 1988) he differs aloud with Lacan on the issue of what Lacan takes to constitute the object of analysis in his seminar on “The Purloined Letter”. According to Derrida, “What Lacan analyses, decomposing it into its elements, its origin, and its destination, uncovering it in its truth, is a story [histoire]”. He accuses Lacan of having neutralised the narrator by not having taken the narration into account, of having “missed a scene” (that of the writer at work, in an intertextual context). He says:

The seminar’s interest in the agency of the signifier in its letter seizes upon this agency to the extent that it constitutes, precisely, on the first approach, the exemplary content, the meaning, the written of Poe’s fiction, as opposed to its writing, its signifier, and its narrating form. The displacement of the signifier,

therefore, is analyzed as a signified, as the recounted object of a short story. (Quoted in Muller and Richardson, 1988, p. 179)

On the other hand, particularly when such an analysis is applied to texts like genre films, where the authorial voice is so diluted by various agents in culture, it becomes clearer the extent to which the position and actor of the “author” by no means bears any more interest as a locus of “truth” than a character in a fictional story. The scene of authorship that exists in empirical reality cannot be said to provide more insight into the “truth” than can the fictional drama he or she creates because the author and the character are equally constituted by the same sets of the Other’s arbitrary signifiers. As such, it might be useful to look in detail at the way in which the letters of the broader cultural Symbolic are very much in exchange within its cultural narratives, such as (perhaps especially) genre films like the Asian horror film remake.

## PART TWO

### I

The thematic lynchpin of the narratives of *Dark Water*, *The Grudge* and *The Ring*, as well as that of their original counterparts, is a dramatization of the dynamics of the nuclear familial unit - the primal scene. All of the films are played out by tragic characters who invoke the anxieties of Oedipal failure as their central dramatic tension: Dahlia the neglectful mother, and Cessie and Natasha, the abandoned children; Takeo, the murdering husband and father, and Toshio the murdered child; Rachel, the ineffectual mother and Samara, the victim of infanticide. In all three narratives, the relationships between mother, father and child form a triangular schematic of subject positions which are made manifest in varied ways within and across the films in question. The autonomous persistence of this most basic signifying structure that provides narrative impetus and the shifts in and particularities of these triadic sets of relationships, their collision, overlap and breakdown set the plot events in motion.

It is a most reduced and concentrated social formation, and as such it is repeatedly played out throughout individual lives, and the broader narratives of mankind. It is the “holy trinity” (which is itself an instance of this triad) of Lacanian psychoanalysis and its emergence can be observed in nurseries, churches, offices and movie theatres. The fact of this return – the continuing circulation of the letter – means that it is relevant on all planes

of analysis that form part of this research – within the diegeses of the films, on the level of the film text (as a genre remake) and on the level of the human subject itself. Just as Freud invoked Greek mythology to make manifest and give a name to his theory of early development, we see here the same formations continue to assert themselves in popular modern narratives. In the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition, the Oedipal complex is the starting point for all analysis, and this one should be no different. In particular, these films reveal a preoccupation with the consequences of the failed Oedipal project as a result of the exertion of either too much or too little energy by any of the positions within this triad: the neglectful mother versus the overbearing mother; the absent father versus the abusive father; the heedless or independent child versus the needy child. This boundary between dearth and excess is precisely “the pleasure principle”, the instruction of the Other to enjoy, but not so much that one goes beyond what Freud calls the pleasure principle. (Evans, 2002)

If one goes along with *jouissant* pleasure, the drive towards that which at once propels and destroys “life”, the subject risks venturing beyond the bounds of the symbolic such that one cannot return, falling into the autistic space of the organism that is no longer caught in the net of symbolic intersubjectivity, that has disregarded the limitative commands of the paternal Other, and has sought a primal incestuous satisfaction of merging of the prelingual infant with mother. So while the drive towards *jouissance* is essential and inescapable, it can also be dangerous for the subject. This is the *jouissance* of occupying the Oedipal subject positions as pure and arbitrary signifiers that have been retained from early childhood and which provide the subject itinerary. This means that the survival of the symbolic subject is dependent on a consistent monitoring of one’s subjective position in relation to the forces of the oedipal formation. In order to survive infancy, one must have a mother, but if she is too much of a mother, such that there is no distinction between mother and child, it can be deadly, since according to Žižek, “the consummation of the incestuous link with the mother would abolish the symbolic distance/prohibition which defines the universe of Culture”. (Žižek, 2000, p. 315)

These anxieties regarding the regulation of pleasure orbit the fact that the Oedipal project is, in some sense, always a failure. It is intrinsic to subjectivity that the symbolic subject can never be whole, since the subject is an entity that has been subtracted from the presymbolic world of the real. The failed oedipal project in which the infant is never initiated into the systems of intersubjectivity (which involves a fundamental sense of self-alienation) is in some ways the more “successful” project because the infant will never experience loss or lack. But this comes at the expense of independence, community and agency. For the symbolic subject whose *jouissant* pleasure lies in a return to this state, wholeness is death.

The insistence of this formation and its relation to the repetition compulsion is quite vividly illustrated in the sample films.

In some cases, within the films, one point on this triangle may not be occupied, or not adequately occupied by a living human character, but the third point of the triangle, that is, the very vacant subject position itself (of Father/Mother/Infant), continues to exert influence over the primal scene. Beginning by compiling the various sets of relationships that exist in the films, or the instances in which this triangular structure asserts itself, should help to understand some of the particularities of, and deviations from, the Oedipal complex, which according to the tradition of psychoanalysis, are at the centre of the emergence and experience of the symbolic subject in culture, including the way in which infancy, paternity and maternity are fundamentally separate and not necessarily equal to children, fathers and mothers respectively. In fact this very simple point – that the Oedipal functions of paternity, maternity and infancy are entirely separate from the biological mother and father, and that their convergence is largely incidental – is central to the psychoanalytic tradition. This kind of slippage can be observed in genre films in the repetition of stock characters whose traits long precede the diegetic particularities of any completed script. The uncanny realisation that the self and the subject position one occupies are not exactly the same thing is dramatised in many films within popular culture: *Stranger Than Fiction* (Forster, 2006), in which Will Ferrel plays a character who has no reason to question his sense of agency, until he comes to realise that he is in the process of being written by an author outside his own diegesis; in *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998), which dramatizes classic paranoia through the world of Jim Carrey's character, who discovers that his entire reality has been constructed by external forces, resulting in a crisis of radical self-alienation; or the horror-spoof *Scary Movie* (Wayans, 2000), in which the characters make decisions self-consciously based on what they ought to do as the stock characters they are, making a farce of the notion of the free, self-enclosed, unique subject in culture. For this precise reason, forces of maternity and paternity are also not reducible to any essentialist notions of sex or gender and Mother/Father need not necessarily be filled by woman/man, nor human even. Rather these are positions that are assumed by those who recognise themselves as the addressee of the letter, perhaps as a result of the possession of a particular set of genitalia, but this is largely incidental. It is possible for a thirty-something male with a new-born child to eschew the position of the Name of the Father, just as it is possible for female octogenarian who may never have reproduced, for example, to take up this very speaking position. And in this lies the uncanny familiarity in recognising oneself in the Other.

Specifically we experience the uncanny through this schism of self and autonomous signifying function within the familial unit in *The Ring*, *Dark Water* and *The Grudge* via the particularities of the mother-father-infant triangle and its repetition across diegeses that do not take any apparent cognizance of each other. Instances of this subject-constituting oedipal formation can be found across all three texts.

In *Dark Water*, we find this relationship in several formations between young Dahlia, her mother and her absent father; between adult Dahlia, her daughter Cessie and Dahlias's estranged husband; between the ghostly Natasha and Dahlia for example. In this film, the position of the father is left largely vacant as far as adequate, living paternal characters are concerned. The film is characterised, in a thematically central way, by incestuously proximate relationships between mother and child. The resolution of the film sees an incestuous re-union of mother and child as Dahlia recedes into the ethereal real to occupy the position of eternal mother in Natasha's oedipal drama, recognising (or misrecognising) herself as the addressee of the letter. And in recognising her position in the intersubjective network as that of mother, she also shifts out of her earlier subject position of daughter in relation to her own suffocating mother figure within her own problematic oedipal progression, heralding her maturation as a symbolic subject. At this point she also becomes a ghost – she becomes pure symbolic abstraction, Mother with a capital "M". She embodies the very realness of the symbolic position of Mother. She becomes pure signifier as her flesh seems to transmogrify into some kind of meta-flesh that exists in that ghostly, parallel fourth dimension that seems not to be limited by the material laws of time and space to which the authenticity of reality is bound. She becomes other to her very self, no longer a participating cultural subject, yet composed entirely of cultural symbolism. She is the pure symbolic alterity of "Mother". The ever presence of the murky water becomes amniotic as we watch Dahlia and Natasha walk away from us, into transparency, out of the realm of symbolic paternalism, the Oedipal position of which is realised in the form of cold architectural structures, rather than a human figure. The two figures recede into the vanishing point of geometric gridlines that characterise their urban living world, and disappear into the womb-like dimension of mother-child connectedness from which the haunting, murky water bursts forth.

Dahlia returns only once to the land of the authentically "living", but the only witness to this is grown-up Cessie. The surreal tone of the scene leaves the question of the original, first-degree presence of Dahlia. Her earlier death means that she cannot logically have any ontological existence beyond the imaginary – a figment of Cessie's imagination. However the

camera eye is not identical to Cessie's, meaning the viewer is experiencing a more special kind of representation of diegetic reality than a simple reproduction of an event. We are being invited into the psychic fantasy world in which Cessie engages with the purely symbolic figure Mother, the mother that has died, but who has refused to die the second, symbolic death. Her signifier, her image, remains imprinted in memory, retaining its significance and gravity in the intersubjective network for Cessie and the viewer that shares her experience through projective identification. We are asked to accept this overtly fantastical moment of Dahlia's reappearance as authentic to the narrative, but via the subjectivity of her daughter as a subject in the register of the symbolic. For Cessie is only Daughter if Dahlia is still Mother, and in the context of the film, in its omission of any elements that would provide a subject position for Cessie other than those defined by daughterhood. The apparition is given credence as a narrative event, despite its impossibility as an authentic occurrence in material reality, which serves to indicate that, for the subject – fictional, diegetic subjects, or real-world viewer subjects – authenticity of experience is dependent on the symbolic frameworks at play more than anything else. Cessie accepts Dahlia's presence and allows it to influence her subject position, and therefore her symbolic life, just as the viewer subjects accept the absent presence of the protagonists despite the true blankness of the screen on which they exist.

In *The Grudge*, the most self-evident instance of this formation is between the small family who originated the curse, Toshio, his father Takeo and his mother, Kayako, though there are other less literal instances, such as the relationship between Karen and her boyfriend Doug, in which she functions as a maternal figure to her immature boyfriend, while figures of institutional authority (such as Detective Nakagawa) fulfil the paternal role. Another exists in the relationship between Matthew and Jennifer, the childless couple who must be guardians to a catatonic matriarch, who functions as a non-lingual subject in much the same way as a baby might in more ordinary conditions, affirming the primacy of the paternal subject, and the various female carers (Karen, Yoko, and Jennifer) who become figures of maternity in relation to the helpless old woman. Much like in *Dark Water*, the proximity between the non-lingual, childlike figures such as ghost child, Toshio, and the maternal figures is claustrophobically intimate and deadly. While caring for her, through Emma, Karen and Yoko both see the ghost of Kayako which literally pulls them into Kayako's realm of non-lingualism, out of a symbolically coherent world. Walls are no longer impermeable and mirrors no longer reflect what is in front of them, and the ability to depend on "meaning" begins to disintegrate. The ghost of Kayako is a pure symbolic signifier – the ghost is the signifier of a living subject that has outlived the referent of the actual living subject that once

was, but has long died and decayed, but the Kayako signifier retains effectivity because it is still implicated and influential in the intersubjective network.

Perhaps the most obvious of the oedipal scenarios appears in *The Ring*, specifically within the relationship between Rachel and Aidan. At first glance, this is the natural fulfilment of the primal fantasy. Aidan seems to have stepped into the position of the father, the world of the superego, thereby becoming a successful social subject. However, there is something overtly premature about Aidan's maturation. There is a visible creepiness of the child-adult that he is, and the way he occupies a certain liminal space between infancy and adulthood. How could such a small person have such world-weary eyes? It seems he has anticipated the fantasy end point of occupying the place of the Father, while having not yet separated from Mother. His world has been saturated by maternal energies, spending the majority of his time with his mother, his cousin and babysitter, Katie, and his very concerned teacher, who are not only female, but who subject Aidan to a somewhat inappropriately intimate dependence and fetishism. Rachel and Aidan's mutual survival are ultimately inextricably bound. Katie has included Aidan in her most intimate death fantasy. At the same time, Aidan lacks contact with paternal forces, but The Name of the Father is a tangible, positive absence. Aidan's response to the lack of a speaking subject for the big Other is to internalise this voice such that it is one that comes from within, and as such, he becomes his own father.

This is made manifest in a scene in which Rachel is frantically getting ready for Katie's funeral and is unable to find her black dress – this is because the diminutive Aidan, standing on a chair, assessing his suited and formal reflection at adult-eye level, has laid it out for her as would a husband or father. In a medium close-up, Aidan appears to be an oddly proportioned adult with a deeply weathered look in his eyes. There is, however, no big Other, no system for ordering reality, no father to kill in order to have a place to take. He has skipped some crucial steps in the Oedipal trajectory. One cannot become a father if there is no Father to become, and so he has created his own by coming to occupy this subject position himself, though it is ill-fitting and caricatured, unintentionally parodying the embodiment of the strong paternal subject position, the big Other, by a mere, fallible, transient human.

If we look at how we come to know Samara, Aidan seems to possess a special ability to know about her sooner, or in more detail than the other characters in the film. Aidan is somehow more attuned to the ghostly entity than anyone else. Her visions appear in his drawings, and the real battle for survival is between Aidan and Samara. Perhaps Samara represents Aidan's

fixation on death, instilled in him by the trauma of Katie's very disturbing end, the pre-emption of which she shared with the young boy. The dawning of the notion of one's own mortality, of the fragility of one's own subjectivity – self-awareness as something that distinguishes one's selfhood from the rest of the asignifying infinitude of the universe in which “me” is of absolutely no consequence – is a terrifying realisation. It is the realisation of mortality that brings into focus the realness of the signifier – its arbitrariness, its absurdity, its central emptiness. Freud's case of Little Hans' fear of horses offers an interesting comparison here. Little Hans was the child of one of Freud's friends, who used to record the behaviour and actions of his son. He developed a neurosis as a young child – a paralysing phobia of horses. It was at a crucial developmental stage when the child was experiencing bodily changes, including finding masturbation both pleasurable and shameful, but was not yet detached from an erotic attachment to mother. Freud believed that the phobia had the horse's large penis at its centre, that it represented paternal potency. As such, the horse became the orienting, phallic signifier around which a chaotic world came to be organised. All movements were governed by the potential of encountering a horse, which would cause him great anxiety. The horse was to little Hans the “phobic object”, in that it created order by becoming an axis in a reality in which rules seemed necessary but obscure. The paternal force of the horse overrides the desires of the mother in deciding what Little Hans should do, and requires absolute obedience (or else something terrible might happen), forcing a rift between mother and child, and forcing a definitive taboo on any erotic association between his juvenile erection and his mother (Palombo et al., 2009). We could view Samara as the phobic object in the life of “Little” Aidan. She is a figure the first encounter with whom heralds a new mode of living, one which entails obedience to a rigid set of quite arbitrary rules. Unless Rachel and Aidan manage to solve the riddle of Samara's wishes (which are not forthcoming), they will die, in the very precise, rigid temporal timeframe of exactly seven days – an entirely symbolic structuration of space and time, the measurable units of which are in no way intrinsic to the passage of reality. This is, therefore, a capricious paternal force, one that exerts arbitrary and unreasonable demands simply because it can, indicating that Samara as a phobic object is related to the “father of the primal horde”. This father is the jealous, vicious and uncastrated father who lays claim to all the women of tribe and need not motivate his actions. (Clemens and Grigg, 2006, p. 65). This is exemplified in religious discourses such as those that form part of Christianity whose God is at times rational and loving, and at others mean-spirited and irrational - the God who asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, simply to prove his love (Pound, 2008). On the other hand, the rational God is the symbolic god, the Name-of-the-Father itself as opposed to the Father position. This is the primal father made symbolic, thereby asserting paternal law and rationality. Aidan has



evidently encountered and embodied the Name-of-the-Father in his adoption of petty, superficial symbolic paternity – visible in his tiny suit, the way he addresses his mother by her first name, and the way he reads his own babysitter a bedtime story. But the uncastrated primal father in the form of a ghost is still a deeply fearful force. Hearing and adopting the Name-of-the-Father, Aidan is able to speak for Samara and her wishes, from some other realm not available to Rachel, but his relationship to Samara, one which came about via his relationship to the maternal figures of Katie and Rachel, is a deadly one. Although Rachel is the protagonist, in that the locus of our identification lies with her, the survival of Aidan is paramount. Rachel only fights for her survival in order to save Aidan. The real tension of the film lies between Aidan and Samara, the latter of whom instructs the former to transmit messages on her behalf, through the symbolic images Aidan produces in his drawing, a symbolically representational form.

Even as a living entity before her death, Samara possesses some uncontainable prehistoric quality, as though she has somehow always existed, before she was even born. It makes an odd kind of sense for the primal father to be channelled through the figure of a young girl – characterised by a tantrum-throwing entitlement and an omnipotent lack of castration anxiety. Her parentage is opaque such that her origin is an ellipsis in the past, and her physical death does not close off her existence into the future. The primal father does not know lack, however there does seem to be, around Samara, a jealous anxiety, a vengefulness that indicates a fear of loss, or the fact that she is in the process of some kind of subtraction. She fears being forgotten, that is, becoming impotent, lacking. As Samara becomes distilled into a signifier in the video, she becomes pure image. And as her death causes her to risk becoming purely symbolic entity, she asserts the very realness of the letter, proclaiming the fact that her image is far more than that, by exceeding its bounds and crawling out of the screen and bringing about very Real death for those who encounter her. Her vengeful rage erupts out of the primal father's resistance to this imposition of symbolic debt and clutches at the phallus, refusing to let go of its power. The video could be regarded as the site of the castration of the primal father. It is the liminal, primordial space in which the itinerary of the letter is born. Not surprising then, that its foremost image is that of a specular snapshot of a simple circle that occurs at the moment of death. There could not be a more reduced rendering of the murderous signifier, of the signifier which hails the beginning of the tyranny of lack and exclusion for the symbolic subject. The circle is the empty, absolute signifier, the *objet a*, the point of the impossible phantasy's signification. Lacan even calls this object the marked circle of the domain of the Other, the "master signifier" (Leader et al., 1995) which comes into play at the moment of symbolic castration of presymbolic wholeness, and in

Samara's case, death of an original potency and reduction to pure circle of empty signification. The lines of the circular signifier become a divisor between light and dark, as the bright ring is subtracted from the dark negative space of everything that it isn't. The dark Real is both within and without. This is the original letter of the original trauma which is given its circular, autonomous itinerary is written into existence, and becomes the constitutive keystone for the subject who is its recipient, such as Rachel, who is more its recipient for her position as mother than for the coincidence of her having stumbled across *The Ring* video. The letter always reaches its destination.

## II

Intersubjective formations precede and succeed any individual who finds him or herself implicated therein. And the viewer subject, just like the film protagonist, is written authentically into existence discursively as it is given a place in culture through having a relationship to processes of signification. The repetition compulsion as a concept explains the reiteration of such intersubjective formations as the Oedipal complex by stating that the subject always somehow seeks to revisit the psychological site of some original trauma – the trauma of the brutal, murderous introduction of lack and alienation into experience. This is a lack that is simultaneously creative and destructive in that it is the foundation of all desire, but would see itself through to the end, a point of impossible satisfaction and stasis (Campbell, 2013). The relationship between the kind of repetition visible Oedipal repetition and ritual to ward of Symbolic death is evident within the films, which frequently make quite literal the connections that exist between story, repetition and the line between life and death. The reiteration of the Oedipal formation is conspicuous, to say the least. The repetition compulsion involves the forwarding on of the letter, repeating it and passing it on. The structure of this forwarding on is always done via narrative constructions; that is, an understanding of self in relation to an imagined linear trajectory, which is narrated by the Other even before our birth. Narrative is the domain of the letter; interaction with it affirms the primacy of the symbolic as well as being real and arbitrary in itself. The relationship between language and the supernatural/spiritual is the ritualistic retelling of particular stories across various modes and contexts such that the entire community is defined obsessively by a text or phrase – creation stories, commandments, litanies. All of the films in question hold the dynamics of the Oedipal complex – the unsettling of or contestation within it – as deeply thematically central. This same ritualistic need to keep telling the same story can be seen in the how, while civilisations change, the *Quran* continues be recited in largely

the same way it has for centuries, for example. The common element in arguably any faith that has ever existed in any civilisation is that narrative is utterly essential to the transmission of the code by which that faith defines itself. Any faith, from Hinduism to quantum physics, begins by or centres on relating a grand narrative of the origin and the end of all reality, or at least of its own origin (which may as well be the whole of reality), and contains numerous micro-narratives which elaborate the code for living as is envisioned in that faith through fables and morality tales. It is not simply a code for living well that is being transmitted, but a code for living at all – a code that lends coherence to experience and connects them to verisimilitude, lending that experience authenticity, meaningfulness. This means that “authenticity” of experience is oppositional to “originality” of experience, because authentic experience is always only measured by its relation to already existing frameworks.

Not adhering to this code places the subject in a position where he or she may fall out of the light and into the dark unknown. The connection between the letter, the death drive, ritualism, repetition and narrative should come into focus when one notes the dual function of the letter which is defined by its location in two registers – the real and the Symbolic. The letter as symbolic entity provides structure and protection for the Ego – a place to which one can return despite venturing into the abyss beyond, the trail of breadcrumbs, or the site where the subject’s anchor lies. On the other hand, the letter itself exists in the register of the Real is, like anything, beyond itself – both empty and saturated, meaningless and jouissant, dead and alive. So we repeatedly return to the letter out of self-destructive drives that arise from the lack central to desire both in unconscious attraction to subjective death, the very same letter in relation to which the subject comes to exist at all. This is how ritual narrative or narrative ritual, in any form, functions simultaneously to keep death out and let death in, and this could not be clearer in these supernatural tales of death with which we’re dealing, in which the door to the underworld is left ajar.

### III

One could scarcely find a set of films that would serve as a better illustration of Lacan’s elaboration of the repetition compulsion in his seminar on “The Purloined Letter”. Not only is the remake film a reassertion of the already circulating letter of the narrative of the original film, but a reassertion of the letter of the horror genre in general. Further, each of the films is explicitly thematised in terms of perpetuation – the title of *The Ring* suggests circularity and return, *The Grudge* implies an insatiable vendetta focused on perpetual return to the origin of a grievance, while *Dark Water* (though less explicit in the title) is

characterised by an eternal dampness – of steady, unrelentingly repetitive sounds of dripping that stand for a presence that refuses to forsake the past. And in a fourth metonymy, within the films there are arbitrary signifiers with an explicit imperative to be forwarded on, such as *The Ring*'s cursed strange, first-person video recording of Samara's intimate experiences that is discovered by Rachel. This notion of a mortal "curse" is rather fascinating in this context.

In the subject position of parent, she has passed the curse of the knowledge of mortality, or the separation of life and death via language, on to her child (which murders the cohesive realness of the being and transforms it into an articulable, mature speaking subject). This is the deadly curse of symbolic self-awareness, of cultural selfhood, that functions to oppose the self to everything that is not itself. As the narrative progresses, the redemption from the curse of death of Aidan (the child who is the phallic signifier to Rachel in the subject position of mother) becomes the primary drive behind all of Rachel's actions. Simultaneously, Aidan's linguistic knowledge of death heralds the return of the biological father from his absence, who is then Oedipally sacrificed for Aidan's survival. In order for Aidan to survive the curse of death that has arisen from the taboo proximity to Mother, the father must assert his presence and be murdered as a result. Aidan can then pass safely into maturity as a subject, aware of his own impending death.

It is the symbolic status of Mother that pulls Rachel into the orbit of Samara's curse. She recognises herself as the subject to whom the letter of this signifying curse is directed from the standpoint of her need to ensure the survival of her child. According to Žižek, within the register of the symbolic, the letter arrives at its destination because of this autonomy of the signifier. Through the signifier of the Ring, by pursuing it obsessively and unwaveringly, directing all libidinal drives towards it, Rachel arrives at the truth of the Real death of the Samara – the cold emptiness at the centre of the signifier – in an extremely physical, jouissant way as she discovers her corpse – fleshy and nearly-living, but decaying, like the coyote running off the cliff, only as she dies too in the Symbolic in relation to the subject of Rachel. Rachel chased the 'ring' to seek life, hoping to somehow save or soothe Samara, but instead she found the absoluteness of death, and the complete uncanny alterity of the symbolic Samara. All the films involve ghosts with a vengeful wish. The ghosts are kind of symbolic debt-collectors. They are seeking some kind of moreness to their disembodied symbolic status. They want something back, they seek to return to the realness of their fleshiness. It is this debt to the real that drives them to pursue the phallic signifiers that would herald a kind of symbolic completion, and the ability to pass on into oblivion, and

their continual harkening back to fixations on Oedipal symbolism, to lack, in all three films, allegorises the way in which the letter provides itinerary to the subject.

Everything leads to the point of the demystification of this central signifier, at which point, the film reaches its jouissant climax and static rest. The death drive is located in the repetition compulsion which is about the forwarding on of the letter. The structure of this forwarding on is always done via narratives – which are intrinsically linguistic – the letter. This letter functions to affirm the primacy of the symbolic as well as being real and arbitrary in itself. So storytelling is about keeping death out and letting death in at the same time, for both the viewer and the protagonist. At all levels of signification, the letter continues its passage, perpetuating the codification of the Symbolic and the subjectivities within it *ad infinitum*. It is not simply a code for living properly, or ideologically appropriately, that is being transmitted, but a code for living in any way that could be self-aware. It is a code that draws the very boundary lines of what we understand, through language, to be a “life”. But surely then, in this realm of asignification the Real organic being does not lament its detachment from symbolic reality, and does not eternally question its own authenticity, because it has never experienced lack? Indeed there are perspectives which do not fear to tread this unknown territory, and with this realisation is opened an entirely new way of conceptualising the subject and its relation to “originality”.

## CHAPTER 3: The Asian Horror Film Remake and Change

### INTRODUCTION

It was at this point that I left off at the end in the general introduction to this thesis, because the theoretical conclusion at which it arrives can be considered to contain the climax and denouement of the argument of this work overall. As such, this third and final section closes off this work, but leaves open the possibility for further developing an account of such a thing as the Asian horror film remake for other scholars.

In the first part of this chapter, I engage with Deleuze's ideas regarding the relationship between identity and difference, elaborating through illustrative examples the way in which identity emerges from the virtual realm of rich potentiality through processes of "difference and repetition". It begins by looking at the lived experience of the autistic person, the subject to whom Žižek relates the condition of not being located within the signifying practices of culture. This initiates a deeper look into the question of what precedes symbolic lack by looking at those who do not experience it, and moves on to examine the complexities of the ways in which feedback takes place between the autonomic body and the Symbolic self. I look at how memory and repetition are implicated in limiting the expression of possibility, but that this realm of immanent virtuality persists as a dimension of vitality.

The second part of this chapter looks at the asignification in relation to the Asian horror film remake, and looks at how the ghosts of *The Ring*, *Dark Water* and *The Grudge* might be illustrative of the way in which incipient possibility becomes determined identity, and how it is an interaction between sameness and difference brings about the illusion of life.

## PART ONE

### I

The persistence of the Oedipal formation, which is so fundamental to narrative construction in Hollywood films, points to the very primality of repetition in signification. It is hardly ridiculous to say that it is likely that intersubjective formations of early childhood (and the complexes there developed) would persist throughout adult life and into adult narratives. From a Lacanian perspective, once the individual has become a speaking subject, the subject becomes irretrievably alienated from the unspeakable world, and knowledge occurs in repeated, signifiatory structures. The Lacanians argue that the subject is protected against the nothingness of the asignifying realm by maintaining a relationship with the symbolic order. The condition of having no relation to the symbolic order, to categorical meaning, is described by Žižek as being an “autistic” one; he says that a “psychotic autism” is the state of “terminal isolation from the discursive network of intersubjectivity”. (Žižek, 1999)

Beyond this qualification of being somehow outside of the structures of signification, however, Žižek does not discuss at length the nature of the experience of existing in the radical negativity of the Real. He doesn't explain what this state would in fact be like, in the present, experiential sense, for the living being. It is only ever discussed in relation to the fearfulness it holds in relation to the symbolic subject. Within the therapeutic psychoanalysis, autism is psychodiagnostically defined as being a neural development disorder that affects communication and social interaction. But then what could be thought to be the ontological (rather than pathological) status of a living being whose subjectivity is not validated back to self by the Symbolic? It is therefore important to look more closely at the condition of autism to see why Žižek makes reference to it in particular. According to the DSM, the psychodiagnostic criteria for autism includes a variety of so-called “impairments” in the areas of social interaction and communication.<sup>5</sup> If the autistic subject remains outside

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<sup>5</sup> Autism is diagnosed according to these criteria:

- “(I) A total of six (or more) items from (A), (B), and (C), with at least two from (A), and one each from (B) and (C)
- (A) qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
1. marked impairments in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, and gestures to regulate social interaction
  2. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
  3. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people, (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people)
  4. lack of social or emotional reciprocity ( note: in the description, it gives the following as examples: not actively participating in simple social play or games, preferring solitary activities, or involving others in activities only as tools or "mechanical" aids )
- (B) qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:

of the intersubjective network, how do we conceptualise the fact that they do not possess the same relationship to “meaning”? How is this existence qualitatively different from a meaningful one? This question might be better illuminated by posing the more specific question of the relationship of the autistic person to the recurring Oedipal formation, if it is so central to the construction of authentic narrative in the symbolic. What is the position of the person in an autistic state in relation to the intersubjective network of letter-exchange? What can we make of an individual who exists positively outside of the constraints of discourse such as those that define the verisimilitude of a horror film and any other text in culture? What is his or her relation to the “original” world if authenticity is only possible inasmuch as it can be spoken?

What if we were to suppose that the realness of our very bodies suggests that a plane of experience exists in which an autistic state persists into mature symbolic subjectivity in the human individual? The fact that one jumps from the fright of a ghost, before one is able to know what it is suggests that the speaking subject is always in negotiation with Real materiality, and is never really completely separated from it by language. In this context, the autistic being, a living subject outside of language, could hold a lot of potential for this exploration. Some insight into the threat that the notion of non-discursive, positive existence poses to the subject in culture is evident in the almost uncannily appropriate real-world account of the experience of ten-year-old Frankie, a boy with autism, as he is confronted with the death of his father. While the experience of traumatic loss and death typically has the effect of rendering the human subject speechless, Frankie, having been unable to communicate like other children throughout his life, somehow finds for the first time the

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- 1. delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
  - 2. in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
  - 3. stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
  - 4. lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level
- (C) restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities, as manifested by at least two of the following:
- 1. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
  - 2. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
  - 3. stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
  - 4. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- (II) Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years:
- (A) social interaction
  - (B) language as used in social communication
  - (C) symbolic or imaginative play.”<sup>5</sup> (Gallo, 2010, pp. 39–40)



ability to communicate emotions regarding his grief and confusion about his father's death, asking his mother, "Why did Jesus steal Daddy?". Frankie's story was sensational enough to capture the attention of TV-Doctor, Bruce Hensel, who featured it in an NBC special episode on autism, entitled "Autism: The Hidden Epidemic", which won an Emmy award (Hensel, 2005). One particularly interesting case study from this broadcast is transcribed below:

*Host: "Autism can be cruel, robbing a child's ability to communicate joy, sadness and pain. But sometimes when you least expect it there is a breakthrough. Doctor Bruce Hensel now has a story about Frankie, a boy who finally came to terms with death."*

*Dr Hensel (Voice-over): "Christmas celebrations. Family getaways. First birthday parties. Times gone by for the ... family. Frank, Maggie, Valentina and Frankie. But when Frankie turned two, their world changed dramatically."*

*Maggie (Frankie's mother): "By age 18 months, Frankie had about 30 words in his vocabulary, and a couple of sentences. But within 6 months, he lost it."*

*Dr Hensel (V/O): "Many tests later, doctors gave Frank and Maggie the devastating news. It's Autism."*

*Dr Hensel (to Maggie): "When you finally knew and accepted it, how did you feel?"*

*Maggie: "We were devastated. My husband Frank and I didn't see it coming."*

*Dr Hensel (V/O): "Frank and Maggie dove right in with research, doctors and treatments. Nine years and hundreds of thousands of dollars later, their son had made remarkable progress, but a cruel and tragic twist of fate nearly changed that. Frankie's father, a beloved LA Times columnist, suddenly died. Maggie, now left without a husband, Frankie, without a father."*

*Maggie: "And it's almost as though he were searching for words. He was in a state of disbelief, and he kept saying, 'Mommy, was it my daddy? Did he really die?'"*

*Dr Hensel (V/O): "Frankie doesn't process feelings like many other children do. Some information does not get in. Some does not get out. It's difficult if not impossible for him to share emotions. His world is blocked out to those trying to reach in."*

*Maggie: "It was so incredibly painful. It really was the ultimate sensory overload."*

*Dr Hensel: "When Frankie's father died, the way and time in which he reacted was not unusual for an autistic child, but that didn't make it any easier."*

*Frankie (stuttering): "I loved him so very much. When I went to Dad's funeral to say goodbye ... I didn't cry that much at the funeral, but everyone else did and it kinda scared me a little bit."*

*Dr Hensel: "Trapped in his own world, Frankie couldn't tell his mom how much he missed his dad till this big breakthrough moment, when his mother's recorded voice about her husband triggered an emotional response."*

*Maggie: "And suddenly, to see him cry, it just broke my heart. It was like seeing Frank die all over again."*

*Dr Hensel: "Painful for Maggie. A relief for Frankie. His mourning began, then led to another breakthrough ..."*

*Maggie: "That a child that just a few years earlier had no speech, no concept of pretend play, what's real and what's not, to suddenly be asking such a big question like that, 'Did Jesus steal my daddy?', he was really searching for the meaning of life."*

*Dr Hensel: "Today marks the one year anniversary of Frank's death. Frankie is able to talk about his father without tears."*

*Frankie: "He kissed me and hugged me..."*

*Dr Hensel: "And Maggie is able to talk about the future."*

*Maggie: "I think Frankie is going to be something special. He is incredibly bright, like his father."*

(Hensel, 2005)

There are at least two planes of significant interest in this short, sentimental video: One pertaining to the discursive elements of the video, which serve to express certain things about the sociocultural demands exerted upon the individual; the second being the experiences of Frankie himself, and the extent to which these are somewhat counterintuitive to certain theoretical models, particularly within psychoanalysis.

The story of the video depends explicitly on the narrativisation of Frankie's own subjectification within quite particular discursive constraints. It occurs within the generic conventions of the medical TV show, which foreground the dialectic of pathology versus health and a desired trajectory of "healing"; in other words, discourses that involve placing importance on going from one undesirable, dangerous or unfortunate state into a desirable, healthy state. What is interesting in this scenario is that sociolinguistic development is tangled up in this narrative linearity of healing in the case of autism. A person who is a healthy, well-developed, desirable human subject is a person who can communicate. Subjectification becomes a matter of vitality versus pathology – of life versus death. It displays explicitly the teleological expectations for Frankie's subjectification along these

lines, betraying much about the figures who surround Frankie and very little about the experience of Frankie himself. Within this framework, the Oedipal undertones of “normal” human development within the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition are less than subtle. In order for Frankie to progress into “the future” or, rather, for a future for Frankie to be conceived of by those around him, his father, a journalist – aptly, a man of words – has to die, and Frankie has to learn to speak, in order to be able to tell the difference between “what’s real and what’s not”, and succeed in fulfilling the potential of his becoming “like his father”, Frank Sr.

The stakes for his achieving or not achieving the fulfilment of this Oedipal fantasy and the conclusion of the developmental process of becoming a social subject seem to be higher for those around Frankie than they are for Frankie himself. It is of no apparent consequence whether Frankie himself can “talk about the future”, but rather it is of more significant interest to Dr Hensel that his mother Maggie may do so. What was terrifying to Frankie at the funeral was not an encounter with death, but the behaviour of those around him. In a similar scenario described on an internet support group forum for autistic families, another mother speaks about her autistic son’s reaction to the death of their family dog:

Last night my husband and I had to put our dog down. He has been in our family for 9 years so he has been with all my kids their entire life. When we came home last night to tell the kids what happened my 9 year old broke down. Even my 4 year old was crying because she saw us so upset. Erick on the other hand had no emotion really. He was just walking back and forth like he wasn’t sure what to say. He saw me crying and pretended to cry and tried to force some tears out. He was just so blunt and said "Jake (the dog) is dead, now we need another one". I couldn’t get mad at him but that was just the wrong thing to say. (Ericksmom1, 2011)

The fact that her son is *not* disturbed by the death of the dog is articulated as being “wrong”. The question is, what does she mean by wrong, and wrong for whom? It was the wrong thing to say because it was a statement not sensitive to the needs of the other family members to preserve the particularity of the anthropomorphised subjectivity of the dog – an at least partially projective subjectivity with which they interacted, therefore validating themselves as subjects in the intersubjective network. Although he clearly attempted to behave “correctly”, by forcing himself to cry, Erick cannot see any essential difference between this dog and any other dog. But he is *supposed* to, and this is an imperative issued by the Symbolic and heard by everyone in Erick’s family, except him. And if this dog could be replaced by another, then the unnerving possibility exists that, through Erick’s eyes, any of his family could be replaced by “another” mom or sibling, which therefore makes it important, for the sake of the sense of specificity and coherent sense of self of subjects

around him, that he be “wrong”, that his interpretation not be the one that is considered to be “authentic” to the situation.

Without further information it is difficult to say exactly what Frankie’s experience of encountering other people’s grief felt like, but implicit in his words is a crude sense that the crying *means* something bad and frightening was being experienced by the people close to him, the people who look after him. It could further be posed, in line with other accounts of autism within psychological and medical discourses, that the fear he experienced may have had to do with an experience of alienation or confusion regarding performances of grief he did not understand and perhaps the distress involved in perceiving a cue and pressure to perform a particular kind of social behaviour, but being both unable to do so, and unable to understand its function. His search for meaning, therefore, was not for the metaphysical meaning of his father’s death but for the symbolic material of the socially signifying behaviours of his family. At the funeral, he is initiated into the world of signifiers.

It was not, as the mother explains using familiar discursive jargon regarding autism clearly gleaned in doctors’ rooms and informational leaflets, “the ultimate sensory overload”. The sensory overload felt by autistic individuals occurs at the pre-signifying level, at the level of *perceptual* experience (Bogdashina, 2003, p. 44), and not at the more *conceptual* level of grief and the rationalisation of traumatic experiences such as encounters with death and the “missing” of a loved one, which requires one to have a whole “idea” of a person beyond simple perceptual experience. The common experience of grief is primarily emotional, not sensorial. The entanglement by Maggie of the sensory and the emotional has to do with the entanglement of the “affective” (a term used by Deleuzians to explain the autonomic, surface-level functions of the body’s reaction to perceptual stimulation), and the emotional, “higher” functions of the human’s *conceptualisation* of the things the body encounters. While Frankie may have experienced an overload in the scenario, it seems that Maggie is projecting her emotional overload onto Frankie, overlaying her conceptual, “higher” notion of grief, (which is tied to the loss of an *idea* of a narrativised future scenario that included Frank, which requires a linear temporality of which autists do not typically have a strong sense) onto Frankie’s perceptual experience of being overwhelmed by the expressive displays of grief by those around him. Certainly when he expresses himself with regard to the loss of his father, it is not in terms of an overly idealised notion of a memory of, or future with, his father, but at the level of the skin: “He kissed me and hugged me ...” This chapter will investigate how one becomes the other, and the flows that exist within these two planes of experience (affect and emotion), which can perhaps be put to use fruitfully later, in sounding

out the event that is the Asian horror film remake.

It is, however, clear that a tension exists in Frankie's mind. The experience of death exposes him, in a more concentrated way than he may have experienced in his life prior to this event, to symbolic institutions that explicitly protect the sanctity of the divide between life and death. It is interesting that the funeral plays a central role in this anecdote. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ritual is deeply important in activities that involve orienting towards and approaching the Real, as in instances of death or the "supernatural", because the explicit symbolic structures that provide meaning in an uncomplicated, automatic, foundational sense, through repetition that doesn't require interrogation of signification, but a kind of suspension of active meaning-making, provide a framework that protects the symbolic subject from obliteration in face of an encounter with that which is truly meaningless – for the subject is only a subject if meaning is possible. From a Lacanian perspective, this potential obliteration of subject threatens a regression into a pre-linguistic "autistic" state – a place of pure *jouissance*, in which the subject does not hear the voice of any big Other, and is alienated from the signifying networks of the social world. In elaborating this post-traumatic subject of Lacan's, Žižek outlines the "autistic state" below:

... we are dealing with the zero-level of subjectivity, with the formal conversion of the pure externality of the meaningless real (its brutal destructive intrusion) into the pure internality of the "autistic" subject detached from external reality, disengaged, reduced to a persisting core deprived of all substance. The logic is here again that of the Hegelian infinite judgement: speculative identity of meaningless external intrusion and of the pure detached internality – it is as if only a brutal shock can give rise to pure interiority of the subject, of the void that cannot be identified with any determinate positive content.

The properly philosophical dimension of the study of the post-traumatic subject resides in this recognition that what appears as the brutal destruction of the subject's (narrative) substantial identity is also the moment of its birth. The post-traumatic autistic subject is the "living proof" that the subject cannot be identified (does not fully overlap) with the "stories it tells itself about itself", with the narrative symbolic texture of its life: when all this is taken away, something (or, rather, *nothing*, but a *form* of nothing) remains, and this something is the pure subject of the death drive.

The Lacanian subject as-is thus a response *to and of* the real: a response *to* the real of the brutal meaningless intrusion; and a response *of* the real, that is, a response which emerges when the symbolic integration of the traumatic intrusion fails, reaches its point of impossibility. As such, the subject at its most elementary is indeed "beyond the unconscious": an empty form deprived even of unconscious formations encapsulating a variety of libidinal investments. (Žižek, 2011, p. 311)

It is therefore really interesting and surprising to observe that it is via an encounter with

death that Frankie, a subject of “pure interiority”, with no “positive content” *finds* language or perhaps, finds himself responding to the tacit (or not-so-tacit ) demands of the subjects and sociolinguistic realm around him to locate himself within a signifying network. If we take into account the overt, almost tyrannical channelling of his story into the various constraints and expectations of the genre, as well as the very particular discourses in operation that frame the autistic’s experience of death with fairly arbitrary specificity, and objective-oriented vagueness (such as in the mother’s use of “sensory overload”), it is reasonable to argue that the “miracle” that Frankie, the autistic, is able to suddenly articulate a symbolic rationale for death has more to do with the legitimation of the signifying networks on which the subjects around him depend, than it has to do with the experience of Frankie himself. This is not meant to imply any kind of cruelly manipulative intentions, but rather show the obsessional relationship the neurotypical, symbolic subject has with the systems of meaning that provide orientation, means of communication, and that preserve the notion of “life”.

The requirement for Frankie to speak is a projective need on the part of the mother and the doctor to have the legitimacy of “life”-preserving signifying networks articulated back to them, like an echo, since the speaking subjects around Frankie have been confronted with the trauma of death that has destabilised their dependence on language, causing their orientation within the symbolic to falter. It is particularly Oedipally poignant that it is the father who has been lost, and Frankie is now required to ventriloquize the big Other, to affirm the primacy of this paternal force. The relief the doctor attributes to Frankie is not the boys’ relief; it is the relief of the reaffirmation of the big Other as true for those who surround him. It is via the figure of the big Other that Frankie is seen to be able to *conceptualise* death. The idea of “Jesus” having “stolen” his father away is not a contemplation of the Realness of death, but an encounter of the subject with the Symbolic in the form of religious signifiers. He is not seeking the “meaning of life”, but quite the opposite. He is investigating and experimenting with the symbolic articulations thereof. He is trying to learn how death is *spoken of*, and not what death *is*, which affirms the power of language over death for the observing subjects, relieving them from the distress of the threat of loss of meaning. Bringing the autistic into the realm of the Symbolic is a defence against the latent fear that, in their traumatic encounter with inarticulable death that strips them of words, the family might themselves fall into the a-signifying realm of the autistic.

The reason Frankie the autistic finds language upon his exposure to death, as an autistic, is therefore not out of the need to rationalise his own trauma. For the autistic, death may not be

traumatic in and of itself, for the need to maintain solid boundaries between the *concepts* of life and death might not be imperative in the same way to a being that does not operate within ordinary sociolinguistic structures and ideality as does a “normal”, developed symbolic subject. He discovers language because his family members have, in their trauma, identified with his autistic state, and have found it terrifying. Frankie is then implicated in a complex, projective, emotional tug-of-war to forsake his own asymbolic, prelingual state and enter into the world of language and subjecthood, for the sake of the faltering subjectivities that surround him. Certainly, for the purpose of this thesis, if not for the family and Dr Hensel, it has the function of illustrating something of the alterity of language, the Realness of the letter, which Frankie adopts late, and under some duress.

In fact, the question remains: Has Frankie actually “found language” at all? Or is the entire narrative of Dr Hensel’s show just a dramatization of a wish, a misrecognition of the Other in Frankie? Certainly the story is only ostensibly about Frankie, and in reality far more focused on the experiences of Maggie. As far as can be told from the information present in this video, Frankie is just a screen for the projection of his mother’s trauma and grief. So then what does it feel like to be Frankie? Is he simply a purely interior subject, embodying nothing but a “void that cannot be identified with any determinate positive content”, as Žižek describes? Or is there more to Frankie, and indeed all human subjects, than is allowed for in this account of the autistic state?

The Deleuzian thinker, Brian Massumi, puts forward some ideas that might help answer this question, particularly the work he does with Erin Manning, on the very subject of autism (Massumi and Manning, 2010). Their ideas run at odds with the fearful image of the drooling, isolated autistic, trapped in his or her own body, where “[s]ome information does not get in [and] some does not get out” (Hensel, 2005), incapacitated by the confrontation with an inner-void. While the psychoanalytic approach used above is useful in understanding the anxieties of the mature subject, it pathologises the prelingual subject. It supposes that desire can be attributed to a fundamental lack, which requires that the individual directs his or her libidinal energies towards fetishistic objects that will fill this central void. This positions the autistic as a subject of pure lack, frustrated in his or her awareness of this lack, but with an inability to satisfactorily invest this negative desire towards in symbolic objects. This notion of desire as negative is a primary and important point at which Deleuzian theory differs from psychoanalysis. Deleuzian theory conceives of desire as positive and productive, as this allows for a radically different interpretation of the autistic experience, as will be elaborated upon below.

The psychoanalytic perspective also supposes that once the subject has entered the world of language, the prelingual entity (nothing but a fragmented body lacking coherence) ceases to exist, and is only regressed to upon the obliteration of the speaking subject. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the two cannot exist side by side – the entry into the world of language is absolute and irrevocable. I will argue in this chapter, in accordance with Massumi and Manning (2010), that the “autistic”, perceptual being of the prelingual organism prior to the attainment of language persists parallel to the sociolinguistic subject, and interacts with it in ways that are not only not pathological, but also vital and life-giving, and absolutely integral to the event of a film. In fact, the “getting in of information” can happen only as a result of the persistent presence of the affective capacities that precede, interact with, and are fed back into by the faculties of language and concept that are part of the conscious, symbolic and emotional subject. There is more to “life” than language. Shaviro says:

Of course language is an important part of what makes us human. But I think it is an exaggeration to say that everything is language, everything is textuality, etc. That is why I don't accept the idea of some overarching "Symbolic Order" as the Lacanians do (as far as I can tell; in Lacan and followers of Lacan like Zizek, I find what they say about the impossible Real far more interesting than what they say about the Symbolic or the Imaginary). (Rosko and Shaviro, 2000)

As can be seen in the Zizek quote earlier, to be located utterly in the Real is not a place of positive drives. It is the positivation of pure lack. Desire and enjoyment emerge only upon the subject's fantasy of fullness misrecognised in objects constituted by language. The Real is conceived by Lacanians as being equivalent to death, as can be seen in the way Zizek discusses leaving the Symbolic realm as being a second, “Symbolic death” that hails the completion of the act of dying. If this is the case, then the autistic subject becomes the living dead. If the divide between the Real and the symbolic is what preserves “life” for the subject, and the incoherent void that is defined on the terms of that which cannot be conceived of by humans is what drives libidinal investment in objects and fantasies, then autists are zombies – stagnant, decaying bodies absorbed into the void of the Real, without desire and vitality, in a state of submission to the primary lack, living without subjectivity in the Symbolic.

But as Shaviro points out, the Real, as the register of experience which “does not depend on my *idea* of it” (2000) might be a lot more interesting than has been explored within psychoanalysis. Deleuzian theory dismantles the dialectic of language as being the presence to the Real's absence, but retains the notion of an asignifying realm that exists prior to, within, underneath and around language. However, rather than being deadly, elusive and



barred to the subject's knowledge, it imagines this asignifying realm as being a place of life, pregnant with potentiality, that is in perpetual interaction with processes of signification.

In their fascinating lecture entitled "Coming Alive in a World of Texture", Massumi and Manning (2010) provide exhilarating accounts of the personal experiences of some autistic activists with whom they work. These provide insight into the world as people like Frankie might feel it to be. What is immediately apparent is that this is a world quite different to the empty, frustrated stiltedness, or place of living death, posed by neuroscientific and psychoanalytic discourses. Importantly, they advocate for a change in perspective with regard to notions of "neurotypicality" in society, towards a notion of "neurodiversity", in other words, an acknowledgement of autism as a polar point on a spectrum on which we all belong. This means that insight into the experience of the autist may provide us with a new place to investigate what it means for a human to live. This is the point at which the relevance of autism to this thesis ought to become more evident. Understanding the experience of the autist as a living, breathing sentient being that exists in relation to the world in a way that is neither ruled by the Symbolic nor terrified of the Real, as opposed to the hypothetical creature of the psychoanalytic worst-case-scenario dissolution of the subject, opens up the relationship between subject, the body, and the environment it inhabits. Specifically then, it might help us to look at film differently, and to understand better the human and the film via the relationship between them, and what they are in excess of their existence as sociocultural or symbolic artefacts.

The words Manning and Massumi present are words of individuals who cannot speak, but are able to write about the "texture" of the world as they experience it. Theirs is a world teeming with movement and possibility. It is an unhierarchised world in which "the organic and the inorganic, colour sound smell and rhythm perception and emotion intensely interweave into the "aroundness" of a textured world alive with difference" (Massumi and Manning, 2010) "Difference" in this context is a notion intrinsic to Deleuze's ontology of immanence, which is opposed to ontologies of transcendence. Before looking further into the philosophical possibilities presented by the autistic experience, it is necessary to outline some of the primary ideas that belong to this Deleuzian perspective.

## II

Philosophy over the millennia has followed a trajectory that has seen the transcendental entity move from the deities to the human subject. With modernity's overthrowing of God, we have seen not an obliteration of the transcendental entity, but a usurping of that position

by humankind, characterised by a powerful mind-body dualism. The transcendental subject is evident even in Lacanian theory, when the question is asked: Who is the "I" who misrecognises itself in the Imaginary, mirror phase, setting into motion the forces of desire and alienation from self throughout the subject's life? How can self be alienated from self, without the unspoken supposition of a prior, whole self to experience this alienation? An ontology of immanence, on the other hand, rejects the idea of any transcendent substance – mental or theological, for in order for any force to have an effect on reality, it must interact with it, and if it interacts with it, it is not transcendental. According to Todd May, it is important to note, in the face of poststructuralist, language-centred theory, that "constitution does not imply creation" (May, 2005, p. 29). If we think back to the first chapter's example of Lego houses, I stated that without a framework of expectation and interpretation provided by generic structures, the house cannot exist. The house only exists inasmuch as it can be said to be and is recognised as a house. This scenario becomes more interesting in relation to an ontology of immanence. We can once again use this very same pile of Lego bricks to illustrate a theoretical concept, this time, the Deleuzian notions of actuality and virtuality:

It would be an oversimplification to say that prior to this moment in this work, and in poststructuralist and psychoanalytic work broadly, the argument has been that the Lego brick house did not exist in *any* form, in the sense that it was conjured into material existence by language. As Todd May says of 'constitution', "[...] it is not as though there were only mental substance and then, by some miracle, physical substance was created from it. What is created is not the *material* but the *world*" (May, 2005, p. 29); in other words, the world (and the Lego house) is not "created" but circumscribed and made meaningful to the subject by its definition, and the imposition of limitations on its qualities such that a manageable range of potentialities that are appropriate to the organisation of social reality are made manifest to the subject. For the subject, the house comes into existence as a house only through the faculties of language and representational thought, but the Lego house, and the bricks that make it up, and the plastic that make up the bricks and so on, are expressive of their own potentialities simply by being materially existent, indifferent to observation by humans. These potentialities include those circumscribed for it by human language, and these indeed contribute to its very construction (because a human with a notion of a house was necessary for the house to get built. However, the vastness of the virtuality of the immanent, actualised object of the house will always exceed the discursive, for-the-subject meaning of "house".

May explains this quite elusive concept of “immanence” very accessibly below:

The immanence of duration to the present has an important consequence: the present always has a greater potential for transformation than it appears to have. Why is this? The present “presents” itself to us as the realm of identities and differences in degrees. In the spatial present, things appear to have more or less fixed identities. An ironing board is nothing more than an ironing board, a shoe nothing more than a shoe. But if difference is immanent to the present, then each moment is suffused by a realm of difference that lies coiled within it, offering the possibility of disrupting any given identity. There is always more than presents itself, a surplus beyond what is directly experienced. That surplus is not a fixed identity, a “something else,” but the virtuality of difference with no identity and all measure of potential.

This is easier to conceive if we think temporally than if we think spatially ... Thinking spatially we ask ourselves: How can an ironing board be anything more than an ironing board? The idea that there is anything more around it or inside it seems absurd. It would be like positing a mystical horizon or aura around or within physical objects that somehow lets them be more than they are. But if we think temporally the idea of the virtual difference makes more sense. The present is more than simply an ideal Now, cut off from past or future. Rather it is a realm of spatial presence, of relatively fixed identities and of differences in degree, suffused by a past that both contributes to those identities and helps to undercut them, to unsettle them in ways that allow for expressions other than the ones that appear at a given moment in experience. (May, 2005, p. 56)

The ontological disparity between Lacanian and Deleuzian thought is clear here. Reality is conceptualised as a “realm”, or “domain” of experience. The “moreness” of objects is excluded from the object as it is presented to and by the subject. In Deleuze, this “moreness” is conceptualised in a rich, present-temporality, as being folded into the ironing board, or Lego house. “Difference” comes about within things, and not in relation to some other, original index. Structuralist and poststructuralist, language-centric thinking conceives of difference through representational thought, which operates on the terms of comparison between signifiers. Identity is formed in relation to systems of meaning that require counterposing signifiers to simultaneously define what a thing *is not*. Deleuzian “difference” is difference of a thing to itself or difference of a thing to other multifarious potential actualisations of itself that may have occurred under different conditions, or upon encountering different forces in different moments. The set of traits, affects, characteristics that “could be” (collapsing into each other the temporalities of what could have been, and what could yet come to be), that exist within the virtual dimension of an actual thing, are what Deleuze calls the “body without organs” (which is abbreviated to “BwO”). A body without organs, a term drawn from Antonin Artaud, is elaborated by Deleuze in his work, *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*. He explains it thus:

Beyond the organism, but also at the limit of the lived body, there lies what Artaud discovered and named: the body without organs. 'The body is the body. It stands alone. It has no need of organs. The body is never an organism. Organisms are the enemies of bodies.' The body without organs is opposed less to organs than to the organisation of organisms we call an organism. It is an intense and intensive body. It is traversed by a wave that traces levels or thresholds in the body according to the variations of its amplitude. Thus the body does not have organs, but thresholds and levels. (Deleuze, 2005, p. 32)

These variations of amplitude are experienced as difference. Clouds are a good metaphor for explaining difference. A cloud is an amorphous body of droplets of water that are visibly suspended in the earth's atmosphere. The cloud changes shape, texture, altitude, behaviour, colour and so on under differing environmental conditions, when particular potentialities exert themselves with greater intensity. A cloud can merge with other clouds, evaporate or become saturated enough to become precipitation under various contingent conditions. It does not have a transcendental identity, but is nevertheless "a cloud", because it is no longer ground water, and isn't yet rain, but under the right circumstances, it, and individually every molecule of water that forms it, could indeed become either of these things again. However, at a particular present moment it is actualised as, for example, a cumulonimbus cloud. Further, this cumulonimbus cloud itself has a range of characteristics and tendencies, including producing rain, thunder and lightning, something that a cirrus cloud does not, and therefore it has an identity, and *expressivity*, of sorts. The "difference" between the cirrus cloud and the cumulonimbus cloud is not at the level of essential object identity, or transcendental nature, however, but rather at the contingent level of molecules of water having encountered particular other forces that have enabled and limited certain actualisations of the virtuality of those water molecules, which in their connection creates new virtualities for the thing of the cloud. The cloud is not a sociolinguistic subject, and is unaffected by terms such as cumulonimbus, so the subject calling the cloud one or another thing will have no effect on its behaviour, but the processes of recognition, categorisation and naming by the human subject, themselves actualise certain virtualities of the cloud. If a human recognises via memory and categorisation, the cloud is "constituted" for the subject and can be positioned within narrative linearity (and therefore the Symbolic), and the human is enabled to have *expectations*. These expectations feed back into the materiality of the scenario in that the human might choose to interact differently with the water molecules depending on what they, through language and narrative, have come to expect. This in itself imposes certain abstract and actual limitations upon what the water molecules are or could be. The human might see what he or she recognises as a cumulonimbus cloud, which signifies rain, and cover his or her swimming pool to prevent the rain from overflowing it or causing the PH balance to be unsettled and the pool to go green (because in the suburbs,

discourse within ideology ascribes desirability to a “presentable” home). When the water molecules in the cumulonimbus cloud do condense to the point of precipitation, as a result of other contingent climatic forces, those molecules could find themselves in a swimming pool, a contained flat body of water filled with chemicals, actualised in connection with other molecules as a particular thing with particular potentialities. For our purposes, they could easily end up in a river, a moving body of water that, because of certain environmental conditions and the molecules’ connection with other things such as rocks and gravity, and propel them to end up as part of the ocean.

Two implications of this perspective emerge. Firstly, even in the tiny instance of a few molecules of water, the massive, infinite amount of data that we have to deal with when conceptualising virtuality is too vast to make statements that are not either incredibly localised both temporally and spatially, or that speak very generally of patterns and tendencies. Patterns provide us with information about likelihoods, but cannot provide guarantees about actualisations, which occur largely as chance outcomes of contingent connections. Secondly, reality cannot be understood as divisible into enclosed objects and subjects, because things and assemblages are both constituted and created by complex vital flows of information and energy that are not distinct from each other.

Therefore, the naming and categorising functions of the Symbolic, including language and discourse, are not unrelated to Deleuzian actualisation, but psychoanalytic and language-centric theory does not adequately take into account the virtuality of material before it has been signified, stopping short at seeing it as empty of meaning, the property of the Real, perceptible only in the form of traumatic or sublime *jouissant* moments, until named and contained within language. Psychoanalysis foregrounds the transcendent, mental subject, and the structures it inhabits, and conceals the affective, perceptual being in a constantly dynamic relation with its environment. Deleuzian theory could argue that there is interaction between clouds or Lego, and humans, that contains myriad possibilities for novel connections, and that the processes of perceiving, conceptualising and naming are not closed, finite actions (as is presupposed by the idea of the hypothetical, teleologically mature developed subject of psychoanalysis). Instead, it could be argued, that thinking and conceptualising things as objects *for the subject* are in constant flux as new connections are forged and new arrangements are found.

According to Massumi in “The Autonomy of Affect”, a “structure” is a static framework, in which all is predefined and nothing happens. In an “event” however, nothing is prefigured.

The event is: “[...] the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox. It is the suspension of the invariance that makes happy happy, sad sad, function function, and meaning mean” (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). Feedback between perceptual responses to a material environment and the higher functions related to “concept” and “meaning” creates an energetic, unpredictable space between the subject and the body it inhabits, which drives creativity and life. It is “as if an echo of irreducible excess, of gratuitous amplification, piggy-backed on the reconnection to progression, bringing a tinge of the unexpected, the lateral, the unmotivated, to lines of action and reaction. A change in the rules. The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against (re)generation of (a structure).” (Massumi, 2002, p. 27)

The fluid interplay and feedback systems between the human and the environment it inhabits can be quite well illustrated if we imagine at least three phases of “actualisation” out of the “virtual” in relation to the Lego house. This perspective does not deny the existence of the symbolic subject, but expands upon its operations in relation to “that which does not depend on my idea of it”. In other words, Deleuzian thought ventures into the domain of the Real towards figuring out how it effects change (refer back to Zizek) in relation to the subject, beyond the sense of it as being simply lacking in meaning, and seeing it rather as a vital and productive realm with which the individual positively interacts on asymbolic terms, and that is constantly in synthesis with language. The first of these three “phases of Lego” is that of the plastic of which the bricks are made; the second, the bricks themselves; the third, the complete Lego house.

As mentioned in the last section, the Lego house requires the *idea* of the Lego house to precede its construction in order for it to come into existence at all. However, what is underrepresented in the equation of “(symbolic idea) + (bricks) = (house)” are a) the immanent qualities of the bricks, and b) the immanent qualities of the body of the subject experiencing the idea (the builder’s and those of any subject who encounters and is required to recognise a house in the lump of bricks).

Coiled inside the Lego brick is the virtual potentiality of “houseness”, in that the particularity of the assemblage of materials represents the possibility of habitation (at the most simplistic level). However the realisation of this potential of “house” requires that bricks make connections (in quite a literal sense) to other bricks, but also that they make contact with discursive networks of meaning that are shared between humans, and these are uniquely present in the body of each particular human, moving between perception, memory, speech.

The bricks themselves were realised as units of construction out of the virtuality of the plastic from which they were forged, and had pressed into their surface connecting sockets that enabled the actualisation of a house. The object of the house arises as much out of the virtuality of the bricks as it does out of language and concepts through memory and signifiers. In fact, the articulable concept of the “house” could rather be seen as a limitative force that excludes all infinite virtualities, but one: a house. The qualities of the plastic and the bricks, however, also contain reactive forces that limit the virtualities contained in the *idea* of a house. So the possibility and limit in language and materiality constantly combine and feed back into each other. Massumi describes the virtual as being composed of a “pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies” (1995). The pressure of the bustling incipencies towards actualisation is what, in Deleuze, is termed “intensity” and is the productive and vital energy that drives the *desire* to “become”. Reality in this context is what is *realised*, or “the incipience of mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression that are then reduced, inhibited, prevented from actualising themselves completely – all but one” (Massumi, 1995).

Ultimately, curled up inside the fully built Lego house is a virtual dimension which cohabits with what it actually is and what it might be. Some of the actualisation that emerges out of the this virtuality occurs at the level of the house’s material form, while some of the actualisation of this object as house occurs within the subject in terms of what it comes to mean. This then, further, has an effect on the house in terms of to what it might then be subjected, or how it might subsequently be altered or put to use, or even broken down. This then again creates new possibilities for actualisation between Lego and subject, who might then decide to build a spaceship, or shove a brick up their nose and cause themselves to bleed, for example. The chain of actualisations that create other virtual possibilities, which then connect to other “machines” which introduce new limitations and, again, new formations with new virtual possibilities, is what Deleuze describes as “rhizomatic”. (Deleuze, 1987)

Now that we have tilled the ground for an exploration of the constantly unfolding, dynamic, fertile, multidirectional, highly kinetic space that exists between perception and conception, and therefore body and language, we can return to the autistic subject, whose experience levers this space open, wide enough for observation, since the sociolinguistic reflexes of the “neurotypical”, symbolic subject are so lightning fast, and the Symbolic fabric so tightly woven and suffocating, that this moment that folds an infinity of possibility into itself has

been able to be almost completely overlooked by psychoanalysis and poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity.

### III

Massumi and Manning begin their lecture on autism with this:

There is very little difference in meaning”, says autistic, Diana ..., “between the children next to the lake that I was playing with, and the turtle on the lawn. It seems,” she continues, “that when most people think of something being alive, they really mean human. What is it we really mean when we say ‘human’? According to autism activist, Amanda Baggs, we certainly don’t mean autistic. We mean neurotypical. We mean expressing oneself predominantly in spoken language. And most of all we mean immediately focused on humans to the detriment of other elements in the environment. (Massumi, Brian and Manning, Erin, 2010)

This observation articulates the predominant notion that subjectivity is equal to life, that the circumscription of subjects and objects, making them articulable, is the act of dividing life from “un-life”, or death, since it is the domain into which we fall when our consciousness ceases to exist. The autistic subject, though, does not express him or herself in spoken language, and does not divide the world via human subjectivity into what is authentically living and what is not. One of Manning and Massumi’s subjects speaks of assigning equal import to the call of a crow as to the voice of the person with whom he or she is walking. But instead of conceiving of the autistic as being lost to the Real, Massumi and Manning present a being whose perception is not hierarchized, but is still very much sensitive to difference or possibility. The crow and the man’s voice exist on the same plane, but are nevertheless particular. Every moment is radically contingent and ceaselessly stimulating, because the autistic does not depend on representational thought. Representational thought operates in terms of category, patterns and recognition. The autistic sees what is unique in every moment, which is always a new environmental assemblage, not what is the same over and over again. “Language overflows representational categories” (May, 2005, p. 97), and freedom from representational thinking enables the autistic to experience these overflows in a way that is denied to the speaking subject.

For the autistic, the crow is no less expressive than the man. DeLanda explains expressivity by saying:

[E]verything, even inorganic creatures, express themselves. A crystal expresses its identity in its form, and its way of interacting with light, and in its way of bouncing ways of light and refracting and



reflecting rays of light, regardless of whether there is a human holding this crystal and producing a rainbow. (Manuel DeLanda - *The Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze*. 2007 2/5, 2007)

The male bowerbird, DeLanda explains, uses its radiantly blue feathers to decorate its nest in order to attract a mate. As the birds age, they lose their radiant blue colour. The bird then scours his surrounds for scraps of blue in the form of bottle tops, plastic, flowers etc. to express the blueness necessary to find a mate. He uses this as a means of explaining how “art” does not originate with the human, and how expressivity moves on a trajectory from the body outwards to become externally signifying. The motion of this trajectory towards expression – from crystal, to bowerbird, to Renaissance art or horror film – is driven by the productive and vital force of the “press to action and expression [that is] life”. (Massumi, 2002, p. 30)

The autistic is open to this. Human expressivity and the expressivity of everything else that composes its environment, are on the same plane of immanence, and can therefore be differentiated but not divided, and not hierarchized. The same is true of receptivity, which generates both autonomic reactions and ideas, both of which go on to generate new responses and expressions. From a Deleuzian point of view, this way of being gives way to an “openness” to novelty, to new connections, to new actualisations that are not provided for within conventional sociolinguistic articulations, as can be heard in this account of an autistic’s experience of jasmine flowers:

I could see the night jasmine, wet with morning dew, lit with fresh sunshine, trying to form a story with their jasmine petal smell.”... In a field consisting of a relay between moisture and light, between smells, shadows, colours, shapes, “the flower has appeared as a function of [a striving to be taken into account]. It is not a discrete object. The field of immediate experience is not composed of objects. The flower is the relational conduit toward a field-wide tendency to expression. (Massumi and Manning, 2010)

Massumi clarifies the distinction between affect and emotion, and how affective response is not to be confused with autism. Affect occurs at the level of intensity/effect, which is experienced in autonomic, embodied reactions, at the surface of the skin, in the senses. Emotion, however, requires qualified form and content, which is different from intensity, although it is also embodied, even if at a deeper level (in heartbeat and breathing), which is also associated with expectation, requiring a habituated narrative linearity of things that typically follow other things. In the instant of an event, the affective precedes the fixing of intensity into quality:

[...] it could be noted that the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between content and effect: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. This is not to say that there is no connection and no logic. What is meant here by the content of the image is its indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its socio-linguistic qualification. This indexing fixes the quality of the image; the strength or duration of the image's effect could be called its intensity [...] (Massumi and Manning, 2010)

But though intensity and content are disconnected in one sense, they are also connected differently in another way. Intensity does not require language to precede it. Affect does not require meaning to occur, but the experience of affect presses towards external expression in the human, like blueness does for a bowerbird. Narrative, qualification and intensity, intrude upon each other, but are distinct.

Modulations of heartbeat and breathing mark a reflux of consciousness into the autonomic depths, coterminous with a rise of the autonomic into consciousness [...] They are a conscious-autonomic mix, a measure of their participation in one another. Intensity is beside that loop, a conconscious, never-to-conscious autonomic remainder. It is outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalized body surface [...] (Massumi, 2002, p. 35)

The fact that affect and content, or intensity and the qualification/articulation of intensity through internalised sociolinguistic structures, are disconnected but parallel, means that there must exist multitudinous possibilities for different points of intersection between these planes – different connections that would constitute different determinate realities. The autistic does not reduce these potentials to determinacy, but the articulate symbolic subject must, in order to share meaning with other symbolic subjects. This is the significant difference between the autistic and the neurotypical, which is a difference in activity, but not in essence.

The process of qualification is one that involves a “relationship between the levels of intensity and qualification [which] is not one of conformity or correspondence, but of resonance or interference, amplification or dampening” (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). Massumi carries on to say that, “Linguistic expression can resonate with and amplify intensity at the price of making itself functionally redundant. When on the other hand it doubles a sequence of movements in order to add something to it in the way of meaningful progression ... then it runs counter to and dampens the intensity”. This is because the locus of experience has moved from affect, to the *idea* of affect. If an affective encounter is an “impingement”, “[t]he body infolds the effect of the impingement – it conserves the impingement minus the

impinging thing, the impingement abstracted from the actual action that caused it and actual context of that action” (Massumi, 2002, p. 31).

However pathways of “entrainment” exist, which demonstrate how the discursive reaches into the affective, just as the affective reaches into the discursive. Entrainment is emphasis by subtraction from the field. (Massumi and Manning, 2010) Some things gain import and attention, and are actualised in particular ways through the exclusion of other possibilities. Massumi and Manning use the example of a chair, the perception of which quickly works to isolate from the line, shape, texture etc. of the chair, the sitting-potential, if the subject were to enter a room with tired legs after a long day at work. However, in different circumstances, say, during a home DIY project, entrainment yields the “laddering”-potentials of the chair. At the moment of the yielding of this potential, between sitting and laddering, the chair has not yet become an “object” in relation to the “subject” – it has not yet been fully linguistically constituted, or given relational, symbolic meaning, because they are still “ready to be either, both, more or less multipliciously”. (Massumi and Manning, 2010) But this is the moment at which the surrounding symbolically organised environment begins to exert its subtractive pull, towards reflection and qualification, and locates the perceptual event into a system that provides expectations, which in turn contribute to the direction towards which the individual chooses to orientate him or herself in the environment (to the exclusion of other things) – where he or she looks, what he or she pays attention to, in order to seek the fulfilment of these expectations.

#### IV

One day in 1994 in the United States, Diane Duyser made herself a toasted cheese sandwich. As she took her first bite, she realised that what she was eating was not, in fact, an ordinary high-fat, lunchtime snack, but a *miracle*. Staring up at her from the surface of the grilled bread was the visage of the Virgin Mary herself. She quickly shoved it into a box full of cotton balls and kept it safe and mould-free for more than ten years, after which she eventually sold it to an online casino for \$28 000 (“‘Virgin Mary’ toast fetches \$28,000,” 2004). In 2007, the Catholic Church had to ask Francesca Zackey of Benoni, to stop encouraging pilgrims to look into the sun, after one of them suffered quite serious eye damage. This was at least until the church had adequate time to perform an investigation into the authenticity of the 17-year-old’s claims that, in her presence, people would see the virgin’s face in the spinning sun at dusk (Gordin, 2001).

In 2001, not long after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, an online community began sharing their sightings of Satan in the smoke billowing from the wrecked buildings. (Eowyn, n.d.)

These sightings of the unexpected in the ordinary are called, broadly, “pareidolia”. They are not the same as hallucinations, but are rather a very common glitch in representational thought, in which people recognise familiar objects where they ought not to be, and are experienced by all neurotypical individuals in a variety of ways. Pareidolian experiences are described as a phenomenon “involving a vague and random stimulus (often an image or sound) being perceived as significant”, according to Wikipedia. (“Pareidolia,” 2013) Very frequently, these sightings are of the faces of divine beings such as the Virgin above, or Jesus, but this is not always the case. It is not only a phenomenon that occurs visually, but in the auditory and olfactory realms too. Sound pareidolia include electronic voice phenomena (EVP), in which people hear communications from the so-called “other side” in electromagnetic recordings and white noise.

Psychiatrist Fontenelle reports a case of pareidolia as a symptom of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Fontenelle, 2008). In this case, the woman suffering from OCD was treated medically with SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) to alleviate the problem of her incessantly seeing gorillas in her floor tiles. The woman could not stop seeing the gorillas, which distressed her so much that eventually she was not able to function normally. However, the problem in this case was not the sighting of the gorilla faces, but that she *could not stop* seeing the gorilla faces, and that she was obsessively fixated – that these bodiless symbolic shapes were *haunting* her (much like the incorporeal ghosts of Samara, Kayako and Natasha haunt their victims). Rather, the symptom that needed to be treated was the obsessive compulsion and fixation on highly specific symbolic imagery, and not the pareidolia itself. Within this diagnostic/therapeutic context, pareidolia is defined simply as “seeing images out of shapes”. However, what is actually meant is that pareidolia is “seeing *the wrong* images out of shapes” – images that are supposedly illusive or not “there”. The supposed dysfunction here is not determined as such on the simple basis of a cognitive process, which is, in itself, quite normal. Humans perceive and recognise symbolic images every time they open their eyes. The dysfunction comes to be regarded as a dysfunction, rather, on the side of what can be said to be actually, authentically “present”, in the sense that there is an established symbolic connection between the indexical signifier of the image on the retina and the signified as it is recognisable. These are taken for granted as being one and the same when there is no *re*-presentational medium but, I argue, a supposedly original,

first-degree presence is measured for ontological authenticity according to equally discursive processes of indexing memory and culture as any presence represented through a medium, since sight is itself indexical. This is the point at which the question of pareidolia becomes a question that cannot be adequately answered within the terms of empirical science, particularly when those terms are so explicitly centred on the notions of cognitive or neurological “dysfunction”.

As discussed by Manning and Massumi, within medico-scientific discourses the physical is treated as explanatory of the perceptual, which reduces perceptual phenomenological experience to an

“epiphenomenon”. The entire setup is designed to extract specifically the side of the event that is physical. It is set up to emphasise the physical by its subtraction from the experimental context. It supposes a fundamental base state difference between the pathological and the normal. The experimental setup is set up around the pathological, and that is what it therefore finds. (Massumi and Manning, 2010)

But the question of pareidolia is centred on asking, not “Is what we perceive empirically there at all?”, because the phenomenon is not the same as hallucination (which is a perception of something without the presence of an explanatory stimulus). Pareidolia involves perceiving things in stimuli that are in fact present, and drawing from them the incorrect meaning. So the question is rather, “Is what we perceive really authentically what we think it is?”, and “Is something we perceive really true to its material originality?” And this is a question far more interestingly posed as an ontological one. An apt example would be the medium of cinema, in which we see precisely this process of “seeing images out of shapes” – images of things that are not, in fact, anything more than flickering light. In this context, however, such symbolically adventurous behaviours are regarded not only as normal, but an indication of the human’s desirable ability to participate in the symbolic network of signs based on categorical recognition of previously encountered objects that are perceived via the senses. People who are not able to watch the flicker of light from a projector onto a blank white screen and come to the conclusion that what they are seeing are indeed characters, or a table, or cherries, or whatever is being portrayed, are likely to be diagnosed (within such a context) as being visually “agnosic” in some way. “Agnosia” refers to a spectrum of “disorders” that affect various aspects of the process of forming visual percepts of objects (“Agnosia,” 2013), relating them to the fairly arbitrary system of naming and categorising potentialities circumscribed for that object by language, and the ability to

differentiate between objects. Incidentally, agnosia is a condition commonly experienced by autists:

When Mukhopadhyay sees a door, he does not immediately see a threshold for passage a neurotypical person might. He sees qualities and textures of integral experience. Colour fields first, and from that interplay, shape asserts itself. “Here I am”. Then with shape comes size. This relay of emergence is now ready to be described as a door. Only now does it have position, only now does it afford passage. As it becomes determinate, an object form separates out from a dynamic form, an affordance opens, and the tendency for describing makes itself felt, tuning to language. (Massumi and Manning, 2010)

In the previous chapter, using the image of a table rather than a door, Zizek was quoted as stating that once the reality of the table has been symbolised, we cannot return to the immediate reality of the thing, and that the table will forever be marked by lack. However, as we can see in the process of objects’ emergence as described above in autistic experience, the immediacy of the table is always present and always interacting with the symbolic subject, whose function it is to exclude the fullness of the table and create that lack on a moment-to-moment basis. The neurotypical exists on the same spectrum as the autist – the difference in experience has more to do with speed and success at relating sensation to language, than it does modality. The “tuning to language” mentioned here is a process of categorisation that employs memory and entrainment, and a system of comparative identification of isolated attributes, and references them to previously experienced objects.

Then, formulated simply, could it not be posed that all perception is indexical – traces of the original, memories of indirect impingements on the senses – and all indexicality might be, in some sense, pareidolia? The perception of an object due to sensory stimulation is not the object itself, but a trace, a clue, a pointing-towards something that can be compared to an object that exists as a qualified memory – the recognition in the materiality of one thing another thing that isn’t really there, but a very immediate, bodily memory. The ability to *expect*, which provides stability and coherence, is generated by a sense of linear causality that exists in the domain of the concept, even at its crudest, rather than the level of intensity, and provides only the illusion of the circumscribed presence of objects. Pareidolia, like any other instance of perception arising into the higher functions of ideas and images, exemplifies isolated instances of humans creating order, finding patterns in chaos and randomness, by indexing remembered categories.

What is the difference, after all, between seeing a gorilla in your floor tiles and seeing a gorilla in your TV? There is no actual gorilla in either case – it’s equally illusory – so the difference lies, rather, in the circumstances surrounding the encounter. Seeing a gorilla in

one's floor tiles is not provided for in the intersubjective network of the Symbolic. There is no institution or discursive framework under which that particular experience can be made sense of. Viewing film is a form of pareidolia (since it is a process of illusive image recognition), that is encouraged toward a particular goal that plugs directly into the Symbolic realm. The way in which recognisable forms are pulled out of the chaos of virtuality is dependent on the discursive context. This is evident when we compare other examples of *condoned* pareidolic play in which the process (rather than act) of recognising objects, (making meaning out of lines and colours perceived in variations of affective intensity) is extended into a kind of intentionally drawn-out agnostic experience. These experiences are nevertheless overlaid with certain discursive demands to recognise a certain range of things towards a certain goal. These kind of play include cloud gazing, Rorschach tests and abstract art.

In Art, the individual is required to seek meaning in an empathic way, to try to understand what was being communicated by the creator of the work, in reference to a common framework of "art". This referencing does not necessarily happen on a conscious or deliberate level, but the preceding circumstances, such as being in a gallery, or knowing the title of the exhibition, for example, create the conditions for certain information to be foregrounded and "tuned" to language in particular ways. This does not mean that something unexpected might occur, but the tendency, or likelihood, of certain things to be made sense of via well-trodden pathways is increased. If you go to an exhibition of Dadaist art, for example, an upside-down urinal allows for an actualisation of the virtualities of the porcelain thing into an object that is completely different to actualisations that might occur in a public bathroom. This can be related to how stimuli are made sense of within a film genre as well, which sets up certain discursive territories that influence the tendencies of certain things to be actualised in certain ways, as will be discussed in the Part II that follows.

Rorschach tests occur within a diagnostic, psychiatric environment, and the call of the Symbolic to make sense out of lines and shapes will always be heard as the call of the Other as embodied in the field of medicine. The test exists precisely to test "affectivity", but only does so via articulated, spoken responses, which means, therefore, it is not really testing affectivity, but rather sociolinguistic reflexes. Interestingly, there are cultural patterns that exist in Rorschach testing which could contribute to an understanding of the transnational remake film. De Vos and Boyer discuss the difficulty of applying the Rorschach test cross-culturally, mostly because not only is what is symbolised in the card for individuals within the Algerian, Japanese, US and Apache cultures with which he worked completely different,

but the identification of certain thematic trends cannot be said to be equivalently indicative of personality “types”. The only thing that seems to be indisputable is that the test, outside of a western framework, is able to identify individuals regarded as deviant/strange by their communities, because their interpretations of the Rorschach cards do not appear to adhere to the ordinary sense-making reflexes of the culture. (Boyer and Borders, 1989, p. 466) This in itself is interesting when it comes to understanding how affect becomes concept in relation to communicative frameworks that influence the learned likelihood of things’ being constituted as particular objects and subjects.

Cloud-gazing is a playful activity in which the recognition of almost any object is condoned, because it is, explicitly, a game where such things are of no consequence. As such, it is common to find things like dragons, or made-up creatures, because the mind is allowed to venture into fantasy without need for explanation or consequence. The cloud nevertheless stops being a cloud, and becomes an amorphous screen of potential for the sense-making capacities of the subject. The thing of a cloud was used earlier to illustrate “difference”, and we can look again at how difference within the cloud is related to varying intensities, which have an effect on how objects are perceived therein. Intensity is the only thing that differentiates a “rabbit”, from “Australia”, in a cloud, but a system of comparative representational definitions and categories is what separates “rabbit” from “Australia” in language. These two planes are separate and parallel, until, mostly by chance, they intersect and the varying intensity of cloudiness blossoms into the categorical memory and creates the cloud-rabbit.

This recognition is not happening only on a symbolic or ideological level, but within the unformed middle space of resonance between representational form/content and perception. Recognition happens with a certain element of chance, but along circuits made more or less likely by preceding factors. This is where discourse and bodies meet. Intensity becomes discursive, and the body itself becomes an ideological machine. For example, on a website that shows this picture of the burning World Trade Centre, which supposedly contains the face of Satan, the commentator asks the question, “But do we really need to find the visage of the devil here to know that evil was behind the events pictured?” Inverting this question tells us more about what is going on behind such apparitions: “Do we really need to know that evil was behind the events pictured to find the visage of the devil here?”

The Lacanian perspective regards all experience that occurs outside of a familiarised Symbolic network as *jouissant*, or unfathomably, traumatically enjoyable. But this



understanding of the emergence of objects does not make allowance for the possibility for different, unexpected connections that do not slot easily into the prevailing Symbolic environment. The Deleuzian perspective is more optimistic about the asignifying realm. The “Body without Organs” (BwO) was mentioned briefly above as being the dimension of all possibilities within the actual body, which

“becomes” actual by making connections with other bodies. Deleuze and Guattari “encourage us to remove the poles of organisation but maintain a mode of articulation. They advise that in seeking to make ourselves a BwO, we need to maintain a mode of expression but rid language of the central role it has in arbitrating truth and reality against madness and the pre-symbolic real” (Parr, 2010, p.53).

So despite the centrality of language in the organisation of the human’s environment as described above, there exists the possibility of novelty within the Body without Organs. Massumi states that “out of the pressing crowd an individual action *will* emerge and be qualified, to take on socio-linguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one’s life” (Massumi, 2002, p. 32), but the potential for entirely new articulations (that have the potential to undermine the obsessional relationship the subject has with the Symbolic) do exist. There are plenty of examples of this around us – increasingly so with the proliferation of affect-driven new media.

A meme video from the Bulgarian version of the talent show franchise *Idols* is one of these instances. In February 2008, Valentina Hasan appeared in front of a panel of judges to perform her version of a well-known pop ballad by Mariah Carey that she had known and loved since she was 15 years old. The performance that followed was so extraordinary that it became one of the more memorable internet meme videos in recent years, and was viewed over 4 million times within a month of its first upload (*Ken Lee or Without you by Mariah Carey (ENGLISH SUBTITLES)*, 2008)<sup>6</sup>. The original Mariah Carey song is called “Without You”, the primary chorus lyrics of which are “I can’t live, if living is without you”. However, Valentina, who doesn’t speak English, sang the song exactly as she had heard it since she was a teenager – phonetically – and the song became “Ken Lee”, as it was subtitled by YouTube user “ArathBenedek”. A stream of subsequent video uploads showed people performing their own renditions of Ken Lee in places as far apart as China, Morocco and the United States. There have been electro-dance remixes, and even death metal cover versions. Valentina found herself an instant celebrity and was invited to a multitude of television and radio

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<sup>6</sup> The video can be viewed at this location online - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQt-h753jHI>

interviews to speak about her experience and give guest performances. The scope of this work excludes any detailed investigation of music and new media, but there are a number of things worth noting about Valentina's interpretation of Mariah Carey's song.

The Idols franchise makes entertainment out of the aspirations of young people to pop stardom. Contestants are required to audition by singing cover versions of songs, and if successful, get given their "break" into the music "industry". It begins with open auditions of thousands of people, and culminates in a showbiz extravaganza of a final episode. The show is generically structured explicitly to systematically subtract elements that are not "pop star material". The emphasis is on ability to meet a particular standard in the performance of pop songs, but discussions regarding the weight, age, gender and appearance of certain contestants is not infrequent. Concessions can be made in favour of ability, but these never go without comment, or without a certain amount of patronising pep talk. Pop music in itself, like genre film, functions on an economy of repetition and slight variation. In other words, the show is self-consciously centred on the rigidity of social conventions pertaining to vocal expression within a genre, and the comparative relation of performers to this "idea" of a pop star. According to Buchanan, in an essay discussing of the relevance of Deleuze to pop music, "Pop culture, in so far as it does induce, command or otherwise result in conformity, clearly cannot fulfil the essential promise of art and deliver us from the homogenising manipulations of the market" (Buchanan, 1997. p.16). But if we consider that novelty need not occur on the level of the sociolinguistic, or on the level of a new "way of making music" or a new "kind" of expression, but rather that it occurs more primarily at the level of the prelingual event – it can happen anywhere, in any space, even in the domain of the monotonously popular, because affect is not subordinate to these discourses, and rather works parallel to and in intersection with them, and the possibility of alternative connections and actualisations always exists.

*Ken Lee* is exemplary of this possibility. It is also exemplary of the way in which newness can be absorbed into the social fabric in both productive and counterproductive ways. The original *Ken Lee* performance is very amusing, a statement to which its tens of millions of YouTube viewers would surely attest. The question is, what is the nature of this pleasure? It is funny, and elicits laughs, perhaps because of its ironic incongruency, its deviance, and Valentina's blissful oblivion. The biggest laugh-moment comes at the moment when the clip cuts back from Mariah Carey's performance to Valentina's. But in this moment lies the evidence of the element that truly makes it pleasurable beyond an ordinary joke dependent on mechanisms such as irony – her complete lack of restraint and the visible unleashing of

her affective capacities, including her complete disregard for the literality of lyrical meaning. The pleasure for the viewer lies in the dual experience of perceptual intensity of hearing Valentina sing without concern, and the fact that it is also an empathically affective experience, of the same nature as the impulse to tap a foot in time to a song. This affective empathy can easily be illustrated by the sheer number of response videos of people who have filmed themselves singing along to, not Mariah Carey, but Ken Lee. There even exists a karaoke video for download online. The difference between the two is that Valentina's complete abandonment of the literality of the song as a vocal-based pop song is *permissive*. It invites participation because it destabilises the authority of the professional pop singer, and undermines the necessity for adhesion to certain formalistic standards and rules, particularly those of vocal control and linguistic circumscription of the meaning of certain musical compositions through lyrics.

The experience of Ken Lee, and the urge to sing along, is about the enjoyment of the physiological intensity of vocal expression, of the passing of air over the vocal chords as a means of expressing a human capacity, beyond an expression of emotional or narrative symbolic material, like a river expresses its "river-ness" by just flowing. It is a celebratory casting off of "correctness" in favour of pure expressivity. Valentina sings phonetically, and the phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in human speech. In other words, phonemes are meaningless, particular noises that are expressive simply of the range of sounds that the human mouth is able to be make. It demonstrates that beneath the desire of humans to speak there lies the pleasure of its very capacity to do so, and the enjoyment of the fulfilment of that capacity – the simplest expression of vitality:

During its existence, bodies experience increases or diminutions of their power or force of existing. Other bodies can combine with a body either in a way that agrees with the body's constitutive relation, that results in an increase in the body's power felt as joy, or in a way that is incompatible with that relation, resulting in a diminution of power felt as sadness. Power is physical energy, a degree of intensity, so that every increase or decrease in power is an increase or decrease in intensity. When the body dies, and the Self or the ego with it, they are returned to the zero intensity from which existence emerges. Every transition from a greater to a lesser intensity, or from a lesser to a greater, involves and envelops the zero intensity with respect to which it experiences its power as increasing or decreasing. Death is thus felt in every feeling, experienced 'in life and for life'. (Parr, 2005, p. 36)

In this sense, singing along to Ken Lee is, in the most fundamental sense, to be alive. This contrasts dramatically with the Lacanian view that symbolic Life amongst other subjects is dependent on speech. As an ailingual expression, rather than being alienating, traumatically *jouissant*, the Ken Lee video shows the potential for non-symbolic expression to function and

bring about change very easily *within* a communicative community. This is what is meant by “remov[ing] the poles of organisation but maintain[ing] a mode of articulation”. While the video had the potential to condemn Valentina to irretrievable ridicule, Ken Lee was embraced quite extraordinarily surprisingly – so much so that she was invited back later in the show to perform in front of a live audience in a more formal setting, and was met with a kind of joyful togetherness that had none of the edge of malice that might be expected. Audience members put arms around each other’s shoulders and sang with gusto along with her still utterly nonsensical words. Buchanan explains that absorption of this kind of newness into a system of exchange “... may in fact be positive rather than deleterious. Yet such absorption is not only inevitable, but also desirable in so far as it implies collective change” (Buchanan, 1997). It’s impossible to measure the exact scope of the kind of collective change inspired by things like *Ken Lee*, but it’s at least certain that *Without You* will never occupy quite the same position in the social milieu it may once have done.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain that the Body without Organs, can be either empty, full, or cancerous. The empty BwO is catatonic, disorganised, and its flows are free but without direction. The full BwO is healthy, but productive and not petrified. Deleuze and Guattari provide instructions towards a healthy BwO, which are evident in Valentina’s performance of *Ken Lee*:

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continua of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO (Deleuze, 1987, p. 178).

The cancerous BwO, on the other hand, is trapped in a cycle of repetition of the same patterns. It would seem that the tendency of pareidolia to be associated with religious, ghostly, spiritual or otherworldly imagery, and the recurring apparition of Christ, or the Virgin, or Satan indicate the presence of a cancerous BwO when it comes to dealing with the sublime and the *jouissant*. Bogue says:

The virtual is immanent and everywhere manifest within the real, and hence the plane of consistency, or the body without organs, is immanent within even the most rigid and oppressive of institutions. There is thus a ‘BwO [body without organs] of money (inflation), but also a BwO of the State, army, factory, city, Party, etc.’ (MP 201/163), and each of these bodies without organs may become an object of fascination for the individual, a kind of tumor that may proliferate and eventually take over. (Bogue, 2007: p 49)

This kind of BwO is present in the pop music industry, as can be seen in the very institution of Idols, but can be made healthy through the embrace of moments like *Ken Lee*. It also exists in institutions which are more totalitarian in mode and which operate on an economy of repetition, and an obsessional relationship with symbolically articulated subjectivities. The rigidity of this BwO makes the individual who has a relationship with such an institution predisposed to articulations of virtualities that fall within particular sets of discourse, at the level of the event in which, through perceptual intensity, object becomes object, and subject becomes subject.

## PART TWO

### I

Within the many subgenres of horror we encounter a variety of entities that occupy the function of “monster”. In the slasher, the deranged, usually male, human assailant takes centre stage. In vampire and zombie films, the monsters are exactly that – vampires and zombies. In sci-fi horror films, the monsters can be extra-terrestrial beings (humanoid or otherwise), cyborgs, microbes or machines. In religiously themed horror, demons are the source of fright. Creature features bring us non-human organisms of varying complexity, size and number, from giant amoebic blobs, to swarms of killer bees. In a variety of literal and more abstracted ways, the characteristics these monsters share, or the characteristics that are definitive of a “monster”, is that they penetrate, threaten, infect, flay, consume, dissolve and absorb, the bounded, circumscribed human subject, thereby drawing attention to the flimsiness and discontinuous fragmentary surface of subjectivity that makes us so permeable. *The Ring*, *Dark Water* and *The Grudge* are ghost stories, and their narratives circle primarily around hauntings and/or curses. Unlike the knife-wielding psycho-killer, or the flesh-eating bacteria, or the ravenous zombie, the assault on the bounded subject is not performed through any literal opening of the skin’s surface, but rather through the idea of the haunting or curse. The ghostly monster invades and passes through the borders of the body, paying no heed to its boundaries, but yet is nothing if not bodily manifest. The contradiction of disembodiment versus embodiment of the ghostly monster is interesting when approached in relation to theory that proposes an ontology of immanence, because this theory is able to understand the quandary of the ghost using the ideas of the actual, the virtual and the idea of the Body without Organs.

In the 2007 film *Paranormal Activity*, a woman has since childhood been haunted by a terrifying but non-descript otherworldly entity. Eventually she is compelled to consult a professional, who informs her that there are two possible kinds of haunting presence that might be troubling her – ghosts, or demons. While demons are entities that aren't and have never been human, ghosts are the spirits of humans who were once living, he explains. Demons then, like almost all other theistic bodies, are transcendent, while ghosts are bodies that were, at one point, immanently human, but went through a process of transition, leaving the body behind and passing into the purely symbolic realm. The ghost, having left its body behind, is considered to have transcended the material world, but this transcendence is always nothing but the leaving behind of a symbolic trace. The ability for a human to transcend, in a metaphysical sense, requires the preceding notion that a human body is divisible, if not always divided, into at least the immanent and transcendent. It requires the concept that humans consist of at least two different substances: the material and the mental and/or spiritual, which have fundamentally different properties and are able to be separated. Human subjectivity mimics the transcendence of the theistic being (May, 2005). While gods (or demons) are always intrinsically transcendent of the world and the subject (even when a theistic figure is embodied on earth, such as Jesus or Mohammed). In the contemporary moment, the human subject understands itself as being simultaneous to embodied life, transcendent of the body in which it lives. With the advent of the Enlightenment, and of Nietzschean and Sartrean thinking, God could be dispensed with, not because the notion of a transcendent being was being thrown out altogether, but because the human subject, through an increasingly strong dualism of mind and body, usurped the transcendent position of God. The subject conceptualises itself as something separate, something higher than the body it inhabits – the Symbolic and the Real as two substances in one body. Even for an atheist, it is hard not to see the analogousness of the sense of unique “I-ness”, and singularity of the human “soul”. Within an ontology of immanence, though, the transcendent is understood as illusory. There is no other, special, ethereal substance that exists alongside the physiological body, and we should, therefore, understand both the subject and the transcendent entities such as ghosts rather differently. From a Deleuzian perspective, the oppositions of transcendent versus immanent, real versus unreal, original versus imitation, are subsumed and transformed under the less oppositional categories of the actual and the virtual which offer perhaps more subtlety as critical terms than the opposition between the Real and the Symbolic in terms of what we can regard to be authentic. This has quite radical implications for the study of the horror film.

The erosion of the divide between film and “reality” outside of film, and the introduction of the terms “actual” and “virtual” allows for a richer analysis of the fractal, metonymic nature of the filmic experience, in which the relationship between the experiences of the characters within their diegetic reality and the experience of the viewers in theirs are not hierarchized and understood differently. It makes space for a complex analysis of the interaction between the two (or three or four and so on, if there is another screen on-screen) diegeses that doesn’t force itself into looking at the discursive, formal or affective elements of film as a distinct or special ontological realm. The filmic event becomes more multidirectional and fluid, since we can look at the surface of the screen and its textures from either side, rather than privileging the perspective and experiences immanent to just one reality in the dialectic of viewer and film. We no longer have to look at the text simply as analogy or structure that informs understandings of “reality”, or as social artefact, or image to be deconstructed, because the flows of affective and symbolic information are complex and constantly feeding back into each other, such that it is impossible to say easily to which “reality” elements properly belong. Rather, the technological, material, symbolic aspects of film intertwine to weave a fabric of filmic event that is constantly “becoming”. This means that in seeking to feel out the texture of that fabric, one should jump between filmic and material “realities” without apology.

The irony of the ghost-horror film as one which motivates for an ontology of immanence is that, though definitively “bodiless”, ghosts are experienced primarily and pointedly in the bodies of those who encounter them. In *The Ring*, in a hallucinatory vision, Samara grabs Rachel’s arm, leaving a hand print burnt into her skin. In *The Grudge*, Jen dies gasping, paralysed on a bed, as though something invisible is pinning her to the bed and closing around her throat. More often than not, the ghost is not seen, but intuited, or felt at an asignifying level. They are affective, prior to being located comfortably within a system of sociolinguistic exchange. They are unactualised virtuality. They are the potentiality of the body, unlimited by the subtractive forces of the actualised body itself. In almost every instance of ghostly presence in the films here, the bodies of both the viewer and the characters are put to use on two levels simultaneously.

Firstly there is the vicarious, observational level on which the viewer is secondarily witness to the affective reactions of the body of the characters. The close-up on the face is the most pointed exemplar of this mechanism in film, though it is true of any shot in which a character expresses bodily or verbally his or her experience. For instance, in *The Grudge*, there is a sequence in which Karen goes to investigate strange cat-like sounds coming from a taped-up

cupboard. The dark shape of a cat, hissing aggressively, suddenly leaps across the screen, and before having had sufficient time or information with which to make sense of the fright, the viewer is shown a close-up of the fright on Karen's face. This shot has a qualifying, explanatory quality and function. It serves to crystallise the immediate affective experience into emotion via symbolic means – through the close up the viewer's experience moves from the corporeal into the conceptual. It is the precise moment of “the rise of the autonomic into consciousness.” As “an emotional qualification” it functions to “register a state – actually re-register an already felt state (for the skin is faster than the word)” (Massumi, 2002, p. 25). It is the exact instant of the co-mingling of the affective with the sociolinguistic, which locates the bodily experience within a system of meaning and expectation and provides discursive and ideological answers to the social subject's question of “Why did I feel like that?”.

Identification is one of the most central processes in the experience of film. It is the means by which a film comes to have any relevance whatsoever to the viewer, by which any connectivity is established between film and viewer. To a large extent, intersubjective identification with characters does involve semiosis and conceptualisation. The viewer has to read the language of the character's bodily expression, and empathise with the way he or she understands his or her own situation or affective experience, which involves drawing on the discursive. In *Dark Water*, Dahlia holds Cessie's hand as they travel in the elevator to the level on which the new apartment is located. When they arrive and the door opens, Cessie dashes out, and the door spontaneously closes behind her, leaving Dahlia alone in the elevator. A perplexed and horrified look comes over her face as she looks down at her hand, which is still being held, by some invisible force, in the same position it was in when Cessie was holding it. She can still feel a hand in hers, though she should be alone. The unease in the viewer depends, at least in part, on the ability to read her expression, and to associate it with the anxieties of motherhood. To be disturbed by this moment, defined by the uncanny sensation of “This is not my child!” one has to be plugged into discourses that construct the private, particular and intimate relationship a mother has with her child. However, the process of identification in film is too often imagined as being operative only in this, discursive, domain, and doesn't take into account the concurrent possibility of the asignifying, bodily forms of identification that are integral to the viewer's feeling connected to the medium in some way, as is so well illustrated by the example of *Ken Lee*.

Another level of the filmic experience occurs at the immediate, skin level, affectivity of the viewer him or herself as he or she connects with the intensity of the filmic medium itself. According to Deleuze and Guattari: “[Cinema's] effectiveness continues to depend on its pre-



signifying symbolic components as well as its a-signifying ones: linkages, internal movements of visual images, colours, sounds, rhythms, gestures speech etc.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 82). These two modes are intertwined and complex, but the corporeal, affective aspects of identification – identification that happens prior to the idea of the relationship of the viewer to character, of who they are and how they are discursively located – are largely overlooked in modern film theory. With work such as that of Massumi, we are able to see more clearly how the body and its reactions, alongside the sociolinguistic, are implicated in identification in these films.

By being focussed on the spectral and reflective, and the signifying image respectively, psychoanalytic and genre-oriented analyses conceive of the space that exists between the eye and the screen in a particular way. It conceptualises a physical, fixed distance between eye and screen and objects there represented. When the focus is on the film image as sign, then the viewer-subject must have some distance from the surface of its representation. The eye sees an indexical image on a screen, and the subject associates it with an object that exists elsewhere, and understands that association via the available symbolic reference points, indexing discourse. From this perspective, identification happens exclusively via symbolic means. However, from a Deleuzian point of view, the world is not conceptualised in terms of such circumscribed subjects and objects, and unidirectional flows. The distances between viewer, screen and filmic reality are much more elastic and dynamic, while the surfaces of screen, cornea and camera lens are more permeable and gelatinous. The experience of cinema therefore involves an oscillation between stretching distance between surfaces such that the textures of each are distinct, and collapse into each other so that the screen, the eye and the camera lens are indistinguishable.

The Korean remake of the Japanese *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), *The Ring Virus* (Kim, 1999), contains a wonderful illustration of this characteristic of film, which also incidentally has fractal symmetry to the very analysis being performed here. The female lead, Sun Joo enlists the help of a doctor named Choi Yul to help her unravel the mystery of the cursed video tape. The doctor senses something unusual about the cursed video that bears examination, something “slippery” – something that evades capture in the symbolic net, but that defies symbolisation. He divides the images of the cursed tape into two categories – those that can be seen with the eye, and those that are abstract, or are without recognisable objects, rather amorphous shapes. As they view the video, they are overcome with strong emotions triggered by the images in the video, and feels “reproach”, which are in excess of what should be communicated simply by the signifying image in itself. Further, all the images that can be

viewed with the eye contain a “dark obstruction”. The doctor asks himself, “Why do I feel like I am actually there?” He concludes, gobsmackingly, that the reason viewing the tape feels like such an immediate experience is that the tape was recorded by psychokinesis – that the dark obstructions are the lids of the recordist’s eyes, and that the lens through which the images were recorded was the very eyes of a human person. Camera has collapsed into eye. The doctor feels like he is really present in the diegesis of the video; the surface of his eye has collapsed into the surface of the screen. The swimming, microbial abstract shots in the video are organic and fluid, like the play of light behind a closed eyelid, which are ambiguously and simultaneously visual and mental.

In the American film *The Ring*, Rachel tries to get a closer look at the cursed tape by playing it on a more sophisticated machine in the archives of the newspaper at which she works. She notices something weird about the tape, and a series of shots focussed on her engagement with the surface of the screen ensue. We move from a shot of the screen that is wide enough to include the frame surrounding it, into a close-up of Rachel’s face, into a closer shot of a fly on the screen, in which it continues to move despite the player being paused, into an extreme close-up of Rachel’s eyes, into a very tight shot of the fly so that it occupies nearly the whole screen, and in which the pixelated texture of the screen surface is visible. The dynamic simulates a drawing closer of the two elements in the dialectic that is constructed by the shot-reverse-shot sequence. The laws of indexicality – that what we are seeing is a representation that stands in for a “real” something else that isn’t materially present, and that the screen is an inanimate surface for inscription – are then violated by the intersection of the trajectories of movement of the two elements towards and into each other as Rachel plucks the fly right out of the video. The surface of the screen no longer functions as the divisor between the corporeal and the indexical/representational. Interestingly, this generates an affective response from Rachel, in a way it does not even register in her conscious mind until it is pointed out to her by someone else: her nose bleeds. Her circumscribed body on which her symbolic subjectivity, and the difference between self and what is indexically represented depends, is discovered to be “leaking”.

This moment of bodily fluids leaking has an obvious metonymic relation to the autonomic experiences of the horror film viewer, who might be heard to describe a film as having made them “want to vomit”, or given them a fright that made them almost “pee in their pants”. The flows of affective intensity that can have visceral, real effects on the body are not filtered or blocked by a supposedly purely indexical screen surface. The surface of the screen is more than a plane for signifiers that index objects that were once recorded. The intersection of

screen and body, of expression and affect, creates the film as an “expression event” rather than simply a cultural artefact presented to an independent subject. It is within the expression event that film, particularly genre film, becomes pleasurable beyond simple recognition of narrative structures and affirmation of subjectivity. There is constant interplay between the expectations provided by the Symbolic, and the reactions of the body entirely discrete from these expectations. The positive, creative energy of the press of incipencies towards becoming actualised both on the surface of the body and in the realm of meaning simultaneously is where the enjoyment of the film experience emerges, and what makes even the most terrifying scenarios still somehow pleasurable. Massumi says, it is as if

an echo of irreducible excess, of gratuitous amplification, piggy-backed on the reconnection to progression, bringing a tinge of the unexpected, the lateral, the unmotivated, to lines of action and reaction. A change in the rules. The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against (re)generation (a structure).” (Massumi, 1995)

This would imply then that identification in film is as at least as much affective as it is discursive and interpellative. While the screen is indeed being looked at across a distance by the eye of the viewer subject, through the Deleuzian lens we are able to see how the act of seeing dynamically oscillates along a spectrum of nearness to the screen, and varying levels of affective involvement in the screen reality. The eye’s position on this spectrum is always moving, sometimes being in two places at one time. At times, the viewer has a sense of frame, at others the eye, the camera lens, and the surface of the screen are collapsed into a single organ. The interplay between the five human senses also has significant influence over this position and the extent to which the eye converges with the screen – from the alighting of a mosquito on the foot of the viewer during a film to the use of sound within a film.

## II

Indexicality is more complicated than being simply the referential relationship of certain signs to empirically existent objects. All perception is in some sense indexical, in that it is a bodily memory, a neurological imprint of an encounter with particular material intensities, and not the original object itself. It is not difficult to imagine that a certain fluidity of entirely authentic perceptual immersion equal to that of any other is possible. The perception of a cinematic moment can be as affective as it would be if it were occurring in the immediate reality of the viewer, not only through symbolic identification, but in the body itself. Identification in this context is much more interesting. According to McCormack:

Asemiotic affect colonizes, overwhelms, dissipates, ablates and dominates signification, including our signified selves, rather than the reverse often being true. The desire for the body to feel something else, to transform, find pleasure and pained gratification in the language-exceeding terrain of asignifying elements ... found in vibrations of molecular identification through asemiotic saturation-colour and sonority-sound. Watching the film and yearning for the image in muscle, in nerve, in widened, gelatinous eye, the audience 'become' what the film evokes: rod and cone-burning red and blue, screeching and sighing tonality. (MacCormack, 2008, p. 27)

We are no longer looking at objects on-screen and being interpellated simply on a symbolic level by handling the letter of the intersubjective network, but we are being drawn into a complicated, shared physical experience with the screen reality, so that we are not just looking at it, but looking with it and through it, to varying degrees, at the same time. The viewer subject can identify with the filmic subject not only discursively, but because his or her body is implicated in the same assemblages of material stimuli that make up the screen-reality. The body is sensorially oriented within the same space of visual and aural stimuli as the diegetic subjects, in which increases in intensity, as stimuli, become louder, faster, brighter, sharper, are experienced as more vital, energetic and immediate (the heart rate quickens, they eye moves rapidly, the skin gets goose bumps), and therefore more pleasurable, and immersive. On the other hand, diminutions in intensity, and the return to the quotidian diegetic reality, which is metonymic for the return to the quotidian reality of the viewer who possesses distance from the screen, is experienced as cathartic, ebbing, fading. The moments during which the viewer's body experiences fearful, adrenaline-releasing vivification are invariably in the moments of the increase of visual and aural intensity – of increased pace, volume, brightness and density of activity. The way in which vitality resides in these increases and decreases in affective intensities is described beautifully in two technical terms in the area of synthesis of sound: “attack” and “decay”. In the life of a synthesised sound, these terms refer respectively to the trajectory of an upward movement of intensity away from zero, followed by a downward movement towards zero. These horror films, with their slow, eerie build-ups to screeches and bangs, their long passages from dimness into searingly bright light, follow a pattern of constant oscillation between “attack” and “decay” – both in the sense of the technical description of a sensual stimulus, but also in the overlapping discursive pertinence of these terms in relation to ideas of human, not only sonic, life. Survival, life avoiding death, attack and decay, danger and catharsis, are felt in the very synapses of the film viewer, who, for as long as light continues to flicker on screen, is always kept suspended somewhere along this trajectory and above a zero level intensity – and is alive.

Staying with sound, if we return to the sequence in which Dahlia is trapped in the elevator. The visual components of the sequence are accompanied by droning, hollow bass sounds, screeching metallic sounds, and indistinct whispers. The sounds reverberate with a quality that is a common device in horror film – the dramatic shift in size, quality and fullness of the acoustic space from enclosed and localised and familiar, to vast and empty but for specific, cold and sharp sounds, often metallic or watery. Simulation of the size and content of the acoustic space in cinema contributes enormously to the immersion of the viewer in the diegesis of the film. Investment in technologies of stereo and 5.1 sound are testament to this. As the elevator doors close in Dahlia's face, we are, counterintuitively, acoustically plunged into a suddenly much larger, indistinct space. Sounds echo further and are qualitatively less contained. Quotidian sounds of the movement of the elevator and the calls of the building manager and her daughter outside are muted, and then disappear. The viewer's auditory faculties, on the most immediate level of variation in perceptual intensity, locate us in a new, unfamiliar location. The bordered limitations of the frame in close-up mean that we can see what is immediately in front of us, but we cannot see what is behind us. We are deprived of our ability to turn around and visually orientate. Suddenly, on the most immediate perceptual scale, prior to any ascription of linguistically-implicated meaning, we don't know where we are. Like a blind person, we become dependent and therefore highly attuned to the aural sense for clues. The filmic medium plays up to this, providing isolated and focussed clues that fill the cavernous space, specifically dripping water and sharp, high pitched, glittering sounds of metal on metal, near a frequency that is physiologically painful to the human ear. At this moment in the linear progression of the film, as well as in the self-contained moment of its perception by a viewer, these stimuli are not explicitly implicated in a chain of causality, expectation and meaning. However, both within the microscopic, immediate scenario of the sequence and in the macroscopic context of the film as a whole "story", these perceptual stimuli slowly become entangled in narrative linearity and the sensory begins to "make sense".

In this disorientating aural world, the auditory focus comes to land on the repetitive hollow noise of Dahlia's childhood drum-like toy. Suddenly the visuals fade into a flashback of her childhood, and the size of the acoustic space reverts back to a familiar resonance filled with familiar, daily ambient sounds that is in accordance with the slightly wider shot of young Dahlia on a bench. We have skipped through time, but have landed somewhere less sensorially bewildering and unstable. We have had to go through this confusing, unfamiliar, undefined space of affective stimulation without clear signification before we got to a place of categorisable, articulable familiarity. This interstitial space is crucial to the horror film. The

dynamism of narrative is located in this space of unfamiliarity and disequilibrium. The creative energy and press to meaning and actuality is electric and buzzing in this middle state of uncertainty and uncircumscribed possibility. We are perched precariously right on the threshold of meaning that is not quite yet available. In these films, this fleeting agnostic moment is stretched and exploited over both the longer course of an entire narrative, and on the most immediate perceptual level. One of the microcosmic devices of the horror film is to delay the reveal of the source of alarming diegetic sounds; with great regularity, we hear an unexpected bump or a screech milliseconds before the film cuts to the visual representation of the source of this unaccounted-for sound. The temporality of the horror film could be characterised as being always “too late!”, in other words, we are regularly affected by stimuli before there is time to conceptualise the stimulus and effect an appropriate response within a chain of causality. The viewer is constantly being deprived of the means to orientate completely, being continually positioned in a state of autistic agnosia out of which clear forms are yet to actualise, a place of pure, but dangerous potentiality.

On a macrocosmic level, across all the films in question, and almost all other films, an element of suspense is crucial to the unfolding of the narrative on a structural level. A question is posed, and the story is complete once we have arrived at an answer to this question. In the detective film, the question is in its alias, “Whodunit?” In the romantic comedy, the question is “Will they get together and live happily ever after?” In the horror film, the question is “Will they survive?” In the ghost film, this question is posed in conjunction with another, which is crucial to the answer of the first: “Is the ghost real?” In *The Ring*, the tension of the ultimatum of “seven days” is dependent on the extent to which the authenticity of Samara is believed, which becomes more and more possible, and therefore more and more threatening, as she is elaborated upon over the course of the narrative in particular ways. However, at a certain point immediately after the climax of the film, her authenticity is fully realised when she manifests in her named, narrativised, but physical, human vulnerability, and her fearfulness is neutralised. She is no longer a transcendent phantasm of the symbolic but has been realised in immanence, which is simultaneously associated with an intersubjective identity. The question is not “Is she real?”, but rather “Is she actual?” Again, in this wider frame, we are suspended in pure potentiality. In this context, the actualisation of ghosts who are definitively virtual, without bodies, constitutes the primary thrust of the narrative, making these films metaphorical in a particularly Deleuzian way. It is a fairly literal allegory of the botched achievement of the BwO – the making of a body into a cancerous BwO. Each ghost was made a Body without Organs through the literal destruction of its physicality and connection to the symbolic

networks of intersubjectivity. The making of Samara and the other ghosts into bodies without organs did not arise out of joyful exploration of potentiality, however, but rather out of reluctant and violent removal from the realm of the actual. These are bodies without organs that are not motivated by creative desire, but by vengeful hatred, paranoia and obsession.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the body without organs:

At any rate, you have one (or several). It's not so much that it pre-exists or comes ready-made, although in certain respects it is pre-existent. At any rate, you make one, you can't desire without making one. And it awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don't. This is not assuring, because you can botch it. Or it can be terrifying, and lead you to your death. (Deleuze, 1987, p. 78)

The fear of botching this is what is played out in these ghost films. The ghost stands as the symbolic representation of the human entity literally without organs. It is the free floating potentiality, and of the very realness of “the letter” itself. The ghost is pure symbol; it is the realness of subjectivity itself, revealing to us the emptiness of the letter we pass around which gives meaning to Life and protects against death, but which itself holds no intrinsic meaning. For same reason, though, it holds the simultaneous possibility of *any* meaning, but these particular ghosts remain stuck in a pathological loop of the very same actualisation via culturally entrained paths. Samara, Kayako and Natasha repetitively replay the events of their unhappy demise, which resulted in the destruction of their ability to belong in a society. The opening words of *The Grudge* make this clear: “When someone dies in the grip of a powerful rage, a curse is born. The curse gathers in that place of death. Those who encounter it will be consumed by its fury.” The curse here mentioned is manifested in the vengeful spirits of Kayako and Toshio, who refuse to leave the spatial location of their rage, refuse to acknowledge the potentialities of spatial freedom in their immanent virtuality. They circle eternally spaces of overdetermined actuality, of particular and corporeal moments. They enact their repetitive vengeful fantasies on healthy families, infecting them with their disease, bringing death. In these opening lines, the words “death”, “fury” and “curse” appear in red, and linger on screen as the others disappear into blackness, as though the BwO circles only around these terms, as if this is all that is imprinted on the recording surface of these ghostly bodies without organs – the only words that link them back to the symbolic, and therefore the only symbolic channels through which they travel, back and forth, back and forth, *ad infinitum*.

In looking towards the Real, Deleuze and Guattari say,

Where psychoanalysis says, "Stop, find your self again," we should say instead, "Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self." Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It's a question of life and death, youth and old age, sad-ness and joy. It is where everything is played out." (Deleuze, 1987)

These ghost stories reiterate the Psychoanalysis' fear of the Real, and employ the same mechanism as the neurotypical figures present in the life of Frankie the autistic boy. This is the Symbolic subject's fear of the autistic state, or that becoming a Body without Organs, the entropy of imaginarily coherent subjectivity, could only be a terrible, alienating and dreadful thing. In Deleuze and Guattari, the more positive, exciting connotations *jouissance* are reattached to the word. They put the "joy" back in "enjoyment". While on the level of allegory, the fear of the Real is evident in these films, there is in their operation a mode of affective enjoyment that fractures and erupts through the narrative coherence and defies these reiterations of symbolic primacy.

The relation of the ghosts to their lost subjectivities is still powerful and mournful, characterised by a sense of longing. They are focused on their loss, looking for their selves, trying to remain implicated in the intersubjective network and clinging to the letter – refusing the Symbolic death – rather than being liberated by the disorganised body. The disorganisation of the body should be joyous and liberating, according to Deleuze and Guattari, because they argue that body is always organised by fascist means. But characters like Dahlia and Rachel find themselves drawn into these ghostly cycles, simultaneously identifying with their anguish and fearing the same fate for themselves. In another fractal instance, this happens through the same perceptual and discursive modes of identification in operation in the filmic subject – sensorially immersive visualisations, screens, narrative unfoldings etc., highlighting the haunting, sometimes accursed, nature of the film event. They find themselves, and we ourselves, caught up in the project of assuaging the ghost's sense of loss, and of facilitating the reorganisation of organs in hope of redemption. The actions of the characters in the films ride on the assumption that the only way to rid the unhealthy BwO of its cancer is to restore the organs to the body.

The reorganisation of organs and their being put to use happens via the re-entering of the realm of "sense". As the films progress, the ghosts simultaneously acquire the faculties of sense, gain the capacity to be sensed, and become able to be made sense of. The process of



actualising the ghost therefore takes place through the very literal materialisation of a body, creating the conditions of possibility for intersubjective exchange, which depends on the positioning of that body within symbolic, sociolinguistic structures and giving it meaning. On both the symbolic and signifying levels, this is a limitative and subtractive process in action. At the same time, the very pleasure of the films is that their duration, as opposed to their closure and circumscription, is sustained by incomplete signification and *jouissant* suspense. The enjoyment arises out of the very process of emergence rather than the completed realisation, of possibilities bustling to be actualised. The lifeblood that pumps through the story still in suspense ceases with full actualisation of the story, which requires narrative completion and closure, and which is invariably anticlimactic, a cessation of stimuli, a return to zero-level intensity, a fade to black equivalent to death.

### III

We could look at narrative like the locomotion of a bird. The vacillations of attack and decay function like the motion of a bird's wings in flight. The down stroke of a flapping wing pushes against the resistance of the air, at the same time as providing forward thrust. The upward stroke provides no lift, but provides some measure of forward thrust, and is also mechanically necessary in returning the wing to a position where the muscles have stored enough tension to produce the kinetic energy and force that provides lift against the air. The oscillating motion holds the bird in suspense, somewhere between the infinitely receding maximum-intensity of outer space, but away from the finite and present zero-intensity point of flight – the ground – at the same time as moving forward in space.

The attack and decay motions of narrative film hold the film in suspense, but simultaneously and necessarily drive the story forward, because every action is recorded, imprinted in memory, and necessarily located within a linear system of expected progression. Even while the precise direction and causal logic of a film is still unclear, each filmic moment or event is in one way or another a “development” that fills out and adds symbolic detail to the narrative (thereby limiting and circumscribing), the kernel of amorphous potentiality that characterises the film to start with. This is much like the linear unfolding of the “story” of a person's life, in which structure and causality towards an endpoint can only be retroactively imposed. This retroactive imposition of a causal logic and a mode is anticipated by the genre film form, and that introduces a mode of understanding that is not completely removed from the notion of fate and predestination. This anticipatory linearity is also influenced by the ambiguous tense of the film medium, which is at once a recording of a past event and an

immersive unfolding of a present reality; it may or may not already have happened, and there may or may not, simultaneously, be a causal logic behind the events in the film. And it may or may not matter, depending on the extent to which the viewer is immersed in the affective immediacy of the unfolding of potentiality or preoccupied with the narrative progression – whether they are looking through and with the screen surface, or looking at it.

The teleological mirage that life and film unfold with a linear causality towards a predestined endpoint of zero-intensity, and the potential of “meaning”, is the Symbolic imposition of structure onto chaos. Within this structure, moments pass from present into past, into memory, order and category. Outside of Symbolic structure, the unfolding of moments is not discrete, linear or clearly circumscribed. A film is not simply the result of a kernel of some original possibility coming to fruition, but this kernel is constantly rhizomatically present underneath every moment as virtual potential. The duration of moments is not bracketed, and is not measured in units of time, but folded in on itself, and also extending outwards, infinitely. They do not simply pass into memory and a temporality of the past, but become just as immediately implicated in the unfolding of the future. The moment moves from the past into the future, through the present. The film, and its viewer, is constantly “becoming”.

The film event is always becoming, always full of virtual potential, but as can be seen within the films in question, the tendency to fall into *doxa* overwhelms the potential for new and different connections. The genre mode assumes an endpoint, a closing bracket, before it arrives at it and in so doing, creates this very endpoint, which may never have been arrived at all, had it not been preconceived. In this way, the limits of a familiar symbolic framework are imposed upon virtuality, and what is actualised is less likely to be subversive or novel, since the railway tracks have already been laid down in front of the engine of insipience. The introduction of the imaginary possibility of completion and wholeness, the symbolic hallucination, completes the present, changing the tense, delusionarily, from the present progressive of “becoming” into the crystallised simple present of “becomes”.

Two prescient terms here, “suspense” and “present”, have a particular and interesting quality about them. They are both descriptors of location that pertain to both space and time simultaneously. The first can be related to the spatial and temporal modality of “virtuality”, while the latter is associated with the spatial and temporal qualities of the actual. Suspense is a vital modality of flight and potential which is simultaneously the state of being somewhere and “somewhen”, but in no time and no place in particular quite yet. The law of gravity assumes that what comes up must come down, but when and where it lands, and the

meaning that this has, remains an open possibility. Todd May uses the useful analogy of a game of dice to explain the interplay between states of virtuality and its inevitable actualisation, and implicitly the state of suspense that lies between fortune and fixity. He says:

The game has two moments which are those of a dice throw – the dice that is thrown and the dice that falls back ... The dice which are thrown once are the affirmation of chance, the combination which they form on falling is the affirmation of necessity. (May, 2005, p. 51)

The present is a finite, accessible spatial and temporal moment. It is the “piece” of time that can be held on to, that exists as actual and manifest, in which the material reality is tangible and not elsewhere in space and time, accessible only in memory. It is the moment when the dice lies with its numbers face-up and unalterable. The present is a certain slowing of certain vital kinetic forces, the cessation of flows, the moment and location in which suspended virtual “becomes” something. The act of “becoming” in the ghost story, the vital virtuality of being held in temporal and spatial suspense at the same time as being carried in the current of kinetic flows, loses its continuousness and is completed when two things have been achieved: the ghost “becomes” manifest – when it “becomes” material in the spatial dimension; and when the ghost “becomes” past – and it becomes subject to and is returned to the linear flows of time from present into past from which it cannot return. The ways in which these Symbolic mechanisms – of not only actualisation, but *meaningful* actualisation – are set in motion are evident in quite particular narrative events in the films which will be elaborated upon below.

#### IV

The ghost is an entity that represents the very moment at which the symbolic becomes Real – the moment at which we realise not only that objects do not have intrinsic meaning, but that meaning itself does not have meaning, and that subjectivity detached from the body does not transcend this world, but remains deeply entangled in the web of cultural signification. Without a body, the subject remains in symbolic limbo, defined by pure indexical signification to a being that is no longer actual, and by its attachment to the arbitrary signifiers that defined its belonging within an intersubjective network – whether this be Natasha’s bag, Samara’s recurring visions of her childhood room or Toshio’s relationship with his cat. This is evidently quite the opposite of a transcendence of the limitations imposed by symbolic structures over raw potentiality. The ghosts seek their freedom via highly corporeal channels, but the overdetermination of their symbolic

subjectivity as entities keeps them trapped in accursed loops. They do not seek to become bodies without organs, but rather to reorganise their existence along the highly limited lines of the categorical memory of their once-embodied selfhood.

In the intersection of subjectivity and embodiment lie myriad possible actualisations, but the dangerous and fascist nature of actualising in the same discursive form in repeated cycles ad infinitum, and the rejection of the notion of novelty, is what these films allegorised. In various ways, each film implies that the diegesis is but one instance of strange events unfolding: In *The Ring*, we know of the high school children who suffered the same fate towards which Rachel seems headed, and it is implied that this may not be the first and certainly not the last time Samara will cause trouble for innocent viewers of her video; in *The Grudge*, the intersecting subplots are all affected by Kayako's rage, implying that there may be more about which we don't know; in *Dark Water*, there is a distinct implication that Natasha would have no intention of ceasing her haunting until such time as she had found what she was looking for, a mother who will never forget her – even if this means ultimately killing Dahlia and Cessie and starting anew with another family. All the ghosts refuse the novel possibilities that lie beyond their frozen, memorialised subjectivities in favour of memory and category, and have distinct cycles that rotate on the axis of the subject becoming actual and familiar once more to the signifying structures of which they refuse to let go. They seek the authenticity of realisation – the reunification of body with sign, the recognition of body as sign. And it ultimately leads back to the same static conclusion time and time again. In their refusal to embrace novelty over memory, change over expectation, in their obsessive *jouissance* in the emptiness of the letter of their own purely symbolic subjectivity, the ghosts find themselves continually compelled to repeat the trauma of their origin. This progress of the ghosts' actualisation through narrative provides a really interesting account of how meaning and affect intertwine to form an articulable life.

The ghostly forms, in their ethereal realness, as freedom the symbolic subject not limited by its embodiment, are purely symbolic and permeated by the rich virtuality of being entirely arbitrary. A ghost simultaneously possesses the quality of being a highly specific subject and a more universal quality of being representative of some larger netherworld of lost subjectivity of which they are a part. But the narrative trajectories of these ghost stories allegorise the cycle of the emergence of the virtual into the actual through the complex interplay between meaning and affect.

In these films, the initial press to actualisation of virtuality is felt in and on the surface of the body. They are experienced by characters at the level of skin and sensory perception, but are also propelled by a press to actualisation towards appearance at one or another point, in represented human form, usually through gradual revelation in the narrative progression. Most of the major set pieces revolve around the unveiling of a new element in the materialisation of the ghost. Invariably the underlying narrative thrust of the films is based on the slow materialisation which is simultaneous acceptance into ordinary discourse of, the ghost. The ghost does not show itself immediately, but is preceded by a murky, anticipatory mood. It remains initially imperceptible and intangible, but it becomes increasingly sensible (and simultaneously more able to be spoken of) as the narrative progresses. The full sensory realisation of the ghost constitutes the climax of the film, but it is also the full discursive circumscription of it as an entity.

In *The Ring*, our first encounter with the ghost is in the scene of the death of Katie, Rachel's niece. As she gets herself a drink from the refrigerator, the television spontaneously turns itself on. She rushes to unplug it, and when she turns around, the fridge appears to have been opened by an invisible presence. At this point, the ghost seems only to have an effect on inanimate objects. It has no more delimited substantiality than the wind, and the same kind of invisible, but present, effectivity. The ghost is pure difference of intensity; much like, to use a previous analogy, a cloud: the ghost is pure shift in air pressure/force of gravity/kinetic energy that causes the fridge door to move, rather than stay still. From this state, imperceptible to the human beyond difference in intensity's causal effect on secondary objects, the vaporous ghost condenses into a new, more perceptibly actual form. Katie goes upstairs and discovers water leaking from under her bedroom door and from its handle. This condensed ghostly presence in the form of liquid, which is perceptible in a localised way via most of the sensory faculties, although still shapeless, "fluid" and uncircumscribable, is also the central and eponymous image of the film *Dark Water*.

As Katie opens the door, it intercuts rapidly between a fast, inward tracking shot of a snowy TV screen and the equivalent reverse shot of a terrified face. This is accompanied by a shrill sound, which may or may not be diegetic. The rapid intercutting of the two shots moving in the same directions and at the same speeds blends two spatial locations (the position of Katie and the position of the TV) into a single temporal event that works to create a sense of rushing towards Katie and the source of Katie's terror in one movement. However, the rapidity and instantaneousness of the sequence exceeds the latency of human perception; in other words it happens too quickly for us to perceive what is going on, undermining the

revelatory, unfolding capacities of temporal duration, normally characterised by the orienting, action-image of the medium shot, and therefore undermining the causality of Katie's terror and the action of the shot. We leap instantaneously, fluidly, from the first contact of perception into affect. There isn't time to actually see the ghost, though the power of its affectivity is implied in both a propulsive force behind the camera movement, the unidentifiable screech in the soundtrack and in Katie's face, and so it must, by implication, be present. It remains lost to the conscious mind, concealed by a fold in time as it is available to the human subject. While the preceding interactions between characters on the subject of death and curses, and familiarity with the generic framework, prepares the viewer for the fearful, that "something fearful" remains just as vague as that. The conditions that lead up to the sequence, involving language and memory encourage the narrative expectation of danger. The cinematic elements are silent, slow-moving shots punctuated by auditory and visual details in the form of close-ups on objects and amplified noises of dripping water, for example, and simulate a mode of hypervigilant sensitivity, or "fight or flight". The entire body becomes attuned to environmental details that might signal danger. When the climactic sequence does occur, it moves too fast for our sense-making faculties to keep up with it, and it takes place purely in the domain of pure affective response, in which, by the time meaning can be made, it is too late.

Our next direct encounter with the ghost, who has not yet been named Samara, is via a telephone call received by Rachel after viewing the cursed video. The voice says nothing except "Seven days ...". Moving from utter differential implication into condensation, Samara now has a voice. Her audibility has developed from the sounds of dripping water, which implies amorphousness, into intelligible words, which implies the presence of a larynx, an organ – whose function it is to modulate pitch and volume – and a mouth, consisting of the organs of tongue and palate, and teeth and lips and cheeks – whose function it is to form consonant and vowel sounds. The human larynx constricts and opens, controlling the pressure of the passage of air from the lungs through the mouth, where this air can become words. It is a limitative process of intensity and virtuality – the process of using the body to enforce particular constrictions over a flow of air so that it is actualised in a way that is related to systems of meaning. It is evidence of the subtractive nature of embodied actualisation.

Samara's telephone voice is excessively constricted. It rasps and whispers. The texture of the vocal apparatus is tangible. It is a voice that struggles to speak. Speech is the movement, and physical filtration of virtual intensity of the body into the discursive, and this is a voice which

enters the discursive as menacing, sickly, and strained. The physical properties of the ghostly voice overlap and interact with the listener's body, through his or her ears and into the throat, with a physiologically sympathetic knowledge of the sensation of straining one's vocal chords. This, through memory and the exertion of categorical thinking, becomes associated with illness, discomfort or danger. The tone of the sounds is only just sufficient to create audible words. This stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned *Ken Lee* video. Whereas Samara's ghost is an unhealthy body without organs, struggling to reorganise itself within the domain of language, Valerie Hassan is a subject moving beyond organisation, seeking to make herself a healthy body without organs. Her singing is characterised by the warmth of open-throated, celebratory expressivity of the human vocal capacity where the phoneme is in service of sound-expression, and not verbal articulation. *Ken Lee* is an opening outwards, an invitation to new potentialities, while Samara's voice is a closing in on itself, a delimitation, an expression of constraints on the body. Interestingly, Samara's utterances pertain to the rigidity and threat of the march of linear time.

In both versions of *The Grudge*, the only sound Kayako ever makes is a rumbling, guttural, croaking sound. It is a primitive, undeveloped sound. The organ of the larynx is being put to use, but the organs of the mouth have not yet been organised into a fully developed vocal and verbal faculty. Toshio is able to utter only his own name, in a stilted, bizarre, parrot-like tone, as if it's not at all natural to him. It is as if all he has managed to hold onto from his lost social subjectivity is his name. He is often to be found with a black cat, but his relationship with the animal is odd and overlapping. In the scene of the death of the new inhabitants of Toshio's family home, Matthew arrives home to find Jennifer paralysed on her bed, struggling to breathe through her throat, making strange gurgling sounds. Toshio appears, and he opens his mouth, letting out a loud cat-like hiss from a black hole of a throat. His larynx is being put to use, but animalistically, in a way refuses him any human subjectivity. In *The Grudge*, Yoko reappears after having gone missing, in the office of the social services agency she used to work for. She trudges silently and slowly past the manager of the home care service for which she worked before she had a run-in with the undead. He asks her "What happened ...?" and she turns around, and shockingly reveals herself to be missing her entire jawbone, seemingly ripped from her skull, so that her tongue hangs down the front of her neck. She no longer has the capacity of speech, because she has, in a very literal way, becoming disorganised and fractured as a body. Her tongue is present and pronounced as the focal point of the central shot, but it writhes and flaps like an organism of its own, and no longer has a coherent relationship with other organs in an organised and enclosed body that would allow the tongue to create words. Her encounters with the cancerous, vengeful *onryo*

have unravelled her subjectivity. However, her “open-throatedness” implies pain and death, condemnation, not liberation and possibility as in Valerie Hassan’s wide-mouthed yodelling.

The telephone disembodies the voice. It is a means familiar to the modern viewer of intersubjective communication that subtracts all other sensory perceptibility of the subject on the other side of the line. In daily experience, part of the experience of telephony involves imagination. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the participants fill in the details of the other person's physicality by mentally reconstructing it. This is necessary to the validity of believing that the entity on the other side of the line is in fact a real person. As in the situation of Frankie's family, expressions of an assured subject are understood differently from the expressivity of something that pays no heed to the structures on which intersubjective exchange take place. The anthropomorphism of animals, or of the originary forces of the universe in the form of God, for example, demonstrate the extent to which intersubjective exchange is premised largely on the ability of the subject to project subjectivity onto forms and entities, rather than the external entity necessarily embodying that subjectivity itself. Questions such as “What are you wearing?”, as might be considered typical of adult phone lines, illustrate how the mind can construct even a disembodied voice into a vision of a whole and coherent subject, even in its physical absence. In the horror film scenario of Samara on the other end of the line, however, the “otherworldliness” of the ghostly figure leaves both viewer and character at an uncanny loss when it comes to filling in the details of the entity from which the voice emerges and the signifying details of its imagined materiality. Where is this voice coming from? Does it even have a mouth from which to speak? The listener has to turn to the discursive in order to perform this imaginary act of constituting another. In this context, discourses of the supernatural, underworldly and imperceptible are invoked both diegetically and non-diegetically (in that that anecdotes regarding curses and ghosts are shared within the diegesis and in the knowledge we are watching a horror film). This means that the mental reconstructions of this disembodied voice is highly likely to be on the basis of an assumed demonic element. The images that are summoned are unique to every viewer at particular moments, and depend on the memories and categories that are associated with their encounters with discourses of the supernatural in their lives. Further, the instability and uncertainty surrounding these imaginary details works to leave the question of the subjectivity of the ghost on the other end of the line wide open. The possibility remains that it is not a subject at all. However, it is nonetheless expressive and affective. The disturbing uncanniness of an anthropomorphic, non-human interlocutor should be identifiable by anyone who has ever encountered an automated/pre-recorded voice over the telephone. It is a defamiliarisation of language, which loosens the



fixity of the subject who depends on it. The entrainment of the technology of the telephone creates a territory of expectations of intersubjective exchange for the subject. But this entrainment is subverted by the ghostly voice, opening up possibilities in new but unpredictable affordances of telephony. This opening up can be exciting or it can be threatening, or both at the same time. In this case, the words of Samara represent an explicit threat – a death ultimatum. Underlying this threat, though, is a certain thrilling excitement in the dynamism of suspense and pressing incipencies.

The position of the eye of the viewer in the visual field has already been discussed to some extent above, but there is much more to say about the nature of things that are see-able, how this seeing happens and what it means for them to be seen. Two of the major ways in which sight is used to sustain the virtual and the actual are through the idea of the glimpse, and through erroneous, illusionary sight. The glimpse is the partial sighting of something, a sighting which is infused with uncertainty, while the erroneous sighting is sighting that is immediately certain, but is subsequently undermined and destabilised. As the virtuality of the ghost moves toward actualisation, the see-ability of the ghost becomes less uncertain, more concrete, less fleeting, and more unmistakable. In relation to the first of these ways, the 'glimpse' is exploited in these horror films in at least three dimensions: spatiality (based on screen position and proximity, in which something is in the peripheral space, or is too close or far to be seen clearly); time (the glimpse of something that appears unexpectedly, or disappears too quickly to be properly registered and observed); and those that depend on the substantiality of visibility (including levels of opacity, texture and colour etc. – the glimpse of something that is concealed, transparent or camouflaged). This kind of erroneous sighting is pareidolic. The ghost emerges into the visual field first by becoming visible to the eye, then becoming particular and recognisable through repetition, and then meaningful within a context, and this takes place in constant feedback with discursive structures and expectations that increase the likelihood of certain realisations over others.

In the same scene in which Dahlia finds herself trapped in the elevator with an invisible presence, Mr Veeck, the superintendent of the building, observes the scene from his office on CCTV. He notices and is bewildered by an odd shape, a kind of warping of the air, a presence in negative space beside Dahlia. He mutters to himself, and rubs the screen. Natasha, the little girl ghost, is visible only in a kind of low-relief subtraction from what is visible. It is a momentary glimpse, which we are viewing through the surface of a second screen. Natasha is visible in form, but not in substance. She represents, within the visual field, the virtual as the void that is not a nothingness (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 118).

As the film progresses, that negative space comes to be filled in with material content, colours and textures. First, Cessie finds Natasha's Hello Kitty backpack, which serves as a kind of proxy materialisation of Natasha. It is evidence of her having been present, in a different moment or dimension. It is brightly coloured and recognisable as an artefact of childhood as it stands out vividly from the grey *mise-en-scène* throughout the film. The intensity of the very bright pink contributes to the shock in the filmic moments of its perpetual, inexplicable reappearance. It ruptures the smoothness of the dull, coherent colour palette; it draws the eye sharply and commandingly towards itself. The difference in intensity, on an immediately perceptual scale, causes the bag to emerge and be subtracted from the visual field and "dances to attention", as Manning and Massumi put it (Massumi and Manning, 2010). The viewer responds to the colour before he or she responds to the shape and meaning of the bag, even if fractionally so. At this point, Natasha is the apparition and expressivity of a simple colour. As the film progresses, she comes to be associated with vivid, red-toned shades. This, along with her physical features, which come to be elaborated upon through photographs and "missing" signs, and the sense that she is somehow omnipresent, set up the conditions for recognition. The repeated encounters with Natasha implicate her in a system of categorical representational thinking and the expectation this affords. Therefore a glimpse of a smudge of bright pink or red, or of the form of a little girl in our peripheral vision, resonates instantaneously with the concept of Natasha the ghost-girl and, as such, becomes more frightening because we have moved from affective intensity into qualified intensity, or emotion. This fixes the image of Natasha into a tragic and terrifying symbolic actualisation – the "ghost" – which, in the realm of the symbolic, belongs to the special discourse of the supernatural which serves to draw strong boundaries between that which constitutes knowledge and life and that which constitutes unknowability and death.

The fact that we are particularly attuned to certain affordances of shades of pink and red, and the form of little girls is illustrated by instances of pareidolia that exist in the film – that is, the symbolic misfirings associated with affective intensity, or ascribing the symbolically "incorrect" meaning to affective stimuli. When Cessie speaks to Dahlia about Natasha, she refutes that she is imaginary, claiming that she is real, but that she is "lost" because her "mommy forgot about her". Being remembered is an essential aspect of Symbolic belonging. Being perceived once, and then being able to be perceived again as the same subject or object with a coherent meaning, "re-cognition", constitutes a firm relation to social reality, a categorical position, a place to be in the intersubjective network. The ghosts in all the films fear being forgotten, and so assert their memory, even in the absence of the body that represented itself. They fear being forgotten because they are trapped in a past-present

limbo, not in a present-becoming, in which new actualisations form new memories and new ways of being. In the case of *Dark Water*, this means the categorical memory of Natasha is found in places it shouldn't be found, like in the image of Cessie and Dahlia, or in the swirling water of a washing machine.

When Cessie goes away to her father's for a weekend, Dahlia takes some anxiety medication and passes out. She dreams lucidly about the return of Cessie, who appears in a red raincoat, and only from behind to start with. The echoing tone of the audio as well as the odd refusal to show her face creates a sense that something isn't quite right, and causes us to mistrust something about the little girl who has just appeared. Dahlia makes supper for the little girl, who we see is Cessie, but who suddenly becomes Natasha in a subsequent shot. Dahlia doesn't seem to be perturbed.

In *The Ring*, Samara's emergence into the visual field is interesting. The act of seeing is integral to her accursed presence. Her presentation of herself happens primarily through the visual (through the cursed videotape), but it is not her that we see initially, but rather things which she herself has seen. She wills herself into a tangible subject not initially through being see-able, but by making known her ability to see – by expressing her subjective perspective. This happens first through the medium of video, and secondly through more direct flashbacks of her life, in which the organ of the camera-lens-eye overlaps with the eye of Samara herself. Ultimately, once the fullness and validity of her subjectivity has been elaborated upon and accepted, largely through a narrative linearisation of her life "story", she is able to manifest fully in the fleshy form. As Rachel flounders in the well that was the location of Samara's death, to which Samara has drawn her, she appears out of the amnion-like fluid of the water, out of the virtual and into the actual. Rachel takes her in her arms, and, in a metaphor of the fleeting nature of particular subjective embodiment manifesting as difference in flows of intensity, her flesh dissolves from her skeleton and she disappears back into the amorphous depths of the murky water, her form no longer visible. Samara is a ghost who is in a continual cycle of seeking and approaching fixity, failing to achieve it, receding back into virtuality, and then beginning her seven day cycle again. The only point of fixity, in which upward and downward flows of intensity are in constant flux, is that of zero, which is also equal to death. Samara is the subject who refuses to die, but when she approaches this point of material fixity, where symbolic subjectivity and body merge, it reveals itself to also be death itself. She retreats once again, refusing the Real death in favour of symbolic life, refusing to accept that a living fixity is not possible, that the body's death is inevitable. There is no healthy way to exist outside the flows of becoming that provide life, which also

inevitably bring the obliteration of the peculiarity of the unique subject. Todd May says it like this:

If the world had a goal, it must have been reached. If there were for it some unintended final state, this also must have been reached. If it were capable of pausing and becoming fixed, of “being,” if in the whole course of its becoming it possessed even for a moment this capability of “being,” then all becoming would long since have come to an end. (May, 2005a)

Samara’s delusion that she can “be” forever means that she is caught in the motion of becoming, but refuses novel connections, and therefore never progresses. The past is actualised by the present, and this is difference. Samara refuses the present and therefore remains in a perpetual, cyclical motion of strangled actualisation of virtuality and sameness. To become a Body without Organs requires that one forgo the self and all its modes of signification, and this is exactly what Samara cannot do, at the same as it is impossible for her to be fully actualised.

The lead-up to her visual actualisation has involved a narrativisation within familiar, repeatable discourse of the incoherent highly affective images that make up the cursed videotape. We slowly demystify the objects that appear therein – that of the ladder, the fly, the mirror and so on – and include them in a linear narrative of Samara’s life. Her perspective and expressivity are asserted, but her realisation as an authentic subject is dependent on the making coherent of her perspective within discourse, on the organisation into a story rather than fragmented impingements upon the body of the viewer. Meaning that fits the linear expectations of narrative is imposed on her memory – both in the sense of her own subjective “memory”, and the “memory” that is the indexical trace of her held in the memory of the Other. She is captured and be made to speak.

## CONCLUSION

### I

The particular actualisation of a ghost from immanent virtuality by capturing it on film allows it to enter discourse as a subject, giving it a position from which to speak. It gives it a chance to be expected, or to participate in the authenticity of reality. It seems counterintuitive that we should so wilfully bring into verisimilitudinous being such terrifying entities as Samara, Kayako and Natasha. And yet we do! It would seem that we want to believe in ghosts because we are ourselves ghostly spectres of the symbolic, and that the itinerant-giving signifier, the blueprints for the lines along which our Lego bricks have been assembled into a subjectivity, existed long before each of us was originally born. As ghostly subjects of the Symbolic eternally circulating the contentless letter, we need to believe in our own ghostly authenticity, and so we see only that which we are used to seeing, or only that which the generic conditions make plausible – that which we expect. We recognise the same monsters along lines of entrainment that betray that this ‘monstrosity’ lies within our own subjectivity. There is a Nietzschean maxim from *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche, 2013) that says: “Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster ... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you”. But do we not gaze into the abyss in every moment of our lives? And if the same recurrent monsters emerge, this is in spite of the virtuality of an abyss that is full of quite everything that is possible in the present moment. “Seeing things” for the subject is not a positive act, but rather a negative kind of seeing, a repeated not-seeing of everything other than what is expected. The film is an abyss of light and sound with all measure of possibility, but the organisation of this pure potentiality into a coherent generic verisimilitude creates a context in which not only is the ghost believable to the viewing subject, but in which the viewing subject is believable to itself.

The believability of one’s own ghost, is dependent on its emergence into discourse. But if repetition occurs as a mechanism of symbolic perpetuation that fends off meaninglessness, the cessation of repetition would bring into doubt the authenticity of what we call reality, and we would no longer be able to function in culture, because we could not depend on the notion of category for anything from the edibility of a hamburger to film preference. This accounts for the feeling that everything fits into a pattern or predictable trajectory. Our sense of being on a fatefully predestined path is particularly relevant in this moment of postmodern representational saturation in which it feels as though “everything has already been done”, because the act of making meaning in the Symbolic is the act of seeking

repetition by indexing prior knowledge. The Asian horror film remake isn't really that new to the Hollywood viewer. It feels more inevitable in its context. It coheres with the pre-existing discursive verisimilitude. Meaning only comes about in uncanny retrospective discourses that expect and recognise the present to be verisimilitudinous to itself as it unfolds into actualisation. Even though it has the same name, the next time you order a hamburger, it will be, on a very essential level, a new and different hamburger (one hopes) to the instance of "hamburger" that you ordered last week. It will be defined by its own particularities resulting from the culmination of an entire, historically specific process of bringing it into existence.

Repetition functions towards ensuring something common exists between this moment and the next – some continuity between this instant of being and the next, some ability to say, just like the vengeful *onryo*, that "I am still here". The difference in each of the frames we see every twenty-four seconds in film is limited, so that the image persists into the next. If every frame that appeared over twenty-four seconds was characterised by too dramatic a change from the last, the experience of viewing would be disorienting and meaningless, but if there was no change between this frame and the last, and the variation in intensity was too small, the illusion of life as a temporal unfolding could not be sustained. The image would become impossibly frozen in time. Discourse expects the progression of life to be linear and temporal, and like the moment of unquinting your eyes after looking at a stereograph, when film time stops, the emptiness of the letter is revealed, and the meaning of the image is discovered to have emerged only as a result of the very particular conditions around the subject's looking. But as this frozen signified image disintegrates, the subject is threatened with the same fate that was suffered by the dying M. Valdemar upon his release from his symbolic hypnosis: that of not finding a new, more vital talisman with which to be mesmerised into believing his own ghost.

The blank pages of the letter reveal themselves to be empty, but they also reveal themselves to be expressive of their own immanent potential to express, yielding not only the possibility of the black squiggles we might mark on its surface, but an infinitude of potential actualisations, if only discursive conditions would allow. However the discursive conditions allow into meaning only the minimum measure of the novel; they allow us to enjoy as little as possible in order to hold onto some coherence of verisimilitude. The repeated signifier contains infinite immanent vitality, but is not mapped onto the timeline of temporal expectation until such time as it is

implicated in the patterns of the Symbolic.

This limitative meaning is a means for us to actualise specifically *in relation* to each other as subjects, to be related under the same Name-of-the-Father. It allows us to see ourselves when we see each other, and know that we are not imagining things. But while discourse allows us to expect things, the Other overestimates its power in attempting to overdetermine reality according to its own patterns. Actualisation is always still characterised by the immediately contingent and unpredictable encounter of these limitative forces with the rhizomatic body without organs. Chance is an inevitability and discursive change is initiated by the need to accommodate the unexpected, to be able to expect to recognise it, and this is clear in the case of the Asian horror film remake entering the discursive canon of western horror. But while this destabilising encounter with the virtual is both feared and fetishised by the symbolic subject, it also holds the potential to be joyously and actively experienced as vital changes in intensity by the being with the capacity to perceive. This conclusion represents a confluence of ideas from a variety of theoretical positions. This amalgamation of ideas exist in non-hierarchical, reflective relation to one another, and have converged into a set of ideas that I consider equally valuable in accounting for various simultaneous and contradictory aspects of genre in culture.

## II

By making mention of the term early on, I left a clue that the Asian horror film remake would serve in some way as a MacGuffin in this thesis, as an object that exists as something on which to hang narrative tension. Just like a Hitchcock film, this thesis and those who interact with it, are given their itinerary by the contentless letter - the empty signifier, the *objet a*. Both you, “the reader”, and myself, “the author”, require a common object, precisely because it allows us to share in the intersubjective meaning on the basis of which we can occupy these very subject positions. But perhaps, in this closing scene, the Asian horror film remake as a signifier that was once of such intrigue, has begun to lose its flavour like an old piece of chewing gum. Our attention has slowly been displaced onto other more interesting ideas, because repetition alone does not sustain life. While lack might drive the desires of the subject in the symbolic, language does not murder the asignifying dimension forever, but rather the persistent active presence of the things that don't mean anything at all is what keeps discourse from petrifying. Without hands, or eyes, or trees or pigment, the letter would not find

its way into circulation. The living body has a positivity of activity, or a reactivity to its environment, that precedes its induction into language, otherwise there would be no life on earth. Because the subject's body is always itself in a state of becoming, the subject is always appealing to the Other for authentication of its own reflexivity. By engaging with a generic text, both you, the reader, and myself, the author, gain a definite but contingent discursive identity. But if a generic work like this did not contain some trace of contingent originality, some incorporation of contingency (which is strictly codified requirement in academic discourse), these identities would quickly reveal themselves not to have emanated from ourselves and, much like haunted houses, we would find that someone else had inhabited them before us. Conversely, the plagiarised text would be rejected as discursively redundant because there would be no variation in intensity to warrant attention, because it is newness, change and difference that keeps us alive in our own discursive homes.

And so even though I'm fairly certain that you have never read this particular sentence (unless I have been the unwitting victim of some cosmic Borgesian joke), through the delimiting actualisation of the graphemes on this page into discourse, you are able to sustain the belief that this is the same sentence it was when you began reading it. But during the few seconds in which you were reading the previous sentence, the entire world around you were in the process of becoming something new. And as soon as you have completed *this* sentence, its letters will fade from your field of vision and only their meaning will remain as a trace of something your body once encountered. And now *this* sentence emerges as the actualisation of a lucky but likely incipency out of the immanent potentiality that was folded into the last, and is both generically plausible and full of immanent potential to yield another entirely new sentence that nevertheless maintains some kind of coherence with this one. And just so, a story emerges. Meaning feeds back into the future, creating a living continuity of experience that is both original and authentic, both novel and predestined, a result of both chance and of fate.



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## Appendix A.

### PLOT SUMMARY FOR *DARK WATER* (2005)

The film opens in 1974, as a young girl, Dahlia, stands outside after school in the rain, waiting for her mother. The narrative flashes forward to 2005, and the audience sees a grown-up Dahlia (Jennifer Connelly) in the midst of a bitter mediation with her ex-husband, Kyle (Dougray Scott), over custody of their daughter, Cecilia (Ariel Gade). Kyle wants Cecilia to live closer to his apartment in Jersey City, but Dahlia wants to move to Roosevelt Island, where she has found a good school. Kyle threatens to sue for full custody because he feels the distance is too great. He also claims that Dahlia is "mentally unstable."

Dahlia and Cecilia see an apartment in a complex on Roosevelt Island, which is just a few blocks from Cecilia's new school. The superintendent of the dilapidated building is Mr. Veeck (Pete Postlethwaite). The manager is Mr. Murray (John C. Reilly). During the tour, Cecilia sneaks to the roof where she finds a Hello Kitty backpack near a large water tank. They leave the bag with Veeck, and Murray promises Cecilia that she can have it if no one claims it. Cecilia, who had disliked the apartment, now wants desperately to live there. Dahlia agrees to move in.

Shortly after, the bedroom ceiling begins to leak dark water. The source is the apartment above, 10F, where the Rimsky family lived up until a month ago. Dahlia enters 10F and finds it flooded, with dark water flowing from every faucet, the walls and toilet. She finds a family portrait of the former tenants—a mother, father, and a girl Cecilia's age. Dahlia complains to both Veeck and Murray about the water, but the former does little about it despite the insistence of the latter. Dahlia soon has dreams of a little girl who appears to be Cecilia returning from a visit to her father's home, but the girl's appearance changes every time Dahlia looks away, so that she looks like the girl in the portrait in 10F.

Cecilia has started school, but according to her new teacher (Camryn Manheim), she isn't fitting in and is spending too much time with an imaginary friend named Natasha. A psychologist is recommended, but Dahlia declines and tells Cecilia to ignore Natasha. Although Veeck had said it was claimed, Dahlia discovers the Hello Kitty backpack in the laundry room's garbage. Cecilia later finds it in the elevator. The name in the backpack reads "Natasha Rimsky".

The ceiling, shoddily patched by Veeck, leaks again. At school, Cecilia appears to get into a fight with Natasha, who appears to control her hand while painting. She's taken to the girls' bathroom where she passes out after dark water gushes from the toilets and sinks. Dahlia, who is meeting with her lawyer, can't be reached, so Kyle picks her up and takes her to his apartment.

Dahlia breaks down when she can't find her daughter and has strange dreams. These lead her to the roof and up the ladder of the water tank, where she finds Natasha's body. When police arrive, they discover the horrible truth and Veeck is arrested for his negligence. He was aware of her body, which was why he refused to fix the water problem plaguing the complex. While Murray is questioned, Dahlia and her lawyer discovers with cold irony that Natasha's parents had left her behind. While her parents assumed they were with another parent, Natasha was left to fend for herself and it led to her eventual death.

Dahlia agrees to move closer to Kyle so shared custody will go easier. As Dahlia packs, Cecilia is taking a bath. A girl in a hooded bathrobe comes out of the bathroom, wanting Dahlia to read to her. When she hears voices in the bathroom, she realizes that the girl is Natasha. Natasha begs Dahlia not to leave her, but Dahlia rushes into the bathroom to save Cecilia. Natasha then locks Cecilia in the shower compartment and holds her underwater.



Dahlia pleads with Natasha to let her daughter go, promising to be her mother forever. Natasha lets Cecilia go and floods the apartment, causing Dahlia to die from drowning. Her and Natasha's spirits are shown walking down the hallway.

Kyle picks up Cecilia from the police station. Weeks later, the two go back to pick up the rest of her belongings. Cecilia has a flashback of her and her mother looking at pictures together, and in the elevator, her mother's ghost braids her hair and comforts her—telling her she will always be there. Kyle, momentarily horrified with a malfunction in the elevator, the weird behavior of his daughter, and perhaps noticing her hair had been braided, finally takes her to his apartment in Jersey City.

Source: *Dark Water* (2005 film), 2013. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

## Appendix B.

### PLOT SUMMARY FOR *THE RING* (2002)

Katie Embry (Amber Tamblyn) and her friend Becca (Rachael Bella) are bored at home. They discuss a supposedly cursed videotape; according to legend, those who watch the tape get a disturbing phone call and die seven days later. Katie reveals that seven days ago, she went to a cabin at Shelter Mountain Inn with her boyfriend, where she viewed the video tape. She then dies mysteriously, and Becca finds her distorted corpse, leading to Becca's institutionalization in a mental hospital.

Katie's mother (Lindsay Frost) asks her journalist sister, Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts), to investigate Katie's death, which leads her to the cabin where Katie watched the tape. Rachel finds and watches the tape; the phone rings, and she hears a child's voice say "seven days." The next day, Rachel calls Noah (Martin Henderson), her ex-boyfriend, to show him the video and asks for his assistance. He asks her to make a copy and she does.

After viewing the tape, Rachel begins experiencing nightmares, nosebleeds, and surreal situations. Anxious about getting to the origin of the tape, Rachel visits Becca in the mental hospital but Becca is mute due to the horror of Katie's death. Becca tells Rachel that she will find out the origin of tape in four days, meaning Becca somehow knows Rachel saw the tape three days ago. Desperate for more information, Rachel investigates images of the woman in the video. She traces the woman to a lighthouse located on Moesko Island. The woman is Anna Morgan (Shannon Cochran), who lived on the island many years prior with her husband, Richard (Brian Cox). After bringing home an adopted daughter, tragedy befell the Morgan ranch: the horses they raised went mad and drowned themselves, which supposedly caused Anna, a horse-lover, to become depressed and commit suicide. Rachel is later horrified to discover that her son, Aidan (David Dorfman), has watched the tape, and when the tape finishes Samara's arm comes out the well ready to pull herself out. Panicked, Rachel calls Noah, revealing that Noah is Aidan's father.

Rachel goes to the Morgan house and finds Richard, who refuses to talk about the video or his daughter. A local doctor tells Rachel that Anna could not carry a baby and adopted a child named Samara (Daveigh Chase). Dr. Grasnik (Jane Alexander) recounts that Anna soon complained about gruesome visions that only happened when Samara was around, so both were sent to a mental institution. At the mental institution, Noah finds Anna's file and discovers that there was a video of Samara, but the video is missing. Rachel sneaks back to the Morgan house where she discovers a box containing the missing video. She watches it and is confronted by Richard, who claims that she and her son will die, and that there is nothing they can do. He then commits suicide in front of Rachel by using an electric cable in a bathtub.

Rachel and Noah go to the barn and discover the attic where Samara was kept by her father. An image of a tree near the cabin is burnt into the wall. Back at the cabin they find a well in which Rachel discovers Samara's skeleton. She then has a vision that reveals Anna pushed Samara into the well, and that Samara was alive and survived in the well for seven days. Noah then informs Rachel that the time she should've been killed has passed, causing Rachel to believe that setting Samara free from the well broke the curse.

When Rachel informs Aidan that they will no longer be troubled by Samara, a horrified Aidan tells his mother that Samara "never sleeps" and that they were not supposed to help Samara, just as his nose begins bleeding. Noah is killed by Samara in his apartment, similarly to Katie. Rachel destroys and burns the original tape. Wondering why she had not died like the others, she remembers that she made a copy of the tape and realizes the only way to escape and save Aidan is to have him copy the tape and show it to someone else, continuing the cycle

Source: The Ring (2002 film), 2013. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

## Appendix C.

### PLOT SUMMARY FOR *THE GRUDGE* (2005)

*The Grudge* describes a curse that is born when someone dies in the grip of a powerful rage or extreme sorrow. The curse is an entity created where the person died. Those who encounter this evil supernatural force die and the curse is reborn repeatedly, passed from victim to victim in an endless, growing chain of horror. The following events are explained in their actual order, the original film is presented in a non-linear narrative.

The Saeki family lived happily in suburban Tokyo, but housewife Kayako Saeki fell in love with her son's teacher, Peter Kirk, obsessively writing about him in a diary. However, her husband Takeo discovered the diary, believing Kayako was having an affair, and becomes mentally disturbed, murdering his wife. He then drowned his young son Toshio in the bathtub to cover his tracks, along with the pet cat, Mar. Takeo hid the bodies in the attic and closet, before committing suicide by hanging himself. Peter comes to the Saeki house to speak with Kayako, only to find her corpse. Devastated, he flees the house, committing suicide the next day before his wife. The family rise again as ghosts due to their rage and sorrow, notably Kayako, who appears as an onryō ghost, leaving the curse on the house.

A few years after the Saeki family dies, the Williams family move in from America. While husband Matthew is thrilled with the house, his wife Jennifer and dementia-ridden mother Emma feel uncomfortable. Jennifer is quickly consumed by the curse. Matthew returns home to find the house trashed, Emma upset, and his wife dying. Matthew and Jennifer are killed by Toshio. Yoko, a careworker, arrives at the house the next day to find Emma alone, and encounters Kayako, who attacks her. Concerned about Yoko's disappearance, her employer Alex sends another careworker, Karen Davis, to take over the care for Emma. At the house, Karen is shocked when she finds a seemingly alive Toshio and Mar in the closet, contacting Alex for help.

Alex finds Emma dead in the house and Karen in a state of shock, and summons the police, including Detective Nakagawa. Nakagawa and his partner Igarashi explore the house, finding the bodies of Matthew and Jennifer in the attic along with a bottom jaw. Matthew's sister Susan disappears after being attacked by Kayako, and Alex is murdered when visited by a Kayako-possessed Yoko. Karen begins to be haunted by Kayako herself, informing her boyfriend Doug of the situation. She researches the origins of the house, eventually confronting Nakagawa, who explains three of his colleagues investigating the Saeki deaths all were consumed by the curse. That night, Nakagawa goes to the house and tries to burn it down, but is killed by Takeo.

Karen races to the house upon learning Doug has ventured there to look for her, experiencing a vision in which she sees Peter visiting the house and finding Kayako's corpse. Karen finds Doug paralyzed by fear, and attempts to flee the house with him, only to witness Kayako drag herself down the stairs and crawl on Doug, causing him to die of fright. Karen spots the petrol and manages to ignite it with Doug's lighter just as Kayako is about to kill her. Karen is whisked to a hospital, but learns the house survived the fire. Visiting Doug's body, Karen realizes she is still haunted by Kayako, who appears behind her.

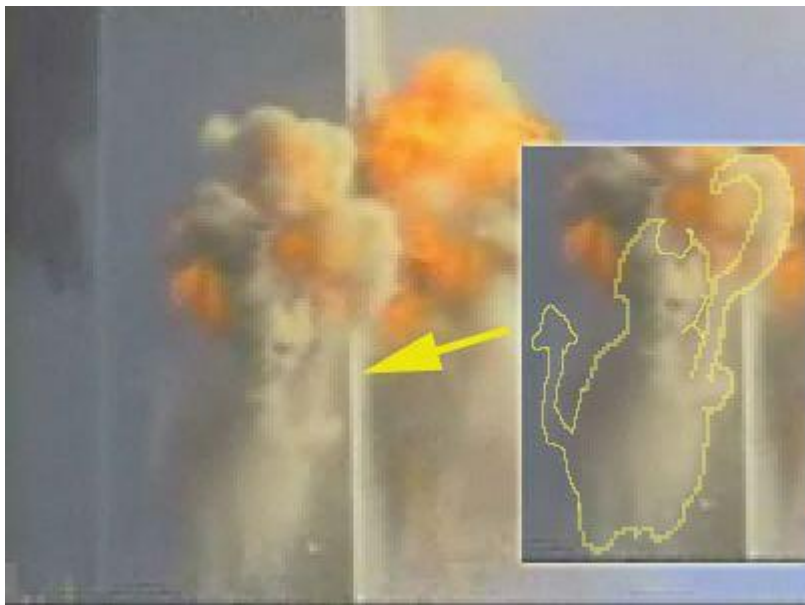
Source: Dark Water (2005 film), 2013. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

## Appendix D.

### PAREIDOLIA IMAGES



Source: "Virgin Mary" toast fetches \$28,000 [WWW Document], 2004. BBC. URL <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4034787.stm> (accessed 11.20.13).



Source: snopes.com: WTC Faces in Smoke [WWW Document], n.d. URL <http://www.snopes.com/rumors/wtcface.asp> (accessed 11.22.13).