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## Occupy Horror: An Analysis of Gothic Motifs and Malefic Technological Prostheses in Contemporary American Horror Films

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OCCUPY HORROR: AN ANALYSIS OF GOTHIC MOTIFS AND MALEFIC  
TECHNOLOGICAL PROSTHESES IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
HORROR FILMS

by

Alexis L. Priestley

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2012

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## **ABSTRACT**

My project explores the genre of Western contemporary horror films, with a focus on the way technological communication devices—the telephone, internet-connected computer, and the television—are given a life of their own and rendered maleficent. By staging the anxieties and ambivalences we as a society feel towards our technological prostheses alongside classic Victorian gothic motifs, the films I analyze force us to confront ancient tensions through a 21<sup>st</sup> Century lens.

To Leigh Alley, with gratitude and admiration.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Evans, for his consistent support and guidance from the inception of this project. I would also like to thank my committee for their valuable and thoughtful input during this process.

A special thanks goes to Sarah Lingo, for her excellent qualities as a soundboard and writing partner; and to Keira Monahan for dealing with the side effects of thesis writing so famously.

*When we suppose the world of daily life to be invaded by something other, we are subjecting either our conception of daily life or our conception of that other, or both, to a new test. We put them together to see how they will react. If it succeeds, we shall come to think, and feel, and imagine more accurately, more richly, more attentively, either about the world which is invaded or about that which invades it, or about both.*

C.S. Lewis, "The Novels of Charles Williams"

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## Introduction

This project is a study of gothic literary conventions in contemporary horror films. It focuses on the way that technological communication devices—the telephone, the television, and the internet-connected computer—are given a life of their own and cast in a nefarious light. By staging the anxieties and ambivalences we as a society feel towards our technological prostheses alongside classic Victorian gothic motifs, the films I analyze force us to confront ancient tensions through a 21<sup>st</sup> Century lens.

While I will reference the level to which each director has employed gore in his film, the discussion of it here will not be a qualitative appraisal. To define something as terrifying is a subjective assessment. The inspection of gore here is less on this plane of evaluation and more regarding the quantity of and justification for the gore.

The horror genre, especially in American film, is one that is often discounted as being inferior. I assert that the horror film, narrative weaknesses included, plays an important role in our media saturated culture. Film critic Robin Wood laid the basis for my argument in 1979 with his “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” essay. Wood argues that the horror movie is a window into that which society oppresses. The monster, a key element to any horror narrative, represents this. The monsters in the narratives I have chosen to explore are closely connected to the aforementioned communication devices, and are sometimes possessed by malevolent beings. These haunted devices are likely chosen because they are the technologies that have become most embedded in our daily lives. It is more deeply terrifying to invade the everyday through those common devices, which should connect us to those we know and trust, but instead create deadly contact with malevolent entities.

One of the redeeming aspects of the horror genre is that it allows us to confront that which we usually deny or ignore<sup>1</sup>. Michel Foucault writes “it is not possible to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak, since it is that which gives to what we can say” (Wershler-Henry, 16). The horror genre allows us to glimpse, if not reflect upon, the devices that have invaded so much of our daily lives. The unique potential of the horror movie to make the viewer shudder with fear foregrounds these technologies and provokes the reader to examine his or her own relationship with these devices.

Wershler-Henry quotes Foucault in his *The Iron Whim* when discussing the way that the typewriter shaped everything from written bodies of work to political systems. He asserts that it is impossible to know the full ramifications of assimilating a new system (like the typewriter) into our everyday lives while they are in place. Wershler-Henry writes “the rules of the systems that govern our lives are always at least partially invisible to us, at least while they’re still functioning” (16). This argument is readily apparent in the tangible world. When one is standing in the midst of a structure—for example, a bridge—one cannot see as much of it as one would by standing half a mile away. In *Asian Gothic*, Sheng-mei Ma supports this with, “Western technology interpolates modern life so seamlessly that the net is invisible to the protagonist” (194).

In my initial framing of these three films, I chose to work with Aristotle’s framework in his *Poetics*. While there are more recent models I might draw upon,

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<sup>1</sup> I believe the descriptor “redeeming” is appropriate when discussing the horror genre. Historically, it has been an outcast breed, a sort of fodder for the critics who brand these films as cheap thrills for a lowbrow audience. Similarly, the gothic, “like other forms of popular literature, [...] has been seen as fare for a sensation-seeking audience and not, therefore, worth literary analysis” (MacAndrew 4).

Aristotle's concept of catharsis is central to the narrative development in these films. Generally speaking, catharsis is a device commonly manipulated in horror films.

In my analysis, I will highlight connections to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Shelley's treatment of the monster has ties with all three of the narratives I am investigating. The dual senses of repulsion and fascination that the monster provokes in those he encounters can also be seen in the technological devices in the contemporary narratives.

Because there is so much material under the vast umbrella of gothic literature, I have focused my analysis in the fourth chapter on several motifs that I view to be especially important. These include: femininity, isolation, decay, the abject, madness, and monstrosity. I have chosen to structure this project by placing the film analyses before the exploration of the motifs. Because of this, there are places where I briefly reference the motifs in the film analysis before more fully exploring them in a later section, and vice versa.

My selection of these three films—David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, Gore Verbinski's *The Ring*, and William Malone's *FearDotCom*—was entirely deliberate. There are many contemporary horror films that employ gothic elements. A visually striking example can be found in James Watkins's *The Woman in Black*. This film contains a gorgeous and decaying gothic castle on a causeway that floods with every rising tide, and a vengeful female ghost. It is not uncommon to find an abandoned, decaying mansion or hospital as the setting for a slasher film. And often at the conclusion of these slasher films, one or two victims are left alive—almost always female.

There are also horror films that make use of modern communication technologies. In the process of narrowing down films, I considered Deon Taylor's *Chain Letter*, which uses email to circulate a deadly letter. There are also a few films based on the urban legend of a killer calling a babysitter from within the house. However, none of these films portrayed these technologies as being possessed. Taylor's *Chain Letter* came closest, but in the end, one of the characters was able to figure out how a serial killer was manipulating the technology to track those who deleted the letter. Thus, a human was able to use deductive reasoning to resolve that anxiety inducing mystery surrounding the technology. The only film that I chose to analyze that came close to this was Malone's *FearDotCom*, but I thought the use of technology was so compelling that it should be included.

These films that I have mentioned all contain a few of the motifs I'm looking at, and some even involve technological prostheses. But the films that I've analyzed contain all of these compelling motifs, and they utilize the previously mentioned technologies in interesting ways. There is an uncontrollable aura surrounding the technology—even in the Malone film—that presents the idea that human logic and reason are not enough to escape death at the hands of these nefarious prostheses.

While *Videodrome* may be considered the wild card of the movies I've selected to analyze for its analog nature and age—preceding the other two films by nearly twenty years—its relationship to the uncanny through technology is not. While the use of analog technology falls out of line with the other two films, it is being used in the same malefic manner as the videocassette in *The Ring* and the internet-connected computer in *FearDotCom*. In fact, there is a sort of progression between *Videodrome* and *The Ring*,

and *The Ring* and *FeardotCom* that is important. In Cronenberg's picture, the technology in question is a videotape that contains violent sexual imagery imbedded with a signal that induces hallucinations and causes brain tumors. The signal is the real villain here, but for the time frame of the movie, it is carried in the cassette rather than over televised broadcasts. There is no time frame for death in this film, since it depends on one's actions after being exposed to the signal. In Verbinski's *The Ring*, the technology in question is again a tape. This time, however, an evil-doing spirit possesses it. This tape causes less residual bodily harm to the victim, replacing tumors with nosebleeds, but leads to a sudden death where the heart stops from fright. There is exactly a seven-day window from the first time the film is viewed until death. In Malone's *FeardotCom*, the window is 48 hours. The cause of death varies by victim, but always involves their worst fear. The 48-hour window of their life between being exposed to the Feardotcom.com website and death is filled with hallucinations.

The first three chapters are devoted to an exploration of the films. In each I weave plot summary with analysis, while saving the exploration of the motifs for the fourth chapter. In the film analyses, I make use of secondary sources and outside commentary on the respective films in their sections. Because Cronenberg's film precedes the other two by nearly twenty years, the pool of resources for his film is much larger, and this is reflected in the number of sources I cite in that chapter.

## Chapter One

### David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*

The television emerges to play a starring role in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). It is one of the key sites of action, acting as the medium through which the antagonist attacks the protagonist. The protagonist is Max Renn, the entirely unlovable president of a television channel station. The station, channel 83, features soft-core pornography and gratuitous violence. The antagonist is a shadier group called Videodrome. Their goal is to start a surveillance network that operates via television transmissions. They want to use channel 83 as the grid from which they project these signals.

Max first encounters the Videodrome signal on a pirated tape. He is on the hunt for something "more tough" for his viewership, and he certainly finds that in the snuff footage that Videodrome puts out. He becomes captivated by the imagery, and seeks out the creators of it. The Videodrome recording is filled with torture and murder. All of the victims are women, and all of the scenes are filmed in one room, which has red walls and a concrete floor. Everything else in the room is bare, save for the torture instruments, thus drawing the attention to the victim. The level of gore in this imagery is low, and the depiction of violence is not intensely graphic. Max first assumes the violence to be fake—this assumption is later discounted. This does not dissuade Max's infatuation.

During the plot of the film, Max dates a woman named Nikki Brand. Nikki has sadomasochistic tendencies, and quickly becomes obsessed with Videodrome. She sets out on a quest to find the creators of it, thinking she is "made for that show". She ends up

being murdered by the shady conglomerate, and her image is used to manipulate Max after her death.

Max has his first hallucination while with Nikki. While they are having sex, he envisions that they are in the room where Videodrome is filmed. This is just the beginning of the alteration of Max's reality. As the film progresses, the line between reality and illusion blurs not only for him, but also for the viewer, who must decide what is illusory and what is reality.

This blur, one of the tropes of gothic literature and contemporary American horror, extends far beyond the line between reality and illusion. As a result of his exposure to Videodrome, Max develops a vagina-like opening on his stomach. The first thing that Max inserts into that opening is a pistol. This is a powerful image in itself, and one that foreshadows the violence that will follow. It turns out that by inserting a videocassette into the orifice, Max can be controlled by whatever is on it. It eventually turns him into a hit man for Videodrome.



*Max Renn's abdominal orifice*

Cronenberg explores a gendered tension by choosing to make this a feminine wound. This is a recurrence in many of his films. By placing this feminine structure on a man's body, Cronenberg plays with often-dichotomous gender roles. The introduction to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Culture* touches on the reasoning behind this with, "The difficult project of constructing and maintaining gender identities elicits an array of anxious responses throughout culture [...]" (9). Just as this difficulty is played out in Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, so too is it a frequent motif in gothic fiction. Remarking on Percy Shelley's *Zastrozzi* (1810), George Haggerty writes, "Shelley uses [the] broken figure of masculinity as the basis of his gothic fantasy, and in doing so he suggests the ways in which loss can determine the workings of the uncanny" (41).

In his *The Uncanny*, Freud discusses the motif of the double. He writes that "the double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, 'an energetic denial of the power of death' [...]" (142). While Max Renn does not have an explicit double in *Videodrome*, the transformation that he undergoes in gaining the new stomach orifice and organ—as there must be some sort of organic VCR to play the video tapes—stands in for this. By creating this separate self for the protagonist, Cronenberg echoes what Freud recalls as an evocation of the double motif: "In addition there are all possibilities which, had they been realized, might have shaped our destiny, and to which our imagination still clings, all the strivings of the ego that were frustrated by adverse circumstances, all the suppressed acts of volition that fostered the illusion of free will" (143). By having this other self that is at once subject to and freed from morality, Max Renn is able to realize, to some extent, the self he would have been had he

a more involved role in the inception of Videodrome. This role serves to act out his repressed desire.

There is a compelling secondary character in this narrative: Dr. Brian O'Blivion. His image is only ever seen on a television screen, and thus he is never physically present with any of the other characters. He believes that television technology creates a reality that is more real than face-to-face interaction. He later elaborates with:

The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the TV screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the TV screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality and reality is less than television.

This is the fulcrum from which the plot moves. The distinction between reality and television is very discrete, and that the average viewer can easily discriminate between the two. This is where Videodrome's signals come in. This consortium seeks to set up a surveillance network in the North American public arena. Their projections cause brain tumors to develop, and from these, hallucinations emerge. The television, a technology that represents society, is recoded as an object that induces pain and suffering.

While Max is working in his living room, he starts to have auditory hallucinations. At this point, the viewer could contend that Max is just reflecting on his growing obsession with Videodrome. However, his body language would suggest otherwise. Initially, he seems to be writing a speech. He is writing with one hand, and gesturing emphatically with the other. As the hallucinations get stronger, Max stops writing, and starts listening intently to them. Instead of questioning the source of these hallucinations, Max accepts them as reality, which is suggestive of schizophrenia. During

this scene, his assistant delivers some tapes and mail from the office. Max slaps his assistant's face, hallucinates that she's Nikki, and hits her again. He steps away and apologizes for hitting her, but the assistant insists that he didn't. This is the first of Max's hallucinations that initially appears as reality for both him and the viewer.

After Max's assistant leaves, he picks up the videotape from Brian O'Blivion. The tape starts to pulse, scaring Max. He drops it, and nudges it with his foot. Deeming it safe, he puts it in his VCR. During the tape, O'Blivion tells Max that half of his reality is already a hallucination. This, compounded on the knowledge of Max's previous hallucination, forces the viewer to examine his or her own experience of the film thus far.



*Max and his pulsing TV set*

Nikki also appears in the video. At this point she is dead, but neither the viewer nor Max know this yet. The plastic and wood that encases the TV starts to ripple. The more Max touches it, the more it moves. The screen becomes more convex, and almost

seems to be burgeoning with life when Max gets closer to it. The screen is now pliable, and Max tries to put his head inside the TV.

Max later learns that Brian O'Blivion helped create Videodrome, but when he saw that his partners were going to use it for nefarious purposes, he tried to take it away from them. They killed him. Later, when Max is watching more of O'Blivion's tapes, he explains how Videodrome works. The signal is sent out through the S&M imagery. Violence opens the neural pathways that make the brain more susceptible to the signal. This causes a growth—a tumor—to develop. This tumor causes controlled hallucinations to blur the line between reality and fiction. This will create a new reality for the viewership.



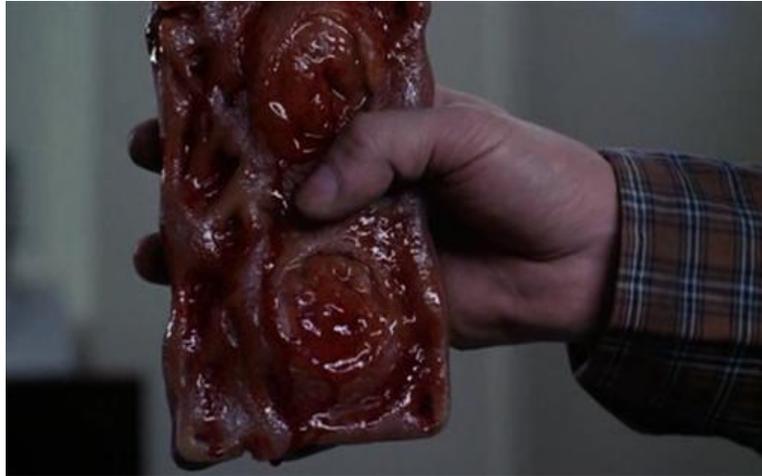
*Barry Convex forcing a tape into Max*

One of O'Blivion's former partners, Barry Convex, forcibly inserts a videotape into Max's stomach, programming him to be Videodrome's assassin, and turning him into the medium for Videodrome's message. He then kills the two men that run channel 83 with him, and then he goes after Bianca, Dr. O'Blivion's daughter. She, however,

manages to remove the tape from his abdomen, effectively severing the connection that turned Max into their assassin. She tells Max that he is the “video word made flesh”.

He then hunts down the two men from Videodrome with whom he has a connection, killing them both. As he stands over the body of the second, he declares, “death to Videodrome, long live the new flesh!” At this point reality begins to take over a bit, and Max realizes that he must run away to avoid capture. He finds a condemned ship in a harbor, where he talks to Nikki Brand via TV. She tells him that Videodrome is crippled, but not dead, and that in order to really kill them off, he must undergo a transformation. This transformation is from what we consider to be life to death. Max, believing this to be true, mutters “long live the new flesh” before shooting himself, and ending the movie.





The stills above are two tapes that are inserted into Max's abdomen during the film. The first appears to be pulsating. The second is more meat-like. In combination with the image of Max as a humanoid VCR, this paints a memorably odious image of the merger of man and technology, with a Frankensteinian echo.

In a review of W.J.T. Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, Casey Haskins says "Videodrome is an example of what Mitchell calls a "metapicture." It is a picture about pictures; but more than that, it is a pictorial condensation of its culture's thinking about visual media" (Haskins 291). This is supported by Cronenberg's choice to use sexually violent imagery as the mode of transportation for the Videodrome signal. American media has produced a high quantity of violent and sexually explicit imagery, especially when one considers how taboo it is to discuss or display such things in our daily public lives. This tension produces a mostly unvoiced anxiety that plays perfectly into what the horror genre and gothic allow for. They both create a space for marginalized anxieties to have a cathartic release. In his *Queer Gothic*, George Haggerty writes, "Transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic writing [...]. [G]othic fiction is not about

homo- or heterodesire as much as it is about the fact of desire itself. And throughout these works this desire is expressed as the exercise of (or resistance to) power” (2).

In an interview, Cronenberg expressed a fascination with what he called “the mind/body schism” (Gordon 39). He views them as interrelated elements, and notes that only our perception and culturally instilled beliefs keep them separate. He plays with this idea in *Videodrome*, using the television as a plot device that highlights the mind’s control of reality and its creation of the monster. He goes on to connect this schism with transformation:

[B]ecause of our necessity to impose our own structure of perception on things we look on ourselves as being relatively stable. But, in fact, when I look at a person I see this maelstrom of organic, chemical, and electron chaos; volatility and instability, shimmering; and the ability to change and transform and transmute.

(40)

This desire to remain relatively stable can be extrapolated to the desire for autonomy. The fear of not being autonomous is a strong one that on an individual level lurks in the unconscious, and at the societal level is played out in the political arena daily. This fear manifests itself in many different social, political, and economic arenas, so it seems logical that it manifests itself in the gothic and contemporary horror arenas as well.

Max Renn can be identified with Victor Frankenstein’s monster. As a result of his exposure to the Videodrome signal, its creators are able to manipulate his body structure in the same way that Victor manipulates his monster’s. His body is altered to include a grotesque wound that he alienates from himself. His attitude towards it is much like the monster’s attitude towards his own body when he realizes how hideous he is in

comparison to the human species. Victor's monster, while containing a human mind, defies categorization as a human. He is made of largely human body parts, though Victor professes that "[t]he dissecting-room and the slaughter-house furnished many of [his] materials" which would lead the reader to conclude that the monster did contain body parts from other species (Shelley 52). While Max is entirely human, the undeniably feminine nature of his stomach wound creates the same kind of tension within the internal self/other structure that self-consciousness brings for Victor's monster. Cindy Hendershot writes "Gothic bodies disrupt stable notions of what it means to be human" (Haggerty 19). Both Cronenberg and Shelley explore this in their respective narratives.

A link can also be drawn between Victor Frankenstein and Videodrome's creators. All are crazed, obsessive scientists with an ambition for discovery. They are subversive in that they are a part of society and draw resources from it, but their visions take them outside of its bounds into a more destructive realm. It is in this realm that their vision is used to explore society's anxieties. For Mary Shelley, those include unchecked scientific advancement, responsibility for one's creations, and the dangers of the pursuit of knowledge. For David Cronenberg, those include media saturation, the dichotomy between the male and the female (and the breakdown of it), and corporate control. These anxieties manifest themselves in ways not unlike those in *The Ring* and *FearDotCom*—each director has taken different fears and given them more power than they would actually have in one's life in order to provide a cathartic release of the anxious energy surrounding it. This type of catharsis is dominant in gothic fiction, as George Haggerty asserts with:

Gothic fiction [...] seems particularly, if not aggressively, open to interpretation from social, political, and sexual points of view. The gothic novel achieves this interpretative license precisely because it reflects [...] ways the anxiety that the force of culture generates. In its excess, gothic fiction thereby challenges the cultural system that commodifies desire and renders it lurid and pathological. (10)

While *Videodrome* lacks the shock factor and the physical thrill that contemporary American horror provides, the viewer doesn't have to dig far to find a horrific message. In an interview, David Cronenberg says:

I really think that the first thing you do in the morning when you wake up is to reinvent yourself. Before you brush your teeth or you have your coffee, you have to remember who you are, what you are, what your context is, what your past is. It's like booting up your computer -- you have to go through all those processes. And if something goes wrong, then you're a different person and you're in a new reality. (21)

This basic premise can easily be seen in the *Videodrome* plot progression. The hallucinations that Max Renn experiences could easily happen to any unassuming viewer. The analogy Cronenberg makes to booting up a computer is an apt one. In *Videodrome*, the televised signals stand in for a virus—one that could alter this boot up process for any viewer.

Later in this same interview, Cronenberg says:

Reality is a consensual thing. There is no such thing as a newsgathering team that goes out and documents reality; they're always creating

something new. Decisions are made, consciously or not, about what to shoot, what not to shoot, what to edit, what not to edit. It's part of the human creative process, and whether or not we think of it as malignant or malicious doesn't matter, because it's going to be there no matter what. So it's inevitable that the media are creating reality. The question is, 'Is there somebody really in control at certain times, wanting to create a specific reality?' It's more pressing than ever now, because of the immediacy and ubiquity and power of television, the Internet -- all these new technologies. (21)

This is a message Cronenberg broadcasts throughout his *Videodrome*. He's not suggesting that there is a problem with the actual technology of the television itself, but rather that we have a complicity with the absorption of messages from unknown sources, and this should not go unchecked. The television can provide hours of innocuous entertainment, but the danger lies in the viewer accepting the messages coming from it without checking them against an independent truth source. By putting the Videodrome signal in the hands of a shady corporation, Cronenberg highlights the corporate control of television broadcasts.

## Chapter Two

### Gore Verbinski's *The Ring*

The malefic technology in Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* is the videotape. There is an urban legend surrounding a particular tape that says the simple playing of it will cause the viewer's death. After watching this demonic cassette, a phone rings, informing the viewer that he or she has seven days to live. The film starts out with two teens discussing this legend. One of them, Katie, confesses that she has seen the grim-reaping tape with a group of friends. She says that she was staying in a cabin in the woods with some friends. They tried to record a football game, but the reception quality was poor. What ended up being on this tape was a series of insidious images. Events reveal that the demonic spirit of a girl named Samara possesses the tape.

After Katie dies, we meet our protagonist of the movie: Her aunt, Rachel. Rachel's young son, Aidan, was close with his cousin and is taking her death particularly hard. At Katie's mother's behest, Rachel sets out to investigate the circumstances around her death. Because of her job as a reporter, she has easy access to the resources she needs to make this investigation happen without making the technicalities of it the center of the plot.

Her investigation leads her to the cabin that Katie and her friends rented, where she finds the tape and watches it. The tape begins with a ring of light around a well cover, which is followed by swirling red water. After this, a plain white wall with a singular chair in front of it shows up on the screen. This is followed by a zoomed in shot of comb teeth running through long, black hair, which cuts to a woman combing her hair in a mirror. The mirror then jumps across the wall to reflect a young girl with long, black hair

in front of her face. Next, there is a shot of a man standing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> story window of a house, followed by a coastal scene where a fly walks across the top of the monitor. This cuts to a zoomed in shot of a string of some sort being pulled out of a mouth. Next we see a well opening slowly being covered with its top, which then cuts to an image of a burning tree. This is replaced by a finger being impaled on a nail, which is followed by a close up shot of writhing maggots, which then turns into writhing bodies. After this, the film cuts to an enormous millipede crawling out from under a table with a glass of water on it. A short shot of a three-legged animal hopping into a barn is followed by a close up shot of a horse's eye. This leads to a wooden box with severed fingers wiggling around in it, which is followed by the well again, where the cover is roughly half covering the opening. The image of the woman in the mirror is repeated again, as is the house, except this time the man is no longer in the window. We return to the chair, which is now spinning upside down. The woman from the mirror follows this. She is jumping off a cliff, which is sequenced with the ladder falling over. The screen cuts to the well again, where the cover is fully on top. It zooms out to an image of the well in the middle of a clearing in the woods<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This imagery differs starkly from the Japanese version in both content and length. However, the Japanese imagery is similarly fragmented and abstract, with a mood that is equally macabre.



*Samara crawling out of the well*

After Rachel is done watching the film, the phone in the cabin rings and informs her that she has seven days to live. Clearly shaken, she returns home. The gothic convention of the dark, gloomy atmosphere and buildings is readily apparent in *The Ring*. The first image we see is of Katie's house at night, which is a large structure with a dark stone façade covered in vines. The weather is often rainy, with a dark, overcast sky. This custom is seen again in William Malone's *FearDotCom*. The cabin where Katie, her friends, and eventually Rachel all watch the tape is in the early stages of deterioration, and covered in moss. It is in a clearing of a moderately wooded, mountainous landscape. The hill behind the cabin is bare save for one red maple tree. There is a similar bare hill with a lone tree on the drive between my apartment and my mother's house, and I've always found it to be uncanny. The sun is setting as Rachel watches the tape, and because of the location of the tree, the sun casts a red hue on the inside of the cabin through the window. The rest of the movie is filmed in neutrals or muted color tones, and this scene is one of few with real color involved.

From this point on in the movie, the passage of time is signified by a caption on the screen that says “[day of the week], Day x”. Rachel calls someone named Noah, who is a video technology buff, to examine the tape. Their relationship is unclear at first, but it is later revealed that he is Aidan’s uninvolved father. While he watches the tape, Rachel goes out onto her balcony. She looks at the building across from her, and notices that many of her neighbors have their televisions on. This sequence speaks to the pervasiveness of television in our daily lives, and illustrates why Samara would have chosen this particular technology to spread her diabolical imagery.

This scene didn’t capture my attention during the initial viewing, but upon later inspection I found it to be of importance to the film’s message. The extent to which television has penetrated our everyday routines cannot be ignored. Because the videotape stands in as a virus, it is easily spreadable. Because television is the technology chosen for this narrative, no one is safe from the virus. The original narrative for this film was adapted from Koji Suzuki’s novel, *Ring*, which was written in 1991. At this time the internet was not wide-spread, and neither were cell phones. The videotape was the logical choice to proliferate this nefarious virus.

Rachel later brings the tape into her office to make a copy for Noah. She notices that when it is playing, the timing equipment is scrambled. This is the first “hard” evidence that the tape is supernatural in nature. Noah explains that the timing mechanism on the tape speaks to whatever did the recording, and to not have one is like “being born without a finger print”. In his *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud writes, “an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a

symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth” (150). While the viewing of the tape is unsettling, this moment with the scrambled timing equipment is the first encounter with the uncanny in this film.

Rachel starts to see the images from the tape in her reality. When she leaves Noah’s apartment, she notices a ladder leaning against a wall. Rachel takes the tape back to her office and finds a hidden image of a lighthouse. There is a fly that has appeared on the screen every time Rachel has watched the tape. This time, she is able to pick it off. From the lighthouse image, she does some further research, finding out that the woman from the tape’s name is Anna Morgan. Mrs. Morgan killed herself by jumping from a cliff into the ocean.



*Anna Morgan (image from the tape)*

During a dream sequence, Rachel finds Samara in a room. Samara grabs Rachel’s arm, leaving her with a burn mark when she wakes up. This visualization of the line blur between the conscious and unconscious contributes to the discourse of boundary violation and corporal invasion that is a theme in all of these movies. Aidan has a similar

mark on his arm after viewing the tape. These marks only go away when Rachel discovers the key to lifting the morbid clause of the curse.

At this point, she must work quickly, because her week is drawing to a close. Her investigation leads her to an island where she finds the Morgan house. Mr. Morgan is cold towards her, and refuses to give her any information. When Rachel is about to leave, he says to her, “What is it with reporters? They take one person’s tragedy and force the world to experience it. They spread it like sickness.”

Rachel doesn’t give up, and between the scenes where she is talking to a local doctor and Noah is digging up Anna Morgan’s psychiatric records, they are finding more pieces of the story. Anna Morgan and her husband adopted a daughter with mysterious origins. The island doctor tells Rachel that the Morgans disappeared one winter, and came back with Samara. Soon after, strange things started happening. Anna Morgan started having terrible visions, the horses on their farm started to kill themselves, and the local fish population greatly diminished, leaving the locals without a livelihood. At some point, Samara disappeared, then Anna Morgan killed herself. Things went back to their normal routine on the island after these events. She also draws a connection between Samara and a contagious disease. She says that “when you live on an island and you catch a cold, it’s everybody’s cold”, essentially hinting that the town is glad to be rid of Samara and her creation of supernatural events.

Armed with this new information, Rachel goes back to the Morgan house. Mr. Morgan is distraught and angry, and he kills himself by electrocuting himself in the bathtub with a TV set. Before he dies, he tells Rachel that Samara will “never stop and [Rachel’s presence on the island] is evidence of that.” The symbolism of Mr. Morgan’s

death is powerful. It seems as though he gathered every television and VCR in his house, and put them in this one room that is overflowing with water. The water, which always precedes Samara's presence and thus is her referent, destroys the patriarchal figure.

Shortly thereafter Noah arrives, and together they find Samara's bedroom, which had been moved out to the barn in the hopes that the distance between her and her mother would lessen the latter's nightmares. They find a TV set in the room, which could be the origin of the tape's nefarious gestation.

We later find out that Anna Morgan puts a plastic bag over Samara's head to strangle her, then drops her body down the well. In the Japanese original, it is the father who kills the girl. However, in the Japanese version, it is implied that the girl's father is not biological hers, and that she was begotten by a sea monster. This change between the versions probably took place because of the culture gap. The legend behind the sea god would not have translated well into an American code. Also, a middle-aged woman of questionable fertility who is trying to conceive is much more in line with American societal anxieties. Switching the child killer from father to mother strikes a chord with the familiar cruel mother ballads. The image of mothering hands that swaddle and also strangle unsettles our conception of gender roles. When a mother kills her children in America, it makes headlines. Simply mentioning the name Andrea Yates conjures unsavory details that directly contradict our mothering norms. By unsettling these roles and norms, *The Ring* awakens feelings of horror and anxiety, much as gothic literature does.

Noah and Rachel go back to the cabin where she and the teens first watched the film. They figure out that the well is underneath the floorboards of the cabin, so they

break through the floor and remove the well cover. In a supernatural sequence, the TV, presumably possessed by Samara, creates a swarm of bees, then slides down a floor board, pushing Rachel into the well. When she is in the bottom of the well, Rachel finds Samara's corpse, and cradles it like a child. Meanwhile, the sun has set. This signifies that Rachel has broken the curse, since she viewed the film seven days earlier just before sunset.

Noah and Rachel return to their respective apartments, but Rachel realizes something is amiss when Aidan's nose starts to bleed again. She quickly goes to Noah's apartment, but she is too late: Samara has already killed him. This sequence, in which Samara crawls out of Aidan's television set, is a memorable visualization of the uncanny. When she returns to her apartment, Rachel sets the original tape on fire, and is confused as to why she lived and Noah didn't. She realizes that in order to lift the death sentence, one must create a copy of the tape and show it to someone else. She quickly gets Aidan to copy the tape, but it is unclear to whom they show it. This is how the movie ends.



*Samara crawling out of Noah's TV*

In "Hollywood's Remake Practices under the Copyright Regime: French Films and Japanese Horror Films", Myoungsook Park writes "Although horror as a

psychological and physical sensation might be universal, every culture has different semantics of horror, tied to different taboos and myths” (Lukas and Marmysz, 119). *The Ring*’s Japanese predecessor, *Ringu*, recalls elements of Japanese folklore, but the technological ties give it a universality with other post-industrial nations, like the United States. Park discusses elements of the film that are lost on international viewers. These elements are deeply rooted in Japanese folklore, and because of this, parts of the American adaptation are lost on viewers because they don’t have the context that Japanese viewers would.

In his *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers the reader seven theses to help them recognize the culture behind the monster. In his first thesis, Cohen offers:

“The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy [...]. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a heirophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. (4)

This speaks to the nature of the technology as a monstrosity and, specifically to *The Ring*, its role in the production and restraint of catharsis. The only way to break the deadly curse that the video places on the viewer is to make a copy of the tape and show it to someone else. Rachel does this unintentionally to Noah, and only finds out about it after he dies. In order to save her son, she does the same for him. At the end of the film, it is unclear to whom they will show the video. One of the deleted scenes shows Rachel in a

video rental store, where the newly copied tape is now on the shelf. With either ending, the cathartic release that the viewer expects from a contemporary American horror narrative is withheld. But it isn't just withheld—it's first given, and then taken away. The release of Samara's spirit as the resolution to the curse would have been a natural ending for any American horror narrative. Instead, the futility of human action is highlighted, which is perhaps one of the scariest aspects of the film. The plot is constructed around Rachel and Noah gathering evidence and making decisions that they feel will lead to a resolution, only to find that the moves they make are irrelevant when compared to Samara's supernatural prowess. This speaks to a lack of confidence in the ability of human intelligence to control things that affect one's own fate.

While *The Ring* and *Videodrome* both deal with merging human biology with videotape technology, they use it to place anxiety in different arenas. Cronenberg uses the technology to focus on blurring the boundary between the self and other, while Verbinski uses it to perpetuate Samara's supernatural lust for retribution.

In his discussion of Regina Marie Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (1797), George Haggerty mentions that "the scene of horrified confrontation is a classic gothic encounter" (75). This best conjures up the image of Samara crawling out of Noah's television to kill him. This is a significant and effective scene, which draws upon Aristotle's concept of peripeteia. Up until this point, both Rachel and Noah assumed that the explanations they dug up, along with their release of Samara's body, had saved them from certain death. It is in this moment that the viewer realizes that their actions and elucidations were futile. Because the viewer was set up with a false climax—the discovery of Samara's body—this moment of peripeteia is all the more powerful. The

false climax is also disguised as a false moment of anagnorisis, because Rachel and Noah think they've made the critical discovery that will release them from the deadly curse. Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis is important here not only for the moment of discovery or knowing that Rachel eventually finds, but because this moment is a revelation on her relationship with the antagonistic ghost. It also leads her to do exactly what Samara's spirit wants—to replicate her harmful imagery.

While the choice of a videotape as malevolent technology in Koji Suzuki's novel makes sense in relation to its publication date (1991), Gore Verbinski's 2002 adaptation could easily have utilized the up-and-coming DVD technology in its place. However, there is a theme in the film of the repressed being made malevolent. So, at a time where videotape technology was being repressed in favor of the advent of the videodisc, it is perhaps more appropriate that Verbinski and his writers chose to work with the former. Chuck Tryon discusses this in his "Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film", and goes on to cite the statistic that "DVDs represented only 11 percent of home entertainment revenues in 1999, but by 2003, when *The Ring* hit theaters, DVDs accounted for 76 percent of that total" (50).

### Chapter Three

#### William Malone's *FeardotCom*

The opening scene of William Malone's *FeardotCom* takes place during a thunderstorm in a subway station. A man hallucinates seeing a young girl playing on the tracks in front of an oncoming train. Unlike the hallucinations in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, it is pretty clear that these are just in the character's head, and do not enter into what the viewer would consider reality. This man tries to save the girl, but ends up being killed by the oncoming train. While this scene is depicted graphically, it still registers low in comparison to the violence depicted in the *Saw* series.

The man that died was bleeding from his eyes and nose. These injuries were unrelated to the trauma of being hit by the train, so Detective Mike Reilly calls the Department of Health to investigate. The agent they send, Terry Huston, is our other protagonist. They eventually figure out that the injuries that this man, and three others, have been caused by their visit to the website [www.feardotcom.com](http://www.feardotcom.com). The premise is that 48 hours after the viewers log onto the site, they will meet their death through their worst fears.



*Mike Reilly with the Doctor's website.*

A particularly memorable one has Denise Stone, a forensic programmer recruited by Mike Reilly, meeting her death with a fleet of cockroaches attacking her. This scene is really well done, and calls on some brilliant gothic staging. The main room in Denise's apartment is a large, open space with tall ceilings. It is poorly lit, as most of the lamps are knocked over, and it is night. Outside it is storming, and the long, white curtains are billowing in the open floor-to-ceiling windows, cast in a haze of moonlight. Only occasional flashes of lightning illuminate her trashed apartment, which is covered in binary code that she has written on every surface. Since most of the light is coming from outside the apartment, it seems to cast the imagery of the rain into Denise, bringing the natural setting almost directly onto her body. She hallucinates that she is surrounded by a hoard of maniacal cockroaches. She is overwhelmed to the point where something in her psyche breaks down, and she jumps out of her window.

The mise-en-scène of her apartment speaks specifically to that of staged gothic dramas. When discussing Matthew G. Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, George Haggerty writes "The gloomy, lap-lit spaces—and even the lofty, well-lit ones—create a special mood. [...] The theatrical effects [...] are marshaled to evoke the dark and brooding landscape of psychological distress" (90-91). The staging in Denise's apartment does exactly that. In his "Arashi Ga Oka (Onimaru): The Sound of the World Turned Inside Out", Philip Brophy writes, "sheets of lightning noise and deep thunder claps [are] prime sonic signifiers of rupture and transgression in global Gothic cinema" (McRoy 157). In visiting the Feardotcom website, Denise has ruptured her reality and transgressed the societal taboo of voyeurism.

The premise behind the feardotcom.com website, is that it is inhabited by the malevolent ghost of a serial killer's first victim. This serial killer, known as the Doctor, runs a website called fear.com where he broadcasts live torture segments of his victims. These torture scenes are not particularly gory or explicit when compared to the *Saw* narrative, but there is a marked increase in violence from the previous two films. The premise is that the whoever logs onto the fear.com website can “watch, but also [...] learn”, as the Doctor puts it. He elaborates that he and his victim have a responsibility to teach viewers that “reducing relationships to anonymous electronic impulses is a perversion.” He claims that his website “offer[s] intimacy” because “the internet offers birth, sex, commerce, seduction, proselytizing, politics, posturing; [and] death is a logical component.”



*The Doctor's "laboratory"*

We eventually find out that the Doctor's first victim, Jeannie Richardson, was a hemophiliac, and her worst fear was sharp objects, which the Doctor obviously used to

torture her. This is where the theme of the deaths come from. The website her evil energy lurks on is presumably an echo of the one that broadcast her death. When her website is visited, the first thing the viewer experiences is a series of macabre images, with the voice of Jeannie in the background saying “Do you like to watch?” She entices the viewer further into the site under the voyeuristic veil of witnessing some sadistic violence. She then breaks down the fourth wall between the website and the viewer of it. There is a series of images that flashes quickly in front of the viewer. These images are eventually pieced together to tell Jeannie Richardson’s story in much the same way the tape in *The Ring* tells Samara’s.

After visiting the website, the viewer starts experiencing hallucinations, some of which appear to be part of reality, others which are blatantly illusory. One of the common images to all the victims was of a little girl with a white ball. This represents Jeannie Richardson as a small child, which is how she viewed herself, according to directorial commentary by William Malone.

A more physical side-effect of visiting the website is the recurrence of a bloody nose. This consequence is also in *The Ring* for people who watch the villainous tape. An additional physical consequence is the rupture of the optic nerves. This more violent reaction can be attributed to the directly voyeuristic nature of the website, which stands in stark contrast to the unassuming viewership of Samara’s tape in *The Ring*.

After Denise’s death, Mike logs onto the website to aid his investigation. He experiences a string of hallucinations, including being trapped in an elevator with the adult Jeannie Richardson. He ends up collapsing, and is brought to a hospital. On his way into the ambulance, he begs Terry not to log onto the website, and explains that Jeannie

gets her power because, "If the will is strong enough, you can live in the objects around you." Terry immediately disobeys him in order to seek more information to save him.

After visiting the site, Terry tracks down more information about Jeannie Richardson, and figures out that she used to play at an old steel mill as a child. She goes to this mill and finds her body at the bottom of a pit of water. This scene strongly echoes the scene in *The Ring* when Rachel dives into the well and finds Samara's body. There is a similar sense that this corporeal discovery is the catalyst for the spirit's eventual release.

Mike and Terry eventually track down the Doctor's torture site—that is, the physical site, not the technological one. They get in a standoff with him, and both Mike and the Doctor end up getting shot. Mike's wound is fatal, but he has enough time left to type the feardotcom website into the Doctor's computer, releasing Jeannie's spirit to kill the Doctor.

Perhaps the most overt reference to the gothic in any of the films is in William Malone's *FeardotCom*. The opening sequence involves a victim by the name of Polidori, which is a nod to John Polidori, who was present when Mary Shelley created *Frankenstein*.

What the film loses in its fragmented plot progression, it gains in staging. Roger Ebert says "If the final 20 minutes had been produced by a German impressionist in the 1920s, we'd be calling it a masterpiece," (Ebert C4). Indeed, the cinematography there is quite fantastic—it is probably the most beautiful death in the three films.

The way in which the malevolent spirits inhabit secondary technologies is not dissimilar in *The Ring* and *FeardotCom*. Both ghosts are able to use telephones to

communicate with the living. Samara uses it to inform her victims of their impending death. Jeannie uses it to entice Terry further into the cavity of a hospital to push her hallucinations further.

Before her death, Denise says that the appeal of the Doctor's fear website is that "it's a way to find out about death before it's your turn." This delves more deeply into the anxieties that Malone's film explores. This one that involves the fear of death is perhaps the most classic anxiety that gets played out in horror narratives. But by using the internet-connected computer as the means of exploration, Malone brings a contemporary lens to an ancient apprehension.

In a directorial commentary, William Malone discusses his employment of the nefarious internet as a plot device. He says that the connection between a lot of computers creates a system not unlike artificial intelligence, and the exploration of that place as being inhabited by a ghost could be "terrifying", especially since the internet lives in our daily domestic habits.

There is a difference between the vengeance that Samara seeks and the retribution that Jeannie seeks which alters the cathartic measure. In *The Ring*, Samara cares not who her victims are, she just seeks the proliferation of her deadly virus via videotape. In *FearDotCom*, however, Jeannie says that "the guilty must be punished." Her vengeance does claim innocent victims, but she stops when she exacts her revenge on the Doctor.

## Chapter Four

### The Gothic

It is widely acknowledged that the gothic literary genre began in 1764 when Horace Walpole published his *The Castle of Otranto*. The genre takes its moniker from the subtitle to Walpole's story: "A Gothic Tale". The parameters of the gothic are still much disputed, but the classic gothic movement is considered to have started with Walpole's book and ended around 1820 (Hopkins xi). It is from this movement that I selected these six motifs for further exploration: femininity, isolation, decay, the abject, madness, and monstrosity.

In her *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, Elizabeth MacAndrew introduces gothic fiction as that of nightmares:

Among its conventions are found dream landscapes and figures of the subconscious imagination. Its fictional world gives form to amorphous fear and impulses common to all mankind, using an amalgam of materials, some torn from the author's own subconscious mind and some the stuff of myth, folklore, fairy tale, and romance. It conjures up beings—mad monks, vampires, and demons—and settings—forbidding cliffs and glowering buildings, stormy seas and the dizzying abyss [...] Gothic fiction gives shape to concepts of the place of evil in the human mind. (3)

This images that MacAdams evokes are hallmarks of the gothic in text and on screen. But beyond the purely visual effects, there are many subtler motifs that recur in the gothic and in these films. In this chapter, I have highlighted six that I think are exceptionally compelling. The gnarled roots of these 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic motifs have

permeated a soil rich with unresolved anxieties. While some of the plants emerging from these roots over time have changed form—in keeping with those anxieties—the necessity for them to germinate has not changed. The motifs that I have chosen have contemporary resonance with topics that our society still grapples with.

### Femininity

In “Hollywood’s Remake Practices under the Copyright Regime: French Films and Japanese Horror Films”, Myoungsook Park writes that, “[the] Western Gothic tradition has a history of depicting women in peril” (Lukas and Marmysz 121). This rings true in all three films. Besides depicting women in danger at the hands of the patriarchy, they also send the message that the patriarchy is the solution to their suffering.

In David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, the feminine is more in peril than any one female, as is indicated by the nature of Max Renn’s stomach wound. This opening is manipulated many times, and forcibly by others. Additionally, Nikki Brand and Bianca O’Blivion are also under the threat of Videodrome’s bloodthirsty creators, though only Nikki Brand falls victim to them.

In Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring*, both the protagonist and antagonist are female, along with the antagonists’s victimized mother. Rachel is in danger of losing her own life and her son’s for much of the film. Samara, while the most powerful force in the narrative, is still repressed. Samara’s mother, Anna Morgan, is perhaps the most threatened character in this narrative, even though her life has already passed. The thing

that she wanted most in life, a child, ended up ruining her life and destroying everything she loved.

In William Malone's *FearDotCom*, the serial killer always chooses female victims, and the vengeful spirit is also female. There is also a subtler subordination of female to male in the relationship between Terry and Mike. She plays the brilliant, but sheltered—and thus naïve—scientist. He, the street smart cop. There are many times through the investigation where he must protect her. All of the women in this film are subordinate to the patriarchy. There is also an echo of the *belle dame sans merci* in the ghost of Jeannie Richardson, who at more than one point in the movie manifests as a beautiful and alluring woman.

Apart from the depiction of women in peril, there is also a theme of women inhabiting the heinous technologies. In *Videodrome*, the violent images that carry the signal are all against women. In *The Ring*, Samara inhabits the imagery on the videotape, and in *FearDotCom*, Jeannie inhabits the website.

In *The Ring*, Samara is cast down a well, where she dies. The well is symbolic of a forgotten place, where the female figure is cast aside and consigned to oblivion. Hogle writes, “The confinement of woman by patriarchy in a great deal of the Gothic [...] is based fundamentally on an attempt to repress, as well as a quest to uncover, a potentially ‘unruly female principle’” (10). While in the American adaptation of *The Ring* the mother is the one who kills the young girl, in the Japanese version, it is the father. This falls in line with the patriarchal suppression of the “unruly female principle”, especially since the girl is suspected of being fathered by a sea monster.

The character of Rachel in *The Ring* falls in line with many gothic heroines. In *The Handbook of the Gothic*, Avril Horner writes “In many early Gothic novels the heroine, sometimes accompanied by the virtuous young man who loves her, is pursued across countryside [...] by a variation on [the] villain figure” (180). She is accompanied for much of her journey by Noah. There are romantic undertones to their relationship through the second half of the movie. In a cinematic arena so heavily saturated with graphic sex scenes, the backgrounded vein of romance here is refreshing.

### Isolation

There is a motif of isolation that finds itself in many gothic narratives, as well as in the narratives of the three films I am analyzing. Isolation is perhaps at its starkest and most pervasive in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, but weaves its way into the setting of many gothic narratives. The complexity of isolation goes beyond just Frankenstein’s monster and society. One of the opening scenes of the story is on a ship near the North Pole, and a majority of the scenes thereafter take place in similarly isolated terrain. The reader is also isolated from the narrative by several lenses: Those of Victor Frankenstein, Robert Walton, and Margaret Saville. Each of the major narrating characters—Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and Frankenstein’s monster—expresses a feeling of isolation and loneliness.

In *Videodrome*, Max Renn experiences a psychological isolation, first from reality, then later from himself. In *The Ring*, there are many layers of isolation. Samara is isolated physically from her parents when they force her to live in the barn. The well

where her body is and where the cabin is built is isolated in the mountains. Samara's birthplace and story are isolated from the narrative. Her home with the Morgans is isolated on an island—a dark and stormy one, I might add. In *FearDotCom*, the Doctor's torture chamber is isolated in an abandoned nuclear power plant. Each character who visits the website is isolated from reality for 48 hours, and paralyzed by their greatest fear.

The inhabited technologies at once prove a source of and reprieve from isolation. In the preface to her *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, Elizabeth McAndrew notes that a recurrent motif in the convention of gothic writing is “closed worlds” (IX). In all three of these films, the worlds presented on screen are isolated. In *Videodrome*, Max Renn's reality is closed off from the world around him, simply and profoundly by the nature of his new orifice. After this anatomical alteration, Max's hallucinations get more severe, and the only way he is able to form a connection to others is through the technological manipulation of this orifice.

In *The Ring*, the Morgans have isolated Samara in the barn to distance her from her mother after they discover she is the source of her terrible nightmares. Samara has just a television to keep her company, and this is where the seed of her maleficence buds. In perhaps one of the most vivid scenes in the movie, the television in Noah's apartment serves as a medium through which she can connect to—and kill—him.

In *FearDotCom*, the namesake website serves as an isolated current through which the vengeful ghost of Jeannie Richardson can travel. It is also the accessing of this website while in the Doctor's torture chamber that ultimately releases her presence. The

Doctor also claims that his fear website offers viewers intimacy through its stark rendering of death.

### Decay

There is also a strong motif of decay throughout the gothic and in these films. There is the obvious physical decay in Shelley's *Frankenstein* of the monster, who is decaying from his first moments of life. In *Videodrome*, there is the contested issue of whether sex and violence in media perpetuate social decay, and Max Renn finds his end on a condemned boat that is decaying in Toronto's harbor. The body of those exposed to the Videodrome signal also go through a decaying process as they are infiltrated with brain tumors which decay both the organ and the reality it perceives.

While the classic, decrepit gothic setting is not highly visible in *Videodrome*, it does snake its way into one memorable scene. Max goes to assassinate Bianca O'Blivion at the building where she works, and presumably lives. It is a large, deteriorating building. It's nighttime, and there are few dim lights in the large room where Bianca and Max have their face-off. We know from a previous scene in this building that the room is filled with makeshift plywood and cardboard cubicles, each containing a TV set. A few of them are on, casting flickering glows around the room. It's a technological labyrinth.

In *The Ring*, it seems that everything Samara touches decays. The decay of her family is perhaps the most vivid, and the origin of her post-mortem nefarious exploits—

the cabin—is the most decayed structure in the film. There is also an undercurrent of the decay of the nuclear family in the film. This is shown both in Samara’s family and in Rachel’s. In *FearDotCom*, many of the physical structures are decayed, especially the Doctor’s torture chamber and the abandoned steel mill where Jeannie’s body is found. The bodies of the *feardotcom* website’s viewership also undergoes decay in the 48 hours between exposure to death, with the ultimate deterioration of the ocular nerves.

In his “Film Remake or Film Adaptation? New Media Hollywood and the Digitizing of Gothic Monsters in *Van Helsing*”, Costas Constandinides writes:

The predominant topography of the early Gothic novel was the castle, which is described by Botting as “decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways, the castle was linked to other medieval edifices—abbeys, churches and graveyards especially—that, in their generally ruinous states, harkened back to a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition, and fear.” (245-246)

This idea of the castle as a site of decay that holds a representation of the social anxieties of fear and superstition easily translates into these three modern films. The castle can be equated with the bodies that are exposed to the malevolent technology in the film narratives. In *Videodrome*, Max Renn’s body is the site of decay and where the anxieties that the technology arouses manifest. In all of the films, there is the constant threat of death that inhabits all bodies exposed to these technologies. But beyond the threat of death, there is the sense that death *is* the best solution to the problem the technology has created. In each film, there is at least one character for whom death seems to be a

welcome reprieve. Like Dracula's castle, these characters seem to have a layer of dust on their cavity—the product of being drained of a life force.

### The Abject

In *The Handbook of the Gothic*, Colette Conroy defines abjection as:

[A]n overpowering sensation of disgust caused by fragments and substances that cross boundaries between subjects. Mucus, saliva, blood, [and] vomit are all examples. These substances pollute the clarity of intersubjective relationships because they belong to both inside and outside and so form the connective boundary between the two. The point of separation is also the point of connection. (106)

In *The Ring* and *FearDotCom*, there are some physical signs of abjection after being exposed to the tape and website, respectively. All of the exposed parties experience nosebleeds. In *FearDotCom*, this is followed with more severe bleeding from the eyes as the 48-hour window closes. Because of this bleeding and the torture scenes depicted in the Doctor's lair, this film is the bloodiest of the three. Even so, the torture scenes are few, and not as graphic as many in other contemporary horror films.

Another sign of abjection in *FearDotCom*, the white ball, is not oriented around bodily fluids. One of the standard hallucinatory visions that all visitors to the website see is Jeannie Richardson as a young girl playing with a white ball. This ball is also seen

rolling about on its own. This ball is a referent for the abject. It separates adult Jeannie from child Jeannie, and yet unites them for website visitors and movie viewers.

Reflection on this connection casts dramatic irony over Jeannie's victims. The only people privy to this connection are Terry, who visits Jeannie's mother and spots a photograph, and the movie viewers.

Apart from the nose bleed in *The Ring*, there are few bloody scenes, and few manifestations of the abject through bodily fluids. Abjection is manifested in water. Water always precedes Samara's presence, and is present at all of the deaths in the film. Just before Katie's death, Samara's presence is foreshadowed in the pool of water that can be seen under the bottom of her door. Mr. Morgan electrocutes himself in a tub overflowing with water. There is a memorable scene where Samara crawls out of Noah's television set and tracks water across his floor before killing him. In Rachel's dream where Samara grabs Rachel's arm and burns her, there is a puddle of water in the living room in the exact spot that Aidan is sitting—having just finished watching the tape—when she wakes up. Though Samara is physically portrayed as an eternal child, it is as though she is mothering these fiendish, replicating tapes, and the water is her amniotic fluid.

The fly that appears on a frame of the tape is also a point of abjection. This is the moment where the screen shifts from being a boundary between worlds to a portal. There is a moment when Rachel freezes this frame and is able to pick the fly off the screen. As Conroy said, this is a point of separation—clearly illustrating the bounds between the two worlds—but also one of connection.

This idea is also at work in *Videodrome*, though it largely manifests through hallucinatory experience rather than an actual tangible one. The abject in this film is mostly exhibited in two places: Max Renn's abdominal orifice, and the sadomasochistic threads that are woven into the plot. Of all three films, the presence of this orifice is one of the most memorable representations of abjection. The sadomasochism, while not as visually striking, is just as conceptually intriguing. Max and Nikki experiment with S&M in their sex life. Max seems at once repulsed by and attracted to it, and behaves in a similar fashion towards the snuff Videodrome footage. In this sense, Max, and to some extent Nikki, are representations of the abject. However, after the new orifice appears on Max, he is incarnated as the abject. He moves from being the signified to the signifier.

### Madness

In *The Handbook of the Gothic*, Helen Small reveals the fear of madness to be “a fundamental source of terror in Gothic literature,” (199). She speaks to a fascination with and terror of the madhouse. Even though the field of psychiatry has grown significantly since the inception of gothic literature, the genre still resists the scientific pacification of madness. While adapting to more modern psychological disorders, modern gothic writers have “remained firmly within the Gothic tradition in rejecting any reassuring conviction that the mind is fully accessible to science, to understanding, or to sympathy,” (Small 202). Originally, gothic literature drew on the hysteria surrounding madness. Now the literature creates it.

In all three films, there is a madness that overtakes characters after they interact with the nefarious technology. Since I have already discussed how this manifests in various other sections, I will instead focus on the peripheral embodiments of and difference in madness in each film. In *The Ring*, Samara's telepathic prowess drives her family's horses into madness. Her unique ability to manipulate other species, and by extension the natural world, puts her power far above that of a human's, thus rendering human reasoning and logic impotent against her capabilities. In *Videodrome*, Cronenberg constructs Max Renn's reality and hallucinations in such a way that the viewer is sometimes unable to discern what scenes belong in which category. This inability rightfully drives Max out of his rational mind and into madness. In *FearDotCom*, the window between exposure to the technology and madness is shorter than in the other two films. The manipulation of the website visitor's worst fear certainly plays a role in this. In every case, each fear seems not to be based in rationality. This fosters paranoia, which, as David Punter and Glennis Byron point out in their *The Gothic*, causes "the self [to be] threatened and pursued by its own unaccommodated residues."

While all three films involve hallucinations, those in *Videodrome* are really the only ones that cause the viewer to examine the reality Max Renn is faced with and decide for him or herself what is reality and what is hallucination. This is because the hallucinations Max experiences are a direct result of his reality. For example, there is a scene where Nikki Brand kills Dr. O'Blivion on screen. While at first the viewer could assume this might be a reality, since Nikki did go in search of the Videodrome producers, it is soon revealed to be hallucination. The hallucinations in the other two films involve

subjects that the hallucinating characters weren't previously exposed to, so those sequences are more starkly hallucination for both the character and the viewer.

### Monstrosity

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold E. Hogle writes:

A Gothic tale usually takes places [...] in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space [...] Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story. These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters [...] that rise from within the antiquated space, or sometimes invade it from alien realms, to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view. (2)

This speaks to the spectral habitation of the technologies highlighted in each of the three narratives. While the two manifestations in *The Ring* and *FeardotCom* may be readily apparent, the manifestation in *Videodrome* is more subtle. In Cronenberg's film, the technology is possessed by man's creation. This production is in effect, a monster, because it creates a combination of realities from different realms that should not be able to coexist.

Later in *The Companion*, Hogle speaks to the gothic as having helped shape Freud's middle-class Oedipal conflict theory. He writes, "in some way the Gothic is usually about some "son" both wanting to kill and striving to be the "father" and thus feeling fearful and guilty about what he most desires, [...]" (5). Here *Videodrome* sets itself aside in the masculine manifestation of the monster. Max Renn is, to some degree, the "son" figure, who is at once repulsed by and attracted to the "father" figure—the Videodrome creators. This dual repulsion and attraction on his part only complicates who the monster might be in this film. While the Videodrome creators seem the obvious choice, Renn isn't entirely blameless. He obsessively seeks out Videodrome to broadcast on his station, even after he finds out that its makers have a dubious agenda. He also is physically alienated from those around him after his new orifice arrives, which has a Frankensteinian echo.

The monster of Verbinski's film, Samara, does interesting things with technology. For the beginning portion of the film, the tape itself is the monster because of the urban legend that surrounds it. The story behind the tape is not known until Rachel investigates further and sheds light on its haunted past. Samara also needs the tape to be replicated in order to continue to exist on some level and terrorize people. It is her horcrux, if you will, and destroying all the tapes and refusing to make another is the only way to kill her. Essentially, Samara's continued victimization relies upon the human survival instinct, which tends to throw morality out the window in order to live.

In *FearDotCom*, the monster is at once Jeannie Richardson and the Doctor. The Doctor embodies monstrosity in the modern sense of being morally corrupt and deliberately hurtful in explicitly violent ways. Jeannie is a Frankensteinian monster in the

sense that her existence should not be possible, but she still continues to prevail. Though the viewer may have some sympathy for her plight, she still kills innocent people without discrimination until she can exact her revenge.

### Conclusion

At the beginning of this project, I set out to explore the relationship between gothic literary conventions, contemporary American horror films, and how the two work together to utilize technology. My initial research interest was in the history and development of communication technologies, and how they affected interpersonal relationships, and spatial and temporal connections. This led me to read Darren Wershler-Henry's *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting*. The first sentence of Wershler-Henry's book reads: "Typewriting is dead, but its ghost still haunts us" (2). He then goes on to cite anecdotes of allegedly haunted typewriters, which led to the focus of my project. While researching, I found many interesting threads that didn't necessarily tie in with my project, but I think they're worth mentioning here.

I was also intrigued by the moment of madness. This most vividly occurs in *Videodrome* with Max Renn, but is also present in the other two films. What drives this? When, and under what circumstances does it occur? What kind of language do we use to talk about madness as it manifests? That last question is of particular interest to me, especially since madness is at once observable and unobservable. Along this line of the role of language, I am also curious about the kind of language we use to talk about what is considered abject, grotesque, and horrifying. These are things that are often repressed in speech, particularly in the discussion of death.

When I was first formulating this project, I spent some time informally questioning my friends and peers about their feelings for horror movies. The standard response was something along the lines of “I don’t like them. They freak me out. They’re too scary.” While this is a valid response, it didn’t satisfy my curiosity. The language they were using was too vague. What specifically was scary, and in what ways?

While I didn’t find the answers to these questions, I did dig into something near the end of this process that illuminated something important for me. Perhaps a part of why horror is scary to people is that it demonizes. In particular, there is a demonization of religious iconography in Victorian gothic literature and in contemporary American horror.

In *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film*, Jack Morgan references the powerful Catholic influence in classic gothic literature (60). There is a perversion of Catholic imagery, which, Morgan notes, is largely at the hands of Protestant novelists. The decrepit monastery is a popular setting for the Victorian gothic plot, and highly sexualized nuns and priests are not rare. In his *Queer Gothic*, George Haggerty discusses religion and the gothic in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. He writes:

The gothic terms of the work [...] have greater meaning because of the religious terms in which they are couched. Sexuality, that is, depends on a religious context to exert its full cultural significance. Sexuality and religion are not opposite poles from which to understand the action of the novel; they are inextricably bound in the cultural imagination. (64)

This corruption of religious imagery carries itself into horror films, and is weaved in the films I chose to analyze. *FeardotCom* plays with an echo of religion in its presentation of

sexuality. The maleficent spirit of Jeannie Richardson is portrayed in two ways: First, as a child wearing all white, and second, as an attractive and provocative adult woman. This echoes the dual image of women in the Bible, between Mary and Eve.

*Videodrome* carries a heavier sense of religious perversion, which surrounds Max Renn. Bianca O'Blivion tells Max that he is the "video word made flesh" this has a strong tie to Christianity through "[...] the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (New Catholic Edition, John 1.14). There is also the sense that Max is hallucinating that he is a Christ-like figure. In his mind, he is working to save civilization from the destruction Videodrome would cause. In the end, he sacrifices himself in order to undergo a transformation he thinks will save civilization. There is also the image of Max's abdominal wound. While its location does not directly correspond with the last of the Five Holy Wounds inflicted upon Jesus's body, there is an echo: "But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs; but one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and immediately there came out blood and water" (John 19.33-34). When Max pulls things from his wound, they are covered in a watery residue as well as blood.

There are Biblical remnants in *The Ring* as well. As Sheng-mei Ma discusses in *Asian Gothic*, the seven-day window between viewing the tape and death speaks of a reverse Genesis (193). In a more gothic sense, *The Ring* also highlights a lineage shrouded in mystery and an evil origin. The different stories surrounding the origin of the malefic child in *The Ring* and *Ringu* speak to that. This plot point stands in direct contradiction to the medieval tradition of harking back to the Creator (Ma 193). In both of these plots, Samara's wicked pedigree is the fulcrum of her power.

The demonization and perversion of something as personal and important as religion, even one that the reader or viewer does not necessarily share, is unsettling. By drawing threads of Christianity into these—and many other—horror film plots, the films' creators could be drawing uncomfortably visceral reactions from viewers.

In a further exploration, I might go beyond the surface of the motifs I have chosen, digging for deeper trends of employment and manipulation, possibly through broadening the number of films and source texts examined. I would like to further explore the questions I listed above pertaining to the language we use and the dialogue surrounding horror films and their imagery.

In perhaps a separate project, I would like to explore the aura surrounding, in the Benjaminian sense, these communication technologies. An examination of ghost stories and urban legends surrounding these technologies might yield some insight into why we tend to be so silent about these horrific mythologies.

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### **Author's Biography**

Alexis Priestley was born in East Machias, Maine, in 1990. She graduated from Jonesport-Beals High School in 2008, and gave up a burgeoning career as a professional napper to enroll in the University of Maine that fall. She graduated *cum laude* in 2012, majoring in English and minoring in Psychology. She plans to take a gap year before graduate school, during which she will be chasing a recalcitrant muse, writing her own cookbook, and dabbling in winemaking. Eventually, she plans to attend graduate school for an as yet undecided program, with the hopes of eventually being employable.