The Malady Lingers On: The Abject and Contemporary Asian Horror Cinema.

by

Daniel Stephen Hey

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Salford
School of Arts and Media

2018

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Abstract

 The aim of this study is to bring together abjection theory, as elaborated in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and other relevant works (particularly, the establishment of "symbolic" and "semiotic" realms), with contemporary Asian horror cinema, in order to construct a detailed and effective framework for the application of abjection theory within film studies. Examining various aspects of abjection theory (purging rituals; rites of passage; the construct and collapse of borders; the impingement of the past upon the present; and the monstrous-feminine) alongside the major themes of contemporary Asian horror cinema (the vengeful spirit; the generation of fear through modern technologies; myth, cult, and urban legend; and horror within the high school and the home), this thesis first reconciles diverse and complex bodies of critical and theoretical literature, before applying this data to a series of case studies spread over six chapters (each dealing with a different theme of abjection theory and/or prevalent motifs in the films), analysing twenty-six contemporary Asian horror films from across Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Challenging existing models of application and a selection of key readings in this field, I propose that combining theory and film does not yield a conservative outlook, as some previous studies argue (in particular, Barbara Creed, 1993). Instead, I demonstrate the importance of applied theory to this relatively new area of cinema in a study that establishes radical elements within the texts through the illustration of abjection as both a subjective psychological experience and a chaotic force, challenging the arbitrary borders erected to establish normative symbolic subjectivity. The introduction of the *abject element* within the films' *narratives of abjection* highlights the fragile nature of ordered symbolic society, and the abject's lasting presence strongly indicates the precipice upon which symbolic authority balances.

Section 1: Introduction, Literature Reviews, Methodology

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Starting Point

To trace the origins of this thesis, I recall the summer of 2001, when I first saw *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) on a copied video cassette. That tape did not contain the same curse as the one featured in the film, though it did spark my interest in a burgeoning area of East Asian horror cinema. A little over a year later, the Hollywood remake (Gore Verbinski, 2002) would hit cinemas up and down the country, but the differences between the "Westernized" version and the original were unmistakable. Gone was the creepy, atmospheric tension and slow, deliberate build-up to the film's famous scene of Sadako's reanimated corpse crawling through the television screen to claim her victim, replaced with an instant exposure to the "big scare." Over the next few years (and still to this day), more contemporary Asian horror films would undergo Western remakes – the most high-profile being *Ju-On: The Grudge* (both the original and remake, titled simply *The Grudge*, directed by Takashi Shimizu in 2002 and 2004 respectively) and *Dark Water* (Hideo Nakata, 2002; Walter Salles, 2005) – as the process of adapting Asian horror films for Hollywood release became more frequent. And though I would still pay for a cinema ticket to see these films on the big screen, my preference was always for the Eastern originals. Fortunately, most of these titles could now be purchased through DVD distribution company Tartan.

Fast forward (or skip, in DVD-era vernacular) to 2012, and now a student of English Literature at The University of Salford, I encountered *Dark Water* (the original) again, this time on the second-year undergraduate module, "The Female Gothic." It was on this module that I was also introduced to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and abjection. It appealed to me immediately as a useful tool for film critique; consequently, the germ of an idea started to grow. Next semester I took the "Cinema and Psychoanalysis" module and almost instantly decided that I would combine elements from both modules for my undergraduate dissertation, which would look at the relationship between Kristeva's abject and J-horror (Hey, 2014).[1] However, during the research

---

[1] Specifically, I analysed *Ringu*, *Dark Water*, and *Audition* (Hideo Nakata, 2002). Elements of this thesis, particularly in chapters V and X, build upon the preliminary findings of this dissertation.

process, I felt that there was much more to be said for the relationship between the theory and a wider selection of contemporary Asian horror cinema. What Kristeva describes in the abject is psychological as well as physical, visceral as well as visual. The two seem to go hand in hand, yet, excluding Barbara's Creed's seminal text, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) (which predates the contemporary Asian horror cinema boom), there has not been a comprehensive study in any area of cinema that utilizes Kristeva's theory. From this experience, I felt that there was scope in this area to go beyond a dissertation on J-horror and examine contemporary Asian horror cinema as a broader cycle of films alongside Kristeva's theory.

In this thesis, as I will explain in the following two chapters, I seek to construct and (re)define an interpretive theoretical framework through which to read contemporary Asian horror cinema by way of abjection. It is not my intention to simply homogenize analyses of the films to fit one pat formula, but rather to incorporate and embrace nuances, differences, and contradictions across a broader range of contemporary Asian horror films; therefore, this will not be a "one way" process but instead a dialogue between film and theory.

1.2 Kristeva: Philosophy, Politics, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalysis

Born in Silven, Bulgaria in 1941, Julia Kristeva would eventually move to France in 1965 to continue her post-graduate education, studying under Lucien Goldmann, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes, among others. Already familiar with the influential works of Mikhail Bahktin, Kristeva's education in a range of disciplines, including structural Marxism, structural anthropology, and social and literary criticism, would influence her later writings as an academic. Kristeva has worn many metaphorical hats over the last fifty-plus years, and her works are often associated with philosophy, psychoanalysis, feminism, literary criticism, journalism, language studies, structuralism, and post-structuralism (later adding "novelist" to the list). While moving in these circles in her earlier years in France, Kristeva would join the avant-garde literary group Tel Quel, founded by her husband Phillipe Sollers, where her contributions actively focused on the politics of language. Nöelle McAfee notes that "Kristeva and others in her circle of intellectuals built upon the insights of structuralism . . ., for they believed that any linguistic intervention was also a political one; namely, they chose to look for the dynamic, changing aspects of systems" (2004, p.6). Later, Kristeva and her contemporaries would

shift their focus toward a post-structuralist approach to language and culture, where language becomes "part of a dynamic *signifying process*" (McAfee, 2004, p.14).

Kristeva first became notable in international academic circles after the publication of *Séméiôtiké: Recherches pour une Sémanalyse* in 1969 (translated in English as *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* in 1980). The ideas proposed in this publication are both important and influential on the sizeable body of work that followed. *Séméiôtiké*'s main contribution is that the concept of signification has two components: the semiotic and the symbolic. The notion is developed from pre-Oedipal object-relation psychoanalysis, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and Melanie Klein, as well as Jacques Lacan's mirror stage and associated model of psychosexual development.[2] The theory also connects the denotative meaning of language (and the process of acquiring it) to social and cultural tensions between feminine and masculine spaces, which in turn Kristeva relates to subject formation and development. These topics are all important to Kristeva's development of later ideas, especially her theoretical models of the abject and abjection.

Kristeva completed her training and qualified as a psychoanalyst in 1979. Her writings in the 1980s reflect her practices in this field, while continuing to draw on the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic in both culture and language. Kristeva's psychoanalytic interest is in Lacan's structuralist re-interpretation of Freud; however, she introduced her own ideas to his model of psychosexual development, now influenced by post-structuralist approaches, which place the emphasis on the feminine, particularly the mother and her pivotal role in subject development. The text that this thesis is most interested in concerns Kristeva's theories on the abject and abjection, published in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980; trans. 1982). With thematic links to the Freudian Uncanny, and re-working Jacques Lacan's model of psychosexual development, Kristeva's abject attempts to explain social and cultural narratives and rituals, particularly

---

[2] For Lacan, and subsequently Kristeva, the acquisition of language is crucial for the subject to acquire symbolic status, which through language holds together society's system of law, order, and community, as well as desire (which Lacan says is identical to the system of language). Lacan's psychoanalytical model (1964 [1977]) is based on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic model (1916), which also provides the basis for Lacan's structure of the unconscious. Saussure posited a system of signs in which the signifier (and what is signified by it) is only relational via a shared understanding of other signifiers; that is, it is defined in relation to what it is not. In this system, the word never fully corresponds to the referent. In Lacan's conceptual model of the unconscious, the structure of which he compares to language, desire itself is ever circulating but never converging on the original desire. *Ergo*, the language learned and replicated to become a functioning symbolic subject is only every arbitrary, and always-already lost from meaning.

those concerning both visceral and psychological horror, in literary texts. Subsequent criticism and responses to this work (notably Creed, 1993) develop this critical theory alongside readings of popular horror cinema. Still to this day, Kristeva is a polarizing figure (as I will demonstrate in Chapter II), and her work provides important topics of critical debate, with some embracing and adopting her ideas as critical models for theoretical analysis, while some reject her writings and accuse her of advocating essentialism and patriarchal conservatism.[3] In this thesis, I delve further into Kristeva's key ideas, going on to consider a large body of post-Kristevan scholarship. This will help me arrive at a balanced methodological approach to applying her theories of the abject and abjection to a cycle of horror cinema hitherto relatively unexplored through this method.

1.3 Brief Introduction to Contemporary Asian Horror Cinema

Horror cinema in Asia (here specifically Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand) has a long history, with the source of the horror narratives often predating the invention of film itself and coming from folklore, ghost stories, urban myth and legend, and earlier theatrical traditions. To give just one example, one could trace Japanese horror back to the silent era of the late nineteenth-century, where ghost films, often featuring re-enactments of scenes from *Kabuki* plays, made up a number of the country's early short films (Shirō Asano's *Bake Jizo* and *Shinin no Sosei*, both 1898). In 1954, one of the most influential monster movies/B-movies of all time was released: Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla*. The production of horror cinema would continue through the following decades, with notable films including *Onibaba* (Kaneto Shindō, 1964), *Kwaidan* (Masaki Kobayashi, 1965), and *House* (Nobuhiko Ôbayashi, 1977), while underground films such as the *Guinea Pig* series, starting with *Ginî Piggu: Akuma no Jikken* (Satoru Ogura, 1985), and *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Shinya Tsukamoto, 1989) gained a cult following.[4]

However, in the late 1990s and through the new millennium, and arguably still to this day, a new style of horror film emerged from Japan and South Korea, one which revitalized the horror cinemas of those respective nations and once again brought international recognition (along with a profusion of Hollywood remakes). In 1998, *Ringu*

---

[3] For example, Jennifer Stone (1983), Russell West (2007), and Imogen Tyler (2009). Critical responses of this nature are dealt with in the following chapter.
[4] Prior to the wider availability of contemporary Asian horror cinema in the wake of *Ringu* and its contemporaries, it is arguable that most Japanese films that gained popularity in the West could be regarded as "cult" films.

and *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-hyeong) were released to critical and commercial acclaim in their own countries, and later further afield in the West, sparking a new interest in the genre and becoming the template for future films to follow in the subsequent production boom from the region (one that stretched to include films from Hong Kong and Thailand, among others). [5] I devote an entire chapter to defining contemporary Asian horror cinema, listing its distinct characteristics, evaluating the existing critical literature, and detailing its compatibility with Kristeva's theory.

1.4 Combining the Two Elements: A Dialogue of Film and Theory

 Although *Powers of Horror* connects the abject to literature and does not mention film, the compatibility seems obvious. Many of the tropes that define or cause abjection overlap with key themes in most horror movies. Barbara Creed was first to put in motion any form of serious study linking the theory with horror cinema, but her seminal text does attract some criticism and has its own limitations. Her study pre-dates this cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema, and while abjection criticism is occasionally used in critiques of this area of cinema, readings have often been shallow or superficial. To my knowledge, there has yet to emerge a sustained critical analysis of a broader selection of contemporary Asian horror films utilizing Kristeva's abjection as a theoretical model. This thesis aims to redress that gap.

The thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1.	To what extent can Kristeva's theory of the abject and abjection be applied as a theoretical model to underpin a wider discussion concerning the visual and narrative properties of a range of contemporary Asian horror films?
2.	Taking into account Kristeva's assertion that contact with the abject constitutes a purging ritual and a rite of passage into ordered society, to what extent does abjection and the horror film narrative reflect the discourses specific to contemporary Asian horror cinema? Do the narratives engage with the abject in similar and consistent ways, and do they confirm or challenge – or even complicate – the prevailing ideologies formed by this

---

[5] For details on *Ringu*'s local and international appeal, see Wada-Marciano (2009, pp.30-32). Furthermore, IMDb lists *Ringu* as the highest grossing horror film in Japan. South Korea's *Whispering Corridors* was the second-highest grossing domestic film of the year and placed sixth overall in the South Korean box office for 1998 (koreanfilm.org).

discourse? How does this relate to the visceral and visual imagery presented by both theory and film?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is essentially structured into three sections. The first section covers this introduction, followed by a chapter that engages directly with Kristeva's theory of abjection, from which follows a literature review of post-Kristevan scholarship. Immediately, I demonstrate an understanding of abjection through a careful engagement with the theory before evaluating how it can be usefully employed as a critical model for analysis of cinema, one which drives the thesis forward. The next chapter seeks to define "contemporary Asian horror cinema"; to complete this task with appropriate considerations, I first set out to place this cinema with respect to genre, sub-genre, and cycles. Following on, I look at the specific properties and key themes that constitute a contemporary Asian horror film and analyze the existing critical literature in the field. A short methodology and film selection chapter follows to complete the first section, in order to synthesize two larger bodies of literature review and establish the foundations from which the following chapters of film analysis are based.

Section Two is the first of two sections that groups together three chapters of analysis. All six chapters in sections two and three focus on the analysis of a broad and representative body of contemporary Asian horror films. Each chapter takes four or five films as case studies, while expanding the reach of the analysis by including relative comparisons and contradictions from other films within the cycle. The chapters look at different aspects of abjection criticism in relation to key features of the selected films. Films are cross-referenced among chapters where appropriate. The chapters are broken down into the following: Chapter V takes narratives of abjection as a starting point and a pivotal focal point for all future chapters; Chapters VI and VII branch out into specific themes of technologies and myth, cult, and fairy tale respectively, rounding off Section Two. Section Three commences with Chapter VIII, analysing the rites of passage into adulthood, particularly where the high school is a key setting (especially in South Korean films, where *sonyeo* sensibility is a prevalent theme), and it is followed by Chapter IX, the family and family home, and, finally, Chapter X, which concentrates on representations of the monstrous-feminine in the cycle. One final concluding chapter synthesizes the research

to determine how and why abjection criticism is an appropriate method for reading this body of cinema.

Chapter II: Julia Kristeva and the Abject

> In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva develops her psychoanalytical
> theory of how the experience of the abject functions both in the process
> of constituting subjectivity and identity and in the processes of creating
> and maintaining social and cultural systems (Sylvia Mayer, 2007, p.
> 222).

2.1 *Powers of Horror* and its Predecessors

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva conceptualizes her theory of the abject and abjection. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, p.4). Abjection is manifested as the human reaction to the threat of breakdown to the hitherto stable borders between subject and object, self and other, causing loss of distinction and meaning. In other words, it is "the place where meaning collapses" (p.2). Abjection is primarily a physical reaction to such a confrontation with the destabilisation of borders and meaning, which, Kristeva states, is "above all[,] ambiguity" (p.9), but often is caused by physical triggers such as blood, pus, wounds, defilement, bodily waste and excess, and even the skin on the surface of warm milk. Each of these triggers are, Kristeva attests, prime examples of the abject, describing that which has been cast aside, rejected, "radically excluded" (p.2). However, the abject *par excellence*, according to Kristeva, is the corpse. It is not the corpse's signification of death that induces a state of abjection; rather, it is the corpse's visual marking of "death infecting life," traumatically highlighting to the subject the fragile border between the two states and consequently reminding him or her of their own materiality (p.4). Taken to its furthest conclusion, the corpse is "the most sickening of wastes, . . . a border that has encroached upon everything" (p.3). Kristeva explains that "refuse and corpses *show* me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (p.3). Therefore, to abject, to cast aside objects, defilement, and various bodily waste is, for the subject, a necessary exclusion to continue to live, it is what demarcates the border between death and life; however, too much expulsion results in "fall[ing] beyond the limit" and consequently becoming the corpse in death (p.3). The horror film is manifest with imagery of blood, wounds, corpses, death, and seeks to elicit a psychological (and sometimes

physical) reaction from its audience; what constitutes the abject and what makes up a horror movie, therefore, seem congenial to one another.

To fully comprehend Kristeva's theories on the abject and abjection, it is important to briefly outline some of the key ideas and influences from and on Kristeva's earlier works. And while this thesis is not a treatise on Kristeva's entire oeuvre, some background information will be necessary for a wider understanding of how her theories emerged over time. In formulating her theory, Kristeva draws upon concepts developed in previous notable works, namely *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974; trans. 1984) and *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), where she develops her theories on the semiotic and the symbolic: the former being tied to the undifferentiated state of co-dependence with the mother, while the latter represents patriarchal law and society structured through and in language acquisition. It is through these works that Kristeva starts to traverse the bridge between structuralist and post-structuralist linguistic analysis into psychoanalytic literary criticism, all of which spans into a wider political spectrum. *Revolution in Poetic Language* is perhaps Kristeva's most acclaimed publication in this area; according to Toril Moi, it "presents a theory of the processes which constitute language … [where] Kristeva transforms Lacan's distinctions between the imaginary and the symbolic order into a distinction between *semiotic* and *symbolic*" (1986, p.12). *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in addition to honing her ideas on semiotic and symbolic realms, also discusses Kristeva's concept of "negativity," which is taken from Hegel, itself a forerunner to the thought process behind abjection, as well as connecting her thinking to the Freudian death drive and the subject in process/on trial, which develops both Freudian and Lacanian notions.

However, many of the ideas put forward in *Revolution in Poetic Language* had been developed earlier in "The System and the Speaking Subject" (1973), itself building on an earlier work titled "Semiotics: A Critical Science and/or a Critique of Science" (1969), in which Kristeva pays lip service to Freud's notions of the processes of signification in dream-work. In "The System and the Speaking Subject," Kristeva begins to discuss semiotics and Semanalysis,[6] both of which are a discursive and heterogenous form of analysis of the signifying process in the speaking subject. In this paper, it is clear to see that Kristeva's thinking is somewhat in tune with Lacan's notion that the

---

[6] Generally defined as a mode of thinking somewhere between semiotics and psychoanalysis

"unconscious is structured like a language,"[7] while her Marxist background is evident in the linking of cultural and social ideology to this field. Kristeva states:

> What semiotics has discovered in studying 'ideologies' (myths, rituals, moral codes, arts, etc.) as sign-systems is that the *law* governing, or, if one prefers, the *major constraints* affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e. that it is articulated like a language. (1973, p.25)

Kristeva continues to suggest that "[o]ne may say … that what semiotics has discovered is that there is a general social law, that this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language and that every social practice offers a specific expression of that law" (p.25). These ideas are crucial not only to the distinction between the semiotic and symbolic, but also in relation to abjection and purging rituals (see below). Even at this early stage, Kristeva includes pointers toward the concept of abjection when she discusses the "remainder" and "waste" produced through the signifying practices that lie outside of the semiotic disposition (pp.28-31).

It is these practices that Kristeva refers to when she discusses "poetic language," which includes all the "various deviations from the grammatical rules of language" (p.28). Such disrupting elements include prosody, rhythm, and song. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva goes on to list art, poetry, and literature as semiotic as opposed to symbolic, declaring the two ends of the spectrum as "inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse involved" (1984, p.92). This section of *Revolution in Poetic Language* is fundamental to how Kristeva will go on to develop her later theories through her assertion that all non-verbal signifying systems "are constructed exclusively on the basis on the semiotic" (p.93) and that the semiotic and symbolic are inextricably intertwined. The latter point is essential for all future thinking behind subject formation and development, and impacts upon her ideas behind the social practices of abject purging. Kristeva states: "Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (p.93). In other words, to speak of the semiotic (rather than to speak semiotic), one must do so firmly within the symbolic. Also important at this stage is the insertion of the mother figure into a more prominent role in

---

[7] See Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1977b)

subject formation as a mediator between the semiotic and symbolic: "The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*" (p.95).[8] Through the association of the semiotic real with the maternal, the symbolic is conversely associated with paternal law, and though Kristeva states that both semiotic and symbolic are two sides of the same coin, they are often at odds with one another. The semiotic is both within and outside of symbolic systems of law; it is this function of the semiotic that posits it as both a necessity and a threat to the symbolic. This idea is key to the concepts of abject and abjection, as well as subject formation, as shall be discussed below.

Through her theories of the semiotic and the symbolic, particularly in connection to the abject and abjection, Kristeva reworks Lacan's model of psychosexual development to give a more pivotal role to the mother figure and the maternal.[9] Lacan divides psychosexual development into three successive stages: the real, the imaginary (closely tied to the mirror stage), and the symbolic. The real is the first stage and takes place, according to Lacan, during the first six months of life. Here, the subject is unable to differentiate itself from the surrounding world and thus is unable to distinguish the boundaries that are closely associated with knowledge of self and other, instead surviving solely on the satisfaction of basic needs provided by the mother or maternal figure(s). Kristeva instead terms this stage as the *chora*. At this pre-linguistic juncture, the subject is dominated by drives, though Lacan does allow for some distinction of boundaries in the form of certain erogenous zones: for example, the mouth and anus. The imaginary – where what Lacan terms "the mirror stage" takes place – is a pivotal moment in Lacanian subject formation, usually experienced between six and eighteen months of age. It occurs when the infant misrecognises his or her image as complete and whole, and is subsequently captivated by the narcissistic illusion of mastery reflected in the image.[10] It represents the onset of the child's acquisition of language, which propels the subject into the symbolic

---

[8] *Chora* is taken from the Greek *khôra* to refer to an enclosed, womb-like space (taken from Plato's philosophical definition). It is, according to Kristeva, a "nourishing and maternal" receptacle and represents the stage of semiotic harmony with the mother (p.94).

[9] Although frequently attributed as a developmental theory, as in Felluga (2015), the different stages are not always progressive in Lacanian psychology and the subject can exist in simultaneous states.

[10] According to Lacan, the mirror stage marks the child's first identification with the "Ideal I" (or "ideal ego"), a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of a complete and whole (ideal) self instead of a chaotic and fragmented reality. This stage is pre-language and marks the onset of narcissism and desire through the phantasies of mastery over the image that remain in the subject upon entry into the symbolic. See Lacan (1977a).

order, where they learn to identify their place within a larger social order; it is also the basis for all future (mis)identifications and notions of self and "I". The final stage in Lacan's triumvirate is the symbolic. The symbolic is entered upon the acquisition of language and subsequent acceptance of (and entrapment within) the rules, codes, and dictates associated with what Lacan calls the "Name-of-the-Father."[11] Upon taking their place in the symbolic, the child submits to a pre-determined role in ordered society and language, thus consigning – or repressing – any previous incompatible experiences to the unconscious. This process is irreversible in Lacan's formulation.

Kristeva, however, posits an intermediary (and overlapping) stage between the real and the imaginary. This stage, according to Kristeva, is a crucial pre-linguistic phase and ties her formulation into the abject and the maternal. It is in this period, Kristeva asserts, that the child begins to establish separation from the maternal provider, learning to form borders and boundaries between itself and the mother or maternal figure (where previously they had been blurred and indistinguishable) that will eventually separate and sever them from the maternal hold within the *chora*, thus allowing future entry into the symbolic. It is this abjection of the mother that the child must learn prior to the acquisition of language, to allow transition into the symbolic. Kristeva states:

> The abject confronts us … and this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (1982, p.13).

In short, the child must learn to abject the mother before entering the realm of the symbolic. The autonomy of language that she refers to in the above quotation hints at such an independence and separation from the mother once language is acquired; however, this break is not clean, nor wholly permanent. With Kristeva's introduction of this intermediary stage, which she names "the *chora*," taking place prior mirror stage, into her model of psychosexual development, all initial abjection takes place firmly within the realm of the semiotic. Therefore, it is key to understanding Kristeva's theories that abjection is both a "primal" repression and a "*precondition of narcissism*" that "has been effected prior to the springing forth of the ego" (pp.10-13). However, though abjection occurs in stages of

---

[11] The symbolic laws and prohibitions that shape both communication and desire.

primal repression, it is only experienced by the subject within the symbolic, or, as Kristeva puts it, as a "pseudo-object that is made up *before* but appears only *within* the gaps of secondary repression" (p.12). Secondary repression occurs when the newly-formed subject learns to abject in order to exist in the symbolic. Once in the symbolic's system of intersubjectivity, it can never fully return to its previous state of existence in the semiotic, although the paradox of the abject is that this transition is not a smooth one; instead, it is a harrowing experience for the subject and the remnants of such a past existence, however vague and fuzzy, sooner or later cause the subject to oscillate between fear and desire for this place. It is not the transition between states/stages itself that gives rise to abjection, but rather the residue or remnant of a vaguely-familiar past existence in the semiotic that erupts violently and abruptly upon the subject when faced with markers of the abject. Kristeva states:

> A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it
> might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as
> radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either.
> … On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I
> acknowledge it, annihilates me. (p.2)

Therefore, while Kristeva refers to the forms of abjection introduced during this stage as "a kind of *narcissistic crisis*" (p.14), its impact upon symbolic subjectivity also results in the abject generating "a symbolic order in crisis" (Foster, 1996, p.121).

In relation to Lacanian notions of subject formation, Kristeva has two main departures. Kristeva's model of psychosexual development accords with Lacan's insofar as the imaginary-real-symbolic triad is concerned; however, she departs with regards to the emphasis placed on the constant constituting (and reconstituting) of the subject in development, rather than the always-already constituted subject as proposed by Lacan. In Kristeva's formulation, the symbolic order posits itself as a hierarchy that places dirt and defilement outside of its borders, thus designating anything that breaches them as a threat to its internal systems, hence the need for the symbolic to assure its position by reinforcing and repeating through language the importance for the autonomous subject to reject the mother through separation. Conversely, Kristeva's model of the abject and abjection insists that the sway and pull of the abject draws the subject back toward this other place, toward the semiotic; thus, the subject undergoes a continual process of abjection. Noreen O'Connor points out that the "semiotic is not simply a state or phase surpassed in later

integrations, but Kristeva emphasizes the fact that the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic" (1990, pp.45-6). McAfee asserts that the "uncanny strangeness of the abject not only reveals one's existence, it reveals one's existence as an I. Through abjection, the I is formed and renewed" (1993, p.121). Hal Foster suggests that the "canonical" definition of the abject is "what [one] must get rid of in order to be an I at all" (1996, p.14), yet the subject, in Kristeva's account of abjection, is never fully and permanently able to cast aside the abjected matter as desired by the symbolic. In other words, the subject is in a constant process of formation and reformation through the act of abjection, which entails being both semiotic and symbolic. The process of being both semiotic and symbolic in a realm where one insists that the other is abjected is, of course, what gives rise to abjection.

The second major point of difference is the insertion of the mother figure as pivotal in the subject's early development. Kristeva notes: "one sees everywhere the importance, both social and symbolic, of women and particularly the mother" (1982, p.70). In the pre-linguistic stages of development, the mother plays a crucial role in demarcating the body's orifices into territories of clean and unclean, proper and improper; Kristeva names this "primal mapping" (p.72). In abjection, the mother is designated as the "trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (p.72). The result of separating natural bodily expulsion from civilised society is a contribution toward the erection of a boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic and a dividing line between nature and culture, with the semiotic tied to nature and the symbolic associated with law and culture. The distinction between the two elements, which sit on either side of the division in the process of abjection, is essential in subject formation. E. Ann Kaplan notes that "Kristeva importantly distinguishes the 'maternal authority' of bodily 'mapping' from the paternal laws, within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape" (1992, p.117). Elizabeth Grosz goes as far to say that "Kristeva is fascinated by the ways in which 'proper' sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its 'clean and proper' self'" (1990, p.86). In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva examines how societies throughout history have come into contact with the abject and subsequently banished it (however temporarily). Kristeva refers to these processes as purification rituals and suggests that these practices emerge in virtually all primitive societies, who employed such rituals to "separate this or that social, sexual, or age group from another one by means of prohibit[tion]" (1982, p.65). It is

through purification ritual that the child also learns to abject the mother, along with nature and waste, to the other side of this border in order to take up their position within the symbolic.[12] Kristeva's emphasis on these practices stems from her insertion of the mother into the process of psychosexual development. Summed up by Konstanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller, "[e]very encounter with the abject is reminiscent of the initial abjection of the maternal body that the subject has to return to in order to acquire language and to establish the border between self and (m)other" (2007, p.8). These rituals, Kristeva attests, draw up "dividing lines" between society and nature, therefore designating archaic, primitive nature, which is inextricably tied to the mother, as abject. At the same time, they also reinforce the notion that the archaic past existence cannot be permanently banished from the psyche (1983, p.65).

Furthermore, these purging rituals also contribute to the formation of identity by establishing separation not just from the mother, but also from oneself. The example of the abject given by Kristeva as balking at the creamy skin forming on top of milk constitutes rejection at a place where separation did once not exist: "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion [rejected the proffered desire of the mother and father] through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (1982, p.3). For Kristeva, abjection is a "founding moment for all subjects" (Anna Smith, 1996, 149). For if the subject must learn to separate from their drives, from their links to the semiotic, then those drives must be repressed in order to maintain symbolic identity; however, Kristeva's concept of abjection decrees that the residues of the semiotic will always remain to return and haunt the subject, forcing the subject to continue to separate over and over again. This recurring threat is problematic for symbolic identity. In Kristeva's formulation, "the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects" (1984, p.100). Kristeva refers to this process as the "*thetic* phase" where the "*thetic* break" occurs (where the subject forges an identification immediately prior to symbolic subjectivity), but again this severing of ties is not permanent. Moreover, these residues, which Kristeva also posits as "poetic distortions," tie into the wider cultural phenomenon of abjection and purging rituals. She states:

> All poetic 'distortions' of the signifying chain and the structure of
> signification may be considered in this light: they yield under the attack

---

[12] In the high school horror films discussed in Chapter VIII, the children are separated from the adult realm by homogeonised codification, namely the school uniform.

> of the 'residues of first symbolizations' (Lacan), in other words, those
> drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublate … by linking them
> into signifier and signified. As a consequence, any disturbances on the
> 'social censorship' – that of the signified/signifier break – attests,
> perhaps first and foremost, to an influx of the death drive, which no
> signifier, no mirror, no other and no mother could ever contain. (p.103)

Kristeva emphasises the violent impact of these separations: "During the course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (1982, p.3). The metaphorical element of giving birth to oneself through abjection prior to the mirror stage, before narcissism, involves the creation and transgression of imaginary and psychological borders. This creation propels the subject from the semiotic into the symbolic realm, but the traces of abjection are never fully dispelled.

It is the collapse of these borders, when confronted with the abject, that forces the subject to harken back toward the site of primal violence, towards the mother, for these metaphorical borders are, in Kristeva's formulation, also inextricably linked to the act of separation that occurs in birth and signifies the beginning and end of life. In the parting separation from the maternal host, Kristeva places the emphasis on the mother because of the dual functions that the terrain of her body signifies: for example, its paradoxical nature as both a space of safety and harmony and a site of violent separation. The maternal body therefore represents both the semiotic and the symbolic, for its functions are necessary for patriarchal law to continue, yet its "unrepresentable … biological movement … cannot be appropriated by patriarchy" (Kaplan, 1992, p.41). Consequently, it is then necessary for the mother and the role that she represents to be disregarded once the subject enters the systems of symbolic law, thus designating (and possibly denigrating) the maternal body and its functions as a site of individual and cultural fear, repulsion, loathing, and anxiety.

Tying in to a familiar notion of the subject's desire to return to an undifferentiated state of being,[13] the onset of abjection is a direct contradiction to the subject's development from a wholly-dependent existence to a fully-formed, autonomous subject, in terms of the symbolic, at least. The abject, according to Kristeva, "preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (1982, p.10). In other words, the separation from the mother and all concomitant associations that must be rejected in order

---

[13] For example, see Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and Lacan's *Écrits* (1977a).

to pass into the symbolic are resurrected with abjection. Abjection, Kristeva attests, splits the subject into both subject and object, self and other, yet is crucially neither. It is, instead, a paradox between desire and repulsion: "Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (p.1). Therefore, though not a tangible object with physical qualities, the abject is something both familiar and unfamiliar, the remnants of a past existence that resurfaces at a point where such notions of existence cannot be supported, and which threatens to split, dissolve, and destroy the subject's identity.

Returning to the purging rituals, as mentioned above, Kristeva suggests that sacred defilement and the cleansing rituals initiated by the mother figure contribute toward the establishment of the symbolic structure by identifying that which threatens to swallow the "totality of [their] living being" (p.64). "The function of these religious rituals," Kristeva asserts, is "to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (p.64). In Kristeva's writings, these cathartic rituals involve contact with the abject only to cast it aside once more. Moreover, she acknowledges that these rituals were primarily religious in nature, but which have since given over to the arts, principally literature. Kristeva devotes a large portion of the latter section of *Powers of Horror* to analysis of the works of Céline before observing that:

> On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border … where identities … do not exist or only barely so – doubly, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (p.207).

When assessing the abject in Céline, Kristeva states that its presence transcends beyond content, style, and biography, instead found in the experience of the reading (although she does go on to identify elements of the content as evidence) (p.133). Later, Kristeva assembles a further cast of authors of whom she believes abjection is a core presence in their works – among them, Baudelaire, Kafka, Bataille, and Sartre (p.207). Kristeva continues to identify literature as "the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses" (p.208). In other words, she considers literature (at the time of her writing) to be part of a "general consensus" of popular form to represent cultural abjection. Throughout this and future chapters, I take this shift from religious practices into the field of the arts to show how more contemporary arts – namely film – are equally, if

not better, equipped to continue this phenomenon, as first identified by Kristeva. However, before proceeding with the film analysis chapters of this thesis, it is important to explain how Kristeva's universalisation of abjection has been read as both transcendent and transgressive of cultural boundaries, as well as demonstrating how the theory is compatible with film studies.

2.2 Objections, Rejections, Corrections, Concessions, Compromise, and Accordance in Post-Kristevan Scholarship

2.2.1 Objections to Abjection

 Subsequent criticism has scrutinized both Kristeva's theory and Barbara Creed's interpretation and application (see below), with particular objections arising from Cynthia A. Freeland (2004) and Imogen Tyler (2009). Freeland objects to Creed's widespread application of abjection criticism to horror film, declaring it reductive, selective, and neglectful of key scenes. Her reading of Kristeva's abject continually returns to the trope of the "horrific mother" who is the basis and inspiration for the psychic condition termed abjection (2004, p.744), and though this interpretation is problematic for Freeland, it is excessive and indiscriminate use of abjection theory as an analytical lens that she objects to above all. Tyler is interested in the "theoretical life" of abjection, and she goes as far as to denounce all repeated use of abjection criticism, citing a potential reproduction of violent histories towards women that reinforces patriarchal values rather than challenging and confronting them (2009, pp.77-8). However, Tyler notes her belief that abjection criticism is a reworking or even a hijacking of Kristeva's theory, which, having been misinterpreted, presents the abject as physical and representable, instead of intangible and unknowable (p.82). Consequently, she concludes that such use of abjection criticism "risks becoming another site in which a narrative of acceptable violence is endlessly rehearsed until we find ourselves not only colluding with, but more fundamentally believing in, our own abjection" (p.87). But though Tyler's objections, like those of Freeland, are predominantly aimed at critics who repeatedly (mis)apply abjection theory, she also disapproves of the source material, stating that Kristeva's theory "legitimises the abjection of maternal subjects" (p.87) and argues for "a more thoroughly social and political account of abjection" in place of the Kristevan model (p.77). In both cases, it is the theory and the

application of the theory that is condemned for potentially reproducing violent histories, as opposed to confronting and challenging them, in eyes of the critics.

Another critic who lambasts Kristeva's theory of the abject is Jennifer Stone. According to Stone, Kristeva's "theory of abjection also reinforces traditional patriarchal and sexist notions about the repulsiveness of the female body" (1983, p.40). Published within a year of the English translation of *Powers of Horror*, Stone's essay, "Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva," cuts a scathing review of Kristeva's abjection, linking her to fascism and criticising her return to Freud as a reproduction of misogynistic doctrines. Stone's biggest concern is that Kristeva fails to lead, or fails to appear to lead, a feminist project through her writings: "*Powers of Horror* also shows that [Kristeva] has taken leave of her feminist senses" (p.41).[14] This overview is problematic because not only, as I will demonstrate through the thesis, can abjection serve to highlight certain issues of gender pertaining to semiotic and symbolic functions, but by this point Kristeva had already dissociated herself from any specific feminist movement.[15] The misrepresentation of Kristeva's theory, as discussed in Tyler above, arises from Anglo-feminists categorising Kristeva within French second-wave feminism,[16] according to Tyler (p.82). And although the purpose of this thesis is not to establish whether or not Kristeva is a feminist, she would go on to reject second-wave French feminism in *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995). While Stone's critique accords with Tyler and Freeland in that she expresses concerns over Kristeva's theory, Stone's argument is broadly against Kristeva due to the perception that she is somehow a bad feminist, whereas Tyler and Freeland are more nuanced in their hesitancy through examining the application of the theory to cultural texts.

Furthermore, a number of edited collections of essays in the field of Kristevan scholarship often level a general accusation at Kristeva's writings (including but not limited to her concept of abjection) boiling down to a biological essentialism and thus political and social conservatism. Grosz describes Kristeva's model of body politics

---

[14] This problem chimes with some of the issues facing the field of genre criticism in film studies, especially where genre meets ideology. In other words, the horror film is often seen as inherently patriarchal, and with such a view, it becomes difficult to argue for different, opposing, and contradictory narratives from within that genre. In the next chapter, I will examine how genre and ideology play a part in determining which films can be legitimately selected as representing the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema that will be analysed in this thesis.

[15] One observation that becomes apparent at this point is that some critics appear to have a pre-determined agenda against Kristeva's work because they do not consider it feminist, regardless of whether Kristeva intends to operate within that field or not. The same approach is later espoused by Russell West (2007).

[16] Inclusive of Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig, and Hélène Cixous, among others.

surrounding the mother and the maternal as "politically problematic" to the construction and articulation of feminine discourse (1990, p.98). Grosz looks at the dividing lines between the semiotic and symbolic and observes that "[a]bjection is the body's acknowledgement that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections – effects of desire, not nature" (p.90), again reinforcing the line of argument that Kristeva's theories are not feminist enough. Alison Weir (1993) talks of an ambivalence in Kristeva's writing toward the mother figure. For Weir, the mother/maternal figure becomes inextricably intertwined with the father, thus declaring that the semiotic cannot escape the symbolic. And though Weir acknowledges that Kristeva is arguing that a woman is not just a victim but also a participant in the symbolic system (1993, pp.89-90), she remains critical of how identification with the symbolic system of subjectivity is dealt with from the female perspective in Kristeva, declaring that, "[i]f we are going to get rid of the patriarchal order we are going to have to give up the phallic mother" (p.87).[17] Elsewhere in the same collection, Jacqueline Rose (pp.41-61) expresses concern that the semiotic can never truly escape the symbolic, while Alice Jardine (pp.23-31) decrees that abjection is specifically exclusive to men.

Russell West (2007), meanwhile, declares outright that at the core of Kristeva's theory is an essentialism that pervades the backdrop no matter what victories for the semiotic/feminine. Adopting a similar blunt line of argument against Kristeva as evident in Stone, West dissects Kristeva's theory of abjection into two distinct but generalised categories, which he views as problematic: the male child who abjects the mother to achieve autonomy, which is distinct from the female child's experience of the same process (2007, p.247). Essentially, West argues that it is always the male child who must abject to achieve autonomy, and therein lies his problem with the theory. Instead, West suggests turning to Luce Irigaray for a better solution. This argument can, in my view, also be problematic in that West instantly dismisses any use for Kristeva's theory because he believes that biological (and patriarchal) essentialism pervades the concept of the abject and abjection. And while such criticism will be taken into account as the thesis progresses in order to ensure that any potential pitfalls to the creation of a dialogue between theory and film are fully addressed, I will go on to argue the opposite to West by putting forward that abjection is still a relevant theoretical tool, especially to work with cinema, and that

---

[17] In psychoanalytic parlance, the phallic mother generally translates as a symbol of castration.

the merits and demerits of the theory are not as simple as West's view. Certainly, abjection takes place in the arena of the symbolic, which is male-dominated; however, I maintain, Kristeva's theory can serve to highlight such issues, as well as providing disruptions to the established order, if not necessarily outright solutions.

2.2.2 Different Perspectives

Moreover, the state of Kristevan scholarship, and in particular abjection criticism, takes a number of different approaches. Sara Beardsworth (2004; 2005) focuses heavily on the psychoanalytic roots of Kristeva's theory, particularly the psychical links between the semiotic and symbolic and their relationship to Oedipus (through Freud) and Narcissus (via Lacan). Throughout *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (2004a), "Kristeva's Idea of Sublimation" (2004b), and "Freud's Oedipus and Kristeva's Narcissus: Three Heterogeneities" (2005a), Beardsworth determines that in Kristeva's psychoanalytic oeuvre, it is the myth of Narcissus rather than of Oedipus that is at the source of psychosexual development. Abjection is also the primary site of subject formation, according to Beardsworth, and is the inextricable, and therefore important, link between the semiotic and symbolic, which operate as two ends of a spectrum. In "From Revolt to Culture" (2005b), Beardsworth connects the psychoanalytic side of Kristeva to the social: "because the social order is always a *socio-symbolic* order, there can be no social transformation without transformation of meaning and the subject" (2005b, p.38). In other words, changes that take place at the socio-symbolic level, such as in abjection, have direct impact upon the essential notion of subjectivity.

A collection of papers in S. K. Keltner and Kelly Oliver (2009) is also heavily grounded in the psychoanalytical aspects of Kristeva's work, with Keltner in particular arguing that "Kristeva finds psychoanalysis and aesthetics to be privileged sites that reveal and work through […] crisis, and thereby provide models for thinking through the social and political problematic more generally" (p.3). In *Kristeva*, Keltner discusses what she sees as the two most important aspects of Kristeva's work: the individual and psychoanalysis, with literature and the arts as primary sites for enacting the processes of subject formation. The reference to Kristeva's focus on psychoanalysis is an acknowledgement of what Keltner sees as the prioritised theoretical approach in her

writings,[18] while the theme of the individual is summed up as Kristeva's "overarching intention to interrogate the personal trials of singular psychic life" (2010, p.1). Kristeva's concept of abjection does in fact deal with a singular psychic reaction in the symbolic subject; however, the idea of abjection occurring cross-culturally, even universally, is discussed in *Powers of Horror*. Keltner does also express a concern that Kristeva's writing may ultimately support hegemonic processes, while at the same time tying abjection into sociohistorical context, specifically in Western thinking. At the same time, she does, unlike Stone and West, acknowledge a danger of eliminating Kristeva's work as a useful theoretical tool solely on this basis: "however, such conclusions prematurely delineate the framework of interpretation by restricting meaning to a governing set of inherited philosophical boundaries" (p.2). In other words, to denounce Kristeva's theories instantaneously on the assumption that they collude with patriarchal essentialism is itself to engage in the same act of taking such structures to be axiomatic; therefore, Keltner retains Kristeva's theories to examine their complexities and understand their usefulness. Anne-Marie Smith also expresses similar views in *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable* (1998). Smith's intention is to merely provide a "theoretical frame of reference" for the reader to engage with Kristeva's key concepts (1998, p.13), but like Keltner, that frame of reference is a psychoanalytic theory that prioritises personal introspection in a decidedly Western context. In this regard, I depart from the latter of these views and argue for a more globalised and universal account of abjection, as shall be explained below.

2.2.3 Striking a Balance

Like several of the above Kristevan scholars, Anna Smith (1996) addresses the concerns of a dooming conservatism /universalism in critiques of Kristeva's writings, particularly with regard to her status as a feminist.[19] However, Smith goes on to defend Kristeva through a form of compromise. She states:

---

[18] Arguably, this acknowledgement can help to shift the focus away from whether or not Kristeva is a feminist. Furthermore, Keltner does not see Kristeva's adoption of psychoanalysis as merely observing the rules of a limited theoretical approach, but instead sees it as both contextualised and interdisciplinary. Kristeva's foray into psychoanalysis is, as I have argued, intentionally disruptive and paradigm-altering, thus already attempting to deconstruct certain boundaries.

[19] Although, as discussed earlier, whether or not Kristeva is considered a feminist as a part of any given feminist movement is not at stake in this thesis.

> I do not accept the universalizing gestures of Kristeva's judgement
> which confines all women to a zone perilously close to psychosis, …
> but I do maintain that women may have a different relation to the
> symbolic and the body which is capable of producing a *different*
> identification with language and thought. (1996, p.16)

Smith writes extensively on the abject, the social, and the inextricable connection between the semiotic and symbolic in Kristeva, and she considers *Powers of Horror* as one of Kristeva's more coherent (later) texts, one which primarily examines the borderline relationship between nature and culture (which in turn are key distinctions important to Kristeva's writing). Smith also begins to touch upon the subject of an essential human condition with abjection and contact with the semiotic. For Smith, the poetic language of the estrangement experienced with abjection, which "makes us strangers to ourselves," expresses Kristeva's view of "the essential human condition" (p.17).

Evidently, several critiques of Kristeva retain the apprehension that it is underscored by a biological essentialism or conservatism; however, that does not mean that all critics dismiss her theories as worthless. Many negotiate different aspects of the theories, particularly abjection, to show how they can serve as an important theoretical tool for analysing culture (particularly through artistic cultural texts). Ewa Ziarek and Tina Chanter (2005) also express some concerns regarding Kristeva's alleged acceptance of a status quo, with Chanter issuing caution against reproducing certain abjects (in Chanter's view, abjection covers a wide range of social and cultural exclusion) in the event that they may legitimise existing power structures. However, they also consider how the theory can be utilized to contribute toward revolt in culture, mostly through the destabilisation of existing boundaries through its fluidity and the increased importance of the role given to the mother in the process of abjection. Contributing to this edition, Beardsworth again considers literature and the arts as a cathartic space for dealing with the abject: "The view that art and literature are symbolizations of the semiotic which release suffering presents the 'therapeutic' aspect of the artistic process" (2005a, p.47). Moreover, Kelly Ives (2010) also refuses to take a definitive position on Kristeva's alleged conservatism, instead looking at a more balanced and compromising view of Kristeva's intentions within the theory. Although Ives states that the "universality of philosophy and psychoanalysis thus becomes founded on a one-sided (male) view of the world . . . [and] becomes the basis for the universal modes of sexuality in psychoanalysis" (2010, p.47), she also acknowledges that it is for this reason that Kristeva determines that "revolution must occur *within*

symbolic (that is, patriarchal) language" (p.37). Furthermore, Ives goes on to recognise that though Kristeva appears to doubt the possibility of a true *écriture féminine*,[20] she does express that the "common denominator among creative people" is their dealing with the purification of abjection in and through their art (p.38; p.117).

Moreover, Ives also examines the role of the social in Kristeva's theory of abjection, shifting the concept into the realms of ideological structures rather than biological ones: "It is the social inscription of corporeality, not the anatomical body itself, that is important" (p.48). Mary Caputi is another critic who views Kristeva as "a theorist primarily interested in bringing the psychic to bear on the social, and in exploring how the unconscious articulates itself in culture" (1993, p.32). Caputi sees Kristeva as an important contributor to feminist scholarship and provides contrasting opinions to those who accuse Kristeva's work of being underpinned by biological essentialism. Caputi states that many critics see Kristeva as having become apolitical and view *Powers of Horror* as a "blatant capitulation to the status quo" (p.32), while the anger and recrimination actually stems from a disappointment that somebody once lauded by feminist critics as the harbinger of "a new dialogue between high-powered theory and political practice … which would meaningfully impact feminism" has taken such a turn away from these ambitions (p.32). However, by examining Kristeva's writings on motherhood, Caputi not only disputes such accusations, but argues the opposite, stating that Kristeva has remained theoretically consistent with her views on language, semanalyses, the maternal, and psychoanalysis, regardless of whether she remains overtly political. For Caputi, motherhood entails a "literal enactment, a dramatic playing out of the semiotic disruption of Symbolic hegemony" (p.32). Consequently, her writing shows that established borders and boundaries are persistently disrupted. Taking forward Caputi's views of themes of abjection being potentially disruptive to the status quo, as well as on how the process is acted out in the social (specifically, in this case, through film), in addition to other critics (see below), my thesis will look at how abjection bears out in contemporary Asian horror cinema.

---

[20] This phrase was the first coined by Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975). It has come to signify feminine writing in a feminist, political sense. Kristeva may have expressed some doubts about a true *écriture féminine*; however, her concept of the semiotic is often taken as being in the same spirit of feminine discourse.

2.2.4 The Abject in Visual Culture

In Kristevan scholarship, as demonstrated above, views on the foundational essence of the theory can also differ. For example, Keltner roots it firmly in socio-historic conditions, thus grounding it in Western thinking; however, Rina Arya (2014) sees it as "universally resonant" (p.44) and a "pervasive cultural code" (p.2). I will move on to discuss Arya's views and how they will be incorporated into my thesis below, but first it is also important to consider how Kristevan scholars have applied the theory of abjection in the field of visual arts. Barbara Creed is the forerunner for this method of critique, and her 1993 text *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* is seminal in this field and warrants its own section of evaluation in this thesis (below). However, Creed is not alone in discussing the abject's symbiotic relation with the visual arts.

Estelle Barrett (2011) is concerned with how the theory of the abject can be applied to physical works of art, particularly modern pieces; the emphasis, specifically, is on the *visual* aspect of art. The basis of many of Barrett's analyses stems from the connection to language in Kristevan theory, and she identifies two key points to be taken away from Kristeva's concepts of semiotic and symbolic:

> The first is that for language to have any meaning or effect on us at all,
> it has to be spoken and/or 'heard' – it has to be put into *process*.
> Secondly, this putting-into-process of language must connect with our
> biological processes, affects and feelings in a vital way in order for
> language to take on particular meaning to *affect* us. (2011, p.12)

Process and *affect* are therefore the two key terms, according to Barrett, who goes on to state that these concepts are less efficient when the bonds between semiotic and symbolic are "insufficiently connected," as would be the case with abjection (p.12). Once language is severed, social practices begin to lose meaning and value, too. It is Kristeva's insistence on the disruption of language and social practice, Barrett says, that privileges the avant-garde and visual art as the vehicle of disruption to ideological cultural practices stemming from the nature-culture binary (p.33). The crux of Barrett's argument is that abjection is moved from a psychic reaction into social practice through the manifestation of cultural rites and ritual produced through visual art, one which "takes us beyond the ideas of Freud and Lacan that posit woman as lack and as castration" (p.96).

Tina Chanter (2001) also focuses on the visual arts via Kristeva. Though her study primarily concerns itself with Third Cinema,[21] Chanter aims to uncover the ways in which film can make manifest that which marks exclusions and "-isms" within constructed social boundaries through the application of abjection theory. Chanter also exclaims that "the abject can provide a model … for illuminating horror films" in addition to Third Cinema (2001, p.91). And despite discussing some concern that Kristeva's theory may reinforce heterosexist social norms, she asserts that "a discourse on abjection offers productive terrain for rethinking these norms" (p.93).

Katherine Goodnow (2014) explains why she believes that Kristeva's theories are still of scholarly interest today, citing "the general nature of representation, theories of language, and the position of women in society" as the primary attraction of Kristeva studies (p.ix). Goodnow aims to add neglected areas of film study to Kristevan scholarship (in this case, New Zealand "New Wave" cinema)[22] and to increase the accessibility of her concepts. To achieve this, Goodnow underpins her study with two key recurring themes in Kristeva: the first is the disruption of order, which ties in with the abject and abjection and is linked by Goodnow to Kristeva's writings on the subject of revolt; the second, the "text of society and history" – in other words, how culture is cumulatively assembled through text and image (p.x). She also expresses an interest in "images and narratives that depart from what has preceded them and that present challenges to established forms of social and representational order" (p.ix). This latter statement concurs with the direction that this thesis takes to justify an analysis of the films, while the first of the two key concepts identified will also be of use. Goodnow does express some "reservations … with the nature of [Kristeva's] argument about the position of women, her views about the significance of images and the place of silence, and the extent to which she appears to accept the status quo rather than to challenge it" (p.xiv), *ergo* querying Kristeva's conservatism; however, Goodnow also looks at different types and gradations of abjection, which she states can have differing emotive values and implications – in other words, to (be) abject can be a widely different experience depending upon the level of abjection and the circumstance. It

---

[21] Chanter quotes Paul Willemen when she refers to Third Cinema as "that cinema of the Third World which stands opposed to imperialism and class oppression in all their ramifications and manifestations" (p.89). However, Chanter's definition is only loosely based on this distinction, and she analyses a diverse range of films such as *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996), *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), and *Secrets & Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996).

[22] New Zealand "New Wave" cinema is typified by films such as *Kitchen Sink* (Alison Maclean, 1989), *Vigil* (Vincent Ward, 1984), and *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993).

is this theory that Goodnow tests against New Zealand "New Wave" cinema, ultimately declaring that "[i]n effect … film acts as a base for concretizing and explicating Kristeva's proposals [specifically regarding the abject]. In turn, Kristeva's proposals serve as a base for understanding what it is about" (p.28). Here, Goodnow takes a specific and historical cycle of films for analysis yet expands her thinking beyond the boundaries of her pre-selected canon to explicate a more universal relationship between film and Kristeva's writings. It is through these same principles that I see no obstacle for the use of Kristeva's theory of abjection (as a theory developed in the West) with a selection of contemporary Asian horror films.

Hanjo Berressem (2007) is another critic to look at the pluralization of abjection; that is, each abject is one of numerous possible abjects that has its own value in terms of the horror and reaction that it imposes upon the subject. In short, not all abjection is equal. Berressem, in fact, distinguishes between "real" and "faux" abjects, where the former is abjection as it takes place in real-time social and cultural events, and the latter is the representation and mediated engagement with abjection, such as experiencing it through film and other forms of the arts (2007, p.1). Though multiple abjects may be relevant to future case studies, it is the latter that will be the most applicable in this thesis. As with Goodnow and Berressem, the degree of abjections and the causes of it are each discussed in Rina Arya (2014). Arya also explores visual arts, literature, and film as prime sites for dealing with the abject in culture. Crucially, Arya, like Berressem, makes a case for the theory to be transcultural:

> I maintain that abjection is universally resonant; it is something that is
> integral to and distinctive about the experience of being human as
> opposed to the experience of being an animal, and is a phenomenon
> that is experienced cross-culturally and historically, although the
> specific sources that cause abjection may vary. (p.44)

This argument is pivotal to the direction of this thesis, and will be summed up later, before moving on to the analyses of the selected films. Arya sums up Kristeva's abjection as a "pervasive cultural code" (p.2), prevalent across the aforementioned mediums. Considering this latter perspective of abjection as a mobilized concept, I read both film and theory in dialogue with one another, leaning towards Arya's view of the universal resonance of the theory by taking the films to exist independently of their cultural means of production, while also remaining wary of potential criticisms of such a strategy. In

terms of applying the theory of abjection to horror cinema, no critic has led on the subject as has Barbara Creed. I shall now go on to examine her extensive study in some detail before returning to the above points, synthesizing them with my own approach to abjection criticism in the area of contemporary Asian horror cinema.

2.3 Barbara's Creed: One Approach to Abjection Criticism in Horror Cinema

> Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* provides us with a preliminary
> hypothesis for an analysis of the representation of woman as monstrous
> in the horror film. (Creed, 1993, p.8)

Though Kristeva does not explicitly make the connection herself in *Powers of Horror*, several critics (as per examples shown above) have taken cinema as an alternative, and perhaps more suitable, medium of the arts in which the themes of abjection are played out and can be observed for critical analysis. The visual capabilities of film, in addition to its capacity to enact narrative, have been noted as making it an ideal companion for the theory by many scholars, and perhaps none more so than by Barbara Creed. In her seminal and ground-breaking text, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Creed explores and utilises Kristeva's concept of the abject and abjection as a lens through which to read popular Western horror cinema and challenge Freudian and Lacanian notions of sexual difference. Given the importance of this text in terms of current scholarly research in the field of abjection and horror cinema, it is necessary to spend some time laying out details of my understanding of the crucial and important aspects of the text, for, as I shall go on to state, Creed's criteria for reading horror film through Kristeva's abjection will be instrumental to my own critique of contemporary Asian horror cinema in the chapters that follow.

In her text, Creed's primary intention is to show that the female is not merely the passive victim of the Western horror film (such as might be suggested by the "final girl" theory in Slasher movies),[23] but rather an historical and long-lasting prototype for the monster, which Creed designates as the "monstrous-feminine." She notes that the "horror film is populated by female monsters, many of which seem to have evolved from images that haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago" (1993, p.1). Creed splits her text into two sections: the first part discusses various markers

---

[23] For a detailed account, see Clover (1992).

of abjection in horror cinema in a range of popular Western horror movies such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), among others. Using various tropes taken from Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, including but not limited to the literal or metaphorical presence of wounds, wombs, and menstrual blood, Creed examines the construction of the female (particularly the mother figure) as monstrous. Because part two of Creed's text primarily focuses on Freud's theories of Oedipus and castration, it is the analyses from part one that are of the most interest to this thesis, and therefore I will continue (below) by looking at how Creed uses the concept of abjection to tie into myth, folklore, and the construction of the monstrous-feminine in horror cinema.

According to Creed, "[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (p.1). Within horror cinema and in culture, she attests, the monstrous-feminine is constructed on the basis of sexual difference and castration, and is manifest "within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology," one which Creed asserts is prevalent in most, if not all, examples of horror cinema (p.2). The monstrous-feminine, above all, is "defined in terms of her sexuality," as opposed to being simply a gender substitute of the typical male monster (p.3). Creed goes on to list the multi-faceted ways in which the monstrous-feminine takes shape within cinema and culture. These include: the amoral primeval mother, vampire, witch, woman as monstrous womb, woman as bleeding wound, woman as possessed body, the castrating mother, woman as beautiful but deadly killer (the *femme fatale*), aged psychopath, the monstrous girl-boy, woman as non-human animal, woman as life-in-death, and as deadly *femme castratrice*. Like Kristeva, Creed also makes the mother figure pivotal to her thesis, stating that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (p.7). For each example of the monstrous-feminine analysed across a number of different horror films, the creation and abjection of this figure is inextricably tied to the maternal.

In fact, in Creed's thesis, the female/maternal figure/monster in all her various forms and guises is represented as the primary abject that is crucial to a genre that she views as inherently conservative: "I wish to re-emphasize that I regard the association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology" (p.83). Creed asserts that such claims of representation can be traced back

through Kristeva to religious texts, myth, and folklore. Moreover, Creed ties this assertion into Kristeva's model of psychosexual development and theories of the semiotic and symbolic:

> The monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order. The monstrous-feminine draws attention to the 'frailty of the symbolic order' through her evocation of the natural, animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage all human beings must inevitably take from birth through life to death. (p.83)

In this quotation, Creed makes clear the association between her own concept of the monstrous-feminine and Kristeva's abjection. The monstrous-feminine is the abject figure in cultural texts. Furthermore, by discussing the "frailty" of the dividing lines between nature and culture (the semiotic and the symbolic) Creed is evidently utilising Kristeva's concept of borders and boundaries, as well as abjection narratives such as primal mapping, and positing the subsequent transgressing and loss of distinction of said boundaries as pivotal to the process of abjection that creates the monstrous-feminine. These tropes are essential to Creed's analysis of Western horror cinema through Kristeva.

In constructing her argument, Creed examines three key areas of Kristeva's theory: the border, the mother-child dyad, and the feminine body. Creed draws upon the visual capabilities of film to show how abjection is illustrated on screen; claiming that these key areas are visualised in the films in three distinct ways: images of blood, wounds, and corpses; the construction of the monster as abjected to the other side of social borders through re-enacting the conflict of abjection; and the construction of the maternal figure as abject, which results in the representation of the body becoming a "site of conflicting desire" (pp.10-11). Creed also engages with abject spectatorship, which involves spectatorial engagement with narratives of abjection from a position of relative safety. This latter idea ties in with cathartic engagement and subsequent re-engagements that Kristeva asserts take place in literature and the arts. Taken all together, Creed draws upon Kristeva's idea that abjection is a threat to be both rejected and tolerated, which she goes on to say is exemplified in Western horror cinema through the aforementioned tropes, either in visual form or through the unfolding of narratives of abjection and purification ritual.

The illustrative capacity of film is, of course, useful for identifying markers of abjection such as described by Creed; however, the idea that examples of visual imagery must be strengthened by analysis of how they fit in with the overall narrative of the film is essential to the direction of this thesis. The presence of both is important to the medium, but counting examples of blood, wounds, and pus alone is not sufficient for sustained analysis. Given the differences in style and content between the popular Western horror film in Creed's analysis and the examples of contemporary Asian horror cinema in this thesis, these visual markers are not always at the forefront of the films' imagery, and are often understated or absent.[24] Nevertheless, I will endeavour to show how Kristeva's theory of abjection is useful for reading contemporary Asian horror cinema, if not always in accordance with how Creed structures her examples through certain visual imagery.

However, Creed does not dwell solely on the visual counters, even if it is at the forefront of some of her analysis. When critiquing the films, Creed does look at examples of purification ritual and the fragility of the arbitrary borders created to demarcate the social-symbolic divide in the narratives. She states: "Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (p.11). For example, speaking of Regan (Linda Blair), the possessed pre-teen in *The Exorcist*, Creed asserts: "The possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed" (p.32). Regan, of course, is one of many instances of the monstrous-feminine in Creed's analyses. In order to ward off and banish the threat of this abject figure, the film, according to the ratiocinative deduction of Creed through the overarching themes in her analyses, must re-engage with the processes of abjection in order to restore the status quo.

According to Creed, abjection is prevalent in almost all horror films because the processes of abjection that Kristeva describes as taking place in all forms of society are a "means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject" (p.8). Generally speaking, Creed's analyses point to the abjecting of the feminine and/or maternal figure to complete this process. She observes: "The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature" (p.11). As stated

---

[24] A full explanation of what constitutes contemporary Asian horror cinema is put forward in the following chapter.

above, it is the engagement and re-engagement with the various abject elements (all centring around the monstrous-feminine) through purification ritual that Creed identifies as taking place in her selected Western horror film canon. Consequently, the symbolic is reinforced within horror cinema, in Creed's estimation, through the reparation and strengthening of the social boundaries that demarcate semiotic and symbolic at the conclusion of the films, linking it to Kristeva's abject in such a way: "In other words, by constructing the maternal figure as an abject being, the symbolic order forces a separation of mother and infant that is necessary to guarantee its power and legitimacy" (p.69).[25] Creed's intention is to show how the monstrous-feminine is not always the victim in Western horror cinema, but is in fact represented as the monster. However, Creed is clear that by arguing for the female in a more active than passive role in the genre, she is not claiming that the role of women in horror cinema is liberated; rather, it is still constructed from a masculine perspective in order to safely deal with male fears and anxieties that are projected onto women (p.7). She states that:

> Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation
> in popular discourse as monstrous is a function of the ideological
> project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief
> that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her
> difference as man's sexual other. (p.83)

Creed's analyses endeavour to show how the ideologies inherent in her choice of popular Western horror films are linked to society's rituals of abjection in Kristeva's text. Creed asserts that contact and subsequent rejection of the "abject element" results in a stronger renewal of cultural boundaries (p.8). It is through ritual, Creed attests, that "the demarcation lines between human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made stronger for that process" (p.8). Therefore, the horror genre, as Creed frames it, is declared to be generally conservative in its ideology.

Though generally in praise of Creed's important text, Arya is keen to add that "it is limiting to conflate the monstrous-feminine with the abject" (2014, p.155). Creed's conclusion is widespread in that the abject works in virtually the same way in all popular Western horror cinema, with few minor variations, and with the monstrous-feminine and the abject at times appearing interchangeable. It is this method of application which is one

---

[25] In Chapter V, I will look at how the abject mother is represented as part of abjection narratives in *Ringu* and *Dark Water*. In Chapter IX, I examine the family unit, and in particular mother-child relationships, while in Chapter X I discuss the monstrous-feminine.

of the major cautions against abjection criticism issued by Tyler, Freeland, and others. Throughout this thesis, I will consider how elements of Creed's study are appropriate for analysing contemporary Asian horror cinema, while at the same time determining if alternative ways of utlilising abjection as a means to critique horror are plausible. Furthermore, Creed's study is the paradigm for critical work in the field; however, her case studies are almost exclusively Western in origin. In fairness, Creed's study pre-dates the commercial and critical success experienced by Asian horror cinema around the dawn of the millennium. Though some scholars have inevitably used Creed's model to read Asian horror cinema – for example, Coralline Dupuy (2007) and K.K. Seet (2009) – such studies and others tend to be at times limited or restricted, or even shallow. No critic, to my knowledge, has yet attempted a sustained, lengthy study of contemporary Asian horror cinema using Kristeva's theory of the abject as their primary source material. I intend to explore the consequent gap in the criticism. For example, in *Ringu*, I argue that the narrative of abjection played out in the film is at a substantial cost to the patrtiachal order via significant collateral damage, disrupting the symbolic order. Therefore, not only do a wider selection of contemporary Asian horror films possess distinct characteristics from those discussed by Creed, but I also consider how abjection might be read alongside this recently-emerged cycle of horror cinema without rigidly adhering to Creed's occasionally reductive criteria.

2.4 Abjection as a Framework for Critical Analysis

 From reviewing the above literature, it is clear that Kristeva's theory of abjection (and associated concepts) is received with mixed reviews. Some critics such as Freeland, Tyler, Stone, and West are vehemently opposed to Kristeva's ideas in both theory and practice, whereas Creed, Goodnow, and others have made Kristeva the central point of extended studies. Kristeva herself, as discussed above, refers to the arts as the prime site for (re)engaging with the cultural processes of abjection, with Ives noting that "Kristeva herself sees the artist's project as the purifying of abjection" (2010, p.107). Ives goes on to stress the importance of the arts for illuminating the theory of abjection when she says that "[f]or Kristeva, the artist activates the tensions between the realms of the symbolic and the semiotic, between expression and repression, between the material and the individual" (p.107). In other words, it is through the arts that abjection becomes prominent. Creed, Goodnow, Chanter, and others all make a case for film as the ideal medium through which

to analyse the presence of the abject. And though some objections to the widespread application of abjection theory within film studies have been raised (particularly Freeland and Tyler against Creed), it is evident that interest in this practice has been recently renewed and remains of scholarly interest.

2.5 Defining My Stance

The objections raised against Kristeva broadly appear to fall into two categories: either dismissing any possible advantages of her theories entirely due to the perception that she is not advancing feminism sufficiently; or, expressing concerns that her theories support biological essentialism/conservatism. Some critics, while aware of these issues, attempt to see the usefulness of her theories (particularly abjection) for analysing culture and cultural texts, while others argue outright against any criticism directed towards Kristeva. The intention of this thesis is not to resolve such disputes, but instead to define and justify my stance on the matter. The relevance of Kristeva's theory of abjection to film studies (as well as social and cultural studies) has been sustained through continual critical interest; however, a sustained project in my chosen area of cinema is lacking.[26] Kutzbach and Mueller begin to identify how Kristeva's theory can work in a wider sphere than that just of the individual or certain Western cultures when they say that her "concept suggests that this mechanism [abjection] works for entire cultures as well as for individuals" (2007, p.9). I agree with the sentiment, and Arya's recent argument that abjection is "universally resonant" is one of crucial significance to my argument, and therefore worth restating: "it is something that is integral to and distinctive about the experience of being human […], and […] a phenomenon that is experienced cross-culturally and historically, although the specific sources that cause abjection may vary" (2014, p.44). The hypotheses and research questions will, over the course of the thesis, reveal whether the project of using abjection theory to analyse this chosen area of cinema will prove fruitful.

My focus is primarily on the link between the psychoanalytic and the social abject, as represented in a selection of films operating within the domain of contemporary Asian horror cinema, and so is aligned with other critics that attempt to do the same: for example, Caputi, Ziarek and Chanter, Oliver, Arya, Smith, Keltner, and Barrett provide readings of Kristeva that will be relevant in relation to the selection of films. Chanter, Arya, and

---

[26] In the next chapter, I go on to identify this gap via a review of critical literature of film.

Goodnow, meanwhile, focus more on the visual imagery elicited by Kristeva's abjection, including but not limited to film, though none specifically address my chosen area of cinema, thus clearly pointing to a gap that will allow me to explore these concepts in relation to contemporary Asian horror cinema. One of the issues at stake in the thesis is how abjection theory holds up in this field of cinema.

Like Creed, I will focus both on visual markers within the films (tropes of abjection) and the films' narratives themselves (in relation to purification ritual), to show how the psychic and cultural aspects of the theory are present in film. This is reinforced by examining an area of cinema hitherto ignored in relation to the theory (with minor exceptions) and will demonstrate how one informs the other and vice versa. Rather than undertake a study with any preconceived notion that all the films determined as representative of contemporary Asian horror cinema share one broad ideology (for example, that they are all conservative), I will attempt to utilise the theoretical tools already identified to test certain hypotheses in order to put the films in dialogue with the theory to produce a set of readings that either bear out the points already raised or even produce a new understanding of this area of cinema. Moreover, I intend to show that while the narratives may sometimes point towards conservative resolutions, the processes of disruption that take place often demonstrate that the structures and boundaries of "meaning" and the "status quo" are shown to be fragile and permeable, thus highlighting their instability. In turn, I am confident this approach will not only highlight the moments of resistance, but also reject the notion that all the films preserve the status quo, demonstrating that Kristeva's theory can be both descriptive (of how psychic and cultural processes operate and intertwine) and prescriptive (how those boundaries can be infiltrated and challenged).

Chapter III: A Guide to Contemporary Asian Horror Cinema

> The 'universal language of fear' has 'the greatest potential to cross
> national barriers' (Ahn Byung-ki qtd. in Daniel Martin, 2013, p.145)

In the previous chapter, I provided a detailed overview of Kristeva's concept of abjection, while engaging with critical responses to the theory and attempting to define its compatibility with cinema (specifically horror) as a tool of critical analysis. I concluded by outlining my approach to utilising Kristeva's theory in a study of a selection of contemporary Asian horror films yet to be identified. Before detailing the chosen films and commenting upon the selection process, there are a couple of issues that need to be addressed in the thesis. The first is how to categorise what I have termed "contemporary Asian horror cinema." To avoid any ambiguity surrounding the integrity of the film selection, some parameters must be established. This task, however, is already potentially problematic through the implication of genre in the term "horror" within the phrase. Genre is often a contentious issue when attempting to define and classify any set of films, and while by no means is this thesis a study of genre or genre criticism, the concept is inescapable for the purposes of establishing the criteria under which to justify the inclusion (and subsequently exclusion) of films to be studied under any following definition of the category "contemporary Asian horror cinema." It is therefore prudent to first address the issue of genre, before moving on to define what exactly constitutes "contemporary Asian horror cinema" for the purposes of the thesis.

3.1 Contemporary Asian Horror Cinema: Genre, Sub-Genre, or Cycle?

Volumes of critical work devoted to the subject of genre have emerged over several decades in the field of film studies, and though ongoing critical discussion appears to have crystalized over the past decade or so, there are many opposing viewpoints and proposed methods to determine how genre is defined and categorised. Barry Keith Grant's edited collection of essays (2003) looks at both critical understandings of genre as a concept, as well as genre criticism. Discussing genre, Grant insists that the idea is created as a result of an unspoken contract between filmmakers and audience through how a film is marketed, and how it is received by its target audience. "Stated simply," Grant says, "genre movies

are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of films we have already seen" (2003, p.xv). Grant goes on to observe how these ideas can shift over time, noting that the Universal monster movies of the 1930s were originally marketed as horror but were later repackaged under the banner of science fiction in the fifties (p.xvi). In other words, the same set of films can be marketed as two different genres at different times in order to target contemporary audiences. One of the ways in which my selection of contemporary Asian horror films can be said to belong to the category of horror is that they are marketed as such in both their countries of origin and through their Western release label (in most cases, Tartan Asia Extreme). I will demonstrate that all selected films have a commonality of themes and tropes, though I will ultimately argue that they more loosely operate as a cycle of films that fit within (though by no means exclusively) the horror genre.

In Grant's collection, Andrew Tudor also refers to an unspoken pact or collaboration between director and audience when he states that genre is "what we collectively believe it to be" (2003, p.7). However, Tudor also ties genre into cultural specificity through an analysis of the genrefication of the western by concluding that genre "appeal[s] to a common set of meanings in our culture" (p.6), yet that analysis also allows, it seems, for this notion of a shared understanding to go beyond culturally specific borders, for as an addendum to that comment, Tudor adds that genre "would be universally recognized as such in our culture" (p.7). Tudor appears to take a loose view on what constitutes culture, and that universal recognition appears to speak to any culture that consumes Hollywood and mainstream cinema; therefore, its unspecific nature ties in to a more universal culture(s) that can cross national boundaries. Steve Neale's contribution goes as far to say that "[g]enres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectations and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process" (2003, p.161). Genre, for Neale, is the product of numerous processes rather than simply a case of repetition and similarity of style and content. In other words, to bring genre to the forefront of analysis is for the spectator to bring with him or her a pre-determined criterion (or at least a negotiable one) for a set of recognisable markers which the film(s) must provide if it is marketed under that shared banner.

Rick Altman (1999) also describes how genre operates as a silent agreement between filmmakers and spectators, as if through an invisible contract, where the former package and market a film as belonging to a certain genre, and in turn the spectator then views the film with the corresponding genre markers in mind. Altman's text looks at the categorisation of genre and how it is assumed by genre theorists, and he goes on to describe genre as a "blueprint," "structure," and "label" for the basis of film production, marketing, and distribution as part of this contract between filmmaker and audience (1999, p.14). Considering the creation of genre from a spectatorial angle, Altman says that this point of view places the audience as "the ultimate creators of genres, which function to justify and organize a virtually timeless society" (p.27). Altman goes further to say that from this perspective, "audiences have a very special investment in genres, because genres constitute the audience's own method of assuring its unity and envisioning its future" (p.27). However, Altman considers both sides of the coin, and concludes that the creation of genre requires a sizeable quantity of recognisably similar films marketed in similar ways as well as a receptive audience: "For a genre to exist, a large number of texts must be produced, broadly distributed, exhibited to an extensive audience and received in a rather homogenous manner" (p.84).

So far, the method and creation of genre has been considered as emerging through an unwritten and unspoken understanding between producers and consumers; however, what constitutes any given genre is often fiercely debated. Where Grant has pointed out how genre values are malleable and can shift over time, Paul Wells (2000) discusses how genre boundaries can be too rigidly defined, which can become problematic and even contradictory for those tasking themselves with constructing them. Speaking specifically on horror film, Wells states: "the horror genre has no clearly defined boundaries, and overlaps with aspects of science fiction and fantasy genres" (2000, p.7). This statement could be equally applied to contemporary Asian horror cinema, which often features elements of thriller, mystery, and melodrama (the latter particularly in South Korean horror films), all of which could be said to be sub-genres pertaining to multiple genres. Wells advises against a generic classification of film genre and instead insists that it "may be more constructive to proceed on to the basis of addressing the distinctive elements of any one text within a particular historical moment" (p.7). To do so would assist in the classification of the forthcoming selection of contemporary Asian horror films in that it would be possible to identify a cluster of films within a certain timeframe that consist of

identifiable recurring themes, plots, and narratives, while considering how they were also marketed and received as horror. Ultimately, all identifiers that mark out these films as belonging to the category of contemporary Asian horror cinema will be considered as component parts of a cycle of films operating within the genre of horror at a specific historical moment.[27]

Nevertheless, it is still necessary to determine what could be said to constitute a horror film, and more specifically, what defines contemporary Asian horror cinema in order to establish some criteria for selecting a body of representative films. Although Wells is sceptical about genre classification, he does make an attempt to define the horror genre, which, contrary to some opinion – Barbara Creed's, for example – Wells views as primarily subversive in nature. One of the results from my analysis of the films that I expect to show is how the abject in contemporary Asian horror cinema does not necessarily reveal all the films to be broadly conservative, as Creed concludes in her analysis of western horror cinema. Wells's interpretation of the horror genre, though equally broad, is that it is "the expression of the ways in which individuals try to maintain control of their lives in the face of profound disruptions which only comment on the frailties and brutalities of the status quo and its habitual norms" (p.9). Wells goes on to say that "[f]undamentally . . . horror texts engage with the collapse of social/socialized formations" (pp.9-10). Wells's summary draws several parallels to the way in which abjection and abject purification unfold as narratives in Kristeva.

Furthermore, in arriving at this conclusion, Wells proceeds to list themes and features that he considers essential to the categorisation of horror as a genre, many of which chime with the tropes of abjection. At the forefront of this definition is that, as Wells states, "[t]he horror genre is predominantly concerned with the fear of death, . . . The central generic image of the corpse reminds the viewer of extinction" (p.10). Wells uses this descriptor to distinguish horror from the science fiction genre, which by contrast, he claims, generally looks towards the future. Continuing with this theme at the forefront of his definition, Wells asserts that it "makes the horror genre continually relevant because

---

[27] In the introduction to *Genre Trajectories: Identifying, Mapping, Projecting* (2015), Garin Dowd and Natalia Rulyova discuss the changes and developments to thinking about existing genres over time, as well as the emergence of new genre classifications with the advent of new technologies (pp.1-8). While they agree that genre can be useful for engaging critically, politically, and socially with a broad spectrum of texts, they also state that "acting as points of registration, genres are fundamentally unstable models, and are paradoxically applied as something that is always already inaccurate, and historically located" (p.2).

societies are constantly having to address the things which threaten the maintenance of life and its defining practices" (p.10). Once again, Wells's description rings true with how the processes of abjection and abject purification are said to operate within societies by Kristeva and, crucially, in film by Creed, albeit with a different conclusion. Wells is also sweeping in his statement that all horror films after *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) display a "systematic collapse of assurance in, and promotion of, the family and conservative values" (p85). While I will define contemporary Asian horror cinema using different themes and tropes aside from merely the fear of death, Wells's text is useful for demonstrating how attempting to define genre can be problematic yet at the same time inescapable for any analysis that brings together a set of similar films from a cycle.

Mark Jancovich (2002), furthermore, suggests moving away from essentialism in genre criticism. Instead of trying to locate a reductive underlying theme(s) or ideological standpoint at the heart of the films making up a genre, he suggests that the boundaries of genre are fluid and malleable, and as such may read differently across their own spectrum. Jancovich claims that genre theorists around the late twentieth century "have come to argue that the study of genre should not be concerned with the search for the essential defining features of a genre," before quoting James Naremore's statement that genre "has less to do with a group of artefacts than with a discourse" (2002, p.1). One of the issues that Jancovich raises against the fixing of genre terms is that their boundaries are flexible and can change over time, yet to fix them in a historical moment can also impose many different understandings from the present and past that define the canons differently, according to the historical moments at which these understandings were made; for example, as with the Universal monster movies, something once defined as horror can change to fit into a different category in a different era but just as easily slot back into its former category at a later date. Another issue is that genres, sub-genres, and cycles are always retrospectively classified. Jancovich states: "[John] Carpenter could not have seen *Halloween* as a slasher movie because there was no such category at the time. His film became the template for the slasher film only retrospectively, after imitators had cashed in on its spectacular success" (p.8). The same argument could be made when defining contemporary Asian horror cinema: progenitors such as *Ringu* (Japan) and *Whispering Corridors* (South Korea) were not made in the mould of what is now respectively considered a J-horror or K-horror film since such filmic notions did not exist at the time; that label was applied to the films retrospectively upon the demonstrable popularity of the

films and subsequent boom in production of similar texts. However, while *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) was not made to be a slasher, many of the slasher films that followed in the 1980s and 1990s were made according to identifiable specifications as a direct result of critical and commercial success;[28] equally, that production trend would hold true for subsequent contemporary Asian horror films that followed *Ringu* and *Whispering Corridors*.

Jancovich does make an interesting point when he claims that a rise in critical interest in the horror genre around that turn of the millennium is due to the fact the horror would come to be seen as "marginal and hence subversive" (p.1). Although Jancovich's text charts a history of horror, his study concludes with *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), subsequently ending his analysis around the time that contemporary Asian horror films such as *Ringu*, *Whispering Corridors*, and *Audition* were starting to gain a surge of popularity in the East, which was followed by critical and commercial success in the West just a few years later in terms of demand for the availability of the original texts and several Hollywood remakes. Jancovich does note that the slasher film as a sub-genre or cycle of horror may eradicate many of the radical elements of the horror film in its attitude toward women, though ultimately he argues against that view as a whole, citing the importation of structuralist thinking into genre criticism as the reason why horror has often been seen as conservative – that in dealing with the unknown, horror texts become a source of fear where reinstating the status quo becomes desirable (p.13).[29] Like Wells, Jancovich is also sceptical on the classification process of genres, but at the same time finds that genres and genre markers categorise his own study, and he draw conclusions from them.

Another of the concerns that Jancovich has with genre criticism is that he feels as though "critics often take one period as representative of a genre as a whole and develop their theories of generic essences from these particular instances" (p.8). Although I will be taking a single period to define my study of contemporary Asian horror cinema,[30] I will not be claiming that this cycle of films defines all Asian horror, or indeed a horror genre as

---

[28] In the introduction to his text, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (2011, pp.1-12), Richard Nowell asserts that the films made in the subsequent boom of slasher movies in the early 1980s did not always represent the original intentions of the independent directors that made the prototype productions. In some cases, Nowell describes the copycat films as parodies of the originals.
[29] For further details regarding structuralist thinking in horror film criticism, see Jancovich (2002).
[30] I will take the year 1998 as the beginning of this cycle.

a whole. Clearly, Jancovich is concerned with essentialism in genre criticism when he aligns his views with Tudor by stating that horror "is not a coherent entity in which all horror films work in the same way" (p.23). In an earlier text, Jancovich notes that "one of the central problems with genre criticism has been the tendency to view genres as coherent and hermetically sealed objects" (1996, p.10). He proposes that certain components of a defined genre (however loose the definition) are often too hastily lumped together to fit a representation of a radical or conservative viewpoint that intends to solely define said genre;[31] Jancovich instead advises that the critic examine the nuances and differentiations across the spectrum to discover how texts operate *within* (my emphasis) genre boundaries. Although Jancovich is specifically addressing American horror films of the 1950s, it is by following such an approach that I will be able to select and analyse a wide and diverse representation of contemporary Asian horror films.

Peter Hutchings (2004) makes a similar argument to Jancovich, pointing out that the definitions of what constitutes a genre can be constructed differently according to the needs of each critic, not to mention that genre can appropriate and be appropriated by a film or set of films at varying times; furthermore, he concurs that genre boundaries are often retrospectively applied to any given groupings of films. Wells, Jancovich, and Hutchings all write about their perspective on the horror genre, and while their views on what it represents (or what represents it) may differ, all agree to some extent that the boundaries are unstable, as with all genre markers, and thus open to reinterpretation and redefinition. Hutchings points to certain tropes such as iconography and thematics that have been used as early markers by critics to define genre (particularly, Hutchings says, the western); however, he goes on to assert that these categories are not always useful to pin down horror because "the numerous definitions of horror cinema do not fit together as a cohesive whole" (2004, p.4). Hutchings views the idea of the emergence of a horror genre as much more complex: "Horror emerges . . . as comprising not just various groups of films produced within different historical and national contexts but also the responses to and understandings of those films generated by film-makers, audiences and critics" (p.31). As much as anything, context can be key to recognising a horror film, Hutchings asserts – that is, how the film is marketed and received (and how widely this perspective agrees) in a given period of time. For example, Hutchings states that "there is a familiarity about the

---

[31] Similar accusations have been made about the widespread application of abjection criticism, particularly in Creed's text (see previous chapter).

designation 'horror film' and an accompanying assumption, both by the markets and critics, that audiences generally understand the term enough to organise their own viewing in relation to it" (p.1).

In light of his views on contextualisation being a key factor in the creation of "horror," Hutchings goes on to discuss how films attributed to a certain genre often form cycles within the genre. Hutchings asserts that film cycles "exist in relation to particular times and particular places, and they offer an intermediate stage between the uniqueness of individual films and the formulaic nature of generic production" (p.16). In other words, Hutchings suggests that any individual production(s) that goes against the grain or stands out as individual or different among other contemporary films said to belong to the same genre can become the catalyst and starting point for a new cycle of films of that nature, which is swiftly followed by a host of imitations.[32] It is these cycles that cumulatively make up the horror genre, according to Hutchings, along with "the responses […] and understandings" spoken of earlier. Furthermore, Hutchings quips: "It is relatively easy to determine when any cycle of horror production begins. You just follow the trail of sequels and rip-offs back to a commercially successful original film" (p.171). While this last statement could be problematic in that it devalues most, if not all, subsequent films in a given cycle beyond the original, these cycles do often begin with one or a handful of commercially successful films that justify future productions: *Ringu* and *Whispering Corridors* both fit that description and are widely considered to be the two films responsible for a succession of similarly-styled productions in their respective nations (Japan and South Korea), which in turn leads to a broader expansion of contemporary Asian horror cinema.[33] Where I disagree with Hutchings's statement is in the implication that any follow-on films from the originator(s) of the cycle lack any intrinsic value for critical study and analysis. Within cycles, new forms emerge at the same level of recognisable format or style; however, these subsequent productions can operate differently, even conversely, at an ideological level through narrative and imagery.

---

[32] Presumably, these cycles draw to a conclusion when a new cycle of films is spawned and/or when the cycle is no longer marketable, profitable, or popular.

[33] *Ringu* is credited as the first prominent film of this cycle known as J-horror by, among others, Takashi (2003), McRoy (2008), Martin (2009), Kinoshita (2009), Richards (2010), Wee (2011), Wada-Marciano (2012), and Byrne (2014). *Whispering Corridors* is afforded the same accolade for K-horror by Black (2003), Choi (2009, 2010), Peirse and Martin (2013), and, again, Byrne (2014).

One alternative to genre criticism that Hutchings offers is to examine underlying social and psychoanalytical narratives in horror, particularly with regards to films re-enacting horrifying experiences in a safe and re-affirming environment, the origin of which he attributes to Robin Wood (1986). In terms of utilising abjection as a critical tool, Kristeva makes a similar argument when she says that the arts are displacing religion as a site through which the abject played out. Furthermore, Hutchings's observations on the construction of the horror genre(s) leads him to conclude that its lack of cohesion means that its ideological standpoint is not always as clear cut as being either conservative or radical. He arrives at this position through his analysis of the monster in horror, which he asserts is separated "from villains in other genres [through the stipulation] that these monsters should not only be dangerous but 'impure' or 'unnatural' as well" (2004, p.35). Hutchings goes on to talk about the influence of Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966), as well as the distinction into clean/unclean categories, as found in abjection, before going on to discuss the figure of Dracula as representative of how cultural narratives and engagement with horror monsters suggests that horror must represent some fundamental truth that the consumer of the texts feels the need to engage with on a continual and recurring basis. He states: "One possible explanation for the ceaseless popularity of Dracula in our culture is that he represents a fundamental truth about humanity. In other words, our fascination with the figure of the vampire is bound up with a need to explore some essential feature of our own nature" (p.40). Changes over time in the Dracula narrative, not to mention various different representations in cinema, lead Hutchings to declare that context and narrative are both important factors for analysing horror texts. Hutchings also makes a similar point to Kristeva when she writes on abjection being a universal process that is experienced and engaged with in different ways throughout different cultures. Moreover, Hutchings insists, the horror monster can both reaffirm or challenge social conventions depending upon context, representation, and narrative:

> On the one hand, horror films can be seen to reaffirm social categories
> by driving out the 'unnatural' monster, but on the other hand the very
> existence of the monster reveals that these categories can be breached,
> that they – for all their apparent 'naturalness' – are   fragile, contingent,
> vulnerable. In this respect, monsters not only represent threats to the
> social order but can also offer new possibilities within and
> transformations of that order. (p.37)

Throughout my analysis of contemporary Asian horror cinema, I will be taking these nuances into account; namely, I do not seek to determine whether contemporary Asian horror cinema as a cycle of films is exclusively conservative or radical, but rather I will take each text into consideration when looking at each film's underlying social narrative, and when determining how the abject can enhance and illuminate the films as part of a wider view.

Given the multiple viewpoints and general lack of agreement as to how to categorise horror as a cohesive genre, to try and define the (or *a*) horror genre would, therefore, be unprofitable, and besides, the task is outside the scope of this thesis, not to mention an unnecessary and possibly counterproductive process. Simply put, the argument is too broad. Rather than state that the selection of films which will receive forthcoming justification for inclusion are representative of the horror genre as a whole, or even as microcosmic of merely the Asian horror genre, it is more appropriate to consider my selection of filmic texts as representing a cycle of films operating within a wider horror genre.

3.2 What is Contemporary Asian Horror Cinema? Kick-Starting the Cycle with *Ringu* and *Whispering Corridors*

Several critical texts have appeared over the last fifteen years or so that attempt to define and analyse contemporary Asian horror cinema, whether focusing on a specific country's output or collating the analysis from two or more of these countries under the banner of "Asian Horror Cinema" or similar; however, none have concomitantly analysed a wider selection across national boundaries utilising Kristeva's concept of abjection. It is generally considered that a "boom" occurred in the production, distribution, and favourable critical reception of Asian horror cinema around the turn of the millennium, and the cycle is usually deemed to have started with the commercial and critical success of *Ringu*. [34] *Ringu* is often touted as the beginning of the J-horror (Japanese horror) cycle and the marker of the beginning of the production of a cycle of horror films following a similar formula and containing shared themes and concerns from neighbouring countries in the region, particularly South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand, not to mention an opening for

[34] Although production of cinema from these regions, particularly Japan, had been strong previously, this new cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema represented a new breed of films that received a much higher international profile than many of their predecessors.

transnational exposure in the West, thus spawning a slew of Hollywood remakes.[35] Given the quantity of output from the aforementioned nations (and a generally-accepted commencement of the cycle from 1998), it is these markers that will form the parameters from which a selection of horror films will be made according to further defining themes in common – identified below – to be analysed in the thesis. I have developed the phrase "contemporary Asian horror cinema" to denote the films belonging to this most recent cycle of production.

Further definition of what constitutes these productions has already been presented. A general overview for a wider audience on the contemporary horror cinema from the aforementioned four countries by Andy Richards (2010) discusses prevalent themes and offers a definition of what constitutes a contemporary Asian horror film. First, Richards suggests that the films in their original form gained popularity in the West at the time of their emergence because their "more fatalistic tone," "more pessimistic approach to an individual's control over their destiny," and "more profound sense of supernatural forces in the 'real' world" (in other words, a more permeable border between life and death) appealed to contemporary audiences and displaced the clichéd American slasher film (2010, p.12).[36] Richards goes on to point out how these films draw upon the spirituality of Buddhism and Shinto religions – particularly the close proximity of the supernatural and spiritual to real life – as well as literary traditions and folklore and mythology – primarily ghost stories and supernatural tales – along with the performing arts in *Noh* and *Kabuki* theatre. For example, *Ringu*'s Sadako, Richards attests, is based on a model of Iwa from *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* (Nobuo Nakagawa, 1959), who in turn is based on a character from a folklore tale in a *Kabuki* play of the same name by Tsuruya Namboku (1825) (p.30). Furthermore, the broader themes identified in this cycle of films by Richards are as follows: the impact of digital technology on modern life; the vengeful female ghost; the rites of passage into adulthood; urban myth and legend; the prioritizing of psychological fear over graphic gore; the family unit and the mother; and, specifically in the case of Hong Kong, the relationship to mainland China (both spatial and political). All of these themes recur throughout the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema and will be

---

[35] It should be noted that South Korea's *Whispering Corridors* was also instrumental in revitalizing horror film production in that country and the subsequent cycle that proliferated in the region.

[36] Richards also describes the slasher film as parodically exhausted by this point. Examples would include the self-reflexive slasher films *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *Scream 2* (Wes Craven, 1997). Furthermore, within two years of the release of *Ringu*, the first instalment of the spoof slasher franchise *Scary Movie* (Kennen Ivory Wayans, 2000) would hit cinemas in the West.

discussed throughout the various chapters of film analysis. Finally, Richards addresses the succession of Western remakes in the wake of this boom; however, while he acknowledges that although "they inevitably raise the international profile of the original [E]astern horrors," their form and style differs from the originals in that they "attempt to rationalise – and therefore contain – their supernatural stories," whereas the originals "are content to leave certain mysteries unexplained" (pp.139-40). This latter point is certainly one of the key features that attuned Western viewers to a new cycle of horror films from the East; moreover, this thesis is only interested in the original films and their relationship to Kristeva's theory of abjection. The remakes will not be considered as part of this cycle, and therefore are ineligible for sustained analysis.[37]

Discussing J-horror as specifically emerging from "a group of relatively low-budget horror films made in Japan during the late 1990s," Chika Kinoshita reinforces some of the key themes identified by Richards when she states that "[a]esthetically, J-horror films concentrate on low-key production of atmospheric and psychological fear, rather than graphic gore, capitalizing on urban legends proliferated through mass media and popular culture" (2009, p.104). Jay McRoy, furthermore, examines the complexities of how specific national and cultural themes also employ Western cross-fertilisation and adaption in J-horror in his text *Nightmare Japan* (2008).[38] Put another way, McRoy attempts to tie these films in to a cultural and sociohistorical context associated with two long cinematic traditions in the country – the *kaidan* (ghost story) with *onryou* (avenging spirit) motif or the *daikaiju eiga* (big monster) (2008, p.6) – while simultaneously acknowledging a parallel history of borrowing from Western tradition. He states: "As a substantial component of Japanese popular culture, horror films allow artists an avenue through which they may apply visual and narrative metaphors in order to engage aesthetically with a rapidly transforming social and cultural landscape" (p.4). McRoy places the need for a culturally specific close reading of J-horror in a contemporary climax of "an historical moment when the artificiality of social, national, and psychological boundaries has never been more apparent" (p.4). However, while McRoy takes a cycle of films and examines their specific cultural context, he is still forced to acknowledge that not only does his interpretation of a need for such a close reading hinge on the dissolving of

---

[37] For a comparative analysis of *Ringu* and its remake, see Wee (2011).
[38] For example, McRoy states that one contemporary influence on J-horror from the West can be found in Hideo Nakata's debt to *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) in *Ringu*.

physical and psychological cultural boundaries, but also that a truly exclusive national cinema is impossible due to a long-standing cross-fertilisation with Western texts.[39] Therefore, it appears axiomatic that while this cycle of films[40] does, of course, have some national context to be taken into account, any analysis undertaken does not need to be restricted to this criteria.

Nightmare Japan is not McRoy's only entry into the body of critical texts discussing Japanese horror cinema. In his edited collection titled *Japanese Horror Cinema* (2005), several contributors attempt to analyse the recent wave of horror cinema experiencing a boom both nationally and internationally. In the preface, Christopher Sharrett declares that the "dominant tone of Japanese horror seems to be hysteria" (2005, p.xii), which Sharrett links to industrial and post-industrial capitalism, but which also ties into McRoy's later assertion of the idea that the films emerge from a time of modern crisis. However, Sharrett also places *Ringu* in the realm of cultural mythos propelled into modern landscape – the imposition of a supernatural past onto the present. And while most contributors in McRoy's text undertake a close analysis of several key films, some offer explanations of the cycle's popularity in the West. Matt Hills considers the influence of digital technology in *Ringu* and suggests that these concerns are more of a shared universal fear with the West, describing it as a "cultural hegemony" (2005, p.167). Richard J. Hand also addresses the issue of analysing Eastern texts through Western source material: "a dominant concern when non-western culture is analysed by western eyes is the issue of international cultural exchange" (2005, p.18). Hand declares that although this process is "neither unproblematic nor uncontroversial," assimilating and adapting cross-cultural influences is at the heart of most national cinemas;[41] it is, Hand asserts, "also linked to intertextuality"[42] and a "cross-generic practice," meaning that not only do films borrow and take influence from previous texts in their genre, but also from other existing genres, sub-genres, and cycles (p.18).

---

[39] The same conclusion is drawn in the previous chapter when discussing Katherine Goodnow's analysis of New Zealand "New Wave" cinema; however, in that instance, it is Goodnow herself who expands her own thinking beyond the boundaries of a national cinema.

[40] In McRoy's case, specifically J-horror; however, I extend this sentiment to a wider cycle that incorporates the contemporary Asian horror films from the countries previously specified.

[41] Hand gives Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1600) into *Throne of Blood* (1957) as a much earlier example.

[42] A recurring Kristevan theme.

Colette Balmain (2008) points to the assimilation of other cultures as a "key defining feature" of Japanese cinema as a whole, although she also acknowledges that the cultural exchange flows in both directions (p.1). Balmain is also critical of attempts to impose Western analysis on Eastern texts, stating that utilising psychoanalysis, inclusive of Creed's methods, "can be reductive, especially if it is utilised unproblematically in the study of non-Western forms of horror" (p.6). To reiterate her point, she draws on Mitsuhiro Yoshimito's critique of "Western and Eurocentric approaches to the study of Japanese cinema," especially those methods that negate cultural specificity (p.3). A response to a similar type of criticism has already been addressed in an earlier chapter; however, it might be prudent to add at this point that while Balmain essentially eschews universalism in national cinemas, she, like McRoy, still has to acknowledge their debt to outside influences and conventions. She states: "Although Japanese cinema was clearly influenced by the West, it managed to retain the traditional elements of a presentational aesthetic, both in the theatre and in film" (p.25). The syntax of that sentence is equally truthful with the clauses reversed. Furthermore, when discussing the tropes of Japanese horror cinema, Balmain notes a number of markers that tie in to Kristeva's abjection and abjection criticism in cinema: for example, Balmain lists the monstrous-feminine/mother, myth and folklore, and a social divide between patriarchy and femininity as key features alongside other more region-specific themes such as the vengeful female ghost and "Groupism." What this thesis aims to accomplish is to demonstrate how Kristeva's theory of abjection can be a useful tool through which to read contemporary Asian horror cinema; therefore, while an awareness of specific cultural context is useful, it does not take away from the evidence of a more global and universalised accessibility of any national or regional cinemas, as demonstrated by cross-cultural influences and shared themes accessible to different audiences around the world. To tie a national cinema down too much in its own sovereign borders is to imply that it does not speak to a more universal audience; this thesis attempts to increase the accessibility to this critically-interesting cycle of horror cinema.

Furthermore, in *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age* (2012), Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano looks at the influence of digital technologies and new media on J-horror films and considers how the ubiquitous rise of digital technology in the film industry has impacted upon contemporary Japanese cinema (as one example of many cinemas affected by these changes). For Wada-Marciano, this process works at both the textual and

extratextual level: first, the effect that this modern technology has had on transnational marketing and formatting (for example, the rise of the DVD); second, how these concerns become thematic elements of the films' narratives. Wada-Marciano views both aspects as inextricably connected: "I want to clarify the relationship between J-horror as a film *genre* and as a film *movement*. Simply put, I view them as inseparable entities" (2012, p.29). Genre, here, refers to a body of films' similarities in style, look, thematic content, and so forth, although I use similar markers to categorise J-horror as part of a cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema; the "movement" aspect of Wada-Marciano's statement refers to external factors and associated media, including marketing, and distribution. It is through this latter point that Wada-Marciano discusses how J-horror productions operate as a cultural flow that appeals to national (Japanese), regional (East/Pan-Asian), and transnational (Hollywood) audiences. In other words, while there is a distinct local and regional flavour to these films, they also contain themes that resonate with the universal. She states: "The appeal of J-Horror films can be seen in their textual elements drawn from the urban topography and the pervasive use of technology, elements which are, at once, particular and universal" (p.32). Contrary to the intentions of McRoy and Balmain, Wada-Marciano "avoids viewing 'Japanese cinema' as *a priori* connected with Japan, the Japanese, or Japanese culture," instead preferring to consider cultural context as just one aspect of the cycle's values (p.6). In fact, Wada-Marciano goes as far to say that the "difficulty of discussing the notion of cinema and other visual media in the age of cultural globalization is rooted in the inherent contradiction of such fundamental things [viewed] as 'culture'" (p.6). In other words, Wada-Marciano warns against fixing "culture" as representative of nationhood, while also reiterating the notion that culture(s) are fluid and mobile in the digital age, transgressing national borders with no fixed centre. For example, she acknowledges that most "films that succeed in the global market manage to cross the boundaries between cultural particularity and universality" (p.2), while specifically in terms of J-horror and its relationship to digital technology, she notes: "The increasing ubiquity of digital technology has indeed made Japanese cinema more accessible to global markets and even created a reverse cultural flow as new global cinema set against Hollywood's dominant flows" (p.139). Taking this approach to the J-horror and expanding the principle to include other regional East Asian horror films, it is possible to identify a cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema through shared themes that may or may not be culturally particular, but which at the same time extend beyond their national borders, presenting themselves for analysis in a more universal context.

Wada-Marciano's text raises an interesting point: that J-horror can provide an alternative to the predominant productions of Western/Hollywood horror cinema. Several of the key features that distinguish J-horror, and, more broadly, contemporary Asian horror cinema, from mainstream Western cinema in general are discussed in Richards, McRoy, and Wada-Marciano (see above). Furthermore, both Valerie Wee (2011) and Daniel Martin (2009) each point to a stylistic element of these films that separates them from their Hollywood counterparts. Wee discusses the influence of *Noh* and *Kabuki* theatre on Japanese horror, which she states ultimately results in a disregard for realism and a focus on a "nonrational, emotion-centred perspective" that opts for artistry and artificiality as its prime mode of expression (2011, p.44). Here, Wee refers to what she calls Japan's "acceptance of a looser cause-and-effect narrative structure" (p.47). Comparing the Japanese original, *Ringu*, with its Western remake, *The Ring*, Wee asserts that "*Ringu* emphasizes the emotion of fear and a mood of anxiety/insecurity founded on ignorance and the inscrutability of the supernatural. This reflects the Japanese aesthetic commitment to exploring ideas and possibilities that extend beyond what is known" (p.47). However, Wee uses this observation to reach a conclusion that hints at abjection being more observable in the Western texts because, she states, the Western productions have more clearly-defined boundaries to transgress. Martin also looks at J-horror's different narrative perspective, although where Wee compares originals to their remakes, Martin instead considers the tension in the ongoing critical debate between the positions of privileging restrained horror over the explicit. Martin puts J-horror in the category of restrained horror and states:

> Critics who privilege restrained horror clearly present it as
> psychological and present the thrills of graphic horror as largely
> concerned with shock and revulsion: the thrill of explicit horror is
> supposedly visceral, addressing physical, bodily reflexes. Restrained
> horror is seen as engaging the mind, and activating the imagination . . .,
> while graphic horror is clearly seen as below conscious thought, merely
> a matter of automatic bodily reflexes. (2009, p.39)[43]

In other words, Martin is pointing out that many critics favour restrained horror as somehow the more intellectual and sophisticated of these two types of horror narrative. Such a value judgement is not necessary in this thesis; however, the distinction is useful when considering the constitutive elements of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Both

---

[43] This subject matter has been questioned as far back as 1991 through Linda Williams.

Wee and Martin's viewpoints might also initially suggest that Kristeva's abjection is more attuned to analysis of Western horror, with Wee commenting on the West's more established borders and Martin placing J-horror outside of the category of horror narrative that privileges the graphic and corporeal, visceral imagery – all tenets of abjection. However, in this thesis I intend to show through a close analysis of several contemporary Asian horror films that though borders may be established differently in the West (and arguably – or not – to a clearer degree), tensions between two diametric counterparts which are then breached at the source of the horror is still a prevalent theme of contemporary Asian horror cinema; at the same time, while not only does contemporary Asian horror cinema depict some graphic, corporeal, and visceral imagery[44] (even when not at the forefront of the narrative), it is also concerned with deep-rooted psychological fear and reaction, which is the prime site of abjection in Kristeva.

Moving on to South Korean horror cinema – or "K-horror" – Jinhee Choi discusses *Sonyeo* sensibility (the sensibility of girlhood) and the associated rites of passage into adulthood as one of several key themes in *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (2010). Choi is particularly concerned with the narrative settings of all-girls high schools in K-horror films, which she describes as "a place of peer pressure and social ostracism" (2010, p.116). The social pressures of education in Korean culture (and also in Japanese society) is often at the forefront of many films under the contemporary Asian horror cinema rubric, featuring as the site of plot development in *Whispering Corridors* and its sequels, as well as other films such as *Death Bell* (Chang, 2008). Choi points to how this concern has wider implications that are predicated upon the blurring of social borders and boundaries: for example, the breakdown of public and private space and the tension between the semiotic and the symbolic in these conflated arenas.[45] Choi also goes on to assert that the characters in these films, specifically the *Whispering Corridors* series, are "portrayed as 'aberrant' in that they challenge the norms" (2010, p.131), thereby implying that the films contain radical elements that go against some of the conservative backdrops against which they take place.[46]

---

[44] For example, *Audition*.

[45] I will explore the dissolution of these borders in greater detail in the chapter that deals with this particular subject matter.

[46] Elsewhere, Choi asserts that *Whispering Corridors* "helped initiate the most recent horror cycle in the South Korean film industry" (2009, p.39).

An edited collection by Alison Peirse and Daniel Martin (2013) offers a comprehensive study of South Korean horror cinema, tracing its cultural roots back to ancient folklore and myth. Contributions include articles connecting K-horror with abject-relevant themes such as the family unit, rites of passage into adulthood, and engagement with the critical work of Creed, particularly concerning the figure of the monstrous mother.[47] Peirse and Martin's text covers a history of South Korean horror cinema, not just recent K-horror productions; and although the debt to myth and folklore throughout the charted fifty-plus years of South Korean horror cinema is always posited as a backdrop to the films' narratives, Peirse and Martin are keen to distinguish different cycles of films within what they view as a cumulative genre. They explain: "Yet while folklore is one key strand of the genre, there is no single or definitive type of Korean horror film, and the examples discussed in this book should be understood within specific cycles of production rather than simply a part of a homogenous horror film genre" (2013, p.3). Considering that *Whispering Corridors* is widely considered to kick-start the contemporary cycle of K-horror in 1998, which also ties in to the emergence of J-horror in Japan through *Ringu* in the same year, it is reasonable to discount any films made prior to these two important releases when establishing a considered collection of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Furthermore, Peirse and Martin identify a formula with *Whispering Corridors* (along with *Ringu*, I would rush to add) that future films could emulate as the cycle experienced its boom from the late-1990s through the first decade of the new millennium: "*Whispering Corridors* also succeeded in emulating the Hollywood pattern of franchising horror, and has produced four sequels to date. The contemporary cycle has seen the emergence of clear patterns of production and distribution" (p.9).[48] It is also important to note, moreover, that though Peirse and Martin identify *Whispering Corridors* as setting the template for future films in the cycle, they acknowledge, at the same time, that the cycle produces diverse horror films, listing *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Jee-woon, 2003) as one of several examples.[49]

---

[47] Individual contributors are discussed later in this chapter.

[48] The term "sequel" is used loosely, and they are only designated as such by the producer of all five films, Lee Choon-yeon. No subsequent film shares any direct link (or director) with its predecessor. The first two "sequels," *Memento Mori* (Kim Tae-yong and Min Kyu-dong, 1999) and *Wishing Stairs* (Yun Jae-yeon, 2003) are included for analysis in this thesis.

[49] Peirse and Martin note that, in terms of national box office success, the cycle peaked with *Phone* (Ahn Byeong-ki, 2002). However, the continued visibility (also noted by Perise and Martin) of the films as part of a wider contemporary Asian horror cinema cycle keep them critically relevant for a much longer period.

So far, I have considered the composition of contemporary Japanese and South Korean horror cinemas. One of several themes in common is a connection with past culture(s) – for example, the continual borrowing from myth and folklore, as identified by numerous critics. In terms of Hong Kong horror cinema, Vivian P.Y. Lee (2009) discusses a perceived lack of critical models for that nation's post-handover cinema. The transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China took place on 1st July, 1997, ending one-hundred-and-fifty-six years of colonial government. Lee considers the cinematic output from Hong Kong from the commencement of this new period of administration, concluding that the overarching theme is "post-nostalgic," which she goes on to explain as having "connections with a long tradition of filmmaking that has developed from creative synergies of both local and foreign sources" (2009, p.1). In other words, Hong Kong cinema has a mix of influences from both the West and the East due to geographical and political circumstances. Lee's line of argument follows that the post-nostalgic viewpoint is "key to understanding the nuanced connections between the cinematic imagination and the larger sociopolitical realities of Hong Kong," with horror film, in Lee's view, portraying a "hallucinatory reconstruction of the past," the evocation of which is crucial to nostalgia (p.5). When discussing horror, Lee places the emphasis of this cinema's influence on Pan-Asian and transnational productions (p.184).[50] As to finding a suitable critical model, Lee suggests that the universal themes prevalent in all Hong Kong cinema (due, of course, to the numerous influences from around the globe) should be considered in a specific socio-political context.

Stephen Teo (1997) also considers a general lack of post-handover theories for Hong Kong cinema. Both Lee and Teo agree that Hong Kong cinema has long been a hybrid of influences from the East and West; however, where Lee suggests that specific socio-political and cultural context must be accounted for within the universal, Teo considers the possibility of importing Western theoretical structures to any critical model in light of transnational cinemas (discussed in greater detail below) and cross-cultural

---

[50] As with the earlier discussion on Japan's predecessors to J-horror, these themes were still prevalent in pre-handover Hong Kong cinema, particularly Category III productions, which were prominent throughout the late 1980s through to the early 2000s. Designated as "adult-only" and extremely sexualised and violent, these films, according to Julian Stringer, were marketed as the "repressed underside of more respectable cultural forms" (1999. p.362) and predominantly dealt with issues of class, socio-economics, and anxieties concerning imminent changes to government policies after the handover (from late-capitalist Western rule to communist People's Republic of China). For a detailed overview of Category III cinema, see Stringer (1999) and Davis and Yueh-Yu (2001).

productions (1997, p.x).[51] Teo goes on to assert that although the "development of cinema in Hong Kong cannot be dissociated from the development of cinema in the Chinese Mainland" (p.3), it is nevertheless the case that "Hong Kong cinema's hybridity, freely mixing elements from East and West, is perhaps seen to best effect in the horror genre" (p.219). This latter line of thinking falls in with Lee's views, and, as I shall go on to discuss in future chapters, the inclusion of particular social, cultural, and political issues alongside universally recognisable tropes is a feature of several Hong Kong horror films that fall into the category of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Kevin Heffernan declares that "Hong Kong films have a long tradition of working localised variations of Hollywood hits" (2009, p.60). However, Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh and Neda Hei-Tung Ng tie contemporary Hong Kong horror into the general movement of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Describing J-horror as a "horror genre characterized by its urban milieu, familial relations and communication technology," they assert that contemporary Hong Kong horror cinema is remodelled on the same formula (2009, p.146). Tony Williams, moreover, considers Hong Kong horror cinema to be linked to a dark undercurrent of socioeconomic issues that impact upon the nation and its neighbouring territories (2005, p.203). Indeed, the depiction of Hong Kong's immediate social and economic issues that also have a widespread implication throughout that region of the East, as well as global repercussions stretching to the West, can be found in *Dream Home* (Pang Ho-cheung, 2010);[52] meanwhile, the mixture of and tensions between Eastern and Western practices are clearly on display in *Dumplings* (Fruit Chan, 2004).[53] In short, contemporary Hong Kong horror cinema has been impacted by political and geographical relations with the West (United Kingdom) and the East (People's Republic of China), while at the same time taking influence from both Western (Hollywood) and Eastern (particularly the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema beginning in Japan and South Korea) cinemas.

Moreover, Choi and Wada-Marciano's *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (2009) appears to be at the critical forefront in discussing all four regions (Thailand appears to have the fewest critical articles available, possibly due to

---

[51] Writing in 1997, on the cusp of the hand-over, another of Teo's reasons for this suggestion is the possibility that future Hong Kong films may fall in line with Chinese mainland policy and undergo certain forms of censorship.

[52] Tony Williams suggests that *Dream Home* has certain shared thematic links with *Dr. Lamb* (Danny Lee and Billy Tang, 1992) and *Cageman* (Jacob Cheung, 1992) (2005, p.203).

[53] *Dumplings* shares certain tropes and themes with the Category III film, *The Eight Immortals Restaurant: The Untold Story* (Herman Yau, 1993).

fewer similar productions from the region and the relative global visibility of the films produced)[54] with a view towards a collective whole in terms of situating contemporary Asian horror cinema as a body, or cycle, of texts. Choi and Wada-Marciano credit early J-horror films as the catalyst for this boom in contemporary Asian horror cinema: "The popularity of Japanese horror cinema (J-horror), initially a product of low-budget independent filmmaking, has propelled horror film cycles in other Asian countries such as South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand" (2009, p.1).[55] They assert, moreover, that within the films that exemplify this boom it is possible to "discern a complex nexus of local, regional and global relationships" (p.1). Choi and Wada-Marciano go on to discuss how regional specificities manifest within and across the horror cinemas of these East Asian nations before moving further across geographical borders (specifically into the West) and becoming visible transnationally; in fact, they assert that the "visibility of Asian horror in Hollywood may be viewed as a case of a reverse form of media globalization, which is usually thought of as the worldwide dissemination of Western culture" (p.3). It is here where they chime with earlier views expressed that cultural influences flow in both directions, the processes of which are, in their words, "differently configured at different stages of production cycles" (p.1). In discussing the prevalent themes of the cinemas responsible for this contemporary boom, many of the markers identified in Choi and Wada-Marciano corroborate with the themes identified above. They also attribute different national specificities emerging from and characterising each region's contribution to their own, individual horror cinemas: for example, concerns over the rise of digital technology in Japan, the implications of adolescent sensibilities in South Korea, and the political and geographical relationship with China in Hong Kong. However, at the same time, Choi and Marciano acknowledge an overlap in key themes, which suggests that each cinema influences the others during the development of this cycle. One reason given for this overlap is that "Asian societies, despite the uneven economic developments in the region, share similar socio-economic problems and concerns – technology, sexuality, and nascent youth culture" (p.5). For example, *Phone* is a South Korean film, in which digital technology, namely the titular phone, acts as the "Maguffin" moving the plot forward,

---

[54] Geo-politically, Thailand is situated within South-East Asia, as opposed to East Asia. It is perhaps for this reason that Thai horror productions belonging to this cycle are often critically overlooked.

[55] While horror cinemas from all four regions have previous boom periods with varying local, regional, and transnational success (for example, the Category III films of Hong Kong), this study argues that the global success of *Ringu*, *Whispering Corridors*, and others led to a number of similar productions being made in a similar mold, which subsequently belong to the category referred to as contemporary Asian horror cinema.

whereas *Suicide Club*[56] (Sion Sono, 2001) is a Japanese production that deals with the social and cultural pressures of education and adolescence.

Contributing to Choi and Marciano's edited collection, Adam Knee is one of the leading scholars on Thailand's horror cinema.[57] Knee identifies *The Eye* (Pang Brothers, 2002) as the most prominent example from this region in the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema, describing the film "as alternatively Asian influenced and Western influenced" (2009, p.70). Knee specifically ties this film into the cycle when he describes it as part of

> an evolving regional movement in horror film production occurring in the wake of the exceptional success of the Japanese horror film *Ringu* […] – a trend toward glossy, highly stylized, intertextually self-conscious horror films which often feature (among other elements) the vengeful ghost of a young woman and the revelation of grim secrets from the past, in a context emphasizing the technologically mediated unseating of traditional Asian culture. (p.71).

However, some of Knee's notions of contemporary Thai horror are not determined by the same boundary used to mark the starting point for contemporary Asian horror cinema by this thesis. In other words, though Knee acknowledges that Thai horror comes to harmonize with some of the features and themes following *Ringu* and others, he also makes a connection to modern Thai horror and links with its past cinema, in a similar fashion to how Lee describes Hong Kong's post-nostalgic cinema. In an earlier text, Knee states that "Thai horror films appear, by and large, aimed primarily at a local Thai audience. These films mark a retrieval of the past, a return to a genre popular in the heyday of Thai cinema" (2005, p.141). Yet, as with McRoy and Balmain on J-horror, Peirse and Martin on K-horror, and Lee and Teo on HK-horror, the contemporary cinema's links to its past, however powerful, do not preclude outside influences from shaping its present form – this includes, as Knee recognises in his later text of 2009, trends in current East Asian horror cinema such as J- and K-horror, as well as Western influence and concerns of tensions between Western and Eastern practices (p.81).[58] Furthermore, Knee suggests that

---

[56] An alternative Western title is *Suicide Circle*.

[57] Interestingly, productions from this region that fit into the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema (albeit admittedly fewer than its neighbours) are yet to be seen as "T-horrors." A similar lack of term HK-horror is also notable, although this could be attributed to the already-existing Category III label, the banner of which many of the films would be categorised under.

[58] For Knee, these practices are exemplified in *The Eye*; the same could also be said of *Dumplings* as a representative of HK-horror.

the modern Thai horror films which look to their own past engage with cultural purification ritual, forms of narrative containment, and the re-enactment of traumas – all essential to abjection – as well as mentioning popular themes such as the return of the past in the form of the spirit or ghost; a debt to folklore; and the treatment of gender in the narratives (conservative or radical) – all of which are already identified as commonplace in contemporary Asian horror cinema (2005, pp.143-145; 153; 157). One film in particular that Knee references is *Nang Nak* (Nonzi Nimibutr, 1999), of which he states: "*Nang Nak* for a Thai audience is rather more a ritual reenactment of a familiar (if also horrific) tale" (143). This theme is also prevalent in the universal process of abjection, as will be demonstrated in Chapter V.

Reflecting that "cinema has always been a global business," Katarzyna Ancuta points towards contemporary Thai horror productions as having "played a significant part in introducing Thai cinema to international audiences and inspiring a desire in Thai film-makers to produce films that could be seen as both locally and globally marketable" (2014, pp.233-234).[59] Ancuta notes that "Thai horror films are often separated into 'early' (pre-1999) and 'modern' (post-1999) productions, the apparent 'modernization' of the genre attributed to … *Nang Nak*" (p.234). These dates tie Thailand's horror cinema productions into the early stages of the wider cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema, following the examples of J-horror and K-horror, as noted by Knee.[60] Mary Ainslie also observes a new direction for Thai horror cinema, one which veers toward the "dominant international discourses of horror" (2011, p.51). However, Ainslie views *Shutter* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004) as the marking of this departure (although she still agrees that the New Thai Cinema movement commenced in the late 90s).[61] For Ainslie, *Shutter* offers a deliberately "standardized version of the horror movie narrative" that caters for a wider market, not just the local audience (pp.51-52). Ainslie

---

[59] In most cases, these films are made with the intention to be appeal to audiences outside of the nation of production, yet at the same time they do not always receive true global recognition. An intermediary term such as "regional" or "transnational" could best describe the reach of distribution and consumption for many of the films belonging to contemporary Asian horror cinema, for while the global success of *Ringu* and others have spurred on subsequent productions using similar narrative structures and recognisable themes, not every film is as well-known internationally.

[60] Ancuta also notes that the "rise of new Thai horror film into prominence also comes in the aftermath of the Japanese and Korean horror boom in the early 2000s" (2014, sp.237). Ancuta goes on to name Hong Kong horror cinema as the other region of dominant production (p.237).

[61] In terms of the globalization and international visibility of contemporary Thai horror cinema, both *Nang Nak* and *Shutter* herald important historical moments. *Nang Nak* was the first ever Thai film to be bought by a foreign distributor, while *Shutter* became the first Thai film to receive a Hollywood remake (Ancuta, 2014, p.236).

laments the process of globalization, complaining that the "deliberate departure from traditional Thai horror aesthetics and narrative structure, [thereby ensures] that *Shutter* is simultaneously and paradoxically lauded as a successful "Thai film" while actually erasing many cultural specificities of Thai horror cinema" (p.45).

Ancuta counters that Thai horror cinema post-1999 appeals to both local and international audiences, and has simply responded "to their changing urban audiences by bringing fear closer to home" while at the same time "responding to broader changes affecting cinema industries in many Asian countries brought about by globalization" (2014, pp.237-238). One way that these developments have been implemented is in the treatment of a traditional staple of Thai cinema (and general culture): the ghost, or *phi(i)*. In an earlier text, Ancuta observes that "[c]ontemporary Thai horror movies unsettle [the] basic assumption [of the presence of ghosts in material form] by de-materializing and de-literalizing ghosts, by changing the form the ghosts are expected to take and the meaning attributed to this form" (2011, p.133). The staple of the *phi(i)* in Thai cinema, and how it is represented, is "challenged through the intervention of technology" (Ancuta, 2011, p.133). Here, some of the key themes of contemporary Thai horror cinema show consistency with the prevalent themes of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Another trope in accordance is the tensions between the rural and the urban (which often reflect the anxieties of estranged traditional folklore, superstition, and cultural practices against the rapid developments and cultural change associated with modernity). Ainslie notes these changes by comparing *Nang Nak* to *Shutter*: the former is set in an "exotic and stimulating rural *mise-en-scene* of pre-modern Thailand" (2011, p.47); pitted against an idyllic rural Thailand is "the sprawling urban chaos of Bangkok" present in productions from *Shutter* onwards (p.48). Regardless of any dispute on the date of commencement, it becomes clear that from the late-1990s through to the mid-2000s, contemporary Thai horror cinema started to gain global visibility. These changes are reflected in the thematic content, narratives, and stylistics. Moreover, some influence is taken from the rise in international prominence of the contemporary horror films from other Asian nations (specifically, Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong), in addition to wider global structures.[62]

---

[62] Ancuta states that "Thai horror continues to be the most exportable genre in Thai cinema" (2011, p.140), while Ainslie observes that in contemporary Thai horror cinema, "narrative structures and *mise-en-scene* are influenced by global horror trends" (2011, p.53).

Moreover, Kinnia Yau Shuk-Ting (2011) discusses the cinema of three regions (Thailand's horror cinema is excluded from the four countries analysed in the present thesis), plus a select few others from East Asia. However, the readings are not specific to contemporary Asian horror cinema, and only J-horrors are discussed from this cycle of films. Shuk-Ting argues for culturally-specific readings of J-horror texts and points to a strong link with *Noh* theatre for its origins, but at the same time, in listing her essential themes of J-horror (of which the return of spirits from the past and the concept of impermanence – namely, borders and boundaries between the past and the present, the dead and the living – are at the forefront), Shuk-Ting also points towards universally consistent themes that transgress national and cultural boundaries (2011, pp.101-124). Interestingly, her view on the presence of ghosts in both *Noh* and J-horror is that human suffering is universal (as opposed to culturally specific) (pp.112-113). Furthermore, after brief lip service to Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine (p.117) and fleeting reference to Kristeva's abject (pp.118-119), Shuk-Ting concludes that "Noh features are brought into J-horror not only because of its highly-stylized presentation, most importantly, it is because of its exploration of human nature. It is a universal theme that audiences in different times and spaces relate to" (p.120).

What emerges from the above review of literature on contemporary Asian horror cinema is that Kristeva's theory of the abject still has compatible potential as a lens through which to read cycles of horror production; however, while some attempt to unify the theory with contemporary Asian horror cinema has been made, the prominence and reoccurrence of the tenets of abjection in this area of horror cinema justifies an extensive and comprehensive study of the field. Throughout this thesis, I will delve further into the key themes identified above in order to justify a selection of films to be analysed and explore the themes in direct correlation to the theory, consequently demonstrating how Kristeva's abjection is a useful tool for analysing contemporary Asian horror cinema on a larger scale. However, before moving on to outlining my methodological approach and outlining my selection of films, there is one recurring issue that needs to be definitively addressed: that is, the imposition of a Western theory onto a set of Eastern texts. I have dealt with this potential pitfall throughout this chapter and the previous; nevertheless, the question must be settled.

3.3 "I Would Heartily Welcome the Union of East and West Provided it is not Based on Brute Force." (Mahatma Gandhi qtd. in Khoshoo, 2002, p.51)

 Objections to Kristeva's theory of abjection, particularly those from Stone (1983), West (2007), and others, have been covered in the previous chapter. Of the main arguments raised against abjection theory, Freeland (2004) and Tyler (2009) warn against the implications of blanket applications of this form of criticism, which resonates with the concerns brought up by Balmain (2008, discussed above). Some critics argue for culturally-specific readings of each nation's horror cinema: for example, Balmain, McRoy (2008), Lee (2009), and Knee (2009), among others. However, it has been shown that the critics who argue for such an approach to the respective horror cinemas all simultaneously acknowledge each cinema's specific and inextricable ties to other Asian nations (for example, as a result of the "boom" in this cycle) and Western cinematic influences and practices. Furthermore, several critics dismiss such a potentially insular set of readings by arguing that national boundaries in cinema are relaxed and dissolved not only by shared cultural influences, but also by the transnational circulation of this cycle of films due to received critical and cult popularity outside of the home nation, as well as commercial success. These arguments are discussed above in Hills (2005), Choi and Wada-Marciano (2009), and, developing this idea further, Wada-Marciano (2009). I do not intend to devalue any culturally-specific readings of the films, either individually or as representative of a cycle of any given nation's horror cinema; I simply rebut the implications that the films can only be read through specific cultural knowledge alone. In the process of impacting upon the contemporary cinematic productions of neighbouring countries, in addition to transnational success across the globe, particularly the West, the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema clearly appeals to audiences from multiple geographic locations. Moreover, as discussed above and continued throughout this thesis, Kristeva's theory of abjection is a compatible and useful method for analysing these films on a larger scale.

There are many factors that suggest that culturally-specific barriers are not impenetrable, which in turn allows for the films to be read with a certain degree of independence from their cultural origins without disregarding their existence entirely. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (2006) discuss the globalization of national cinemas, which make a true national cinema difficult to define except by describing that which it is *not*. In this

edited collection, Choi looks towards transnational cinemas that retain semblances of their cultural origin instead. She states: "Through the process of globalization, networks that connect different parts of the world become faster and more dense" (2006, p.310). The rapid rise of digital technology is the main contributing factor in this process; it also features in the iconography and narratives of several contemporary Asian horror films. Choi identifies and lists three possible critical approaches to national cinemas: territorial, functional, and relational (pp.310-11). The first refers to cinema produced within a nation state's territorial boundaries, though Choi adds that it might more accurately relate to the nationality of the studio that produces the film. This idea of a rigid, national boundary already starts to become blurred with pan-films and co-productions.[63] A functional approach "identifies instances of national cinema based on what a film embodies at the level of text and how it functions within a nation state" (p.311). Choi relates these critical views as akin to Benedict Anderson's idea of the "imagined community" as a parameter of definition, where national identity is constructed upon the consumption of culture, which includes works of fiction (and which, Choi adds, could be feasibly extended to include film) (p.312). The flaw in this method, Choi asserts, is that it potentially suggests a "homogenized experience among its viewers" (p.313). Many of the above critics who argue for culturally-specific readings appear to adopt a functional approach, yet at the same time fail to separate their readings from the territorial method. The relational mode is understood as "a cinematic category only within a historical context in comparison with other national cinemas," where themes in common are often grouped together to demarcate any particular body of national cinema (p.315). Choi champions this method and insists that national cinema actually "weaves in and out" of the relational mode of domestic circulation (seen as national) and internationally financed and distributed cinemas (transnational) (p.315). In other words, the global production, distribution, and consumption of national cinemas make it difficult to pin down cultural and regional specifics when analysing groups of films; but at the same time, Choi argues that these common thematics can define a national cinema in relation to *what it is not like*. My

---

[63] In the previous chapter, I discussed how Adam Knee views *The Eye* as a prominent example of contemporary Asian horror cinema emanating from Thailand. The film's directors are from Hong Kong, while the film is shot on location in both Hong Kong and Thailand. It is produced by Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, a film production company based in Singapore, in association with Hong Kong-based Applause Pictures (cinematography and score, meanwhile, providing Thai representation) and, with prominent cast roles filled by actors and actresses from Malaysia, Thailand, China, and Singapore, is generally considered to be a pan-Asian production. Perhaps *The Eye* serves as a prime example of how some contemporary Asian horror films cannot always be defined by a set of rigid, national boundaries, nor should readings be shaped this way.

argument will proceed by drawing on the transnational aspects that give these films – whatever national specificities may also be present – a universal appeal, now that they are no longer solely bound by regional specificity.

A similar case regarding the "decline of rigid national boundaries" is made in Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (2005, p.3). Consequently, they say, this accounts for the increased critical attention toward international cinema in the West. They continue:

> In an era defined by the blanket terms 'post modernism' and 'global economy', it is increasingly difficult to distinguish *any* cinema according to exclusive national and sociocultural parameters. Every nation, region, and cultural artefact is now influenced by forces outside its geographical boundaries. (p.3)

In Lee (2009), the argument for readings sensitive to local and regional culture is always undermined by globalization. Again, in the case of Asian horror (and in Lee, specifically the cinema of Hong Kong), globalization refers to a film or body of cinema both taking influence from and gaining visibility beyond national borders. This includes the neighbouring Asian countries, which produced the films in this cycle, and further afield in the West, where critical and commercial interest was piqued in the wake of their success. Summarising, Lee notes that, in academic terms at least,

> globalization has weakened old forms of identities and affiliations through drastic realignments of political, social, and economic interests, thereby redrawing and redefining national, regional, and cultural boundaries that used to provide reference for communal and individual identification. (p.3)

In film studies, this idea is linked to the concept of transnational cinema, which in essence demonstrates that individual productions are not bound by one set of national borders. Indeed, the popularity of the earlier films in the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema (*Ringu*, *Whispering Corridors*, *Audition*, and others) led to a succession of films made in the same mode around East and South-East Asia; subsequently, the success of these films led to their availability in the West, the sufficient interest from which propelled the numerous remakes in addition to demand for the originals.[64]

---

[64] Distribution of the original films in the West was primarily (and mostly) under the "Asia Extreme" banner via the London-based Tartan Films/Metro-Tartan distribution label. Although the marketing of these films as "extreme" is often misleading, Chi-Yun Shin notes that Tartan was the most "high-profile" label for

Even when taking specific sociocultural and political nuances into concern, it is still possible to draw upon common themes among the films that also have an additional universal resonance. James Byrne (2014) points to a tension between cultural specificity and more universal generic conventions prevalent in J-horror (which he views as the West's primary gauge of this contemporary cycle of Asian horror films), which is also complicated by Pan-Asian productions and cross-cultural exchanges. However, Byrne is specifically referring to cross-cultural borrowings *and* cultural specificity between the nations producing the original films, namely Japan and South Korea. Considering the Korean remake of *Ringu*, *Ring Virus* (Kim Dong-bin, 1999), Byrne states that the Korean version was able to adopt the successful formula of *Ringu* but also build on a recent revival of its own horror cinema through *Whispering Corridors*, suggesting that a hybrid style of two sets of cultural conventions had started to emerge in the early stages of the cycle (2014, p.186). According to Byrne, this cycle of Asian horror cinema is already embroiled in a complex dynamic of local traditions and generic, more universally-recognisable conventions. Again, evidence points to the difficulties in attributing any specific aspects of a cycle of films to one set of national conventions that preclude external readings.

Furthermore, Donald Richie (2005) also observes a long pre-cinematic tradition of Westernisation in Japanese culture.[65] He then goes on to identify many shared thematic overlaps between Japanese cinema and its Western counterparts, claiming that perhaps the main difference is that Japanese cinema does not favour realism as its dominant mode. To reiterate this point, Richie states that "there are more similarities than differences among the films of Europe and America, and those of Japan" (p.10). Richie also concludes that, like Western cinema, genre and the concept of film cycles have once more become the driving force behind the production of Japanese cinema once a successful formula has been identified. This argument holds true when considering the number of similar films that followed the success of *Ringu*. Given the level of cross-cultural exchange to and from the West, as well as among the East in the establishment of this cycle of horror cinema, and along with the dissolution of national boundaries that goes hand-in-hand with the processes of globalization and transnational cinemas, it becomes clear that the idea of an inaccessible cultural barrier between West and East is not sustainable, especially

---

promoting Eastern films in the West (2009, p.85). Furthermore, Shin observes that the sudden availability of many of the films under this banner in the West is a testament to their transnational popularity, as is the swiftness with which the Hollywood remakes were commissioned and released.

[65] Richie traces the origins of Western cultural influence back to Meiji era (1968-1912) (2005, pp.9-10).

considering the universality of many of the themes identified in both the cycle of films (see above) and in Kristeva's abject (see previous chapter).

As already discussed, Peirse and Martin (2013) raise South Korean horror cinema's debts to folklore and myth, a common theme among the four cinemas under analysis. However, the ties to a nation's past in its modern cinema do not, as established throughout this chapter, preclude critical readings using theoretical models from outside that nation. Kristeva's abject is intricately connected to the return of the past in the present, and at the same time describes a universal process[66] (which may take slightly different forms in individual cultures), especially one that manifests itself in the rituals and cultural narratives manifest in literary (here, cinematic) texts. I have specifically returned to Peirse and Martin here because within their text many of the contributors discuss prevalent themes of the abject; however, discussion of these markers or the process of abjection itself, though clearly touched upon, does not come to the fore of the analysis in any sustained method. For example, Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine is discussed by Eunha Oh. Oh asserts that all mothers who "occupy a central position in Korean horror film. ... all kinds of mothers – stepmothers, mothers-in-law, sacrificing mothers, benevolent mothers and indifferent mothers – are monsters" (2013, p.60). Using Creed's writings on the archaic and monstrous mother as a framework to read two Korean horrors from the 70s and 80s,[67] Oh links her readings to Confucianism and the *wonhon* in classic Korean cinema.[68] Although Oh notes the similarities between these cultural practices and their Western counterparts, in addition to utilising the theoretical tools to challenge the readings, Oh still falls on the side of bringing her analysis back to a culturally-specific reading. Therefore, while the possibilities of utilising Kristeva and Creed are identified, the opportunity for a sustained analysis using these theories remains unexplored. Elsewhere, Chi-Yun Shin focuses on the rites of passage into adulthood (from the semiotic to the symbolic) in *Death Bell* (2013, pp.131-141). Once again, Creed's monstrous-feminine is utilised, and comparisons are made between this film and earlier Western horrors, namely *Carrie* and *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000). The presence of the family unit (and deconstruction of same) in contemporary Asian horror cinema – a motif in both *Acacia* (Park Ki-hyeong, 2003) and *A Tale of Two Sisters* – is taken up by Hye Seung Chung (2013, pp.87-100).

---

[66] Here, I again return to Arya's statement that abjection is "universally resonant."
[67] *Mother's Grudge* (Lee Yoo-seob, 1970) and *Woman's Wail* (Lee Hyeok-soo, 1986).
[68] The *wonhon* is a vengeful female ghost.

Discussing these two films along with *The Uninvited* (Lee Soo-youn, 2003),[69] Chung suggests that fear becomes located within the family structure, with each film focussing on "individuals living in seemingly comfortable . . . domiciles which ultimately become settings for abjection, paranoia, terror and madness" (2013, p.88). Once more, lip service is paid to compatible Western theoretical models, yet the article develops toward a largely culturally-specific reading that centres on national adoption policies.

What has emerged through a review of the critical literature throughout this chapter is that the body of contemporary Asian horror cinema to be analysed going forward can be more accurately considered a cycle of films operating within the horror genre. Moreover, in addition to identifying the year 1998 as the commencement of this cycle, several prominent recurring themes have been identified that mark films belonging within it. To restate, these include but are not necessarily limited to: an emphasis on the supernatural, particularly the vengeful female ghost (this trope can be read as the dissolution of the borders between the dead and the living); narratives steeped in literary traditions, folklore, mythology, and urban legend; widespread concerns over the impact of digital technologies (including conflicts between urban and rural spaces); focus on the rites of passage into adulthood (moving from the semiotic to the symbolic); the prioritising of atmospheric, psychological fear over graphic gore and violence; the family unit and the monstrous mother; looser cause-and-effect narrative structures; reflections on social and socioeconomic pressures (education systems feature prominently in this regard); political and spatial relations to other nations, East and West (specifically in the case of HK-horror). Furthermore, the boundaries between national cinemas are shown to be unstable. Contemporary Asian horror cinema has become transnational, thereby facilitating the imposition of theoretical frameworks from outside the nations of original production. Kristeva's concept of the abject and abjection is evidently one suitable model, identified through the many overlapping themes that also apply to universal human conditions. Some critics have already established thematic links between films from this cycle and Kristeva's theory or affiliated abjection criticism (namely Creed); however, none of these connections are researched to the fullest potential, thus creating a critical gap that can be explored through a sustained analysis of abjection read alongside contemporary Asian

---

[69] Chung also makes the connection between these films and some J-horror productions, namely *Ringu* and *Ju-On: The Grudge.*

horror cinema. In the next chapter, I will outline my methodological approach to this thesis and determine a selection of films to be analysed.

Chapter IV: Methodology

> If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is also true for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be in the end (Michel Foucault, 1982)

4.1 Methods Established

So far, I have engaged with a broad range of topics in two literature review chapters. Given that the aim of this thesis is to reconcile diverse bodies of critical and theoretical literature in a coherent and comprehensive study of a relatively new cinema, exploring the gaps in existing research and thus contributing new knowledge to the field, the lengthy measures are necessary and justified.

In Chapter II, I undertook an extensive review of Kristeva's theory of the abject and abjection. Here, I established my understanding of the concept to concern Kristeva's reworking of the Lacanian model of psychosexual development, as well as the psychological reaction to the threat of destabilization to existing borders and boundaries. According to Kristeva, this reaction can be triggered by anything that reminds the subject of their fragile state of humanity, their mortality – including, blood, wounds, and corpses. To be "abject" is to be something cast aside, radically excluded. In Kristeva's formulation, the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic is key to this process, and the mother is positioned in a pivotal role. Kristeva brings her concept into universal culture when she describes various forms of purging rituals used in many societies to purify the abject.

I moved on to establish a link between the abject and cinema, and in particular horror cinema. I identified Barbara Creed as the forerunner of criticism in this field, while at the same time demonstrating how other scholars value abjection criticism as a viable method of film critique. By literature review, I also dealt with those critics who vehemently oppose the application of abjection criticism. Following this was a justification of my stance that Kristeva's theory is compatible with contemporary Asian horror cinema, while simultaneously identifying gaps in the critical literature. For example, while the

theory is a viable companion to the texts, the area of cinema in question is a relatively new body of films, which Creed's study of exclusively Western films pre-dates. Furthermore, Creed's criteria for reading horror cinema with abjection is often rigid, and her conclusion is broadly sweeping, declaring horror cinema to be conservative. I approach this thesis with no pre-determined conclusions as to such an outcome, only suggestions that I will likely find a more diverse result; one which may suggest that some films within the body of contemporary Asian horror cinema offer challenges to this reading. In his introduction to Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*¸ Leon S. Roudiez notes that Kristeva is "[n]ot 'applying a theory, but allowing practice to test a theory, letting the two enter into a dialectical relationship'" (1980, p.1). It is this process that will continue throughout the thesis.

I have also in Chapter III identified shared key themes across the recent horror cinemas of four Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand) that broadly define contemporary Asian horror cinema, as well as determining that it more accurately operates as a cycle of films within the horror genre, commencing in 1998. The conclusion of Chapter III restates these themes. In reviewing the critical literature in these fields, I also established further potential problems to be addressed: namely, the imposition of a Western theory onto Eastern texts, a concern that chimes with some of the objections to abjection criticism. By recognizing the impact, implications, and licence of globalization and transnational cinemas, I have been able to substantiate my claim that abjection is a useful theoretical tool through which to analyze this body of cinema. While not disregarding the importance of culturally specific readings, I have established that both the theory and the cinemas can transcend national boundaries (in particular, the films have a wide global distribution network and appeal to such audiences). My aim is to broaden the spectrum, not to keep the readings insular. In doing so, two thorough literature review chapters have been essential to establish all the components that combine to drive forward future film analysis chapters.

4.2 Quantitative or Qualitative approach?

Due to the nature of the thesis, my research methodology has been mostly qualitative in order to gather essential information from the relevant cross-disciplinary fields. Certain value(s) must be taken from / ascribed to the aforementioned literatures so that an established model for analysis can be ventured. Some measures that may be considered

quantitative have been taken: for example, garnering a general consensus of opinions in order to categorize a body of film, and to formulate and support my own ideas, as well as for identifying more common oppositions to my methods. However, the primary function of this thesis is to analyze and interpret filmic texts belonging to the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema (the parameters of which have been established in the previous chapter), utilizing Kristeva's theory of the abject and abjection as a supporting model. Each subsequent chapter will discuss a selection of films and proceed to analyze them through and with the theory of the abject and abjection. Comparisons, contrasts, and contradictions will be made when arriving at a conclusion.

4.3 Theory and Film: In Dialogue

Although Kristeva's theory will be used as a lens through which to read contemporary Asian horror cinema, both theory and film will be considered as in dialogue with each other. In other words, there may be occasions when the films speak to the theory of abjection, not just the other way around. Moreover, I have stated earlier that Creed's model for applying abjection criticism to horror cinema (to date, the most sustained and sophisticated) is at times reductive and formulaic, thus drawing some criticism against her methods, application, and abjection criticism more broadly. Some of Creed's methods, however, are useful as a starting point to begin to uncover the ways in which abjection and contemporary Asian horror cinema can (and perhaps in some cases cannot) speak to one another. Creed indicates the presence of certain tropes and visual markers in Western horror film that concord with Kristeva's abjection to produce a viable reading; considering how contemporary Asian horror films might adapt, challenge, or depart from this criterion to produce different readings should prove fruitful. Nevertheless, to avoid redrawing the parameters of this critical model only to fall into the same trap, I will be looking at different qualitative aspects of abjection in each subsequent chapter, for some films will display multiple traits of the abject, and some will be more prominent than others.

4.4 Film Selection: The Final Cut

To achieve a study that considers a wider range from the body of contemporary Asian horror films, a broad selection of texts is necessary. However, contemporary Asian horror cinema could include a vast selection of films. A definite start date, along with films considered as the forbearers of the cycle, has been identified (1998), but there is no

definitive end date to this cycle at this moment in time.[70] A cursory internet search can produce results of near two-hundred films. Furthermore, not all Asian horror films produced after 1998 fall into the cycle based on the common thematic identified in Chapter III. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to identify and analyze each and every one of these films in equal detail, yet the range must still be broad and representative. Not every film selected, moreover, can receive equal attention, nor is it possible to represent all four nations equally, for some countries (notably Japan, followed by South Korea) are more prolific and have more prominent films in their collective output. To implement a fair and representative model of analysis, I divide the following six chapters into categories that deal with different themes that connect the cycle of films with the abject. In each chapter, four or five films will undergo deep analysis in the form of case studies; however, comparisons and contradictions will be drawn from other films in the cycle where necessary. Where appropriate, films will be cross-referenced across multiple chapters.

A broad selection is required to meet the aims of the thesis; nonetheless, to alleviate any possible dilution through excessive analysis of such a large number of films, a large body of films had to be excluded. The first paring of the numerous films yielded a selection of thirty-three films for potential analysis; however, in the interest of clarity, those films were narrowed down to a final selection of twenty-six, from four countries, from which to analyse the key themes in this cycle of cinema. *Ab-Normal Beauty* (Oxide Chun Pang, 2004), *The Doll Master* (Jeong Yong-ki, 2004), *Exodus* (Pang Ho-cheung, 2007), *Gozu* (Takashi Miike, 2003), *Ladda Land* (Sophon Sakdaphisit, 2011), *The Meat Grinder* (Tiwa Moeithaisong, 2009), and *Rigor Mortis* (Juno Mak, 2013) are the films that missed out after the final cut. In total, thirteen films from Japan, eight from South Korea, two from Hong Kong, and two from Thailand, along with one pan-Asian production (*The Eye*) that incorporates both Hong Kong and Thailand will be analyzed as representative of an even larger body of films from the cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema. And although the allocation of films representing each individual country is not even, it does provide a fair reflection of the level of output of productions considered to belong to this category of cinema from each respective nation.

---

[70] Although it has been argued in the previous chapter that the cycle has passed its peak in terms of both critical and commercial popularity and economic revenues, films are still being produced that would meet the criteria for this cycle.

The analytical part of the thesis is divided into two sections, with each section having three chapters. Although each chapter (and its subject matter) speaks to all the other chapters to some extent, and of course feeds into the larger objectives of the thesis, this division serves the purpose of grouping together two closely-related clusters of chapters. This choice aids clarity and facilitates the smooth progression from one chapter/section to the next. Chapter V will begin with a discussion of *Ringu* (Japan) and *Dark Water* (Japan) as part of a chapter that focuses on the narratives of abjection. Two important points emerge from this first chapter of film analysis. The first is that although some of the earlier progenitors of this cycle, particularly *Ringu*, have been written about more than any other contemporary Asian horror film, they are still important texts when considering the cycle as a broader whole. Therefore, it is crucial to outline a reading of these films (again, specifically *Ringu*) in order to attain a base point from which an analysis of the films that followed in the wake of these originators can begin. Secondly, while this chapter focuses specifically on "narratives of abjection," the theme is essential to my interpretation of abjection criticism, is prevalent throughout the cycle, and therefore will be considered in each subsequent chapter to some degree or another. It will be considered as an example of cross-referencing throughout the chapters, as will the revelation that *Ringu* could also be considered for subsequent chapters on digital technology and urban legend. Complementary films in this chapter are *Ringu 2* (Hideo Nakata, 1999), *Uzumaki* (*Spiral*) (Higuchinsky, 2000) and *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman* (Kōji Shiraishi, 2007).

Chapter VI begins to diversify toward one of the themes raised in Chapter V and explores the importance of contemporary technologies to defining a world of horror in contemporary Asian horror cinema, as well as their relationship to abjection theory. *Shutter*, *Phone*, *One Missed Call* (Takashi Miike, 2003), and *Pulse* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001) are the focal points of this chapter. Chapter VII then diverges its attention from narratives of abjection to look at myth, cult, and fairy tale, another prominent theme raised in the earlier film analysis. Here, *Noroi: The Curse* (Koji Shiraishi, 2005), *Suicide Club* and *Noriko's Dinner Table* (both Sian Sono, 2001 and 2005), and *Hansel and Gretel* (Yim Pil-sung, 2007) are the films selected to provide the most representative analysis for this theme. Section two commences with Chapter VIII, a study of the high school and *Sonyeo* sensibilities in four South Korean films: *Whispering Corridors*, *Memento Mori*, *Wishing Stairs*, and *Death Bell*. As mentioned above with regards to *Ringu*, it is important to give attention to *Whispering Corridors* as a forerunner in the cycle. *Ringu* sets the tone for the

rest of the thesis, while *Whispering Corridors* (along with its two nominal sequels and another film set in a Korean high school) commences the second section of analysis. Chapter IX concerns the family and family home and concentrates on *Ju-On: The Grudge*, *A Tale of Two Sisters*, *Acacia*, and *The Eye*. Chapter X concludes the second section of analysis and features the Creedian concept of the monstrous-feminine, taking *Audition*, *Lady Vengeance* (Park Chan-wook, 2005), *Nang Nak*, *Dream Home*, and *Dumplings* as its focal texts.

Section Two: Narratives of Abjection; Technologies; Myth, Cult, and Fairy Tale

Chapter V: The Malady Lingers On: Narratives of Abjection in *Ringu*, *Ringu 2*, *Dark Water*, *Uzumaki*, and *Carved: The Slit-Mouth Woman*

> Because patriarchal authority and bourgeois family values have been undermined or jettisoned in these films, abjection as a source of horror and disruption threatens the symbolic order, generating chaos and catastrophe, mayhem, madness, and murder. (K.K. Seet, 2009, pp.144-145)

5.1 Abjection Narratives

What is a narrative of abjection? And why is it of sufficient importance to warrant the first of a total of six chapters of film analysis? In many ways, this chapter is the foundation of all analysis to follow and the fundamental line of argument throughout the thesis, in that I consistently argue that an analysis of the narratives of abjection is the most useful method through which to read contemporary Asian horror cinema. In future chapters, I isolate certain key themes of abjection and concentrate on their representation in the selected films; however, narratives of abjection are central, and I inevitably return to them in subsequent readings. In other words, each trope of abjection ultimately feeds in to a narrative of abjection; they are parts contributing to a whole. For clarity of argument and coherence of structure, this chapter is also part one of a three-part section that further incorporates chapters on technologies and urban myth.

To answer the question, "What is a narrative of abjection?" it is first useful to recap Kristeva's theory, which is recounted at length in Chapter II. Kristeva discusses abjection as a kind of physical and psychological reaction to certain triggers (often in imagery) that remind the subject of his or her own fragility of existence by drawing attention to the process by which subjectivity and identity are formed, namely through the creation of arbitrary and imaginary borders. In other words, abjection occurs when those borders are threatened with dissolution, and thus identity as we know it is at stake. Kristeva links abjection to her earlier writings, namely the differentiation between the semiotic (associated with feminine, poetic, non-linguistic signification systems, and nature) and the symbolic (conversely, associated with paternal law, order, language, society, and culture). The mother plays an important role in preparing the child for entry into the symbolic

system of intersubjectivity, but at the same time, abjection also occurs as a pre-lingual break from the mother in Kristeva's remodelled system of psychosexual development, which is referred to as the *thetic* break. This break is never clean, and subsequently the abject continually returns to haunt the symbolic subject with the threat of dissolved borders and a return to the (now inconceivable to the speaking subject) nothingness of a former identity, cast aside (abjected) in order to enter the symbolic.

Kristeva goes on to assert that abjection is prevalent in multiple societal systems through examples of different religious and cultural purging rituals designed to ward it off (the structure of her theory, here, indebted to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*, YEAR). In most cases, these rites involve contact with abjection before banishing it to the other side of a redrawn border. However, though Kristeva initially considers actual cultural systems and rituals (usually religious) as her examples of the abject in practice, she ends her text by acknowledging that literary fiction has taken their place as the prime site of abjection catharsis. Post-Kristevan scholars have since demonstrated how Kristeva's theory can be utilised in film studies, with Barbara Creed providing the most detailed and sustained study, albeit applied to an exclusively Western canon of films. Creed utilises abjection criticism to aid her study by setting up criteria through which to read her selected films. First, she employs three key areas of abjection: the construction of borders, mother-child relationships, and the feminine body. Then, through examining visual aspects of the films – namely, imagery of blood, wounds, and corpses, the abjection of the film's monster, and the construction of abject maternal figures – Creed sets out to show that all her selected texts (and by extension, all Western horror films) reach a conservative conclusion in their ideological objectives by redrawing and strengthening those symbolic boundaries (as in the processes described by Kristeva). The aforementioned narratives of abjection, therefore, consist of Kristeva's description of abjection as a psychological process (from both psychical and physical triggers), the processes of engaging with abjection only to dispel it on the other side of the border again, and the consideration of how this takes place in cinema (Creed has offered one suggestion). Commencing with the first two *Ringu* films, I will now examine the significance of abjection narratives in contemporary Asian horror cinema.

5.2 The Process of Eternal Deferment: *Ringu* and *Ringu* 2

Ringu centres on a female journalist, Reiko (Nanako Matsushima), who is investigating the origins of a purportedly cursed video tape. It is rumoured that upon watching the tape, the viewer will immediately receive a phone call forewarning them of their impending death, which occurs seven days later. In the film's opening sequence, Reiko's niece, Tomoko (Yûko Takduchi), informs her friend, Masami (Hitomi Satô), that she had watched the videotape exactly one week ago. Following a series of strange technological disturbances, including the television set switching on by itself, Tomoko is killed off screen, while the camera focuses on Masami's face contorted in terror. Upon discovering her niece's death, Reiko becomes more determined to uncover the origins of the tape. She finds a set of photographs taken by the teenagers and is disturbed by the distorted images of their faces. Reiko's investigation results in her tracing the deaths back to a cabin in Izu – a provincial area on the outskirts of the city – where she discovers an unlabelled tape, which, upon playing, displays a series of bizarre and seemingly random images including a well, a woman brushing her hair in a mirror, a close-up shot of an eye, and the word *eruption* spelled out on screen. Immediately afterwards, Reiko receives the phone call (relayed as a screech similar to the sound that occurs at the beginning of the tape) and realises that she has watched the cursed videotape.

Having fled the cabin after receiving the telephone call, Reiko's belief in the curse is heightened when she sees a photo of herself has developed with her face blurred out, exactly the same as Tomoko's. Fearing that she has only seven days to live, and therefore must solve the mystery within a week, she enlists the help of her ex-husband, Ryuji (Hiroyuki Sanada), making him his own copy of the tape. Ryuji discovers an almost indecipherable dialect on the tape, which he traces back to the island of Oshima. Ryuji is able to make out one message hidden on the tape: "frolic in brine, goblins be thine." Reiko and Ryuji decide to set sail for Oshima, and their desire to conclude the investigation is given further impetus when Reiko discovers that her young son, Yoichi (Rikiya Ôtaka), has also watched the tape. When they arrive in Oshima, they learn of a famous psychic of the island, Shizuko (Masako), who allegedly committed suicide after the media and the island's locals accused her of being a fraud. On the sixth day following Reiko's viewing of the tape, they discover that Shizuko's lost daughter, Sadako (Rie Ino'o), whose psychic powers are alleged to have surpassed her mother's, must have made the tape psionically.

Their accumulated evidence, along with Reiko's vision of Sadako killing a reporter via her psychic powers, leads them to believe that Sadako's vengeful spirit is responsible for the deaths connected to watching the videotape. Returning to Izu, they discover a well buried beneath the cabin. Reiko discovers Sadako's body and frees it from the well. When she does not die after the seventh day, Reiko assumes the curse has been lifted, but shortly afterward Ryuji's television mysteriously switches itself on to reveal the image of the well, from which Sadako emerges, crawling through the television screen and killing Ryuji. Reiko then understands how she alone has avoided death: she has made a copy of the tape. Realising that the curse cannot be lifted but can be avoided through making a copy, Reiko asks her father to make a copy of the tape Yoichi has watched in order to save her son from the curse.

In addition, *Ringu*'s setting provides a clear juxtaposition of the urban and rural, of culture and nature: the metropolis of Tokyo, and the islands of Izu and Oshima. The contrast of locales serves to highlight a sense of the uncanny, as Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano explains: "The mix of familiarity and relative remoteness of these areas gives the film a sense of spatial and temporal reality as well as a mythical undercurrent related to the remnants of pre-modern culture lurking in rural locales" (2009, pp.18-19). Notably, the curse originates from the rural outposts and spreads into the city, and the well that has served as Sadako's watery tomb for thirty years lurks directly beneath the cabin to which Reiko traces back the tape's origins.[71] Wada-Marciano argues that the realism depicted in the film's use of location creates "images that resonate with a sense of Japan as a repository of the 'antiquated' and the 'mysterious'" (p.20). Ramie Takashi asserts that the film's "notion of horror" is "a horror of the past intruding into the present; a remnant of some distant chaos that emerges to disrupt the stability of the here-and-now not only through its actions, but by its very presence" (2003, p.295). What is essentially implied in both narrative and setting is a return of a (somewhat mythical, mysterious, and buried) past into the present, one that blurs the pre-existing borders separating the spiritual rural islands from the modernity of the metropolis via the emergence of the cursed videotape. It is that videotape, as I shall go on to argue, that acts as a conduit for the abject to traverse past and present, semiotic and symbolic.

---

[71] *Ringu 2* reveals that Sadako spent approximately thirty years buried in the well.

Valerie Wee notes that the "video images offer crucial information to [the] film's female protagonist," serving as a "road map" to *Ringu*'s underlying values (2011, p.42). With the tape's almost indecipherable language and the lack of virtually any recognisable semantic meaning in the combination of images, it might be understood as emerging from the realm of the semiotic. It is certainly the source of the horror and the object that not only transmits the curse but allows it to spread from its point of containment (the concealed well) into wider society. All the images captured on the tape originate from a past that is played out in the present. The recurring return of that past is symbolised by a final confrontation with the violent process of separation in the visceral image of Sadako traversing the borders of the television screen. Sadako, however, could be accurately described as a "technologically re-defined chaotic vengeful spirit" (Ancuta, 2015, p.23) in that she emerges from multiple versions (copies) of the original source. This idea links to Eric White's reading of the significance of the simulacrum. He states fully:

> This introduction of the motif of the simulacrum – understood as the copy of a copy – is of considerable interpretive consequence. It turns out that Sadako's revenge upon a cruel world entails the inauguration of a new cultural logic, a logic of the simulacrum according to which copies of copies vary continually from an always already lost original. (2005, p.41).

The implications of simulacra and the multiple copies of Sadako has, White argues, an impact upon the film's depiction of the notion of subjectivity. "Subjected to ceaseless modification," he continues, "the self consequently becomes a contingent assemblage, a bundle of provisional identifications rather than a cohesive unit" (p.45). The dissolution of subjective identity is a key consequence of excessive contact with the abject; it is what threatens the symbolic subject with an irreversible (and fatal) retreat back into the semiotic realm. Being the host site for the curse, and a conduit for its traversing of the semiotic-symbolic borders, the tape (and, consequently, its contents) might be read as representative of a repressed semiotic memory that materialises in the symbolic once the subject has come into contact with it; one which also elicits the same desires and repulsion concomitant with abjection (the compulsion to watch the tape, as demonstrated by the repeated viewings that the film alludes to, collides violently with the look of frozen terror on the contorted faces of the dead or irretrievably altered victims).

If watching the cursed videotape in *Ringu* equates to the abject being released into society, then the plot follows with Reiko's search to banish the curse and restore order – in

other words, to purify against it. Upon engaging with the tape, the viewer has a limited time in which to engage in the purging ritual – copying and passing on – before their identities, in addition to their lives, are threatened.[72] In other words, the tape, once viewed, must be reproduced and rejected to the other side of the life-death border. The physical, concrete object of the tape acts as the border between its semiotic text and the symbolic realm in which it circulates; its content, and the consequences of viewing, symbolise the abstract, intangible qualities of the abject that elicit desire (to watch) and fear (of the repercussions) in the subject, where too much contact equals death. It is this aspect of abjection that threatens to eradicate the subject through re-immersion in the inaugural violence of primal separation. The failure of the viewer to undertake the copying ritual is a failure to purge against the abject and results in their certain death.

The purging rituals as described by Kristeva exemplify what Hal Foster asserts is the "canonical" definition of the abject: "what [one] must get rid of in order to be an I at all" (1996, p.114). To avoid the curse, and subsequent annihilation, the viewer does not, however, necessarily need to decipher the images and symbols on the tape – without recognisable referents, the tape's language is arbitrary within a symbolic system – but it is essential that they comply with the rule of copying the tape and ensure that another watch it. Once the tape has been duplicated, in much the same way that language is learned and replicated, the viewer can bypass the curse and continue to function in the symbolic at the expense of another, while the tape and its abject contents re-enters society, now seen by a new viewer who must repeat the process of copying and rejecting it, *ad infinitum*.[73] The abject, in other words, is not completely banished from society, and it will return to threaten the identity of the individuals within that society with dissolution, destruction, and death on a recurring basis. If its rules are understood, the tape can also be seen to function as a physical site on which aspects of the abject can be projected so that society can act and re-enact the purification ritual to endlessly postpone its threat.

One of Creed's criteria for reading abjection into the horror movie focuses on mother-child dynamics. This relationship is explored in greater detail in Chapter IX but is

---

[72] The threat to identity is demonstrated by the blurring of the subject's image on subsequent photographs following visual engagement with the tape. In *Ringu 2*, this trope is even more prominent when at the end of the film the now-hospitalised Okazaki is haunted on a photograph by the laughing spirit of Kanae, another of Sadako's victims.

[73] Factoring in the events of the sequel, *Ringu 2*, it appears as if those who escape the curse in the first narrative are still affected by it, despite undergoing the purging rituals, as White has pointed out elsewhere.

inextricable from the narrative of abjection in the film. In *Ringu*, there are several interesting examples at work throughout the film: the relationship between Reiko and her son, Yoichi; the relationship between Shizuko and her daughter, Sadako; and the, albeit brief, relationship between Reiko and Sadako, where Reiko acts as a surrogate maternal figure for Sadako. The Shizuko-Sadako relationship is characterised by the failure of the daughter to break from the maternal bond. McRoy relates the key flashback scene depicting this to Shizuko's rejection from the symbolic community:

> Consider, for example, the scene in *Ringu* in which a roomful of exclusively male journalists vehemently reject [her] uncanny psychic abilities and apocalyptic predictions. The men are threatened by more than [Shizuko's] possession of a knowledge that exceeds that of the patriarchal scientific community; it is her ability to vocalize this knowledge and, thereby, insert herself into the realm of public discourse that evokes a virulent fear from the male audience. (2008, p.87).

Sadako's psychic ability, however, is not verbalised at any point, and remains outside of symbolic communication structures; furthermore, the revelation of her capabilities proves fatal to those who reject her mother and label her fraudulent. The condition of Sadako's existence, Katarzyna Ancuta points out, "violates the rules of logic and puts into question the order of the universe, bringing disorder to our doorstep and creating a point of entrance for chaos" (2015, p.24). When Sadako's psychic powers, inherited from but superior to her mother's, are employed to deadly consequences in Shizuko's defence, she too is rejected from society by this same community of fearful males (including her father)[74] and thrown into a well and left to die.

---

[74] However, he is not Sadako's biological father, as the film series later reveals her to have been a product of her mother and a sea monster. In this regard, although the "figure of Sadako […] [utilises] the wronged woman and/or vengeful *Yureii* archetype of conventional Japanese horror" (Balmain, 2008, p.174), the film takes a slight deviation from the typical vengeful, long-haired, female ghost tradition.

Figure 1 *Ringu*

In *Ringu*, Reiko discovers blurred facial features on developed photographs of those who have watched the cursed video tape (left). Later, when she watches the tape, her own photograph develops blurred (right).

Figure 2 *Ringu*

Reiko exhumes Sadako's body from the well (left). Yoichi watches the cursed tape (centre). Reiko realises in horror that she must find a solution to save Yoichi (right). The scenes involving Reiko cradling a cursed child may mirror image one another, but the resurrection of Sadako does not lift the curse. Instead, Reiko learns that the correct purging ritual (or deferment ritual) is to copy the tape for another to watch.

Figure 3 *Ringu*

Sadako emerges through the borders of the television screen to claim her victim.

Discussing *Dark Water* (analysed in detail below), K.K. Seet observes that "metaphors of the womb abound" (2009, p.148). In *Ringu*, the long, narrow, dark passage of the well, sealed at the top, demonstrates Sadako's return to a womb-like space, which in turn shows how Sadako, communicating in semiotic terms and embodying the consequences of abjection, namely the eradication of the speaking symbolic subject, is cast to the other side of a border with the intention to ward off her threat. When Reiko recovers Sadako's body from the well, she releases it back into the society that rejected her, thus re-enacting the *thetic* break that should propel her back into the symbolic and, Reiko assumes, break the curse. Instead, Sadako's continuous rebirth and breaking of boundaries is acted out when she emerges through the television screen to claim her victims, one week after watching the tape. Consequently, White concludes:

> Although *Ringu* employs the traditional motif of the vengeful ghost
> longing for eternal rest, this narrative should not be understood, at least
> in the most familiar sense, as a tale of the uncanny. Sadako's
> emergence from a well of forgetting cannot finally be explained as the
> return of the repressed in the sense of an unresolved trauma that has
> endured in the unconscious, waiting to be exorcised by means of a
> therapeutic catharsis. (2005, p.40)

White is quite right to dismiss any straight-forward reading applying the uncanny. Sadako's repression and return does not represent the crux of the plot, at least not the whole of it, nor does the initially-proposed resolution of resurrecting her restore the balance that the cursed videotape disrupts. Nonetheless, the events of the film can be tied into a more complex reading of a narrative of abjection. Reiko fails to lift the curse by exhuming Sadako's body from the well, and the film reveals that the curse is actually still firmly located within the videotape. That is to say, the ancient curse, levied against a symbolic society which rejected Shizuko and Sadako's spiritualistic practices through a fear of the unknown, is released into an urban, modern society through its technology. The curse, it is revealed, cannot be fully dispelled; but it can be contained, according to McRoy, "through a process of eternal deferment" (2008, p.176).[75] And with this realisation, Reiko then turns her attentions to re-enacting the ritual in order to save her son's life and re-establish his position in the symbolic. This practice follows a similar line to Kristeva's description of abject purifying. Where Kristeva alluded to the "primitive societies" that used religious ceremony to come into contact with and reject the abject, she

---

[75] White observes that the prevalent theme of modern digital technology is also vital. The fear and terror depicted in the film are analogous to the fear of new technologies encroaching on old ways of life.

is referring to the "dividing lines . . . between society and a certain nature" so that filth (which becomes "defilement" in the process) can be "jettisoned" from the symbolic system (1982, p.65). The film depicts society coming into contact with the abject element contained within the cursed videotape before exorcising itself of that curse by making and passing on a copy. Like the abject, the threat can never be eradicated, only endlessly postponed through a loop of ritualistic practice that can never cease.

It seems clear, therefore, that *Ringu* follows a narrative of abjection without limiting the reading to Creed's criteria alone. The image of the corpse, which Creed attests is one of the vital indicators of the abject in cinema, is technically present in *Ringu* in the form of Sadako's dead body being exhumed from the well; however, the recovered cadaver is not central to the plot, proving somewhat misleading in Reiko's quest for a resolution. For Kristeva, the corpse is the ultimate in abjection, for it is death infecting life – in other words, the collapsing of a fundamental boundary of symbolic subjectivity. However, in *Ringu*, it is the reanimating and rebirth of that corpse through modern technologies (where not only does Sadako crawl through the television while the film cuts between her traversing the border of the screen and the abject terror on Ryuji's face, but also the cursed tape acts as a repository that engenders the horror when people view its contents) that facilitate the abject in permeating and disrupting those established borders.[76] In keeping with the aforementioned motifs of contemporary Asian horror cinema, the film employs a characteristic subtlety when it comes to the depiction of gore, instead concentrating on the psychological fears and anxieties of contemporary society. Moreover, it emphasises the mother's role in the ritual. In her book, Creed asserts that the contact with and subsequent rejection of the abject simply redraws and strengthens the social boundaries, ultimately showing the process to be conservative. Initially, this might seem to be the case, with Reiko's actions following a similar line to the expected maternal role in the process of abjection, that is, preparing her son for entry into the symbolic, or more specifically in the case of *Ringu*, ensuring his survival. Colette Balmain would agree. Balmain suggests that not only does the film restore the status quo, but that it also "reaffirms" the "oppressive reality" that constructs Reiko as a "neglectful mother" in the confines of a patriarchal society (2008, pp.174-175). Indeed, Reiko's neglect of her son is

---

[76] Not only does the curse spread through various media, but it also requires a form of mediation to come into effect. In other words, society's collective acceptance of the curse (and its rules) helps to facilitate its increasing potency, for as more people become aware and, consequently, are equally fearful and compelled to view, the more the horror infiltrates symbolic life.

evident throughout *Ringu*. Yoichi's isolation is prominent in the scene at the research library or in his journey from the apartment to school, and most importantly he is left alone on the night before the trip to Oshima, where Reiko's lack of supervision means that she is unable to stop him from watching the cursed videotape.[77] However, while this may be the case, it is absolutely necessary to any reading of *Ringu* to note that the stability of the symbolic is thrown into disequilibrium once the tape enters Reiko's possession. The male bloodline of Ryuji and Yoichi is exposed to the tape as a direct consequence of Reiko's acquisition of it; and when compared to the majority of the tape's victims before these scenes, where the victims are mostly teenage girls whose deaths do not alter the original narrative stability (media investigation into the tape as an urban legend), it may also seem as if the female victims are merely passive, while the threat against the patriarchal line warrants immediate investigation and resolution.[78] Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that Yoichi's guaranteed passage in the symbolic is achieved at the expense of his patriarchal lineage: his father dies after watching the videotape introduced to him by Reiko, while his grandfather blindly and unquestioningly assists Yoichi in copying the tape at the film's conclusion, again at the instruction of Reiko, who is fully aware of what the consequences will be for her father.[79] Furthermore, it is Reiko alone who is able to understand the rules of the curse, and how to avoid it, but without having to fully decode the semiotic text contained within the tape's material.

The figure of Reiko, in fact, contradicts some of the terms of the monstrous-feminine; or perhaps more accurately, she indicates contradictions in the terms of being a monstrous-feminine. On the one hand, she fulfils an expected maternal role in preparing her child for the symbolic by ensuring that he survives the curse; however, this is not achieved by the abjecting of the maternal bond. Creed states that "by constructing the maternal figure as an abject being, the symbolic order forces a separation of mother and infant that is necessary to guarantee its power and legitimacy" (1993, p.69). Conversely, refusing to relinquish the maternal bond can make the mother equally monstrous. Reiko ensures the survival of both herself and her son, but it is at the cost of Yoichi's paternal lineage. Therefore, Reiko could also be constructed as monstrous "because she threatens

---

[77] Further, in *Ringu 2* when Mai finds Yoichi abandoned by his mother in a shopping mall.
[78] It could just as easily be argued that the urgency to halt the effects of the curse increases only when Reiko and Yoichi watch the tape, thereby placing the importance on the resolution for the mother and child, rather than the father.
[79] *Ringu 2* confirms Reiko's father's death as a result of watching the tape without passing on a copy.

the symbolic order" by drawing attention to its frailty (Creed, 1993, p.83). Sadako is equally represented as a monstrous-feminine, for it is she that represents the "eruption" of the semiotic, the spread of the repressed abject element into society, into the symbolic though it is facilitated through Reiko's investigation. Whichever way Reiko may operate as a monstrous-feminine in *Ringu*, her position in the film does not provide underlying support for the patriarchal ideals of a symbolic social system, while at the same time, Sadako's threat to the equilibrium of the symbolic will continue with the tape still in circulation. The film may depict some overarching conservative values in terms of how Creed reads abjection into horror film, as stated above, but the ultimate consequences at the conclusion show that any notion of stasis is only restored at the cost of two paternal positions in the symbolic system, thus demonstrating a form of collateral damage inflicted by the abject contents of the tape (propagated by and through Sadako and Reiko via different means) that confirms those symbolic borders to be a construct.

Set only a matter of weeks after the events of the first film, *Ringu 2* nonetheless throws up some interesting contributions and contradictions to the legend of the cursed videotape established in *Ringu*. In the opening sequence, Sadako's body is once more resurrected from the well and bestowed on her uncle, who gives her a burial at sea (a true return to her origins). Meanwhile, the plot is driven by further investigations, only this time it is not just concerning the origins of an urban legend; while Ryuji's girlfriend Mai (Miki Nakatani), along with his devoted lab assistant Okazaki (Yûrei Yanagi),[80] are determined to find out what has happened to him, a more formal inquiry into Reiko following her disappearance in the wake of the deaths of Ryuji and her father is being conducted under the banner of symbolic law (in the form of the police).

Examples of the "authority" of other formal institutions abound in this narrative. Masami, whose twisted look of terror characterises the opening scene of the first film, is now under supervision at a mental institute after witnessing her friend's death. A mute with a phobia of televisions, Masami is *sans* language and no longer allowed to circulate within open symbolic society. The doctor assigned to her care (Fumiyo Kohinata) also happens to be a paranormal researcher. However, where that may suggest that he is a double-agent of sorts, practising formal medicine and investigating the less-credited

---

[80] In the course of his investigation, Okazaki is handed a copy of the cursed tape by a student named Kanae who has already watched it. Okazaki reneges on his promise to watch the video and make a copy, which becomes important towards the end of the film.

aberrances of nature on the side, his experimental project centres on the dispelling of psychic energy (concluded to be an excess of fear and negative energies). Therefore, he ultimately intends to disprove the curse through showing that paranormal spirits such as Sadako cannot cross the borders between the realms of the living and the dead – in other words, he is attempting to rationalise the events by providing a scientific explanation. Of course, the film goes on to debunk Doctor Kawajiri's theories when Sadako once again materialises in the symbolic, prompting White to note that "we learn in [the] second *Ringu* film, [that] even after the curse has been ostensibly lifted, the living continues to be haunted by Sadako's irrecuperable otherness" (2005, p.41).

Perhaps the most salient point of comparison between the two films concerns the respective fates of Reiko and Yoichi. As discussed above, at the end of *Ringu*, both appear to escape the curse by following the rules for deferment. However, Yoichi's continuation as a symbolic subject is undermined in the second instalment. He, like Masami, has lost his ability to speak – a significant impact upon his symbolic status;[81] moreover, he has started to develop psychic powers that are not only emerging as a result of his possession by Sadako, but which also appear to rival Sadako's in their destructive capabilities. Reiko, meanwhile, appears to receive retrospective symbolic punishment for her actions at the conclusion of the first film, being run over and killed by a lorry as, with Yoichi, she attempts to escape custody after they are arrested following the death of Kanae (Kyoko Fukada) (a student who had watched the tape). Upon their arrest, Reiko and Yoichi are kept apart, a forced separation of mother and child by symbolic authority figures due to the threat posed as a result of their semiotic powers (both acting as conduits for the deadly Sadako). Reading *Ringu* and *Ringu 2* collectively, White observes that survivors of the curse "fall victim to a logic of the simulacrum as well: they will never again quite be themselves" (p.41). This appears to be the case for Yoichi, Reiko, and Masami, the latter two being killed off in the sequel (Masami dies after psychic experimentation by Kawajiri goes wrong and summons Sadako). Furthermore, the deferral of the curse, as seen in *Ringu*, has caught up with Reiko and Yoichi, with the former paying the ultimate price with her death, while the latter is denied access to the symbolic's system of language. This

---

[81] The narrative now appears to show that without his paternal lineage, Yoichi is denied language.

acquisition of psychic powers now positions him as a double for Sadako, the original threat of the abject in the first film.[82]

Another major development from the plot in the first instalment of the series is that the rules for summoning Sadako have changed. In *Ringu*, only those who watch the tape and do not successfully pass on a copy for another to watch are subject to the curse, which results in the materialisation of the vengeful Sadako exactly one week later; in *Ringu 2*, it appears that anyone who has had any form of close encounter with the tape or Sadako acquires the psychical capacity to either summon her, replicate her powers, or act as a conduit for her re-materialisation in society. When Masami approaches the television set in the psychiatric institution, the picture on screen distorts into the image of the well notable from the cursed tape in *Ringu*. In the fatal psychic experiments performed by Kawajiri, aiming to project and expel excess psychic energy onto a blank tape, Masami instead projects the imagery from the original videotape, thus resummoning Sadako. Yoichi, as discussed above, acquires a more potent strain of those powers. In addition, Mai, who also takes on the role of female protagonist in place of Reiko, demonstrates an ability to communicate telepathically with Yoichi and becomes another conduit for Sadako, having earlier watched the tape as part of her investigation.

Later in the film, Yoichi becomes Mai's *de facto* ward after he is orphaned. Taking on the role of a surrogate mother figure, she assumes the responsibility of warding off the abject threat of Sadako and Shimizu after they appear to Yoichi in a dream/vision after returning to Oshima Island. Mai's centrality to the film also ensures that the main characters and plotlines converge at the institution, where Doctor Kawajiri's experimentations take place. Both Mai and the psychiatric institute are important for understanding the film's narrative of abjection. First, the hospital represents a place of symbolic authority for containing those perceived as not conforming to a standardised level of sanity according to law – Masami is already confined there at the beginning of the film; later, Reiko and Yoichi are detained there after Mai surrenders them to the authorities. Second, it is the place where medical authorities experiment on patients (the subjects all female except Yoichi, who himself is doubled with the abject Sadako and

---

[82] Notably, the *Ringu* series now shows a gender twist on the conditions for acquiring these psychic powers, where males seem just as susceptible as females; however, this may be due to Yoichi's young age and the fact that, generally in Japanese culture, children are not considered to have a separate identity from the mother until the age of seven. This is discussed further in the analysis of *Dark Water* below.

shown to be exempt from gendered symbolic subjectivity) and attempt to scientifically disprove the existence of the curse. In *Flowers from Hell: The Modern Japanese Horror Film*, Jim Harper notes that "the psychiatrist's experiments not only fail to solve the problem but also threaten to release even more of Sadako's power into the world" (2008, p.124). The institute, in both its ostensible function and its practices depicted in the text, attempts (albeit unsuccessfully) to use experimentation to detain, contain, and eradicate any traces of semiotic excess.

With regard to Mai and her assumed role as a substitute mother figure for Yoichi, the film depicts her attempts to enable him to continue his passage into the symbolic. Where Reiko appeared to have achieved this in *Ringu* by following the rules of deferment, Mai does so by offering to become a conduit in a final experiment to rid Yoichi of Sadako's curse once and for all – by expelling the abject properties from the young boy. Here, the curse, and subsequent contact with the abject Sadako, is shown to be a site of both fear and compulsion, with Mai and Yoichi having to re-engage with it in order to banish the threat. This particular experiment involves trying to deflect Sadako's hateful energy out of Yoichi and into a swimming pool, which Kawajiri believes will neutralise it. Once more, the attempt goes awry; Kawajiri commits suicide by jumping into the electrically-charged swimming pool, Sadako's uncle Takashi also drowns in the ensuing melee, while Mai and Yoichi find themselves inside of Sadako's well. *Ringu 2* takes a more telling twist when the ghost of Ryuji appears to absorb Sadako's rage, which subsequently frees his son along with Mai. In this narrative, therefore, it must be concluded that it is the father who sacrifices for his son so that the surrogate family of Mai and Yoichi may live; otherwise, the ending to *Ringu 2* mirrors the first film, with the mother figure and son surviving after a close encounter with the abject. This significant amendment, along with the deaths of Kanae, Masami, and, specifically, Reiko[83] alters the dynamic of the first narrative somewhat in that the symbolic not only gets its "revenge" for the collateral damage caused in *Ringu*, but in that it is ultimately the father figure who enables the son to banish the threat of abjection, projecting a more conservative conclusion. At the same time, a

---

[83] Where in the first film, Reiko is able to survive by correctly reading the tape as a semiotic/abject text, at the expense of her ex-husband and father, in *Ringu 2*, not only is she killed off once the rules have changed, but the only cost to the patriarchal institution is more evenly balanced alongside the death of Doctor Kawajiri and Takashi. Additionally, Okazaki also ends up trapped in the psychiatric hospital after Kanae's spirit materialises to haunt him for not watching the tape that she passed on to him, as he had promised.

Figure 4 *Ringu 2*

Mai, assuming the role of maternal protector for Yoichi, consents to undergo psychic experiment in an attempt to rid her ward from Sadako's curse in *Ringu 2*. This experiment goes awry and instead unleashes Sadako in physical form.

Figure 5 *Ringu 2*

After a confrontation with Sadako's animated corpse in the well, it is Yoichi's father, Ryuji, who returns (in spirit form) to save his son.

narrative of abjection still persists throughout, with the central characters having to figure out a way to postpone the threat of abjection through contact with Sadako, while the eruption of the semiotic within the walls of a symbolic institution still undermines the authority invested in such structures.

5.3 Throwing the Baby out with the Bathwater: Abjecting the Maternal Bond in *Dark Water*

Regarding the mother-child relationship, *Ringu* might first suggest that a re-enactment of the primal birth scene can expunge the horror of the curse, before going on to abruptly eliminate that solution in exchange for a temporary resolution of deferment. Similarly, the mother-daughter relationships in *Dark Water* are vital to its own narrative of abjection. Like *Ringu*, *Dark Water* focuses on a single mother, Yoshimi (Hitomi Kuroki), who is entangled in a custody battle with her ex-husband for her only daughter, Ikuko (Rio Kanno). As in the *Ringu* films, isolation is also a key factor in the mother-daughter relationship in *Dark Water*; the opening scene shows a young Yoshimi staring into the pouring rain after being neglected by her parents, with the scene then cutting to Ikuko mirroring that loneliness after Yoshimi has failed to collect her from school. After moving into a dilapidated apartment block, Yoshimi and Ikuko's home becomes infiltrated by water coming from a leak in the apartment upstairs. Along with the gradual penetration of water into the apartment, Yoshimi becomes plagued with terror by the recurring but unexplained presence of a red school bag, and soon after the bag's appearance she begins to spot a child in a yellow anorak patrolling the apartment building.

Like *Ringu*'s Reiko and *Ringu 2*'s Mai, Yoshimi conducts an investigation into these strange occurrences and soon learns that the apartment upstairs once belonged to the family of a missing girl, Mitsuko (Mirei Oguchi), who disappeared over a year ago. Mitsuko would have been of a similar age to Ikuko and attended the same kindergarten at which Ikuko is now enrolled. Furthermore, Yoshimi also starts to notice a shift in Ikuko's behaviour, who now seems to be drawn toward an imaginary friend and frequently escapes the apartment. Yoshimi's increasing paranoia – which has been reported back to the father, framed as neglect, thus giving him the advantage in the custody battle – leads to her following a vision of Mitsuko to the roof of the apartments, whereupon she discovers

through a psychic vision that Mitsuko fell into the water tank on the roof and perished there.[84]

While Yoshimi is investigating on the roof, Ikuko, is once again left alone in the apartment, this time while in the bath. Dark, murky water begins spurting out of the taps, Ikuko is pulled under the water by a distorted image of Mitsuko, and is found unconscious on the floor when Yoshimi returns. Yoshimi, trying to escape the flooding apartment, carries Ikuko's limp body into the lift. Yoshimi, however, looks up as the lift doors are closing to see she has left Ikuko behind and that the body she is cradling in the lift is the ectoplasmic form of Mitsuko. After her initial terror and subsequent repulsion at, and rejection of, Mitsuko, Yoshimi consents to be her mother. Meanwhile, Ikuko approaches the lift doors, which emit a gush of brown water upon opening, although Yoshimi and Mitsuko have now disappeared. The film then jump-cuts to a scene depicting a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl Ikuko (Asami Mizukawa) returning to the apartment building. She reunites briefly with the ghostly image of her mother, although her recollections of the events ten years ago are nebulous. Yoshimi, however, refuses Ikuko the permanent reunification she seeks, as she is bound to remain with the ghost-child, Mitsuko.

One of the key differences in the narratives of *Ringu* and *Dark Water* is that Reiko's attempt to act as a surrogate mother for Sadako is ineffective, whereas Yoshimi's acceptance of that role for Mitsuko is essential to ending the hauntings. On closer inspection, however, the ultimate conclusions to these narratives of abjection are not so different. Both mothers have to enact a ritual that allows their child passage into the symbolic: for Reiko it is the copying of the tape – essential to defer the threat of its contained abjection – while for Yoshimi it is the severance of her strong maternal ties to Ikuko, which once again highlights a significant dilemma that positions the figure of the mother in culture as abject for not breaking the maternal bond with the child and abject(ed) for having done so, the latter presented as necessary for symbolic identity to occur. E. Ann Kaplan's critical analysis of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* sums up succinctly that "the mother as abject would result from the necessary separation from the mother" (1992, p.42). Chapter IX deals with mother-child relationships in greater depth, while Chapter X

---

[84] Psychic visions of female protagonists are already proving to be a common theme of the J-horror. The use of thoughtography, or *nensha*, highlights the collapse of boundaries between the dead and the living by projecting ghosts and spirits into the symbolic realm or onto material objects (such as the photographs in the *Ringu* films).

discusses the monstrous-feminine, which is often conflated with the mother figure; however, suffice to say at this point that the role of the mother plays a crucial part in narratives of abjection. In both *Ringu* and *Dark Water*, those roles are essential, for it is a re-enactment of an inevitable, and symbolically necessary, encounter with abjection in society that allows the child to continue as a symbolic subject. What is even more interesting is factoring in the subsequent events of *Ringu 2*. Accepting that *Ringu* and *Dark Water* achieve similar resolutions through different approaches to the *thetic* break, *Ringu 2* re-emphasises those initial differences with its subsequent treatment of Reiko and Yoichi in the sequel (discussed above). Taking all three films together, it appears as though the severance of the maternal bond is crucial for the children of these films to achieve symbolic identity: in *Ringu 2*, Reiko is subsequently killed off, with Yoichi becoming more associated with the semiotic and the abject, while Yoshimi's forced separation from Ikuko in *Dark Water* allows the latter's continued existence in the symbolic realm (the most obvious assumption is that her father obtains custody after Yoshimi consents to being Mitsuko's otherworldly surrogate mother) – while Yoshimi is forever destined to remain as the mother to the ghost child whose death will permanently prevent her from becoming a symbolic subject.

Throughout *Dark Water*, Yoshimi is repeatedly reminded that her advantage in the custody battle might only be temporary due to Ikuko's age: for example, she is informed by her legal representative that "with children under seven, the mother has the advantage." Seven appears to be the age where the child becomes associated with the father (and, more broadly, the symbolic), and it seems inevitable that Ikuko, almost six years old, will eventually transfer into the father's custody. This idea traces back to older Japanese culture, as pointed out by Balmain: "In Japanese folklore, a child is considered a foetus, as not having an identity separate from the mother until it reaches the age of seven" (2008, p.141). The looming threat of a potential separation to a relationship constructed upon a foundation of heavy, mutual dependency causes terror and panic in Yoshimi's already tormented psyche. The importance of this age to the passage from semiotic to symbolic, and therefore the text's semiotic marker of this rite, is mirrored in Yoshimi and Ikuko's first encounter with the apartment building: from outside the temporary maternal home, Ikuko counts the number of floors but is interrupted when she reaches five; significantly, the top floor, where Mitsuko remains in limbo, is the seventh. Yoshimi is fully aware of the limited time that society will permit her the role of primary carer. In short, Yoshimi

and Ikuko's relationship, built on a dependency that will soon be suppressed by society and culture's demand to break, is in the process of being forced to dissolve via another patriarchal institution: law. As we have seen in *Ringu 2*, such institutions are sites of detainment and containment, as well as the arena for conducting rational, scientific experiments to explain the supernatural; in *Dark Water*, those forces will compel the mother and child to separate at the symbolically-determined appropriate age. The binaries between the patriarchal symbolic and the feminine semiotic are once again in force via the culture-nature distinction, as Balmain observes from analysing the opening scene: "In *Dark Water*, femininity is associated with superstition, the supernatural and the subjective, whilst masculinity is linked with the rational, the observable and the objective" (2008, p.138). Furthermore, Mitsuko, as a ghost-child, remains eternally five-years-old, having died in the water tank when she was a similar age to Ikuko. Like *Ringu*'s Sadako, Mitsuko was neglected, rejected, and abandoned by her parents before she reached the age associated with the father's realm. The watery grave that subsequently seals her fate reflects the enclosed, damp space within which Sadako was consigned to die. Mitsuko cannot take her place in the symbolic order, which eventually positions her as the ideal substitute child for a mother reluctant to relinquish the maternal bond.

K. K. Seet understands the importance of Mitsuko's prohibition from the symbolic order, stating that "[i]t is therefore significant that the ghost-child jettisons her schoolbag, emblematic of schooling and socialization into the law of the father, when she craves reunion with Yoshimi as her surrogate mother" (2009, p.146). It must also be significant, therefore, that the semiotically-charged red bag is rejected by Yoshimi when Ikuko discovers it, signifying her fear of loss and reluctance to allow Ikuko's inevitable transference into the law of the father. It is perhaps, then, of paramount importance that the returning Ikuko, in the film's final scene, is semantically encoded in her school uniform, having been permitted access into the symbolic after Yoshimi substituted her for Mitsuko.[85] Ikuko's desire to return to a place that was once a site of pure fear serves to remind the spectator of the dual pull of the abject, and that abjection itself cannot be fully purged, but instead is only discarded on the other side of a border that separates the subject from the jettisoned object, allowing the subject to continue to be; once those borders are

---

[85] However, in the South Korean high school films discussed in Chapter VIII, the school uniform can also visually distinguish the schoolgirl from the (symbolic) adult realm.

collapsed or permeated, the concoction of fear and desire continues to haunt the subject, as in this reunification with her mother sought by Ikuko.

According to Creed, the mother who does not let go of her child is representative of the abject maternal figure and constructed as a monstrous-feminine. Abjection is also linked to the mother through the polluting objects associated with her. In Kristeva's formulation of abjection, there are two types of polluting object: excremental and menstrual. Each type of object poses a threat to social order, as Kristeva attests:

> Excrement and its equivalents . . . stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (1982, p.71)

Creed draws upon these two polluting objects to assert that all of horror cinema visualises this area of abjection to construct the figure of the monstrous-feminine. The mother is, of course, connected biologically to the menstrual and, as Creed argues, to the excremental through her role in sphincteral training, demarcating what is clean and unclean (1993, p.12). In *Dark Water*, it might be argued that Yoshimi initially fails (or possibly refuses) to implement the distinction of clean and dirty because Ikuko is exposed to the caliginous water that pervades their apartment in spaces that are culturally associated with cleansing rituals: primarily, the bathroom, which is the setting for Ikuko's closest physical encounter with Mitsuko. Conversely, the water that emerges from between Mitsuko's legs in the hide and seek scene at the school is clean. It is only in the climactic lift scene that the polluted water is expelled after the lift doors open following the unification of Yoshimi and Mitsuko; crucially, this scene excludes Ikuko who is looking on from the other side of the elevator shaft, separated on the other side of the borders of the lift and the water. It is only at this point that the *thetic* break is re-enacted to force Ikuko to take up her role in the symbolic. Balmain summarises by stating that in *Dark Water*, Yoshimi "decides to become Mitsuko's mother in order to appease the vengeful foetus and to protect Ikuko, thereby putting her obligations to the wider community over her familial duty in the present" (2008, p.142). This observation connects to Kristeva's idea of primal mapping, where the mother prepares their child for symbolic identity through the distinctions of clean-unclean and pure-impure by way of identifying a border to separate the two. Yoshimi undergoes

Figure 6 *Dark Water*

In *Dark Water*, Ikuko, here with semiotically-encoded red bag, curiously peers into the rooftop water tank, where her new friend, the ghost child Mitsuko, died several years ago (left). Yoshimi rescues Ikuko from being dragged under the caliginous bath water, after Mitsuko attempts to pull her under (right).

Figure 7 *Dark Water*

Yoshimi sacrifices (abjects) the bond with her biological daughter to become an eternal mother figure for Mitsuko (left). Ikuko remains on the other side of the lift (the border, in this case), while the polluted water is expelled (right).

such an act in this scene, with the doors of the elevator shaft and the surge of water emanating from it providing a separation between the semiotic mother and ghost-child, and Ikuko.[86]

As has been shown in my analysis, the abject border can take many different forms in contemporary Asian horror cinema: spatial, temporal, and even ontological, and it is often manifested in the form of many different physical objects. In *Dark Water*, as the title suggests, water plays a prominent part in how the film constructs such borders as part of the narrative of abjection. Balmain notes the pervasiveness of water in J-horror:

> Water, as we have already seen, is associated in Japanese horror cinema
> with pollution, impurity and the archaic maternal body. Its
> juxtaposition with the urban legend of the videotape and Tomoko's
> subsequent death [in *Ringu*] immediately constructs a relationship
> between femininity, technology and death. (2008, p.171)

In addition, the sea is instrumental to Sadako's origins and the site of her entombment. Water also plays a key role in *Ringu 2*: Dr. Kawajiri attempts to use a pool of water as a repository for excess psychic energies, while the climactic scene revisits Sadako's well. Furthermore, if the aqueous content of *Dark Water* also acts as a key border, then it is also the transgressor of its own boundaries, for it can permeate liminal spaces that are intended to distinguish inside and outside: Yoichi's apartment, the lift, the water tank. Moreover, water is used in the film to distort identity. Mitsuko's face, for example, is always obscured: the hood on her yellow raincoat, the water-stained missing child poster, and her representation in the tradition of the Japanese *Yureii* with long, wet, black hair covering her face. When Ikuko is pulled under the water in the bath by Mitsuko, it is her whole identity, as well as her life, that is threatened to be subsumed. The obscurity of visual markers and identity also reflect the consequences of abjection visualised in *Ringu*, where not only do the viewers of the tape have their features distorted on subsequent pictorial representations, but also Sadako's face is obscured by her long, black hair, thus placing her in the trope of the *Yureii*.

Ikuko's diminished memory of the events indicates both a primary and secondary repression at work in the text when read as a clouded remembrance of a violent and painful split from maternal unity. Ikuko still longs for the fantasy of dependency and fused identity

---

[86] The elevator shaft demonstrates another womb metaphor, which, as discussed above, abound in the film, according to K.K. Seet.

that she once had with her mother, although, as Alison Weir points out in her reading of Kristeva's essay "*Stabat Mater*," the idealised relationship is not formulated through the mother but is instead based upon "our memory of our relationship to her" (1993, p.81). Moreover, when Yoshimi comes too close to the corpse-like Mitsuko, she is consumed by the abjection that remains on her side of the border. Hal Foster observes that a "crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is the slippage between the operation *to* abject and the condition *to be abject*. For her the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society, while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations" (1996, p.114). Linking to ideology of the horror film, Creed reminds us that the mother who does not let go of the maternal ties is constructed as monstrous:

> The ideological project of [most] horror films . . . appears to be . . . constructing monstrosity's source as the failure of paternal order to ensure the break, the separation of mother and child. This failure, which can also be viewed as a *refusal* of the mother and child to recognize the paternal order, is what produces the monstrous. (1993, p.38)

Yoshimi both abjects and is abject: she refuses to relinquish the *chora*-like bond that she shares with Ikuko, but to allow Ikuko to continue as a subject in the symbolic, she substitutes her for the perpetual ghost-child, always-already rejected from entry into the symbolic. Thus, she sacrifices herself to abjection and performing the necessary severance from Ikuko. Moreover, Ikuko becomes a symbolic subject by being abjected (as opposed to the one who abjects the mother), and the final scene demonstrates the pull of the semiotic that remains once the subject has taken up their position in the social symbolic. As in *Ringu*, the resolution is never permanent, and the abject continues to exist within symbolic systems to haunt its subjects. However, where Creed suggests that the encounter with abjection in horror ideology ultimately re-draws the lines, thus denouncing all as wholly conservative, one must also consider the fragile dividing line between action and condition of an abject figure, as noted by Foster. In *Ringu*, Reiko regenerates the semiotic-symbolic border by having her father copy the tape that Yoichi has viewed so that she can separate herself and her son from the threat of abjection, and in so doing she preserves the status of patriarchy while simultaneously striking a blow against it by exposing Yoichi's paternal bloodline to the tape's abject contents; in *Dark Water*, Yoshimi operates as an abject figure before finally creating a boundary that prevents Ikuko from being swallowed by abjection (redrawn in the final scene, when the older Ikuko is again rejected). In both

cases, the ghost-child, always-already abject, is contained within the narrative through the actions of the mother figure, while the living child, in contrast, takes his or her role in the symbolic order as a result of her actions, though not without a cost.

5.4 Spirals, Scissors, Snakes, and Mirrors: Further Narratives of Abjection in *Uzumaki* and *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman*

With the plot split into four parts – "A Premonition," "Erosion," "Visitation," and "Transmigration" – *Uzumaki* (also known as *Spiral*) is set in a small, rural town (Kurouzu), whose occupants become manically obsessed with spiral patterns, appearing in many forms, with the end result being their deaths. *Uzumaki* is framed with the lead protagonist, a high-school girl named Kirie Goshima (Eriko Hatsune), telling the story of her small town after the event; as she narrates, a close-up shot of a dead schoolboy zooms out to reveal his body to be at the bottom of a spiral staircase (superimposed with other spiralesque imagery), a premonition of a forthcoming death.[87] The shot rotates as it pans out, as if to imitate the geometry of a spiral; thus, the spectator is instantly drawn in to the curse that besets the Kurouzu inhabitants.[88] In the following sequence, Kirie realises that she is late for meeting her boyfriend, Shuichi (Fhi Fhan), at the spiral tunnel on the edge of town, and as she runs through the town to her destination, the topography of Kurouzu is laid out, while the spectator is also introduced to Yamaguchi[89] (Sadao Abe; a high school student chasing Kirie's affections) and Mr. Saito (Ren Ôsugi; Shuichi's father). Mr. Saito is seen in a trance-like state and is filming a snail on a railing. This is the first sign in the plot of the oncoming spiral curse. Later, Kirie tells Shuichi what she saw, though Shuichi is not surprised and comments on his father's growing obsession and spiral-themed collection of items. Shuichi asks Kirie to elope with him, for he feels that the town has been cursed by spirals. Shuichi's father is also shown filming Mr. Goshima (Taro Suwa) spinning clay to make ceramic earthenware, fascinated by the spiral patterns caused by the rotating clay. He tries to enlighten Mr. Goshima on "the true spiral" and tells him that with spirals you can "sense a deep rhythm" (as well as mentioning the dizziness and fascination

---

[87] Strictly speaking, it is a helical staircase.

[88] Throughout the film, digitally-added spiral patterns can be seen appearing in various scenes, often as part of the skyline or in the bottom corner of the screen, outside any of the characters' point of view, and away from the central focus of the shot.

[89] Yamaguchi has a penchant for jumping out of hiding places to "surprise" his female school friends. While he converses with Kirie and professes his affections, the film cross-cuts between each speaker, but with each cut back to Yamaguchi he has rotated ninety degrees until he has completed a full rotation.

that they induce). Here, the first connection with Kristeva's concept of abjection is made clear: Mr. Saito experiences a pull towards the spiral while at the same time experiencing a form of nausea. His (and subsequently the other residents of Kurouzu's) fixation on spirals will have much graver consequences, and a greater connection to its narrative of abjection unfolds as the film progresses into its second part.

The first death is of Miyazaki (the boy from the opening shot); his death, however, is attributed to an accident caused by performing gymnastics on the handrail at the top of the staircase. The final scene of the first part then revels that Shuichi has thrown out his father's spiral collection in a bid to help him overcome his obsession; initially irate at both his son and his wife, Mr. Saito adopts a philosophical attitude to the events, claiming that he no longer needs the physical objects, as the abstract concept, the mere idea of the spiral, is sufficient. "You bring the spiral out of yourself," he tells his wife and son, before rotating his eyeballs in a spiral motion. The second part begins at the high school, where another of Kirie's classmates, Katayama (Tomoo Fukatsu), arrives late for class and is covered in slime. His nervous teacher observes that he only comes in when it rains. After he is tripped up on the way to finding his seat, a pulsation is shown coming from his back. Meanwhile, Mr. Saito has since killed himself by crawling into a washing machine in order to become one with the spiral and get a point of view shot for his film.

Mr. Saito's death kick-starts a chain of events in the plot. At his funeral, Mrs. Saito (Keiko Takahashi) observes a spiral cloud of black smoke forming in the sky, which has emanated from the crematorium. Mrs. Saito claims that it is her husband. Kirie then notices the twisting tail of black smoke heading towards a local landmark, Dragonfly Pond. Mr. Saito's death also draws the attention of a reporter named Tamura (Masami Horiuchi), who investigates both the death and the curse that has afflicted the town, starting with the video recordings made by Mr. Saito. Tamura traces the strange occurrences back to the prophecies of local ancient soothsayers and discovers two cults – the "mirror" and the "serpent" – that both made use of spirals in their iconography, as well as discovering old artefacts belonging to these cults as salvaged from Dragonfly Pond. Meanwhile, the grief-stricken Mrs. Saito is committed to a hospital, where she also becomes obsessed with all things spiral, especially her fingerprints and other parts of her anatomy, which leads her to cutting off her own hair and fingernails. Throughout the town, the curse has soon spiralled out of control, with Kirie's father shown clearly to be under

the spell, staring at spiral patterns on his eyeballs in the mirror. Also, a girl at Kirie's school, Sekino[90] (Hinako Saeki), has permed her hair into cascading spiral patterns (which continue to enlarge to unfeasible proportions in each subsequent shot), while Tsumura (Hassei Takano), another student, is becoming like Katayama, slowing down, taking in excess amounts of water, and developing a pulsation in his back. The second part of the film ends when Yamaguchi, after his advances are once again thwarted by Kirie, throws himself in front of Tamura's car (as he rushes back to tell Kirie and Shuichi of his discovery). Yamaguchi is wrapped around one of the front wheels of the car in a spiral shape, as well as having created a spiralled crack in the windscreen at the point of impact.

The third and fourth parts of the film are presented as shorter segments than the preceding two. "Visitation" commences with a long shot of a hospital corridor; at the far end, a spiralling vortex appears. Next, we are shown a millipede making its way through the corridors to burrow in Mrs. Saito's ear. She is initially repulsed, but then starts to become tormented with the appearance of spiral patterns and the sound of her dead husband's voice entreating her to join him: "The spiral is deep inside you," he says. The film cuts to Mrs. Saito's funeral, and, as with her husband's funeral earlier, the plumes of black smoke coming from the crematorium form a spiral that engulfs the sky, only this time Mrs. Saito's face is clearly visible in it. The widespread obsession has now begun to result in either the deaths or complete transformation of many of the Kurouzo residents. A TV reporter and her crew are reporting on the invasion of giant snails at a local high school (Katayama and Tsumuro, among others). The crew then try to leave the town via the spiral tunnel, but one of them notes that there appears to be no way out. Inside the school, Sekino now leads a gang of girls down the corridors, with each girl staring transfixed at her hair, while also sucking spiral-patterned lollipops. Even Shuichi becomes possessed by the curse, warning Kirie to get away beforehand, but urging her to become at one with him and the spiral as soon as his transformation occurs and his body begins to twist and contort. The fourth and final part of the film is by far the shortest segment, lasting little more than a few minutes, and is presented in montage form, wrapping up the fates of the remaining town-folk: Sekino, her spiralled hair now reaching the skies, is dead and leans up against a lamppost; the camera crew in the spiral tunnel have all transformed into

---

[90] Sekino cuts an interesting figure in that she comes to resemble the figure of the Medusa, a figure of both the castrated (for Freud) and the castrator (for Creed). For a comparison of the two interpretations, see Creed (1993, p.111).

snails; Kirie's father has drilled out his own eye; and Shuichi is dead, with his contorted body lay prone on the floor. Finally, a shot of Dragonfly Pond shows that the vortex has completely engulfed the sky over Kurouzu. The film's plot itself takes a circular twist, as it closes with the same narration from Kirie.

Uzumaki's abjection narrative is presented in a different style to the *Ringu* films and *Dark Water*. However, the film has many similar themes to those films discussed above: a supernatural curse has been unleashed either within or from the locus of a rural town, which prompts an investigation into its origins, and is ultimately revealed to be steeped in ancient mythology, cult, and legend. However, where the aforementioned films depict the abject element being brought into society to subsequently be rejected again, *Uzumaki*'s connection to Kristeva's theory chimes more with the assertion that the abject underpins all societies as a force of both repulsion and compulsion. Andy Richards touches upon this phenomenon when he links the film's structure back to the looser cause-and-effect narratives that often characterise these films: "[T]he film doesn't concoct any glib explanations for the phenomenon…, [instead] it suggests a concealed, cosmic patterning underpinning our existence which we gradually succumb to and are absorbed into" (2010, p.69). McRoy also emphasises this point:

> As Tamura discovers during his investigation into Shuichi's father's suicide (depicted via montage), not only do spirals appear continually throughout nature (from galactic formations, to weather patterns, to fingerprints, etc.), but they have been immortalised in art works dating back thousands of years and bridging multiple cultures. (2008, p.157)

In short, the cause of the terror in the small town, the spirals, are naturally-occurring phenomena from an ancient past that have once more materialised in the present. Furthermore, the linear narrative of the film begins to dissolve into non-linear montage as it progresses through each of its four parts, suggesting that the coherence of the text (in line with symbolic understanding of speech, language, and causality), is eroded as the threat of abjection engulfs the town, leaving the final part as a selection of segregated stills, the non-linear aspect of which evokes the realm of the semiotic.

Abjection, Kristeva argues, is timeless in societies (always-already ever-present) and bridges multiple cultures, and in *Powers of Horror*, she relates the experience as both a psychological and physical reaction to the dissolution of known social and cultural boundaries. In *Uzumaki*, known subjectivity begins to collapse for the Kurouzu residents

once they become enthralled by the spiral patterns that begin to emerge in all aspects of their day-to-day lives. The compulsion that comes with the obsession draws the victims into a desire to become at one with the spirals, to retreat into the ancient phenomena that they find inexplicably compelling.[91] Once again, McRoy touches upon the spirals' potential to both attract and repel when he says that the film "posits entropic dissolution as both an 'end' to be feared, as well as a 'means' to potential and corporeal social transformation" (2008, p.136). This statement is true on several counts: many sufferers of the curse undergo, or at least believe themselves to have undergone, either a physical or psychological transformation as a direct result of becoming one with the spiral; for example, Mr. Saito believes himself to be enlightened and spiritually transformed, progressing (in his own estimation) from a material collection of spiral-themed junk to total nirvana in the mere abstract idea of the spiral, while Sekino's popularity in the high school increases exponentially after she crimps her hair into spiral patterns. However, too much contact with the spirals results in complete subjective annihilation and, ultimately, death, as shown in the final two parts of the film.[92]

Unlike the investigations in the *Ringu* films and *Dark Water*, which uncover the causes of their films' respective curses, Tamura is unable to find the root cause of the spiral plague in *Uzumaki*, only discovering that the imagery can be traced back to ancient cultures and the location. Perhaps the reason for this is simply because in *Uzumaki* there is no underlying reason for the spirals to project themselves into society other than the fact that they are immemorial, though simply remain dormant for periods of time before re-emerging. Abjection, according to Kristeva, "preserves [both] what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship … [and the] immemorial violence" of that relationship (1983, p.10), and the impact of this confrontation with the revenants of an ancient past clearly draws the Kurouzu townsfolk "toward the place where meaning collapses" (1983, p.2). Once again, the presence of the abject element is shown to be "at once, particular and universal" (Wada-Marciano, 2012, p.32) in that it has specific implications for the specific culture, while at the same time maintaining a more universal resonance, one that Smith refers to as Kristeva's "essential human condition" (1996, p.17).[93] The lack of an

---

[91] It is also worth noting that the deaths often coincide with a retreat into a dark, enclosed space, such as the washing machine (Mr. Saito) or the spiral tunnel at the edge of town (the TV reporter and her crew).
[92] In addition, there are also the numerous characters who transform into snails and Shuichi, who takes on a physical change as well as becoming attuned to the way of the spiral.
[93] It is also worth referring back to Rina Arya's assertion that abjection is "a phenomenon that is experienced cross-culturally and historically" (2014, p.44).

explanation for the spiral curse is also the likely reason as to why purging rituals are ineffective, or more accurately, non-existent. Without any true understanding of its nature or rules, no solution can be found. *Uzumaki* represents an entropic enveloping of the symbolic, one where sufferers transition from one state of subjectivity to a dissolved identity, as opposed to a narrative structured around the re-establishment of symbolic status through purification of the semiotic abject. Interestingly, the curse is so widespread (again, presumably through lack of purification rite) that it is indiscriminate as regards the status of the victim (male or female, young or old). Only Kirie appears to survive, which is implied through the re-utterance of her introduction at the film's close.

Steeped in the urban myth and legend of *Kuchisake-onna* (the slit-mouthed woman),[94] word of which has been spreading around another small town, the premise of *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman* is that this tale of the supernatural materialises in the real world after an earthquake awakens a corpse in an old, abandoned house. Like *Ringu* and *Uzumaki*, the trope of urban myth is key to the underlying horror of Kristeva's abjection, as well as the film's plot; it is the impinging of the past onto the present, the lurking repressed material, never fully dispelled, that is ready to resurface in its place from which it was banished. The legend in *Carved* states that the woman stalks the town in her trench coat and white mask, asking the children, "am I pretty?"; to which the response must be neutral, otherwise she abducts and murders the child (her targets are those on the cusp of socio-symbolic identity). The woman also fits a similar trope popular in earlier J-horror in that she is identifiable by her long, black hair (like a *Yureii*), as well as her long trench coat, white mask, and scissors (the murder weapon). Her codification would position this woman as the "deadly *femme castratrice*, a female figure who exists in the discourses of myth, legend, religion and art but whose image has been repressed" (Creed, 1993, p.127). Creed examines this figure from Freud's writings but insists that she is the cause of male anxiety not as a symbol of castration (the castrated figure, as Freud would argue), but rather as an agent of castration – the castrator, not the castrated. The recurring trope of long, black hair associated with the female monsters in these films (Sadako, Mistuko, and even Sekino in *Uzumaki* after she has fallen under the spiral curse) can be traced back as a Japanese horror trope through the cultural signification of hair. Balmain cites Gary Ebersole (1998) to show how hair is both a source of pollution and fear:

---

[94] The story itself can be traced back to a popular ghost story from the *Edo* period.

In Japan, human hair was employed in purification rituals, but it was also a potential source of pollution and danger' … [because] … female hair [is] associated with 'life force, sexual energy, growth, and fertility'. (Ebersole 1998: 85; qtd. in Balmain 2008, p.67)

Furthermore, the *Kuchisake-onna*'s chosen weapon, the scissors, is also a symbol of castration.[95]

The film's main plot revolves around Mika (Rie Kuwana), a young girl who is suffering as a result of domestic troubles (the parents are divorced, and Mika claims that her mother beats her). After a boy is abducted at the local school, the children are sent home, but Mika is reluctant to go, confiding in her teacher, Kyôko Yamashita (Eriko Sato). Mika's circumstances, and subsequent declaration of hatred for her mother, hit home with Kyôko, who herself has gone through a divorce and has a troubled relationship with her own daughter, who lives with her ex-husband. After she becomes irritated with Mika, the young girl runs away and is captured by the slit-mouthed woman. Mika knocks off the woman's surgical mask in the struggle, revealing that she has a disfigured face.[96] Subsequently, Kyôko and another teacher, Noboru Matsuzaki (Haruhiko Kato), begin their own investigation into the missing children after Noboru shows Kyôko a thirty-year-old photograph of a woman who looks remarkably like the slit-mouthed abductress, and confesses to hearing the voice ask, "Am I pretty?." They manage to trace the slit-mouthed woman back to an old house, where they are able to save one of her captives. Kyôko kills the *Kuchisake-onna* figure with a knife, but the corpse then transforms into the dead body of a neighbouring housewife. It is then that they realise that the slit-mouthed woman operates by possessing the bodies of other women by infecting them.

Noboru reveals that the slit-mouth woman is actually his dead mother, Taeko Matsuzaki (Miki Mizuno), who was abusive to him when he was a child and is believed to have murdered his siblings.[97] The abductions, killings, and body-hopping continues until Kyoko, Noboru, and Mika's mother eventually trace Taeko back to a house that matches a description of Noboru's childhood home (the red roof being the key image, which also signifies a return to his past, to a point where he was under the care of his mother). Her

---

[95] Creed discusses this trope briefly in the second part of *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. For further details, see Karen Horney (1967).

[96] The disfiguration of the monstrous-feminine figure is discussed in Chapter X.

[97] Taeko would also fit the profile of a monstrous mother.

facial disfigurement, it is revealed, was caused by Noboru as a child when, in recognition of her own monstrous nature, she asked him to decapitate her to prevent such future horrors, but he botched the attempt. Once again, the slit-mouthed woman changes her host body, and it falls to Noboru to sacrifice himself to save Mika and her mother so that they can re-unify; he also decapitates Taeko, believing it to be the resolution to the curse, but this turns out not to be the case, for the spirit of the *Kuchisake-onna* is later shown to have possessed Mika's mother at the film's conclusion.[98]

Once again, the plot of the film is driven (at least in part) by an investigation into the supernatural elements that have infiltrated and pervaded standard symbolic living.[99] *Carved* shares similarities with *Ringu* in that the investigation leads to a false conclusion; in *Ringu*, the resurrection of Sadako's body does not put an end to her curse, whereas in *Carved*, the final decapitation of Taeko does not eliminate her spirit from the corporeal realm, as shown in the possession of Miko's mother. Taeko herself represents the abject figure coming into the symbolic realm – she has all the hallmarks, as discussed several times above: an ancient legend consigned to the past returning to haunt the present; an agent of chaos and death for those who come into excessive contact with her; a figure of the semiotic, maternal realm; and the cause for a purification ritual to banish her from society, which nonetheless cannot annul her perpetual return. By targeting young children, she also prevents them from taking up their place in the symbolic system. *Carved* serves as a suitable addition to the films discussed in greater detail above, highlighting the recurring tropes of abjection and the usefulness of reading films via their narratives of abjection, additionally demonstrating a wider correlation between contemporary Asian horror cinema and Kristeva's theory. Taken together with the other films analysed in this chapter, *Carved* also shows that abjection can only be deferred rather than wholly banished. In the process of establishing a purification ritual, Noboru must literally sever his attachment with the mother-figure, although the film clearly suggests that the reunification of mother and daughter at the conclusion is problematic through both the historical relationship and the fact that the mother is now possessed by the vengeful spirit.

---

[98] Interestingly, one of the key differences, Creed states, between interpreting the *femme castratrice* figure as castrated or castrator is that "the former is usually punished, whereas the latter rarely is" (1993, pp.122-123).
[99] Once more, the investigation is led under a nominal banner of the symbolic authority (representatives of the education system).

Figure 8 *Uzumaki*

In *Uzumaki*, Mr. Saito goes from collecting kitsch objects with spiralled imagery to a fasicnation with spiral-shaped food to the abstract concept of the spiral, which, he claims, one brings out of oneself.

Figure 9 *Uzuamki*

"Visitation" and "Transmigration": The spiral curse begins to affect all the residents of Kurouzu (above), eventually enveloping the entire town (below).

Figure 10 *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman*

 "Am I Pretty?": The slit-mouthed woman of *Carved* abducts children who do not give the correct response (left); she is codified in both the style of the *Yureii* and, with the scissors as her chosen weapon of torture and mutilation (right), as the deadly *femme castratrice*.

5.5 Conclusion: The Loop

 Throughout this chapter, I have considered the narratives of abjection in five contemporary Japanese horror films. Each film has similarities with the others, on which I have drawn upon to show how Kristeva's abject is a useful tool through which to read them; however, I have also highlighted certain differences between these films and how their narratives of abjection take shape and/or play out, which shows that readings, while highly relevant, cannot be applied in identical fashion throughout. All the films' plots involve the introduction of the supernatural into ordinary life, and each disruption strongly reflects the tenets of the abject and abjection. Furthermore, the plots are regularly driven by an investigation, usually from a symbolic authority; however, these investigations often lead to false resolutions (particularly *Ringu* and *Carved*, but also *Ringu 2*). In *Ringu*, *Ringu 2*, *Dark Water*, and *Carved*, a purification ritual is established in order to attempt to banish the abject element from society (*Uzumaki* does not establish a method of purging, and in a way almost accepts – and even embraces – the inevitability of abjection). An element of gendered subjectivity has also been established; for example, the majority of the investigations are led by female characters. Furthermore, I have demonstrated a correlation between society's abjection and the maternal semiotic, the latter of which has usually already been cast out (abjected) to establish symbolic order, with its return necessitating such purification rituals to re-draw those boundaries. It should be noted again, however, that these rituals come at a price of a death count, particularly from within the symbolic realm, and in all films, the abject is never wholly or permanently excluded from the symbolic's borders. Instead, abjection projects as a loop, always returning to the realm from which it has been cast.

The continual and recurring presence of abjection within individuals is essential to understanding the narratives of abjection thread that I have established in this chapter. As stated earlier, I will continue to return to this line of argument in the following five chapters; my aim is to highlight how abjection, in many and varying forms, is both present and essential to the collection of films examined in this thesis. It is through demonstrating both diversity and sameness throughout the forthcoming analysis that I shall achieve this aim. Therefore, to proceed, it is now necessary to isolate certain themes prevalent in both contemporary Asian horror cinema and Kristeva's abjection in order to begin nuanced analyses that further the overall argument. The next chapter considers the use of

technology for containing and spreading the horror and abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema. The section will then conclude with a chapter on myth, fairy tale, cult, and urban legend. Both impending chapters extend themes already broached within this chapter and will contribute toward the ratification of a connection between theory and film that will further the contribution that the thesis intends to make to the field and establish sturdy and vigorous sets of case studies to segue into the next section, which in turn will advance other key themes already considered in this chapter.

Chapter VI: Download Something Useful or Useless: Abjection and Technologies in *One Missed Call*, *Phone*, *Shutter*, and *Pulse*

> Of particular interest here are visual communication technologies, such as film, television, video, multimedia messaging systems on mobile phones, photography, computer networks or the Internet. (Ancuta, 2011, p.138)

In the previous chapter, one recurring theme among many stands out in the case studies: that is, the intrusion of "technologies of the real" into the films' narratives.[100] In *Ringu*, it is the cursed video tape – or *tapes*, due to the continuous replication of the original – that is both the locus of the horror and the conduit that allows its abject contents to disseminate into society. As previously discussed, the tape also facilitates a dissolution of borders between past and present and semiotic and symbolic, as well as more physical ones; it is also a source of fascination and repulsion (viewers are compelled to watch, but to do so has fatal consequences). In *Uzumaki*, the same type of fascination abounds, perhaps even exceeding the levels on display in *Ringu*. The object of allurement is the spiral, both in a physical and abstract form; however, the impulses arising from its sway manifest in the desire to create and capture its image – the latter through Mr. Saito's fastidious recording of any and all spiral-esque objects through the lens of his video camcorder. Other instances of technological disturbances are evident in *Ringu 2*, where videotapes and television screens functioning independently feature, as well as in the misappropriated apparatus of Doctor Kawajiri, whose experiments go awry, accidentally re-summoning Sadako; elsewhere, *Dark Water* features several shots of Yoshimi being watched through closed circuit television cameras, which also capture images of the ghost child. Evidently, the use of technology as a plot device is important to the aesthetics of contemporary Asian horror cinema. It is utilised as a container, conduit, and source of the wider horror in these films, particularly horrific and abject elements. Given the prevalence of contemporary technologies so far on display in the case studies, it seems that the subject matter is an appropriate transitional theme into this next chapter.

---

[100] "Technologies of the real" here refers to the technologies (very much contemporary, thus presenting an air of verisimilitude with the modern age) prevalent in the films that gives rise to the "unreal," that is, the fantastical and supernatural elements within the texts.

The impact of technology on contemporary Asian horror cinema is twofold: first, the rise and prominence of digital technologies enables a global dissemination of the texts; second, the diegetic content of the films reflects the ubiquity of such modern appliances. In *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano "investigates how the new media, primarily computer and digital technologies, have impacted the flow of cinema culture, especially in the global commodification of such regional genre films" (2012, p.1). Wada-Marciano continues to say that "the films that succeed in the global market manage to cross the boundaries between cultural particularity and universality" (p.2). In other words, while the films retain a certain amount of "Japaneseness" (in this case), they also deal with themes that resonate on wider global scale. As argued earlier in the thesis, I am considering abjection (already connoted with the notion of border crossing) to have a universal, inescapable, resonance that can be explored through this area of cinema. The ubiquity of digital technologies in the late twentieth century through to present day (not to mention the evolution and escalation of such commodities) appears to make their presence inescapable in contemporary Asian horror cinema, and the prominence of like-minded texts in the cycle of production emerging in the successful wake of films such as *Ringu* or *Whispering Corridors* places such shared themes and concerns among multiple East Asian nations. For instance, Wada-Marciano observes that "a frequent plot device in J-horror is ghostly visitations through videotapes, cell phones, or computers" (p.2). A cursed videotape is central to the abjection and horror that takes place in *Ringu*; examples of the second and third of Wada-Marciano's tripartite of terror is observable in *One Missed Call* and *Pulse*. One year ahead of *One Missed Call*, South Korean horror film *Phone* explored the concept of a vengeful spirit transmitting through a mobile phone, while in 2004, Thai film *Shutter* focused on the spreading of horror through photographic technologies. Commencing with camera technologies in *Shutter* and moving through the mobile phone in *Phone* and *One Missed Call* to the Internet in *Pulse*, this chapter will explore how modern technology plays a part in the presence of the abject in contemporary Asian horror film, often as a conduit or gateway through which the abject can enter symbolic society and collapse the borders erected for its expulsion.[101]

---

[101] Although photography is a much older medium than the mobile phone and the Internet (and in the case of *Shutter*, Tun uses photographic film, not digital apparatus), it is still a contemporary technology at the time of *Shutter*'s release. Moreover, the medium of photography is inherently uncanny. The photograph is a representation of reality, but in a captured moment – a moment frozen in time. Thus, the live, animate subject becomes a still, inanimate double – or replica – an object of the subject. It transfers the image of the subject from live in the present to a static object in the past, the demarcation of which both crosses borders and is

6.1 The Harsh Truth of the Camera Eye: Showing You What You Didn't Want Shown in *Shutter*

Shutter begins with a group of friends celebrating at a wedding party. Driving home afterwards, photographer Tun (Ananda Everingham) and his girlfriend Jane (Natthaweeranuch Thongmee) are involved in a car accident, from which they drive away, leaving a girl lying unconscious, presumably dead, in the middle of the road. Following this incident, Tun, Jane, and their friends from the wedding start to experience hauntings and supernatural occurrences, which begin when Tun's photographs start to develop with white smears erasing the faces of the captured subjects. Jane believes that the mysterious girl whom they left in the road is responsible, though Tun is initially sceptical and dismissive of any supernatural involvement. One by one, Tun's friends begin to commit suicide, and eventually Tun concedes to the possibility of being haunted by a spirit. Furthermore, Tun confesses to Jane that he had a previous relationship with the girl in the accident: she is a former girlfriend of Tun's named Natre (Achita Sikamana), who threatened to commit suicide when Tun broke off the relationship. Tun and Jane investigate further into Natre's life, discovering that she did commit suicide but that her mother was yet to have her cremated, preserving the corpse in her apartment. They arrange a funeral for Natre in the hope that the ritualistic burial will appease her vengeful spirit and lay her to rest; however, the haunting of Tun continues and intensifies. Eventually, Tun is forced to confess to Jane that his friends had sexually assaulted and raped Natre while Tun took photographs (encouraged to do so by rest of the group in order to implicate him in their misdeeds). Jane leaves Tun, who continues to be haunted by Natre. The film ends with another developed picture, this time showing Natre's spirit perched on Tun's shoulders after he hastily throws the camera across his apartment, accidentally setting off the flash. Dismayed and disoriented, Tun falls from his apartment window.

As early as the opening credits, the impact of technologies on the film's form (as well as its narrative) is apparent. This sequence depicts several still photographs from the

---

fixed by them (the latter, arguably, within the frame of the photograph). The photograph itself, therefore, is an example of the past existing within the present. Both the crossing of borders and the return of the past in the present are essential to abjection theory. Margaret Iversen observes that the "nature of the medium as an indexical imprint of the of the object means that any photographed object or person has a ghostly presence, an uncanniness that might be likened to the return of the dead" (1994, p.450). In *Shutter*, the return of the dead becomes quite literal in the form of Natre, who is both able to infiltrate the borders of the supposedly-fixed past in order to return in the present and is a return of Tun's past, here one of repressed symbolic guilt.

wedding scene (the next sequence). However, a red filter is placed over these shots to mimic the appearance of a darkroom for developing the pictures. A series of effects such as pixilation and blurring, as well as extreme close-ups, excessive zooms, and a shaking camera gives the impression of restlessness and distress, which, coupled with the blood red hue of the pictures, adds an overall sense of foreboding and uncanniness to the introductory sequence.[102] In other words, the techniques employed to represent the camera and what it shows foreshadows the horror that is to befall the attendees of the wedding from the beginning of the film. Furthermore, the medium used to frame their fate in such a way is the same instrument that implicates the friends in their horrific act and serves as a conduit for the abject element to cross the necessary borders to infiltrate their social hive. When the sequence transitions into the wedding scene, the camera continues to distort the characters' appearances and put the spectator at unease with the visual effects by rotating 360-degrees around the group of friends in an arc shot, never settling on any given shot for any extended period of time. The extreme close-ups and zooms are also in effect to add an aura of nausea and distress. The shots in both these sequences are slightly out-of-focus and the subject matter (for instance, the guests' faces in the close-ups) is often out of sync with the frame of the shot.[103] Again, the techniques employed to create effects of this magnitude both foreshadow and reflect the nature and form of the horror about to be unleashed within the narrative, which I can explore further through particular tropes of abjection theory, namely the emphasis on subjective identity and threat of its erasure that abject poses, as well as the commonly-recurring theme of border crossing and collapsing.

Having convinced Jane to put the hit and run incident behind them, Tun first starts to experience strange phenomena when he collects a set of professional graduation photographs. On many of the pictures, a white smear has developed, which obscures the subject's face. Like in *Ringu* (and many other films analysed throughout the thesis), contact with the abject element often leads to the erasure of subjective identity, which is consistently symbolised through the obscuring of facial features in photographs, pictures, and other forms of captured image. The major difference to the utilisation of this trope in *Shutter* is that the white smudges, which are shown to be present on the negatives, too, are the manifestation of Natre's spirit, whereas in *Ringu*, and more frequently across

---

[102] Red can have cultural significance in Thailand as representative of blood shed for the nation, or as a lucky or unlucky colour in some ancient customs. In a more global sense, red can signal both blood and danger.
[103] Each sequence lasts for nearly two minutes, thus prolonging the sense of unease that the editing techniques create.

contemporary Asian horror cinema, the erasure of identity is usually bestowed upon those who have fallen victim to the vengeful and abject spirit.[104] In *Shutter*, the still photograph captures two realms simultaneously: that of Tun's "real" world and the spirit world that Natre's restless and vengeful ghost occupies. The developed picture, therefore, provides the first indication of the collapsing of the borders between these two realms and their subsequent conflation; the apparatus of the camera, meanwhile, is the method through which Natre can traverse both realms.[105] In addition to the strange developments on his negatives, Tun has also begun to experience severe neck pains since the accident. When he visits a specialist, it is discovered that Tun is weighing in at double his regular body weight. This condition is due to the manifestation of Natre's spirit occupying his frame, though he still dismisses the possibility of a supernatural presence as an impossibility. A remnant of Tun's past that he had presumed buried, the nature of Natre's return to haunt Tun and his friends positions her as an abject being. First, she is a return of a repressed past in the present, and her presence threatens to annihilate the group that wronged her in life. Second, she is able to cross borders and boundaries between different realms and occupy the liminal spaces simultaneously. As well as being the indicator of a ghostly presence, the photograph becomes an object of horror in *Shutter* because it captures images of what should *not* be present in known symbolic reality; in this case, it is the vengeful and abject Natre, who disrupts the known rules and laws of Tun's universe.

Abjection, Kristeva reminds us, is manifested and measured as the human reaction to the destabilisation of order, as constructed by and within arbitrary borders. Confrontation with the collapse of meaning is what threatens known subjectivity with disintegration and oblivion. Tun's refusal to acknowledge the presence of a spirit in the face of overwhelming evidence is his attempt to cling to his subjective perception of the reality that he understands; in other words, he upholds the rules, codes, dictates of symbolic law.[106] The first true scare scene, however, is experienced by Jane alone. With

---

[104] Mary Ainslie observes the similarities between Natre and other vengeful spirits emanating from contemporary J-Horror productions: "The vengeful *onryou* – reminiscent [of the] long black-haired and white faced *Phii* Natre, with her stilted crawling and staring eyes ensures comparisons to *Ringu* […] and *Ju-On* […], and both Thai and non-Thai reviews mark the film as stylistically similar to well-known Japanese ghost films" (2011, p.52).

[105] The notion of technological appliances used as gateways between the "real" and spirit worlds had already been explored in *Pulse*, which is discussed in further detail below.

[106] Tun not only believes that he has recognised Natre from the accident, which itself would suggest a supernatural presence in light of Tun already understanding Natre to be dead, but also the combination of the disturbed photographs and body weight anomaly give added weight to Jane's theory that they are somehow being haunted as a result of their actions.

Tun out of the apartment, Jane investigates a rattling door handle at the entrance of Tun's darkroom; crossing the threshold into this room, the door shuts and locks Jane inside. Here, the shot takes on the red-tinted darkroom effect from the title sequence, with the same restless, unsteady camera techniques, executing quick cuts between a frightened Jane and the image of a woman emerging from the sink. Jane appears to faint, then she awakens on the couch, suggesting that it may have been a vision or a dream rather than a real-time experience. Thus far, I have asserted the inextricability between Kristeva's semiotic-symbolic spectrum and her theory of abjection. Symbolic practice is associated with the masculine, patriarchal authority, and language and is reinforced by the rational and logical; in contrast, the semiotic is associated with the feminine, maternal, and non-verbal communication systems and is usually categorised in line with the superstitious (and, often therefore, the illogical). Abjection is the breakdown and conflation of the two realms, and for somebody with symbolic identity to return to a semiotic state is a threat to their very being. The culmination of the aforementioned scene casts doubt onto the validity of Jane's experience, and her readiness to believe in spirits (which pre-exists this incident) is shown in a superstitious light in contrast with Tun's staunch refusal to accept the fact that they are being haunted by Natre. The visual effects of Jane's encounter with a spirit that is presumably Natre furthers the semiotic association with the supernatural, superstitious, and hitherto illogical in that the experience is presented in such a way that distorts, disrupts, and unsettles the illusion of reality presented in a more standard or common shot/sequence.[107]

In contrast, Tun possesses sufficient evidence to arrive at the same conclusion as Jane, even if it means making a slight leap of (known) logic, but remains sceptical for much longer, eventually accepting his haunting after witnessing his best friend Tonn (Unnop Chanpaibool) commit suicide after being haunted by Natre. Like Reiko in *Ringu* or *Uzumaki*'s Kirie, Jane takes charge of an investigation into the strange happenings, while Tun continues to try to ignore the disruption to his normal life. Before Tonn's suicide, Jane had persuaded Tun to visit a spirit photographer, who theorises the premise that photographs can capture the vestiges of lingering spirits, thus the plausibility of the phenomena that they are experiencing is now established and backed-up in pseudo-scientific circles. Though no more than exposition in terms of plot development, this scene

---

[107] Furthermore, the appearance of the spirit in potentially dream or vision form also adds weight to the suggestion of non-rational and non-verbal communications.

does at least bridge the gap between the rational and irrational for Tun and Jane. In terms of reading the film alongside abjection theory, it explains the process for the collapsing of borders between the two realms and establishing the means through which the spirits can traverse multiple worlds that exist simultaneously in the same temporal and spatial dimension. Furthermore, Jane's ethos with regard to the spiritual presence, and her intuition, which ultimately proves true, strengthens her association with the semiotic abject Natre; Tun, who maintains his beliefs in an ordered, rational world, holds many of the clues to identify the problem but chooses to put up a façade of ignorance.[108]

The suicides of his friends from the wedding party, all of whom jump off or from buildings, precede the final haunting of Tun, and all occur as a result of contact with Natre's ghost.[109] Emerging from a realm shut out by symbolic law and crossing the borders between those realms, as well as conflating the most basic border of abjection, that of life and death, contact with the abject Natre has equated to instant death. Moreover, the deaths of his friends, culminating in Tun witnessing Tonn jump through his apartment window and onto the roof of a car, are what force Tun to confess to a previous relationship with Natre (thus identifying the spirit to Jane), though he only states that she had reacted badly to the break-up. Armed with further information, Jane continues her investigation, which leads them to Natre's mother, where they discover that Natre had committed suicide but that her body was being kept and preserved at the mother's apartment. Here, the element of purification ritual, like those concomitant with a narrative of abjection, takes place. In abjection, the corpse is "death infecting life" (Kristeva, 1982, p.4) and therefore becomes symbolically (in the signification sense) representative of the borders infiltrated by Natre. Staging a burial for Natre's corpse, Tun and Jane enact a purification ritual that they hope will put an end to the hauntings;[110] however, as in *Ringu*, this action proves to be a false hope, and Natre's spirit continues to haunt them. When in their hotel, Natre torments Tun,

---

[108] Not only is Tun presented with evidence of Natre's haunting throughout the film, but he also has withheld information from Jane about his past with Natre and that he clearly recognized her as the girl that they knocked down with their car.

[109] The theme of suicide, both as a plot device to rationalise supernatural deaths and a result of the processes of abjection, is discussed further on in this chapter (*One Missed Call*, *Pulse*) and in future chapters (*Suicide Club* and others).

[110] A similar purification ritual is enacted in *The Eye* (2002), which is discussed in Chapter IX. Here, Tonn's guilt is also a factor in the events of the film, in a similar way to the linking of symbolic guilt to the returning repressed material, that which has been abjected but has come back to haunt the symbolic, in *Ringu* (previous chapter) and *Audition* (Chapter X). The attempts to bury the corpse fail to quell the hauntings in these instances, for, as argued throughout this thesis, the abject cannot be permanently banished from the symbolic realm.

causing him to attempt to flee the building. At the bottom of the stairs, he believes that he encounters Jane, but her form morphs into that of Natre, further associating Natre and Jane with the semiotic abject. The sequence culminates with Tun falling from the building as he attempts to scale the fire stairs on the outside; unlike his peers, Tun survives.

With Tun hospitalised, Jane continues her investigation and unearths a series of negatives hidden within the bookcases of their apartment that appear to depict their group of friends sexually assaulting Natre. Jane takes them to the darkroom to be developed, where she appears to witness the raping of Natre, which is shown in flashback form and framed between close-up shots of a frightened Jane within the red filter of the darkroom. Reminiscent of the false resolution of *Ringu*, the unearthing and developing of these implicating negatives serves to summon and release Natre's spirit, who climbs up the bookcase. Meanwhile, a tearful Tun arrives home and is confronted by Jane about this sordid incident from his past. Although trying to excuse himself from the incident by claiming not to have been involved in the rape (Tonn had simply told him that he would "take care of it," he explains) and that his complicity was a result of peer pressure, Tun is deserted by Jane. With no lead investigator to continue to search for a final resolution, Tun is left to the mercy of the abject spirit. A final photograph develops with Natre perched on Tun's shoulders, and in his distress, he falls from his apartment window. What this ending demonstrates is that, once again, the abject can never be fully purged, nor the boundaries completely redrawn – the failure to achieve resolution by burying Natre's corpse is prime evidence of this. Furthermore, Jane's association with the semiotic abject Natre is illustrated throughout, and her desertion of Tun at the end of the film allows for Natre to enact the final piece of her revenge, with each member of Tun's group of friends, and finally Tun himself, succumbing to the revenants of their repressed past deeds in the form of contact with an abject element and the subsequent annihilation of their subjective identity in their deaths.

6.2 It's Not Your Style to Dial: Mobile Phones in *Phone* and *One Missed Call*

Given the global ubiquity of mobile phone technology, following its sharp rise in popularity throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, it is of little surprise that it has become the subject of horror movies, where fears of the impact of new digital technologies can be manifested on screen. According to Jon Agar, just one Japanese

Figure 11 *Shutter*

In *Shutter*, Natre's curse manifests as facial distortion on developed pictures (left), a mark on the negative film (centre), and the imposition of her image in other photographs (right). When she appears in Tun's reality, she is able to occupy the same space as her victim, as demonstrated in the final scene (below).

cellular phone company alone (NTT DoCoMo) increased customer subscriptions from ten million in February 1997 to thirty million in 2000, and forty million in 2002 (2013, p.94). Likewise, Young-jin Yoo, Kalle Lyytinen, and Hee-dong Yang assert that in South Korea over seventy-five percent of the population (of a total of approximately forty-seven-and-a-half million people) had mobile phone services by the early 2000s (2005, p.325). With malfunctioning and haunted contemporary technological appliances having already appeared in previous J- and K-horror releases, the mobile phone soon warranted its own film as the main feature for the vehicle of ghosts, spirits, and, as I go on to show, the abject and abjection. South Korean film *Phone* was released in the summer of 2002, while Japan followed with *One Missed Call* in 2003.[111]

The main plot of *Phone* follows a female journalist named Ji-won (Ha Ji-won) who has started receiving threatening calls as a result of a controversial article that she had published about a sex scandal. Having changed her phone number, her editor advises her to back off this investigation and follow up a lead on reports of paranormal activity instead. Discussing the matter with her sister and her sister's husband, they agree that Ji-won should temporarily move into an empty property that they own, for security purposes. However, despite having changed her number, Ji-won continues to receive strange calls, which sound like static or feedback, accompanied by an incomprehensible yet menacing voice. Furthermore, she receives an image of a naked, dead woman on her computer screen, which later shows up as a "laptop infection." Investigating the history of her new mobile phone, Ji-won discovers that it once belonged to a girl named Jin-hee (Choi Ji-yeon), a young schoolgirl who had been obsessively in love with an older man who had eventually deserted her. Jin-hee is currently reported as missing, and the two subsequent owners of that mobile phone number had died in mysterious circumstances.[112] Jin-won's investigation eventually reveals that the man that Jin-hee had an affair with was Chang-hoon (Choi Woo-jae), the husband of Ji-won's sister, Ho-jeong (Kim Yu-mi). Ho-jeong had found out about this affair and accidentally killed Jin-hee by pushing her down the stairs when confronting her. Ho-jeong then buried Jin-hee within the walls of their new

---

[111] In addition to both films spawning Hollywood remakes, *One Missed Call* was followed with two sequels: *One Missed Call 2* (Renpei Tsukamoto, 2005) and *One Missed Call: Final* (Manabu Asou, 2006).

[112] In the opening scene, a young woman receives one of the haunted phone calls just before entering an elevator at a train station. When she enters the shaft, the lights rapidly flicker and the contraption ceases to work (another example of ghostly spirits appropriating technologies). She receives another phone call and the elevator plummets. Her death is recorded as a heart attack, while the other death pertaining to the owners of this phone number is a taxi driver who died in a car wreck near to the house where Jin-hee is staying.

home, where Ji-won is currently living, and it is the spirit of Jin-hee that has been causing the hauntings all through the film. Ho-jeong then attacks her own sister and attempts to burn down the house to remove evidence of Ji-won and Jin-hee's bodies; however, Jin-hee's spirit returns one more time, saving Ji-won and exacting her revenge on Ho-jeong.

Among many other themes (discussed in more detail below), one key motif in *Phone* is the spreading of a curse (or cursed and vengeful spirit) through mobile phone technology. Jin-hee's ghost is contained and carried through her mobile phone number, which infects and kills the next two owners, as well as being released when Ji-won acquires the number. The same theme makes up the plot of *One Missed Call*. Commencing with a group of university students drinking in a bar, one of the party turns up late and distressed, having heard that a former high school friend has recently drowned. During this commotion, one of the group, Yoko (Anna Nagata), receives a missed call on her mobile. She checks the number in the bathroom shortly afterwards, but she discovers that the call had originated from her own phone number. Yoko and her friend Yumi (Kô Shibasaki) listen to the voicemail, which, to their horror and confusion, is from Yoko and from a later date and time, recording the impending moment of her death (another example of temporal distortion in relation to abjection). Two days later, Yumi telephones Yoko, and they realise that the conversation is playing out the same as the mysterious call; however, the realisation comes too late, and Yoko is thrown from a bridge in front of a speeding train. Her severed arm, still clutching the phone, is then shown dialling a new number. The curse then transmits to Yoko's boyfriend Kenji, who tells Yumi of this call, but only moments before his death is due to happen, for he disbelieves the logic of the phenomena. Kenji is then dragged into an elevator shaft and dies, and the curse continues when the phone automatically dials the next person, Natsumi (Kazue Fukiishi). Both Natsumi's friends and the local media start to believe in the superstition as a result.

Like *Phone*, the second half of *One Missed Call* follows an investigation into the curse, with Yumi assuming the role of lead investigator alongside Mr. Yamashita (Shin'ichi Tsutsumi), a man who has tracked down the group of friends on the basis that he believes his sister died as a result of the same transmitted curse;[113] meanwhile, Natsumi is persuaded by the press to attend a live studio exorcism – a ritual intended to purge her of

---

[113] A key symbol that connects the two sets of deaths is that both Kenji and Yamashita's sister are inexplicably found with red jawbreaker sweets in their mouth after their deaths.

the cursed spirit. Yumi's investigation leads them to the Mizunuma family (a mother and her two daughters) via the sound of an asthma inhaler heard in the background of Kenji's recording. The eldest daughter, Mimiko, had suffered regular asthma attacks and had been admitted to the hospital on many occasions, while the younger daughter Nanako would frequently be admitted with unexplained injuries. Talking to a nurse, Yumi and Yamashita believe the mother, Marie (Mariko Tsutsui) to have been administering harm to her daughter as a result of Munchausen syndrome by proxy. Eventually, they discover that Mimiko died from one of her asthma attacks, and the mother disappeared shortly afterwards. Yumi and Yamashita do, however, locate Nanako at an orphanage. The young girl does not speak, but a teddy bear that she cradles plays the same musical ringtone as heard on the haunted missed calls. Yumi then receives a call foretelling her own death, after the live exorcism went awry and Natsumi was killed. Desperate now for a solution, Yumi ends up following her leads to an abandoned hospital, where Yamashita later meets her. They unearth the ghost of Marie, and Yumi stages a surrogate mother-daughter reunion (similar to the ending of *Dark Water*) after seeing her own abusive mother in the image; however, this proves to be a false resolution to the curse. Old CCTV footage discovered by the lead detective in the case (who had hitherto dismissed all notions of the supernatural, putting the deaths down to nothing more than a string of suicides) shows that it was Mimiko who was harming Nanako, offering her the red jawbreaker sweets to keep quiet. Marie had discovered the abuse and left Mimiko to die of an asthma attack while tending to Nanako. It is, therefore, Mimiko's spirit that has been causing the hauntings and deaths. Mimiko then possesses Yumi's body. Yamashita rushes round to Yumi's apartment, having just watched the footage and solving the curse. However, he is too late, and is stabbed by the possessed Yumi. He wakes up in hospital with Yumi standing over him, concealing a knife behind her back. She smiles at the helpless Yamashita, then feeds him a red jawbreaker, declaring that she has found a new Nanako to take care of.

As with the camera in *Shutter*, the employment of mobile phone technologies as a plot device in *Phone* and *One Missed Call* enables the vengeful spirits to migrate from victim to victim and navigate liminal space and borders. Just as the videotape in *Ringu* captures the remnants of murdered and buried Sadako, the mobile phones in *Phone* and *One Missed Call* absorb, retain, and transmit the ghosts of a murdered Jin-hee (*Phone*) and the young Mimiko, left to die (*One Missed Call*). *Phone*'s Jin-hee is able to appropriate and manipulate technologies in an attempt to communicate with Ji-won (as well as for the

purposes of vengeful murder), which manifests as incomprehensible, garbled sound that mimics white noise/static that comes through on the phone calls[114] and spreads to the laptop infection on Ji-won's screen, followed by the phone number flashing on the monitor.[115] Likewise, Jin-hee is also able to possess other bodies, specifically Ho-jeong's daughter, Yeong-ju (Eun Seo-woo). Momentarily left alone in an art gallery by Ho-jeong and Ji-won, Yeong-ju answers Ji-won's ringing phone and immediately becomes distressed. The camera pans 360-degrees at speed round the young girl now surrounded by the concerned sisters, imitating the distress and disorientation caused by the phone call. Later events, which will be discussed below in relation to another prevalent theme, demonstrate that Yeong-ju was possessed by Jin-hee as a result of this encounter, which illustrates the spirit's ability to travel and traverse through mobile phones and other electronic technologies, acting as a conduit for the vengeful deceased.

In *One Missed Call*, the vengeful spirit is mobilised in a similar way, moving from phone to phone in order to claim her victims.[116] Each new fatality is selected from the phone's memory – information from the electronic storage systems located within the device – and Mimiko is able to appropriate and manipulate the technology's properties (such as enabling the phone to effectively ring itself and utilise a ringtone not stored in the phone's memory), as well as marshal the apparatus to travel the boundaries of past and present (the messages come from a future time and date, while Mimiko, having met a corporeal end, is a remnant from the past – both of which operate in the present). Like Jin-hee, Mimiko can also annex other technologies to achieve her means. For instance, in the scene where Kenji dies, he tells Yumi that he received a similar "prank call" to the one Yumi had just before her death (though he maintains a staunch dismissive stance toward the possibility of supernatural mediation, despite recognising his own voice on the message). He suddenly realises that his transmitted fate is about to happen when he utters

---

[114] These sequences resemble the mysterious montage of images and sound on the cursed videotape in *Ringu*. Like Sadako, Jin-hee is clearly unable or unwilling to communicate in recognisable symbolic language; therefore, is immediately connected to semiotic forms of communication (travelling through technologies in such a way already being another indication of a non-symbolic status by defying usual logic).

[115] Interestingly, Ji-won is shown plugging the laptop into the wall of the house where, as yet unbeknown to her, Jin-hee is concealed, thus suggesting that Jin-hee can transmit her spirit from her corporeal body via the laptop's charger.

[116] Discussing *Phone* and other texts from the director, Daniel Martin states that "[o]ne of the key qualities of the vengeful ghosts in classic and contemporary Korean horror is that its victims are chosen logically, based on a sense of righteousness" (2013, p.148). Although Jin-hee's ultimate targets in the film are the man who abandoned her and the woman who murdered her, the slew of victims in-between are chosen in a manner that defies such logic, instead their fates coming down to chance on the basis of inheriting the same mobile phone number.

the last words heard just before his death on the message ("I totally forgot…") the moment that the elevator arrives. Kenji is dragged into the dark elevator shaft; and then, to emphasise the supernatural manipulation of the elevator, the same shaft opens moments later, from which a group of young men disembark. Both Kenji and Yoko experience a last-second realisation just before their deaths, both of which occur when they utter the same words as they heard on their respective voicemails. Acting as a case of déjà vu, they each recognise an utterance from the past (albeit transmitted from the future in the initial instance) which signals their impending death and contributes to subjective annihilation – Yoko is severed, while Kenji's body disappears entirely. And though déjà vu is not directly connected to abjection, it does enact an unsettling, almost uncanny, familiarity in those experiencing it; furthermore, for Yoko and Kenji, it signals a brief cognisant connection with a past remnant that is haunting the present, with which contact equates to death (in Kenji's case, he enters a womb-like space never to be seen again). Mimiko, like Jin-hee in *Phone*, as wells as *Ringu*'s Sadako and *Dark Water*'s Mitsuko, represents an abject semiotic figure, dissolving the boundaries of known logic and sense of "reality," and her return threatens the stability of symbolic order.

6.2.1 The More You Ignore Me, the Closer I Get

In Chapter V, I examined the tensions between symbolic and semiotic realms, in relation to Kristevan terms developed in Chapter II. According to Kristeva, a pre-subjective life is initially at one with the mother, within her semiotic realm, knowing nothing else of outside existence; however, once born and heading into the world of symbolic subjectivity, fixed by the acquisition of language, all connections to these former ties must be severed and repressed to maintain that subjectivity. Abjection is both the conflating of the artificial borders erected to enable such discrimination and the return of the semiotic sway into symbolic society; it demonstrates an inextricable connection between the two realms, despite any efforts to disassociate them. One of the ways in which this fraught relationship becomes palpable in films is through the presence of characters that possess and maintain a rigid symbolic logic, even in the face of evidence of supernatural and irrational disturbances and intrusion (in other words, the presence/return of abjection) into these regulated realities. Such symbols of authority include the male journalists in the flashback scenes in *Ringu*, whose response to Shizuko's psychic powers (and subsequently Sadako's) is to attempt to banish them from their reality; or the scientists in *Ringu 2*, who

Figure 12 *Phone*
Yeong-ju is possessed by Ji-won after answering her aunt/surrogate mother's phone in *Phone*.

Figure 13 *One Missed Call*
Kenji realises a moment too late that the call foretelling his death is about to be executed (left). Yumi witnesses her friend being dragged into the empty elevator shaft (centre); seconds later, the door of the shaft opens, and life carries on as normal around her (right).

Figure 14 *One Missed Call*
Yumi encounters the ghost of the Mizunuma matriarch, Marie, in the abandoned hospital (left). However, a surrogate mother-daughter reunion proves to be a false hope, and Yumi is possessed by Mimiko, Marie's daughter, at the film's conclusion (right).

are intent on rationalising the supernatural, ultimately with the goal of disproving the presence of ghosts. Similar figures are present in *Uzumaki*, and *Shutter's* Tun also holds on to his line of logic longer than his own apprehensions should suggest.

In *One Missed Call*, the police force represents another institution of symbolic authority. The lead detective in charge of the case of mysterious deaths states that "nothing is unexplainable" and declares them to be nothing more than suicides. Consequently, Yumi has to conduct her own investigation, here aided by Mr. Yamashita. This theme is prevalent throughout many contemporary Asian horror films, as will be demonstrated as the thesis progresses. In *Phone*, Ji-won's profession as a reporter requires her to be investigative, but when she assumes this role in the film to unravel the supernatural mystery, it is not undertaken in a formal capacity. In fact, Ji-won is told by her own superior not to meddle in affairs concerning high-ranking members of society in the underage sex scandal that she had exposed, instead being directed toward a different paranormal story (Reiko in *Ringu*, also a journalist, is also encouraged down that route). Ji-won's inquiry into the history of the phone number turns up Jin-hee's name as a listed missing person; however, that case had gone cold because no leads existed that fit the specifications of what the symbolic authorities could justify as an explanation or conclusion (whereas the two subsequent deaths could be rationalised). In *Shutter*, it is Jane who must lead the investigation into the spirit haunting Tun and his friends, while Tun withholds vital information due to his guilt and because it does not fit in with his notion of logic. It is this trope of contemporary Asian horror cinema that offers one of the more radical elements of the texts, which goes against the grain of Creed's assertion that all abjection in horror film points to conservative conclusions.[117] Throughout many contemporary Asian horror films, the symbolic authority makes a declaration on the events and the case is officially closed – it is suicides and nothing more in *One Missed Call*, for instance, or the deaths in *Phone* are either rationalised or left unsolved (in the more extreme cases, such as in *Ringu*, those that do not fit within the realms of symbolic logic are murdered, and evidence and memory of the events are buried). Consequently, it falls to independent investigators, usually female, to solve the mystery, defying authoritative ruling, often bringing to light that which is repressed, and occasionally releasing (whether

---

[117] Again, Creed's study is exclusively Western and pre-dates the cycle of films under scrutiny in this thesis. In light of this more recent cycle, certain elements of Creed's text, while at times valuable, can be shown to be limited, as is evidenced through the present analysis.

deliberate or unwittingly) the abject element into society (for instance, when Sadako is exhumed from the well in *Ringu*, or the excavation of Jin-hee's corpse from the interior walls in *Phone*). *Shutter*'s Jane and *Phone*'s Ji-won both uncover a series of events that have been concealed and repressed; in the former, it is the brutal rape that led to Natre's suicide, while in the latter it is the murder of the husband's mistress, concealed within the walls of the family home. In *One Missed Call*, Yumi inadvertently absorbs the malevolent spirit of Mimiko after her investigation exonerated the mother, who had hitherto been held responsible through the medical explanation and analysis considered most likely.

This theme is further illustrated by visual cues that connect the abject spirits to these lead female investigators. Immediately after *Phone*'s opening scene, showing one of Jin-hee's victims dying in an elevator, the film transitions to a shot of a perspiring Ji-won in the gymnasium as she receives her own phone call warning her of the physical threats being made against her person. These adjacent scenes serve as connective tissue that links the two as recipients of Jin-hee's wrathful phone calls, reinforced later on when Ji-won acquires the same cell phone number. However, it is not specifically the affiliation of the unnamed victim to the lead female protagonist that is important in relation to the semiotic-as-fractious-to-symbolic theme, but rather it is how Ji-won is semiotically coded in relation to Jin-hee's vengeful spirit at various intervals throughout the film. Since moving into her sister's spare home, Ji-won regularly sees apparitions that connect her to the semiotic space existing simultaneously on the same plane as her "regular" reality. These figures include the young Jin-hee (unrealised at the time by Ji-won) at several stages, including one time picking up a hitchhiker who turns out to be Jin-hee's phantom,[118] and images of the other victims, particularly the woman who died in the elevator shaft. Ji-won's connection to Jin-hee, therefore, is intensified to the point that she is able to see elements of the spirit world co-existing with her own. Moreover, many of the visions occur when looking into mirrors or at family photographs; in the scene directly following her encounter with the young ghostly hitchhiker, Ji-won is in her bathroom, unable to get water from the taps on the sink. Instead, a clump of matted black hair comes from the tap, and as she looks up into the mirror, the glass begins to shake, and the image of the spirit's

---

[118] This scene is later linked with a flashback sequence depicting Chang-hoon picking up Jin-hee at the same bus stop during a downpour of rain. Ji-won realises the possibility of the supernatural when her hitcher, also a young girl coming in from the heavy rain, leaves no water marks on the car seat.

eyes flash up in the mirror, as if superimposed onto Ji-won's reflection.[119] Ultimately, their affiliation is further strengthened when Jin-hee, hitherto the agent of chaos and death in the film, prevents Ji-won's murder at the hands of her sister. In *One Missed Call*, Yumi takes on a semiotic connection with the spirits of both mother and eldest daughter of the Mizunuma family; the former when she establishes a surrogate maternal bond, the latter when she is possessed by Mimiko in the final scenes. The presence of the mother (and, in turn, the mother-child relationship) is essential to both Kristeva's theory of abjection and an important element of both *Phone* and *One Missed Call*, particularly to comprehend their relationship with abject theory, and so the next part of this chapter will dissect this theme in greater detail.

6.2.2 Would You Look into Those "Mother-me" Eyes?

In *One Missed Call*, the primary mother figure is Marie Mizunuma, who is initially suspected of harming her youngest child, Nanako. During Yumi's investigations, it is told that Marie has subsequently gone missing after her eldest daughter Mimiko died of an asthma attack. Marie is considered as a monstrous mother because it is assumed that she regularly harmed Nanako; however, it is later revealed that Marie was dutiful, caring, and attentive toward the youngest daughter. It is when she discovers that Mimiko was harming Nanako that she leaves the elder child to die of a severe asthma attack (somewhat ironically, given that Marie is accused of having a factitious disorder imposed on her daughter, she mistakenly allows her other daughter to die, assuming her to be fabricating the symptoms), thereby acquiring such a status in the process. As previously discussed, the sanctioned maternal role in symbolic society is to raise the children in order for them to create and distinguish between borders (primal mapping) that separate clean and waste, culture and nature, semiotic and symbolic, thus facilitating the definitive act of abjection that allows the child to pass into the intersubjective symbolic system of law, order, and language, thus forever dissociating the maternal semiotic from their sphere of existence. The mother that does not allow the child to pass into the symbolic or the mother that is harmful to the child is considered monstrous, and therefore allowing Mimiko to die prevents her from attaining full symbolic status. Furthermore, Marie's death (seemingly

---

[119] This further links Ji-won to Jin-hee, the *wonhon* (vengeful female spirit in South Korea, whose codification includes long, black hair and is not too dissimilar to the *yurei* of Japanese folklore and J-horror films).

suggested to be caused by the returning spirit of the forever-semiotic Mimiko) impacts upon Nanako, who when located by Yumi is unable to speak; in other words, she lacks language, which is the ultimate indicator of a subject's symbolic status. When Yumi traces the Mizunuma family curse, she finds the rotting corpse of Marie and encounters her in spiritual form. During this confrontation, Marie's spirit morphs into the image of Yumi's mother. Having been hitherto absent from the film, a flashback sequence shows that Yumi's mother was cruel and abusive toward her daughter, going so far as to make her look at her grandmother's hanging body through a hole in the door after the grandmother's suicide (hence, explaining Yumi's irrational fear of looking through holes mentioned in the first scene). Faced with the image of her mother in Marie's spiritual form, Yumi stages a surrogate mother-daughter reunion, similar to the one enacted toward the end of *Dark Water*, with Yumi promising to be good and to stay with the mother forever. The discovery of the corpse and unification with the mother's spirit seems to eradicate the dead mother's ghost from the proceedings; however, it also allows for the corporeal possession of Yumi by the abject daughter. By becoming the surrogate abject daughter, Yumi's body becomes the next vessel through which the abject element (Mimiko's curse) can be contained and spread into the symbolic, which is demonstrated in the final scene, showing Yumi brandishing a knife behind her back, about to treat Yamashita as the new Nanako.

However, it is in *Phone* where a more complex mother(s)-daughter dynamic magnifies the forces of abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema. Ji-won shares a very close relationship with her sister, sister's husband, and niece. It is later revealed that Ji-won is technically the biological mother of Yeung-ju, having donated one of her eggs for *in vitro* fertilisation, and because of this, Ho-jeung has harboured a jealous grudge toward her sister, which is manifested in the final scenes. The interesting dynamics of this relationship can be observed in the scene where Yeung-ju is taken to a child psychologist: as the psychologist is explicating her theories to the parents, who sit together, facing the psychologist on the other side of her desk, Ji-won is sat directly behind the parents, while Yeung-ju is in the adjacent room being tested by another professional. Separated mostly by a glass panel, Yeung-ju turns her head to meet her biological mother's gaze, while the psychologist discusses the Electra complex theory with the parents. The reverse angle shots establish a connection between Ji-won and Yeung-ju that is external to her parents, who sit rigidly focused on the psychologist, unaware of the events taking place behind them. Moreover, as mentioned above, Ji-won is visually linked to the abject semiotic

throughout the film through mirrors and family photographs. Earlier, I demonstrated how this technique graphically associated her with the *wonhon*; however, there is a more intricate connection that links Ji-won, Yeung-ju, and the vengeful spirit of Jin-hee that identifies them with the semiotic realm.[120] Shortly after she moves into her sister's second home, Ji-won looks at a family photograph of Ho-jeung, Chang-hoon, and Yeung-ju, only for the camera to briefly fade out of focus on the family, instead magnifying Ji-won's reflection within the frame, thus foreshadowing (at this point) her intextricable connection to the family, and her dominance within it. Moments later, Ji-won enters an unfurnished bedroom, in which a large portrait of Yeung-ju hangs. Ji-won then flicks through a photograph album and receives a call from her sister, and as the shot cuts between the two locations, it captures both the photographs in the album and a number of pictures of Yeung-ju on the wall of her sister's main home. The inextricable correlation is established, particularly Ji-won's biological connection to Yeung-ju. The following bathroom scene (discussed above) that links Ji-won to Jin-hee hints at a three-way association between Ji-won, her niece/biological daughter, and the spirit of Jin-hee.

This link is further reinforced when Jin-hee takes possession of Yeong-ju's body. Going back to *One Missed Call*, the abject semiotic Mimiko can only take possession of Yumi's adult body after she stages a reunification with the returning, spiritual maternal body; in other words, after she has succumbed to abjection, which, in Kristevan terms equates to giving up subjectivity, *ergo* symbolic status. In *Phone*, there is no overt yielding to any abject pull; therefore, it is of no surprise that Jin-hee can only possess a not-yet-fully-symbolic body. Herself a representation of the abject element, Jin-hee can only experience scenes from her own life while in Yeong-ju's pre-symbolic frame. This includes re-enacting the moment of her death, when the possessed Yeong-ju throws herself down the stairs (though she survives the ordeal), as well as a parallel action sequence that shows Jin-hee, in a flashback shot, bitterly cutting off the image of Ho-jeong's head in a family photograph alongside a present-time possessed Yeong-ju furiously stabbing at her father's framed photograph with a kitchen knife.[121] *Phone*'s Jin-hee and *One Missed Call*'s Mimiko can therefore be grouped with Sadako of *Ringu* and Mitsuko of *Dark Water*, in

---

[120] The Electra complex, like its Oedipal counterpart, is usually a phase that must be overcome for the child to develop subjectively. The psychologist, naturally, assures the father that it will eventually pass.
[121] A further example of the erasure of subjective identity occurs in *One Missed Call*: a ripped-up Mizunuma family photograph is missing the head of Mimiko, foreshadowing her unveiling as the malevolent spirit behind the deaths and her lack of symbolic subjectivity, which ties her to the abject semiotic realm.

that they are barred access from full symbolic subjectivity; thus, they display traits that elude and defy the boundaries of symbolic logic. In doing so, they become abject figures – repressed, cast away, banished – and bear the qualities of the same semiotic realm that symbolic abjection equally shuns. Their association with mothers and maternal figures is no coincidence, and in both *Phone* and *One Missed Call*¸ the abject and monstrous mother is both suggested and enacted (Marie is assumed to be monstrous for allegedly harming Nanako, but actually becomes such later, while Ho-jeong is the legal but not biological mother in *Phone*, who kills the pregnant lover of her husband and tries to murder the biological mother of her daughter), or the mother is intrinsically tied to the semiotic abject figures in the films (Yumi to her own mother and surrogate mother figure of Marie; Ji-won, Yeoung-ju, and Jin-hee are all intertwined in a nexus that connects the abject to the maternal). Furthermore, Mimiko and Jin-hee, like Sadako, can appropriate, utilise, and manipulate modern technologies through which their abjection can spread through symbolic society.

6.3 I'm the Ghost in the Machine: Abjection and the Internet in *Pulse*

Just like the rise of mobile phone usage either side of the new millennium, so too had the Internet's popularity exploded to previously unprecedented levels around the same time period. Though developed in the mid-80s, private and commercial usage of the Internet in Japan did not begin until circa 1993 and user numbers did not begin to grow significantly until personal computers became more readily available around 1996 (Gottlieb and McLelland, 2003, pp.3-4). Nancy Gottlieb and Mark McLelland further illustrate the Internet's rapid rise in cultural popularity in Japan by pointing out that the household penetration rate in 2000 had risen to 21.4 percent from 11 percent in 1998, a rate exceeding the household growth of the fax machine, telephone, personal computer, and even the mobile phone (p.4). Like the other technologies that have been hitherto discussed in this and the previous chapter, the Internet, while a relatively modern device aimed at enhancing quality of life around the time of the contemporary Asian horror cinema boom, has equally become an object or concept for representing cultural and societal fears, on both a local and global scale. Gottleib and McLelland state that "[i]n Japan, as elsewhere, the Internet has helped bring together people from all walks of life who share common interests, ideals or anxieties" (p.2). In other words, it is a tool that enhances social outreach and helps to establish communities. In *Pulse*, the technology becomes a means for bringing

together spiritual and human domains; however, the effects are relayed in terms of further isolation, loneliness, and exposure to abject elements that results in complete subjective annihilation.

Pulse (also known as *Kairo*) revolves around the idea of ghosts penetrating the world of the living through the Internet.[122] It features two parallel plot lines that converge toward the end of the film. Like *Uzumaki*, the film is bookended by the narrative of one survivor, in this case, a girl named Michi (Kumiko Asô), who begins and ends the film by reflecting on the narrative events from onboard a boat escaping the plague of spirits that have infiltrated her home city, Tokyo. Michi, along with her colleagues, Yabe (Masatoshi Matsuo) and Junco (Kurume Arisaka), are awaiting a computer disk relevant to their work project from their other colleague, Taguchi (Kenji Mizuhashi), but become concerned when he misses the deadline and has not been heard from for days. Investigating his apartment, Michi finds Taguchi acting aloof and despondent, and then Taguchi hangs himself while Michi is looking for the disk. When the three colleagues look at the contents of the disk, they discover an endless series of images of Taguchi staring into his computer screen, as well as the reflection of a ghostly face. This event prompts a sequence of hauntings. First, Yabe receives a distorted phone call and the same image of an apparition as on the disk, and upon investigating he discovers a "forbidden room," where, on entering, he encounters a ghostly figure. Consequently, Yabe's demeanour becomes similar to Taguchi's immediately before his death, and eventually he physically disintegrates, leaving nothing but a black stain on the wall, similar to a mark discovered at Taguchi's apartment. Realising that there must be a connection between the ghost on the disk, the forbidden rooms (which are marked with red tape around the door), and the subsequent change in attitude followed by the death of their friends, Michi and Junco decide to investigate. However, when Junco unseals and enters one of the many forbidden rooms now appearing across parts of the city, she too encounters a spirit, eventually becoming despondent and disintegrating before Michi's eyes. Michi continues the investigation alone.

Simultaneously, in the second plot thread, a young economics student, Kawashima (Haruhiko Katô), has recently connected his computer to the Internet. His computer then

---

[122] More specifically, the spirits manifest themselves onto computer screens, before later becoming present in the real world. However, the film explains the phenomena in this manner.

accesses a website on its own accord, which asks Kawashima, "would you like to meet a ghost?" and subsequently displays images of lonely people in dark rooms. Kawashima turns off the computer, but during the night it switches itself back on, this time displaying images of a man whose face is obscured by black shadows and a man with a plastic bag over his head. The next day Kawashima enlists the help of a post-graduate computer science student, Harue (Koyuki), who initially instructs him how to print off or bookmark the page so that she can take a look; however, when the computer ignores his commands and displays more images of distressed people, Harue becomes involved with an investigation into these strange events. Appearing to become closer to Kawashima, Harue shows him a computer programme that she has been working on. The screen image of her programme, which is just a series of dots floating around but never touching another dot, Harue explains as a miniature of an isolated and futile world, where people have no real connections and never truly interact. "People don't really connect," she tells Kawashima, clearly embodying her own philosophy.

Kawashima later meets a mysterious student at the university library. He explains that the ghosts are the result of a problematic overflow of the spiritual world into the human world, with technology (namely the Internet) the main gateway for them to cross the borders from one realm to the other. The spirits do not kill, because that would create more congestion in their world once the deceased had become a ghost, but instead prolong the life of others by trapping them within their own loneliness (a tactic slightly flawed, as the severe depression of loneliness regularly translates to suicide). Meanwhile, Harue begins to display strange behaviour similar to that of Michi's friends, so Kawashima encourages her to escape the city with him; however, while on a subway train, Harue has a change of heart and returns to her apartment. Kawashima tracks her down but discovers that Harue is missing. While the number of ghosts appearing in the city has increased, so has the number of people vanishing, which causes the city (now resembling a post-apocalyptic wasteland) to begin evacuation procedures. It is at this point where the stories converge, and Kawashima meets Michi, as they are both heading toward the docks. There they discover an abandoned warehouse containing one of the forbidden rooms, where they encounter Harue, now taking on the appearance of one of the lonely people on the computer screen images; she removes a plastic bag from her head and shoots herself. Eventually boarding a ship heading for South America, Michi goes below deck and narrates that she is with her only friend. The camera focuses on Kawashima, who is

crouched up against a wall, only for his image to change into the black, shadowy stain that has hitherto demarcated the affected.

Like *Phone* and *One Missed Call*, the spirits in *Pulse* are able to appropriate and control technologies in order to collapse and cross the borders between their realms and the "real" world. This ability stretches to both the software and hardware – they travel and communicate through the Internet, but at the same time are able to switch on hardware devices at will (for instance, Kawashima's personal computer) – with the technology itself becoming the means of traversing the border and the technologies' physical housing units the gateway through which to enter the physical realm and make contact with the living. Abjection, as I reassert, comes about as a result of the collapsing of borders that demarcate, in various forms, the boundaries that construct the symbolic order, while that which is abject is instrumental in the collapsing and traversing of those borders. These borders are superficial, yet socially and culturally binding; and, moreover, are the foundation of subjective formation and identity, which is threatened once these dividing lines are exposed and eradicated in the films. In *Pulse*, therefore, the spirits, with their free rein to travel between realms, are abject by this very definition. Furthermore, in the film, there are visible examples of the construction of boundaries that attempt to reseal and contain the abject presence within the "real" world; these appear in the form of the forbidden room, clearly marked by the red tape around the rim of the doorways (which act as a physical border separating the rooms from the outside).

The first to enter one of these liminal areas is Yabe, after he finds a note at Taguchi's apartment. Yabe discovers an old dwelling within Taguchi's apartment block that is sealed with the red tape, covering the gaps between door and frame. He removes the tape and goes inside, and the inner space seems to take on greater dimensions than is suggested from the shot of outside. The uncanniness of the space highlights its designation as an area of liminality, where the logic and order of the symbolic realm begins to collapse; the darkness and sombre, atmospheric palette of the shot, which mirrors the appearance of the rest of the diegetic world, in turn shows that inextricable connection between the two realms, despite the attempted erection of dividing borders to separate them. The ghost that confronts Yabe in this space also takes on an uncanny appearance. Although ostensibly retaining the shape of her human form, the spirit moves towards Yabe using an inhuman, unsettling gait, which seems to modify her appearance, marking her as

Other from the human world. In Chapter II, I established that Kristeva's concept of the semiotic is both within and external to the symbolic. In *Pulse*, the forbidden rooms, which house spirits, are found within the landscape of the symbolic plain; however, the red-tape borders that are used to mark and divide these areas from the rest of the "real" are a means of separation (to abject, cast them aside once more) as well as evidence of the arbitrary and fragile nature of such borders.

Having voluntarily dismantled the sealant temporarily separating the spiritual domain from the symbolic realm, Yabe, like the many others who follow him in doing the same act, comes into contact with the abject element, that is, the spirits who have crossed the border into the world of the living. One of the key aspects of abjection theory is its tie to the formation of subjective identity within symbolic systems. To abject is as necessary as the acquisition of language throughout the psychosexual development models already elaborated on. The abject, though not a physical, tangible object, is the residue of the repressed semiotic material returning (from a realm where individual identity was not asserted or understood), a preservation of pre-object relations. The individual's notion of subjecthood and sense of "I" is not compatible with the non-distinct existence it had once known and known only; however, the lure of the abject is, as Kristeva describes it, "a power as securing as it is stifling" (1982, p.13). Too much contact, Kristeva concludes, and the subject's identity is threatened with annihilation because of the threat of returning to a state of undifferentiated existence. After Yabe's experience with the abject spirit within the liminal space, he becomes disconsolate, dejected, and withdrawn from society. In other words, he is no longer able to function as an individual asserting his own unique identity. The same phenomenon happens to all the other characters who experience the insides of the forbidden rooms: most notably, Junco follows on from her friend, but Taguchi has clearly also experienced the contents of one of the forbidden rooms, hence the note found by Yabe. Kawashima and Harue have a similar experience in their plotline, and eventually reunite in one of the forbidden spaces – Harue shoots herself in the head, and Kawashima later goes the same way as Yabe and Junco before him; only Michi experiences the innards of one of the rooms and remains alive with her subjectivity seemingly intact at the conclusion of the film. Eventually, those who come into contact with the abject spirits, particularly in the forbidden rooms (a semiotic space), disintegrate and disappear, leaving only a black shadowy stain on the walls (a flickering image briefly restores them to their

friends' eyes before fading away again – literally a shadow of their former selves), their subjective status dissolved and erased.

The other cause of death following contact with the inhabitants of the spiritual realm is for the characters to commit suicide. In addition to the suicides already mentioned, Michi witnesses a woman hurriedly sealing a door with red tape before throwing herself from the top of a silo. Suicide is a theme that runs throughout the films analysed in this chapter: in *Shutter*, Natre's victims appear to have committed suicide; in *One Missed Call*, the detective assumes that the victims have committed suicide, thus ignoring the true nature of the curse. In *Pulse*, suicide is another manifestation of the result of too much contact with the abject. Harue's codification as one of the lonely people transmitted over the Internet confirms the connection between the suicides and the ghosts. Kawashima also encounters a spirit in a forbidden room, which tells him that "death was eternal loneliness," thus conflating the demeanour of the spiritual world occupants and the drastic change in attitude of the living who come into contact with them.

Jay McRoy asserts that "[i]n *Pulse*, everyone is a 'ghost', even if their hearts still beat and their lungs still breathe; identity, in other words, is always liminal" (2008, p.165). The relevance of identity to the blurring of ghosts and humans is key to making the final point of this chapter, which is to say how the films unfold a narrative of abjection. Subjective identity is dissolved in the film as soon as somebody comes into contact with the abject element; this can be shown via the suicides of the dispirited and despondent, or it can take a more literal shape on screen in the form of the characters simply disappearing and ceasing to be. However, through the film, it is only the rules of the hauntings that are defined and understood; no true purging ritual is established or attempted. In this sense, the film bears similarities to the entropic nature of *Uzumaki*, with the curse (or, more accurately in *Pulse*, the problematic border collapsing) originating in a more local setting before becoming widespread. Like their spiral-haunted counterparts, the characters of *Pulse* are drawn "toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1983, p.2) and subjectivity is rapidly annihilated after exposure to and contact with the abject element. The only semblance of ritual to ward off the spirits is the erection of red tape over the doorways that contain manifestations of the ghosts – the forbidden rooms – yet these boundaries are easily eradicated and readily traversed by the humans as much as the spirits, while at the same time the ability of the spirits to appropriate Internet technologies
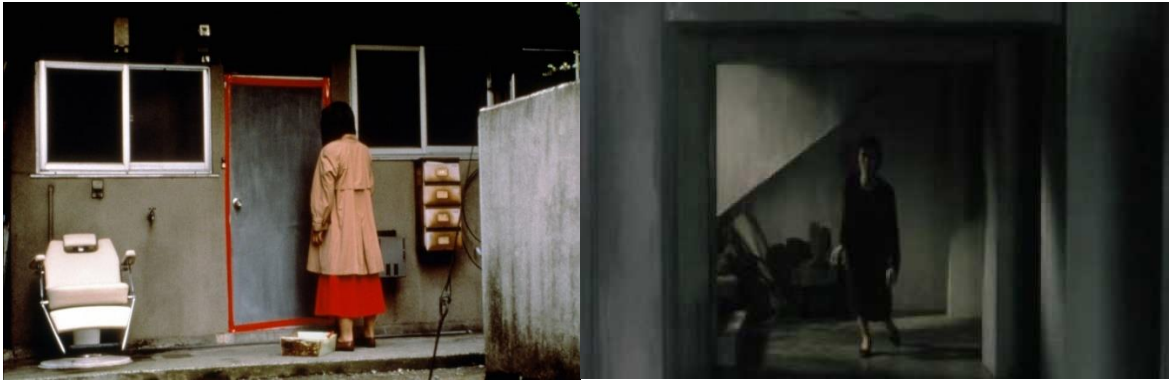
Figure 15 *Pulse*

In *Pulse*, forbidden rooms are marked by red tape around the door frame (left). When Yabe first enters a forbidden room, he encounters a ghost with am uncanny gait (right).

Figure 16 *Pulse*

Inside the forbidden rooms, the ghostly imprint of dissolved subjectivity manifests as a black stain on the wall (right), moments after a flicker of former subjective image can be glimpsed (left).

Figure 17 *Pulse*

Ghosts, isolation, and suicide are three of the key themes explored in *Pulse*.

makes such rituals wholly ineffective. The lack of any such established and successful purge negates any concept of the film redrawing, renewing, or strengthening cultural dividing lines between the abject and non-abject, between semiotic and symbolic.

In contrast, *Shutter*, *Phone*, and *One Missed Call* do attempt to establish some method of purging ritual, through which the characters are afforded an opportunity to banish the abject element and redraw (though not necessarily strengthen) the social boundaries. However, many of these attempts prove to be false resolutions, and once again it is indubitable that the films highlight how the abject can never be wholly banished from society, for it is, through its inherent connection to the semiotic, both always-already within as well as outside of symbolic systems of law, order, and logic. In the section on *Shutter* above, I pointed out similarities to *Ringu*, in that the burial of Natre's corpse does not lay to rest the vengeful and fatal hauntings that she enacts on those who wronged her during life. In *Phone*, the exhuming of Jin-hee's corpse from within the walls of the Lee family home does not put to rest her spirit, but rather enables her to exact the final stage of her revenge against the woman who buried her there. In *One Missed Call*, there are several false resolutions. First, there is the attempted exorcism ritual on Natsui, which goes horribly awry, with the spirit running amok in the television studio and still claiming her victim. Second, the investigation led by Yumi and Yamashita, which brings them to the abandoned hospital, results in both the discovery of the mother's corpse and a *Dark Water*-esque forged unity between the ghost mother and child; however, the true haunting nature of the abject spirit lies in the eldest child Mimiko, not the mother, and her possession of Yumi's body and the final scene showing the continuation of Mimiko's brand of bodily harm and torture is clear evidence of the abject still present in that particular diegetic setting. Therefore, the extended and more nuanced purification rituals attempted in these three films bear no more fruit than does the red tape sealing the forbidden rooms in *Pulse*. The abject is released in each of these films, yet none demonstrate a clear re-banishing of the abject element from society, thus eradicating any possibility of a conservative conclusion in line with Creed's generalisation of Western horror, instead producing a more complex outcome that depicts an ongoing tension between two realms (spiritual and human often standing in for semiotic and symbolic) where the pull and sway of the abject's presence can be felt at varying degrees, though never truly expelled from symbolic society's (arbitrary) borders.

6.4 Conclusion: There is No Such Thing in Life as Normal

Following on from the discussion of cursed videotapes and the use of camcorders to capture spiral-esque images in the previous chapter, I have moved on to isolate cameras, mobile phones, and the Internet as contemporary technologies utilised regularly within contemporary Asian horror cinema. By analysing the films in relation to abjection theory, I have demonstrated how these technologies function as both conduits and gateways for the abject to cross and conflate borders within semiotic and symbolic realms. In *Pulse*, I identified how the spirit world exploits the Internet to traverse from its side of a border – the ultimate symbolic border, that which separates the living and the dead – to the "real" world; the same applies to *Shutter* with the camera and *Phone* and *One Missed Call* with the mobile phone. However, I went on to identify a conflation of the two realms in *Pulse*. In other words, the spirits do not just move from one domain to another, they also occupy two spaces simultaneously, hence it being liminal and therefore susceptible to abjection. In *Shutter*, Natre is also capable of occupying two realms simultaneously, as the scene of her possessing Tun's bodily frame, which doubles his regular weight, shows. Border crossing is fundamental to abjection theory, and in each of the four films technology is the primary method for the manifestation of the abject element to traverse through boundaries. The vengeful and abject spirits in both *Phone* and *One Missed Call* utilise the radio frequencies of mobile phone networks to locate their victims, for instance. Whether moving from one realm to another or dissolving borders entirely, the identified abject elements in these films are further examples of how the social boundaries are arbitrary and fragile. Their frailty is exposed by that which, to paraphrase Kristeva, disturbs identity and system within symbolic order, by that which respects neither its borders, positions, or rules.

Another essential theme raised in this chapter is subjective identity as the cornerstone of the symbolic; moreover, how the abject jeopardises the totality of each living being. The abject, as already established, carries both an attraction and a repulsion for the subject, yet excessive interaction equates to subjective annihilation. In the four films of this chapter, the erasure of subjectivity is represented in numerous ways. In *Phone*, *One Missed Call*, and *Shutter*, a familiar trope from the previous chapter – the erasure of subjectivity represented on the photographic image – recurs: the theme of the family photograph recurs in *Phone*, with pending abjection signalled through either the smashing of framed stills or the cutting of heads from the printed picture; in *One Missed*

Call, a discovered torn family photograph missing Mimiko's head should point the way toward the figure of abjection; moreover, the white smears on the prints and negatives of Tun's photographs in *Shutter* demonstrate similarity to the blurred facial features that materialise in *Ringu* once Sadako has claimed a victim. However, the most prominent and unmistakable of these methods is through the deaths of those unfortunate enough to come into contact with or be targeted by the abject spirits. In both *Shutter* and *Phone*, the deaths are the result of a vengeance carried over (and then back across) from life to death by wronged females. Nevertheless, while in *Shutter* the victims are specifically targeted as those complicit in Natre's rape, *Phone*'s Jin-hee claims numerous innocent victims – on the somewhat arbitrary basis of who subsequently possess her mobile phone number – before finally locating the Lee family. Furthermore, in *Shutter*, the deaths are presented as suicides. The presence of Natre's spirit defies symbolic logic; therefore, it is difficult for Tun (and others) to accept it for what it is. Suicides are also a feature of *One Missed Call*; again, unable to accept the evidence of supernatural incidents, the lead detective declares that the casualties have been killing themselves. In *Pulse*, contact with the overspill of spirits leads some of the characters to actually commit suicide; these deaths are essentially conflated with the complete disintegration of subjectivity suffered by other characters who also engage with a spirit or enter a forbidden room. Each confrontation with a figure representing a crossed-border between past and present results in a personal abjection that wipes and dissolves subjectivity from those who get too close to the abject element.

Finally, I concluded the analysis section of the chapter by examining the narratives of abjection in the films. In the previous chapter, five J-horrors were discussed in terms of how they are driven by investigations as plot devices so that the rules of each curse could be understood and rectified. The same plot device occurs in each film examined in this chapter, with the inquiry again predominantly led by a female character. The importance, here, is that each curse and the set of horrific events that is triggered defies the rules of symbolic order, and is therefore treated as aberrant or denied formal acknowledgement by symbolic authority (for instance, the detective in *One Missed Call* ruling that the deaths are merely a spate of suicides, or even Tun, having already recognised Natre from his past, refusing to believe in the existence of the supernatural, despite contrary evidence). Moreover, each film, to a wavering degree, attempts to establish some form of purging ritual in order to banish the abject from society and re-establish its borders. In *Pulse*, the red-tape seals on the forbidden rooms temporarily keep the spirits at bay, yet they are

easily traversed and destroyed from both sides. In *Phone*, *One Missed Call*, and *Shutter*, the corpse of the spirit is exhumed (and in *Shutter*'s case given a ritualistic burial), though it does not quell the abjection; *One Missed Call* also stages a surrogate mother-child reunion, only to discover that it was not the mother's spirit responsible for the murders. The narrative of abjection for each film varies, however, and it is impossible to apply one single formal reading that covers all. More importantly, the notion of each film reaching a wholly conservative conclusion that re-establishes and strengthens social borders proves to be unsustainable, with the abject being demonstrated to still be within the symbolic systems at the end of each film, and no definitive conclusions that establish a method for its permanent banishment or even temporary abeyance offered. To finalise this section of analysis, I now move on to discuss myth, cult, and fairy tale.

Chapter VII: The Story is Old, I Know, but It Goes on: Myth, Cult, and Fairy Tale in *Noroi: The Curse*, *Suicide Club*, *Noriko's Dinner Table*, and *Hansel and Gretel*

> Toward the end or in the beginning? (Kristeva, 1983, p.188)

Completing the first section of case studies, this chapter moves on to discuss myth, cult, and fairy tale in contemporary Asian horror cinema, particularly with regard to the role that these tropes play in the understanding of abjection, and their importance to this cycle of horror cinema. In the previous chapter, I expanded the analysis on the narrative of abjection case studies to the theme of technologies; in this chapter, I conclude this three-part section by turning my attention to one of the other prevalent themes that stands out in Chapter V: the underlying presence of myth, cult, and/or fairy tale as a foundation for the abject in contemporary Asian horror cinema. Myths, cults, and fairy tales, furthermore, chime with Kristeva's concept of abjection in that they pervade the backdrop of abjection narratives (including Kristeva's examples of abjection ritual and purification in multiple societies). For instance, many contemporary Asian horror films are steeped in myth and urban legend (so far, this would include *Ringu*, *Uzumaki*, and *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman*, as well as establishing underlying patterns for understanding supernatural phenomena in *Pulse*, among others). With the establishment of foundational myth comes cultural, societal, and religious rituals. Societal groups that form on the basis of myth often enact such rituals, acquiring the status of "cult" through their philosophies, practices, and beliefs. Finally, fairy tale, is itself a form of myth in that it emerges from folklore into culture; however, in terms of abjection theory, it also takes the form of a fantastical narrative, one which often defies rules, system, and order (the very nature of Kristeva's abject). Although the study of fairy tale and its deeper meaning is outside the scope of this thesis, the traits of its characteristic narrative elements, particularly those that defy the rules and boundaries of ordered social practices and laws, are often semiotic in nature (in terms of their poetic distortion, as well as their capacity for alternative communication systems) and allow space for the semiotic voice, against the grain of symbolic authority.[123]

---

[123] For further reading, Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) applies Freudian psychoanalytic readings to popular fairy tales, including the tale of *Hansel and Gretel*. Christopher Hoile (1984) takes both the Freudian uncanny and Bettelheim's analysis into the area of (Western) horror cinema to read Stanley

When grouping together themes for the first section, I have demonstrated that technologies and various forms of urban legend and fantasy are the most suitable topics to follow the opening analysis chapter, covering narratives of abjection. In many ways, technologies and myth, cult, and fairy tale are at opposite ends of a spectrum: the former encapsulating the fear generated in and through modern commodities that are now everyday tools of contemporary reality, while the latter is steeped in an ancient past and fantasy. However, it is at the crossroads where the past and the present meet that abjection usually germinates. As already established, a radical and unexpected confrontation with a repressed (semiotic) past that has resurfaced in the present demarcates the symbolic crisis that accompanies the abject, one which collapses the borders erected to separate the two realms and threatens the eradication of subjective identity. In this chapter, technologies are often inseparable from the myth and urban legend that constitutes the main topic of analysis. For instance, the recording of the myth/urban legend in *Noroi: The Curse* is done entirely through handheld cameras and presented to the viewers in the form of a diegetic videotape (that is, a tape presented to viewers that is also accessible to characters in the film); furthermore, the cult that permeates the backdrop of the events in both *Suicide Club* and *Noriko's Dinner Table* is reliant on the Internet. This chapter will also anticipate some of the themes in the next section – the family, the home, the mother. Like the chapter before, this chapter will be structured in three parts, with each part focusing on a different element of the folklore/fantasy aspect of the chapter title. The first part will consider myth in *Noroi: The Curse*. The second part will examine cult in *Suicide Club* and its nominal sequel/prequel *Noriko's Dinner Table*. The final part will analyse the use of fairy tale in *Hansel and Gretel*.

7.1 Found, Found, Found (Footage): Myth and Abjection Rituals in *Noroi: The Curse*

 The premise of *Noroi* is focused on the video recordings made by paranormal investigator Masafumi Kobayashi (Jin Muraki). The tape is introduced by an unnamed narrator, who informs the viewer that its contents "reveal a truth too astounding for us to imagine"; furthermore, the narrator explains that after the last recording on the tape, Kobayashi's house mysteriously burned down, killing his wife, while Kobayashi's body was never

---

Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), while Cristina Bacchilega (2010) looks at the uncanny, gender, and narrative in fairy tale. Furthermore, Jack Zipes (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of the influence of fairy tale on cinema.

found, resulting in him being declared as missing. With the film being presented as "real" documentation, along with the frequent shaky-camera techniques and (intentional) low production values, *Noroi*'s framing and structure is, therefore, in-keeping with the found-footage sub-genre/cycle of films,[124] thus generally differing in look and appearance from other contemporary Asian horror films. However, in terms of its general themes and content, particularly with regard to those conducive to a study of abjection within the cycle, *Noroi* is thematically similar to other contemporary Asian horror films. Specifically, the film features an investigation into a curse (the subject of the recorded footage) based on an urban legend; purification rituals are essential to its abjection narrative; and its visual linking to the semiotic and the abject is paramount to deeper understanding of film, cycle, and theory.

As I have previously established, in Kristeva's abjection, the realm of the semiotic (associated with the mother and nature) is separated (abjected) from the symbolic (law, society, and culture) in order to establish the symbolic's system of intersubjectivity and language. Jettisoned to the other side of the dividing line, the semiotic acquires certain traits that distinguish it from the symbolic. In Kristeva's theory, the repressed semiotic is closely identified with the abject in that, once banished, it has resurfaced to haunt the subject with its previous state of co-dependent existence, a state incompatible with the subject's new symbolic existence; in contemporary Asian horror cinema, this is often manifested in the form of a deadly curse or vengeful spirit, and the abject is once again closely associated with semiotic traits. Specifically, in *Noroi*, the supernatural and cursed elements are semiotic through their correlation to the natural, animalistic aspects of that realm. The first piece of footage on the tape is of Kobayashi's investigation into the report of a local resident complaining of strange noises coming from a neighbouring house.[125] The "mother" and her seldom-seen son become the root of this particular investigation (and are crucial to the documented events that follow); however, at this time, Kobayashi

---

[124] Found-footage film in cinema can be traced back to *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and the films of the *Guinea Pig* series. However, around the time of the emergence of contemporary Asian horror cinema, the found-footage film also experienced a rise in mainstream popularity, following the commercial and critical success of *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999. A full critical or theoretical account of the found-footage technique of filming is outside of the scope of this project. For further reading on the form of found-footage cinema, particularly with regards to stylistics and framing, see Cecilia Sayad (2016).

[125] The contents of the tape are pieced-together recordings from Kobayashi and his cameraman, which are spliced with other forms of footage to tell its narrative: for instance, the psychic reality television show or the recording of the purification ritual shown to Kobayashi by the historian later in the film. Consequently, this piecemeal style of footage draws attention to the editing process involved in creating the tape, thereby diminishing its authenticity as factual.

records the unusual sounds and sends the results off for a sonic analysis. The findings are outside of the ordinary, expected results and are reported back to Kobayashi as having an animalistic quality (specifically that of a cat's meow, missing certain salient idiosyncrasies which prevent a conclusion that the noise was simply coming from a cat). Also audible on the recording is the sound of multiple babies' voices crying in harmony. Here, the expert cannot place the exact cause of the strange noise, but instead relays his findings in approximations that cite both the animalistic and infantile; in other words, the sound being produced from those afflicted with the curse (as it is later demonstrated) is unexplainable in logical symbolic discourse, so is put in terms associated with the non-verbal, language-less semiotic.

This scene is not the only example of the curse being connected to the animalistic or to alternative forms of communication. When Kobayashi returns to the neighbourhood with the results, he finds that the family have moved from their home, which is now surrounded by dead pigeons. Over the course of his investigation into the paranormal, Kobayashi gains some companions, each of whom are also afflicted in some way or another by the paranormal. One of these acquaintances is Mr. Hori (Satoru Jitsunashi), who is coded as a crazed conspiracy theorist (although he is elsewhere in the film referred to as the "super psychic"), complete with tin foil hat and coat and displaying erratic behaviour and gestures. He tells Kobayashi to watch out for pigeons and ectoplasmic worms (his home-made tin foil outfit protects him against the latter, he claims). Hori is helping with Kobayashi's investigation into a missing girl and draws him a map detailing where the ectoplasmic worms have taken this girl. When Kobayashi traces the map to an old apartment block, he once again witnesses a group of pigeons congregating in a concentrated area, this time on one man's balcony, where evidence of the paranormal activities can be located. Furthermore, as Kobayashi learns more about the specific curse during his investigations, it is revealed that dogs were kept as superstitious totems in the accursed villages. Thus far, the presence of the semiotic curse is inextricable from the presence of the animal world.

Moreover, the second piece of footage on Kobayashi's tape is of a reality television show that is testing supposedly-psychic children. In addition to the conditions being like a school examination,[126] the presentation of the footage is reminiscent of a wildlife

---

[126] See next chapter for further connection between educational systems and the abject.

documentary, with many of the cameras and the show's host (and narrator), hidden behind the props and settings, all the while providing commentary of the children's activities, as though observing them in a foreign habitat (albeit natural to the objects of the study) and from a safe distance. Like in *One Missed Call*, where the spiritual possession of an individual becomes the subject of a television debate, this show in *Noroi* attempts to identify children with extrasensory possession via means of standardised testing. One girl in particular, Kana (Rio Kanno), shows a keen sense of precognition and telekinesis (different aspects of the tests). Kana demonstrates an ability to make water materialise in an empty container (the water appears with traces of hair and animal plankton[127]) and she matches nearly all the concealed drawings to an uncanny accuracy. Kana officially fails only one test, where she draws a strange-looking head and face instead of the Cyrillic script for "star" – thus drawing a patronising response from the show's host.[128] She disappears from her home shortly after the show has finished filming, thereby becoming the subject of Kobayashi's investigations (as mentioned above), having, in the interim, become unwell and also received visits from "super psychic" Mr. Hori. [129] The former examples further demonstrate how methods of non-lingual and non-verbal communication, specifically those that defy professional explanation, are inherently linked to the animalistic and infantile in the film.

Shortly afterwards, the actress Marika Matsumoto (playing a fictional version of herself) joins Kobayashi and Hori in their search for Kana and quest to understand and quell the nature of the curse. Marika has (in the context of the film) experienced supernatural phenomena at a shrine in a wooded area while filming another project and begins to unconsciously draw a strange pattern that semiotically links her to Kana (who drew the same pattern independently during the television show test). Hori's inextricable association with the paranormal, the curse, and its aforementioned traits, meanwhile,

---

[127] The show's chosen professional expert commentates that it could be human hair but lacks medulla development, meaning it must have come from a baby, if not an animal.

[128] However, her drawing demonstrates prescience beyond the means of the show's testing devices, for the image she draws in "error" is actually one of the many images and symbols associated with the curse and its rituals, evident in the scene of her sacrifice later on.

[129] Interestingly, the doctors cannot find a medical explanation for her illness.

implicates him within the semiotic realm that engulfs both Kana and Marika, and which brings them together as part of the investigations into the curse.[130]

After Marika faints in the woods, she appears to have become possessed, and then she herself becomes the subject of one of Kobayashi's recordings.[131] On the footage, the sonic analysis expert isolates a deep, growling voice that seems to be saying "Kagutaba." Kobayashi recognises that name from earlier, as one mentioned by Hori around the time that he drew the map to where he believed Kana's captive location to be. At this point, *Noroi* introduces the foundational myth from which the curse, possessions, and paranormal activities arise, both explaining its origins and offering a superstitious purging ritual through which to nullify its potency. By tracking down an expert historian of the subject, Kobayashi learns that Kagutaba is a demon in the folklore of the Shimokage Village. A group of local priests annually performed the "legend of Shimokage's Way," a ritual to summon and pacify the demon; however, the spirit of Kagutaba went rogue one year, wreaking havoc on the village, so the villagers began to perform a new annual ritual, one that buried Kagutaba deep underground (the village was later demolished and its remains lie submerged under a dam) and would continue to ward off his presence. The historian has recorded footage of the last ever ritual, which is included on Kobayashi's tape. This shows the routine going awry, with an explanation that the priest performing the ceremonial rite had used an unusual sequence of claps and bows. As a result, the priest's daughter, who was acting the role of Kagutaba in the performance (and who Kobayashi soon learns is Junko Ishii [Tomono Kuga], the woman living in the house from where the strange noises were coming in the initial footage), was rendered catatonic and later disappeared.[132] The film thus establishes the possibility of the supernatural entering the realms of the symbolic and two superstitious and religious rituals connected with its presence: one to summon the demon (not shown), one to banish it (shown performed erroneously, subsequently failing).

---

[130] Hori's lifestyle, which is affected by his obsession with ectoplasmic worms and the lengths he takes to shield himself from their psychic influence, arguably reinforces this association; in other words, he operates outside – or at least on the perimeters of – "normal" subjective and symbolic existence.

[131] An interesting point occurs in the film at this juncture, which highlights the process of editing in the film's contents. During the recording of Marika and others in the woods, a strange, ghostly figure appears just within the frame of the shot behind Marika as she faints. Kobayashi withholds this evidence from Marika.

[132] The ritual, through its elements of music, performance, and dance, has artistic traits that chime with Kristeva's description of the semiotic realm. See Chapter VIII for further discussion.

When Marika joins forces with Kobayashi and Hori to search for Kana, it is also because she has become concerned that she is possessed (her sudden propensity for attracting pigeons, some of whom will fly directly into the glass of her apartment window at high speeds, is a visual clue to her possession) after several people connected with her commit suicide (her unconscious fashioning of nooses onto trees during her first appearance in the film is another connection). The three of them – Kobayashi, Hori, and Marika (along with Kobayashi's cameraman) – go to the area surrounding where Shimokage once stood, finding that the locals still display their totems – sickles above the door and the keeping of dogs for ritualistic slaughter – demonstrating an enduring superstition and belief in Kagutaba. They also discover images of the strange patterns that earlier connected Kana and Marika both with each other and the Kagutaba curse. It is Kobayashi's intention to enact a correct performance of the banishment ritual to rid Marika of the curse and contain Kagutaba's spirit. However, when they reach the dam under which Shimokage is buried, Marika goes into a possessed trance and runs off into the adjacent woods, along with a panicked Hori, who claims to have seen Kana. Kobayashi attempts to restart the ritual, having discovered a shrine located deep in the woods, but before it can be completed they come across the image of Kana, who has been brought to the woods by Junko as a sacrifice in the ritual to summon Kagutaba. The image of Kana is filtered through the camera's negative/night-vision lenses and depicts her covered with crawling, undead foeti.

Kagutaba, as an established urban legend whose summoning unleashes him in the present, encapsulates the essence of Kristeva's abject, for in abjection it is the resurrection of an ancient, buried past in the present that serves to dissolve symbolic borders and confront the subject with their previous semiotic state of indistinction, of non-subjectivity. The ritual performed by Junko to conjure Kagutaba's spirit further completes this connection with its visual and connotative connections to the semiotic: the re-appearance of the patterns in nature,[133] the association of the animalistic and the infantile,[134] and the filtered image of Kana in a dark, womb-like space. Junko, furthermore, has committed suicide in the woods at some point during the process. Her body is found among a shrine

---

[133] These designs may remind the viewer of the spirals in *Uzumaki*, more so in their prevalence throughout the film, rather than their specific geometric patterns.
[134] A discovered scroll later reveals that baby monkeys were fed to a psychic in the original ritual, thus furthering the implication of animals and children in these ritualistic offerings. Junko used the foeti in an attempt to replicate this procedural rite.

Figure 18 *Noroi: The Curse*

Noroi's conspiracy theorist, Mr. Hori.

Figure 19 *Noroi: The Curse*

The psychic children are observed from behind the camera (left). Kana's ESP is ahead of the show's tests (centre). Kana, the most prescient of the contestants, is interviewed about the "incorrect" prediction (right).

Figure 20 *Noroi: The Curse*

Kana's drawing is later shown to correspond to Kagutaba iconography displayed across the village (left). As part of the ritual to summon the demon, the kidnapped Kana is covered in foeti (right).

of the totems and symbols hitherto connected with the Kagutaba curse and rituals, with a young boy, erroneously assumed to be her biological son remaining behind. Kobayashi completes the purging ritual and, with Marika making a full recovery, believes to have successfully contained Kagutaba. Hori is placed in a mental institution, while Kobyashi and his wife Keiko (Miyoko Hanai) adopt the young boy.

The film, therefore, is structured according to a narrative of abjection, as established in the opening chapter of this section: the abject element is introduced into ordered society and a purification rite is performed in order to expel the abject back to the other side of the border. Moreover, as with many of these films, the purging ritual enacted to banish the abject element and redraw societal borders proves to be a false resolution, and the abject is once more demonstrated as a force that cannot be excluded from within the symbolic's dividing lines (it operates both within and without). Although the narrator in the opening sequence presents the tape as the discovered documentary film, studied by Kobayashi, that device is shown to be just a part of the wider film *Noroi*, in that a further tape is annexed to this conclusion, a coda of sorts that furthers the narrative beyond the confines of its initial boundaries; in other words, a form of liminal space that exists both within and additional to the originally-presented narrative borders. This additional tape was mailed by Kobayashi to his cameraman, who clearly has access to the original tape and is in a position to addend this new material. Its contents show Kobayashi, his wife, and the adopted boy at the dinner table. The boy is not named and believed to be around six or seven years old (that is, around the cusp of transferring from the mother's domain into the father's in legal terms, as established in the analysis of *Dark Water*). Hori, who has escaped from the institution, turns up at the Kobayashi home in a flustered state and attempts to attack the boy. In the ensuing melee, the camera becomes unfocused, erratic, and hurried, creating a sense of chaos and unease. Kobayashi, now operating the camera, falls to the floor, and the shot takes on a low, sideways angle. When it finally settles on Hori and the boy, the boy transforms into the image of the demon Kagutaba, revealing that he is carrying the curse and the evil, abject spirit has not been suppressed. He possesses Keiko, forcing her to set the house on fire. An added narratorial intertitle states that Kobayashi is still missing. In short, the young, nameless boy is both semiotic and abject as per established parameters, and he is a conduit for the curse of an urban legend and local myth who has returned into the present day to cause death and destruction to symbolic systems. The film establishes both semiotic and symbolic realms, then collapses the

dividing lines between the two. A purging ritual is also established, but this method of warding off the abject in society proves to be inconsequential, shown as the narrative unfolds to be at best a temporary abatement.

7.2 I Want to Leave, You Will Not Miss Me: Cult and Identity Crises in *Suicide Club* and *Noriko's Dinner Table*

 Both *Suicide Club* and its nominal sequel (which also serves as part-prequel) *Noriko's Dinner Table* centre on a nationwide cult known as the Suicide Club, who predominantly connect via the Internet. *Suicide Club* documents the events of one particular week in late May through early June 2002, while *Noriko's Dinner Table* begins approximately six months before the events that kick off *Suicide Club* but concludes around eighteen months later, therefore spanning two years in total.[135] Each film contains a different cast of characters, but shares the same temporal events, particularly the mass suicide at a Tokyo train station, as well as exploring similar subject matter.[136] In my case study of these two films, I will discuss the themes of identity as fluid and malleable, particularly with regards to notions of "self" and social alienation; the foregrounding of psychological and physical connections, as raised in the films; the correlation between mass suicide hysteria and the dissolution of subjective identity; fraught tensions between forms of symbolic and semiotic discourse; and the connection between the social upheaval caused by the Suicide Club and abjection theory.

7.2.1 Who Am I that I Come to be Here?

 Throughout both films, there is an underlying tension between semiotic and symbolic discourses that is one of the main themes of abjection, as established and discussed throughout this thesis. One way in which this topic manifests is through the plot device of investigation. As the two previous chapters have shown, investigation as a staple of contemporary Asian horror cinema is often conducted by either an agent of symbolic

---

[135] Where the events of *Suicide Club* take place over a consecutive number of days, the events of *Noriko* are relayed in a largely non-linear order. *Noriko* is divided into five chapters, with the first four titled after the main characters in the film and the final chapter foretelling the conclusive events; however, each individual chapter is not limited to the titular character's perspective, and shifts points of view frequently.
[136] *Suicide Club* commences with a visually arresting opening sequence. The camera initially cuts between shots of everyday activity at a train station and black title screens, with a slow, wistful score underlying the sense of mass tragedy about to unfold. Fifty-four school girls then link hands (as the score livens) and jump in front of an oncoming train, spraying blood all around the station and onto the other passengers.

authority or through an independent individual (usually female and often against the grain of symbolic ruling). *Noroi* provides an interesting contrast to this norm, featuring a male who is conducting investigations into elements often dismissed for not fitting with symbolic logic – the paranormal – and for his own motives. In *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*, both forms of investigation take place. The group of detectives in charge of the suicide cases in *Suicide Club* are initially dismissive of the possibility of a cult controlling the suicides,[137] noting it as nothing more than coincidence or accident; however, two female characters simultaneously conduct their own independent investigations: Kiyoko, also known as "The Bat" (Yôko Kamon), and Mitsuko (Saya Hagiwara). The former locates the club through hacking and interpreting the Internet, and she assists the police of her own volition by drawing their attention to a website that records coloured circles representing the men and women who have committed suicide. The Bat is then kidnapped and taken to an abandoned bowling alley serving as the one of the club's headquarters. She encounters the androgynous figure of Genesis (Rolly) and his gang, and she witnesses the rape, torture, and murder of several young women who are contained inside white blankets. She is able to transmit a message to the police, who arrest Genesis as the leader of the Suicide Club (while he gladly accepts the plaudits for being the "Charles Manson of the Information Age"). Meanwhile, Mitsuko also uses contemporary technologies to unravel the clues pertaining to hidden messages in the iconography of pre-teen pop group "Dessert" (whose songs appear frequently throughout the film, particularly concomitantly or juxtaposed with the suicides),[138] thus locating the inner circles of the Suicide Club. There she finds numerous children, all of whom ask her questions about connection to the self, before leading her to a backstage area, where people are having pieces of their skin shaved off.[139] In contrast, the detectives, as Jim Harper states, "represent the establishment: efficient, well-meaning and completely helpless in the face of society's new-found nihilism" (2008, p.62). For instance, one of the detectives, Kuroda (Ryo Ishibashi) also receives a call from a young boy with a distinctive cough, who asks him questions such as "are you involved?" and informs the police of another mass suicide

---

[137] In *One Missed Call* (previous chapter), the detectives are content to declare the inordinate number of teenage deaths to a collection of random suicides, as opposed to admitting a supernatural element at play. *Suicide Club* and *Noriko's Dinner Table*, in turn, dispense with the presence of ghosts and spirits, instead examining a more global phenomena (that also retains a degree of locality) that connects the suicides – and the cult surrounding it – to abjection.

[138] Throughout the film, the name of this pop band is frequently misspelled as "Dessart," "Dessret" and "Desert."

[139] A roll of stitched-together flesh in a white bag is found at the train station, which is symbolic of the totality of each of the individual victims. A new roll is being created as the suicides continue.

about to take place at the train station, yet the team of males representing law and authority are unable to adequately prevent a wider epidemic of suicides throughout the city. Despite rushing headlong to the station, their efforts prove fruitless.

Importantly, the three main detectives investigating the suicides have different outlooks on the case. Detective Murata (Akaji Maro), the eldest of the three, appears to be the lead officer in charge and fastidiously refuses to acknowledge the workings of a cult. Detective Shibusawa (Masatoshi Nagase), in contrast, is much more open to other possibilities. Detective Kuroda, meanwhile, becomes implicated within the suicidal net that sweeps the city. Often pictured with his family (wife and two children), Kuroda gradually becomes emotionally estranged from them as the film progresses. At one point during the investigations, his son shows him the website that The Bat revealed to the police. The site asks the user various questions pertaining to connectivity and involvement (as prevalent throughout both films), but Kuroda is unable to interpret any deeper meaning, which is also the case when he receives personal calls from the coughing child. After the latest wave of suicides, a weary and exhausted Kuroda returns home. He is greeted by his daughter, who stands behind him covered in blood. Kuroda does not notice initially, then discovers that his entire family is dead. In turn, he shoots himself. The perspective of the symbolic authorities, particularly under Murata's lead, becomes interesting here. Having hitherto dismissed the suicides as no more than random accidents, Murata now decrees that a murder investigation must be opened following Kuroda's death. In other words, the "official" discourse changes, or at least becomes enlivened, from the moment that one of the representatives of authority becomes a casualty. Shibusawa understandably questions Murata's change in attitude, querying the motives for a special exception and declaring that the deaths have been effectively murder all along. Of the detectives, it is Shibusawa alone who decodes Dessert's message (though, as will be expanded upon more generally, only partially), arriving to try to stop Mitsuko boarding the train out of Tokyo, having recognised her unique butterfly tattoo from the roll of skin patches – he both identifies Mitsuko from this and realises the possible implications, namely that Mitsuko is highly-likely to commit suicide. His attempts to connect with Mitsuko on the platform are rejected, coming too late, and the film ends with Mitsuko leaving Tokyo on a train. As the credits play, Dessert announce their disbandment and perform their final song.

Figure 21 *Suicide Club*

Fifty-four school children hold hands at a Tokyo station platform before jumping in front of the oncoming train. The scene is the catalyst for a wave of suicides sweeping the city in *Suicide Club*.

Figure 22 *Suicide Club*

Teenage J-pop band Dessert (frequently mispelled) play an integral part in the subliminal spreading of suicidal tendencies. Mitsuko discovers that the hidden message in the group's iconography, which leads her to the location of the club's secret headquarters.

Figure 23 *Noriko's Dinner Table*

Noriko's continues to explore the themes of isolation and identity. Noriko arrives in the city alone (left) but is soon drawn into the realm of Kumiko's family rental business. Here, they adopt the personas of two wayward daughters (centre) returning home to have dinner with their father (right). The mood soon changes when the client's time expires but Noriko (still a novice to the game) begs to extend the session.

The main plot line of *Noriko* follows seventeen-year-old Noriko, who has run away from her rural home to the metropolis of Tokyo to meet a girl, at the time known only to her as "Ueno Station 54" (Tsugumi), whom she met through a website for teenage girls. Soon after, Noriko becomes deeply immersed in a world of roleplay and family, having discovered that Kumiko (Ueno Station 54) works for an organisation that specialises in providing paid actors to pretend to be family members for lonely clients. Six months later, the incident at Shinjuku station takes place (the opening events of *Suicide Club*), which prompts Noriko's younger sister Yuka (Yuriko Yoshitaka) to wonder if Noriko was involved with the suicide pact. Yuka also runs away to join up with her sister and becomes equally bound-up in the rental family organisation. Yuka's disappearance eventually prompts their father, Tetsuzo (Ken Mitsuishi), to go and look for his daughters (his wife has committed suicide as a result of a deteriorating mental health condition in the interim). Following a set of clues left by Yuka, he tracks them to Tokyo and meets a member of Kumiko's corporation, having become aware of the Suicide Club through the media and the website that his daughters used.

Therefore, in *Noriko*, the main investigation is once again male-led, this time by Tetsuzo in his role as a father, though not in his professional capacity (his job as a reporter has been the cause of some previous tension in the household). The position from which Tetsuzo conducts his search is arguably the ultimate position of symbolic authority, as detailed in my explanation of the Lacanian interpretation of "Name-of-the-Father" in Chapter II, as well as outside of symbolic institutions. This role mirrors that of Ji-won's in *Phone* (previous chapter), with the genders reversed – and perhaps more importantly the position of "father" inserted. However, where Ji-won and others must lead their investigations in the face of threats against the contradiction of symbolic dictate, the only obstruction facing Tetsuzo is his own inability to interpret communications outside of his known mode of discourse. When Noriko runs away, Tetsuzo continues as normal; when Yuka follows on her trail, she leaves behind a set of clues for her father to pick up in the form of a fantasy story. In this tale, Tetsuzo becomes a character who immediately quit his job and began a frantic search for his daughters. Later in the film, Tetsuzo disputes this version of events and admits that he continued to immerse himself in his work for two whole months, despite both his daughters disappearing and his wife dying. It was only when he found Yuka's fictional diary entry that he decided to go and look for them, and it is in the discrepancies between the two accounts that both a friction and an incompatibility

between symbolic and semiotic discourses is highlighted. Unable to respond to his daughters' departures, Tetsuzo continues in his own universe, and then, aside from the wishful fantasy that portrays him as instantly abandoning his job and commencing his search, he concedes that Yuka is able to project an accurate understanding of his motives and actions in her story. In contrast, he lacks the insight and imagination into his daughters' world to be able to locate them, instead relying on the more literal and logical clues left for him. Yuka is adept at both projecting and interpreting versions of her father, but Tetsuzo is unable to reciprocate without instruction.

This moment in the film is both indicative of multiple discords between discourses in *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*, and ties in to another key recurring theme of abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema: identity. A feature of each film is the mysterious website that records the suicides in advance. This utilisation of technologies to document the horror links back to the previous chapter, and in particular draws comparisons to Harue's dot-based computer programme in *Pulse*, which, in that film, symbolises the isolation and loneliness of the general population. Jay McRoy also notes the similarities and, drawing on the same themes, states that "[a]mong *Suicide Circle*'s[140] primary themes is the seemingly paradoxical dilemma of alienation and interpersonal dis-communication in an age of proliferating information technologies and 'mass communication'" (2008, p.142). In *Suicide Club*, however, the dots are also colour-coded: red dots for females, white for males.[141] Here, the website signifies the lives lost using mere coloured circles, distinguishable only by gender coding. In *Noriko*, the website is also shown to have an independent chat room for teenage girls, where users assume different identities – Noriko becomes "Mitsuko," Kumiko is "Ueno Station 54," and so on – and the site, as I will go on to explain in further detail, points forward to a crisis of identity that is inseparable from abjection. The dots on the computer programme in *Pulse* and on the website in its various incarnations in *Suicide Club* and *Noriko* come to represent the eradication of subjective identity, exchanged for a blurred and indistinct mark as a result of abjection contact.

In short, the concept of identity throughout *Suicide Club* and *Noriko* is in a constant state of flux. In the former, the manifold people who take their own lives lose individuality, becoming data in a larger computerised representation of a collective unit.

---

[140] As noted earlier, *Suicide Circle* is an alternative distribution title.
[141] The red and white colour scheme is also prominent at the closure of the opening sequence, where the white bag containing the skin roll is soaked red with blood as a result of the fifty-four simultaneous suicides.

The androgynous figure of Genesis, furthermore, functions as both a disruption to the action (in the song he performs) and a purveyor of violence and murder. When he is arrested, he takes the credit for being the main perpetrator behind the Suicide Club, but his incarceration is a false resolution, in narrative terms, for the club extends to a wider network (as revealed in both this film and in *Noriko*). Conversely, Genesis, whose name connotes beginning and creation, is merely a cog in a larger wheel, gladly becoming the public face of the Suicide Club and enjoying the media attention, yet his disappearance from the narrative has no impact on the greater concerns illustrated throughout both films. In *Noriko*, as mentioned above, both Noriko and Kumiko create a different identity through their usernames, but they also become more than that as the film progresses. In one scene, Kumiko and Noriko fabricate their own origin stories, which, though rooted in the truth of their own formative experiences, extends into their world of role play. In Kumiko's case, she was abandoned as a child and her worldly possessions are tied up in locker number 54 at the station,[142] whereas her day-to-day identity is determined by the corporation that she works for, fluctuating according to the whims of the client. Noriko becomes deeply immersed in this role, and during one scene she begs Kumiko to allow her to carry on being "daughter" to their "father" (the client, not her biological father). Kumiko had moments earlier informed the client that his time was up, and her persona changes from doting but troublesome daughter to aggressive and abusive service provider, insulting the client for indulging Noriko (as well as admonishing Noriko, too) and instructing him to pay up.

It is this fraught father-daughter relationship that comes to characterise Noriko in all forms of her identities as the film progresses, with the emphasis drawing on the implications of her being on the border between child and adult. As a seventeen-year-old when the film starts, Noriko has obviously progressed beyond the established threshold that places her within the law of the father in her culture (see Chapter V), but, as will be discussed more in the next chapter on high schools, her coding as a school girl, especially in the earlier sequences, denotes her as not having fully passed into the adult realm yet either. Noriko even observes these disparities about herself, stating that "dad was an adult" when they dispute her chosen university,[143] as though contrasting his status with her own,

---

[142] A dark, enclosed space, which Kumiko describes as both solid and fragile.

[143] Noriko is set on going to Tokyo University. Her father is against the idea because Noriko's cousin became pregnant while a student there. This conflict ties in to both the rural versus urban tensions (the father has deliberately isolated himself and his family from the big city) and the adult-child borderline, with

later stating, "Just a kid. That was me" when she arrives in Tokyo to find Kumiko. Early in the film, she meets an old friend, Tangerine (Yôko Mitsuya), by chance encounter, and although they are both the same age, Noriko admits to admiring Tangerine, now working as an idol, for being grown up, thus demonstrating that the barrier between childhood and adulthood is just as much psychological as it is physical.[144] Noriko also narrates via voiceover that she became a reporter for the school paper, not to be like her father (also a reporter) but to rebel against him through these channels (she describes her father's articles as "fluff," thereby suggesting that he toes the line, whereas Noriko sees her line of reporting as provocative). By running away to Tokyo, Noriko symbolically moves into adulthood by crossing those borders that had (more so mentally) prohibited her from progressing beyond childhood, visually indicated by her pulling a red thread from her coat upon arrival in Tokyo. However, in order to survive in her new environment, it is essential for Noriko to change her identity, thus becoming "Mitsuko" in the process, which leads into the world of cult, fantasy, and role play.[145] Later, when Yuka becomes party to the proceedings, she also changes her identity, becoming "Yoko," and follows a similar pattern of acting out her tensions and fantasies regarding the father-daughter relationship. Noriko and Yuka, biological sisters and Tetsuzo's daughters, often act in the role of "sisters" and "daughters" for their clients. In the last chapter of the film, Tetsuzo orchestrates a false session through an old friend, who hires Kumiko to be his "wife" and Noriko and Yuka (as "Mitsuko" and "Yoko") to be his "daughters," while Tetsuzo observes from inside a closet, eventually confronting his daughters after Kumiko temporarily leaves the house to buy cigarettes. Things go awry, and the security workers from the organisation arrive to attack Tetsuzo, who kills them all with a knife. Amid the chaos and emotional distress, Yuka provides the solution by begging them all to "extend the session" and they all sit down as a "family" (Kumiko filling the role of surrogate mother), with Tetsuzo's role having moved from father to "father." Beforehand, the girls refuse to drop their characters and call Tetsuzo "stranger." The next morning, Yuka disappears to reinvent herself again, while Noriko decides to become "Noriko."

Tetsuzo still considering his daughter a child and concerned that she may become a mother if she went to the city.

[144] In Japanese culture, an idol refers to a young media celebrity (often in pop music), crafted to be a public role model and tied in to the culture of *Kawaii* (cuteness). The bubble-gum pop band Dessert from *Suicide Club* also fit in with these criteria. For further reading see Hjorth (2003) and Otmazgin (2008).

[145] A different character from Mitsuko of *Suicide Club*.

A number of important things resonate in this vital thread running through the film. First, *Noriko* draws attention to the indeterminate border between childhood and adulthood, which symbolises the passing from semiotic to symbolic status through the trope of coming of age (see next chapter for deeper analysis on this theme in contemporary Asian horror cinema). To move into the realm of symbolic subjectivity, the child must, in abjection theory, denounce and cut ties with the maternal semiotic while taking their place as a lingual subject in the symbolic, or law of the father. In other words, the attaining, asserting, and maintaining of "official" identity is key. In *Noriko*, the two wayward daughters seek to escape the father in order to affirm their identities. By contrast, the mother is largely absent from the proceedings, both before and after her suicide. However, in the film, both Noriko and Yuka are clearly suffering from an identity crisis, with their personas malleable to the desires of others (the always adult male clientele), while seemingly condemned to repeat a routine of acting and re-enacting relationships that resolve conflicts and tensions with a father figure. Here, the role-playing element of Noriko and Yuka's new life helps them to fulfil a social function, but one which is unstable, thus returning the emphasis to the fragility of social borders. In Chapter IX, I go on to discuss the family unit in greater detail, where I establish that the family and family home are often a locus for abjection. In *Noriko*, the fractious relationship between Noriko, Yuka, and their father, which manifests itself through various substitutes, surrogates (including the surrogate mother figure of Kumiko), and role imitations, results in identity becoming precarious and volatile, situating it on the cusp of abjection, which, in full force, causes complete eradication of subjectivity in its symbolic form. Noriko reassumes her "old" identity at the end of the film, which ostensibly reunites her with the father, while Yuka absconds once more as a blank slate, yet to form a permanent identity. Furthermore, the tensions and fragility of the borders are illustrated throughout the film, as are connections between semiotic and symbolic realms. To explore this point further, I now move on to consider how abjection functions as a border-collapsing agent of chaos in both *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*.[146]

---

[146] Abjection, as I have established, can be both a personal psychical or physical reaction to a confrontation with the subject's own materiality (and maternal origins), as well as a disruptive force that occurs in liminal spaces and on the cusp of indiscriminate borders, particularly when those boundaries are collapsed or dissolved – such as the ones between symbolic and semiotic.

7.2.2 It's the End of the World as We Know it (And I Feel Fine)

 Neither *Suicide Club* nor *Noriko* establish a purging or purification ritual to subdue the threat of abjection; however, that does not mean that the abject or abject element is not both present and prevalent throughout each film. Abjection, it is important to remember, can appear in many forms and, in the theory at least, lacks definitive tangibility; although, as already established, in cinema it can take on a visual representation. In the further absence of a supernatural presence, the abject element that connects both of these films is the Suicide Club itself, though in its more abstract and philosophical concept, as well as how it physically manifests in society. Border collapsing is essential to the abject's potency, specifically in how it traverses liminal space as a rogue and chaotic element that challenges not only subjective existence but also the laws, codes, and boundaries of all culture and society. Running across both films is the notion of a Suicide Club, yet it is impossible to precisely pin down exactly what the club is, who is a member, where it is located, or whether it truly even exists. Genesis, at one point, takes credit for being the leader of the club, yet the consequences (or lack of) following his arrest suggest that he was nothing more than a bit-part player in the wider scheme, if involved with the club at all. Giving its name to the title of the first film, the club is established in theory once the fifty-four girls jump from the platform. The wave of suicides that follows suggests the essence of a wider perspective or movement, particularly when the school children proclaim their own club before jumping off the roof; at the same time, with no true connection established (ironically, a questioning stance towards connections embodying the ideology of the club), these actions could simply be the consequence of a series of copycat actions inspired by the train station incident. However, Mitsuko's discovery of a secret space located through the station – a hidden cult operating secretly within the hub of society – is the first true indication of the club's underlying presence, where hordes of children, ostensibly present for a Dessert concert, practice the club's mantra (questioning involvement and connectivity). Operating within the same confines, groups of adults shave skin patches off other members, preparing them for their role in a greater scheme.

 If, as Harper indicates, "*Suicide Club* suggests that the roots of this wave of self-destruction are already present in the Japanese psyche, simply waiting for the right trigger" (2008, p.62), then it is in *Noriko* that the concept of the Suicide Club (or "circle") is both expanded and expounded. During Tetsuzo's eventual search for his missing daughter, he

meets up with a man employed by the same agency as Kumiko. Now aware of the media attention being given to the possibility of the existence of the Suicide Club, Tetsuzo questions him about it, believing that his daughters are now a part of its operations. Of particular interest is the man's response: he flatly denies the existence of a club, in the physical sense, but at the same time explicates a broader yet abstract general philosophy pertaining to the recent wave of suicides. Specifically, he states that the collapse of civilisation began at locker number 54. Here, the man locates the origins of the cult with Kumiko, who is interpretable as an entity with an unknown origin story and a malleable identity. She cannot be tied down to any given persona, yet operates freely in society, temporarily fulfilling desires. It is, therefore, possible to read both Kumiko and the club (which here Tetsuzo's informer essentially conflates) as the abject element that has entered society. It is a chaotic and destructive element, and too much engagement with its presence equates to death and an abasement of identity that dissolves individual subjectivity (for instance, the suicides are represented as nothing more than an indistinguishable coloured dot).[147] Moreover, the mysterious man explains the club's ethos as *proximity to death giving life more value*, which is a reduction of two states (life and death) to the cusp of their border, reminding us of Kristeva's view of the status of the corpse when presented to the living.

Just as interestingly, Tetsuzo interprets this information as Kumiko's vengeful "grudge" against society. Unable to process the logic (if any) behind the club's existence, Tetsuzo frames Kumiko and the Suicide Club in terms of a familiar contemporary Asian horror cinema trope, albeit not one that exists or is further explored within the narrative of either of the films. What Tetsuzo's reaction does reassert, however, is the underlying presence of the club, its cult-like status, and their general mindset toward the destruction of society and collapse of civilisation, which runs concomitant with my argument (already established and further reinforced throughout the thesis) of abjection operating within the societies depicted by this filmic cycle. When discussing *Suicide Club*, McRoy observes "an impending dissolution of personal and cultural identity" (2008, p.142), the sentiment of which is clearly continued in *Noriko*. McRoy goes on to declare this wave of self-

---

[147] A prominent example of this in action would be the montage sequence in *Suicide Club*, which depicts a number of individual and small-scale group suicides across a wider range of Japanese society. The effect of montage removes any textual coherence during this spell of suicides by downgrading narrative structure to clip and image, in turn reducing the individuality of each person committing the act to a mere fragmentation of the larger, more abstract whole.

annihilation as reactionary, but I dispute this conclusion on the basis that, when read through the lens of abjection theory in the manner presented here, it is clear that a pattern of unrestrained abjection has entered symbolic society, rapidly eradicating the identity of many of its subjects, without discrimination. In many ways, these films are ideal companion pieces to *Uzumaki*. The narrative of all three films is predicated on urban legend, myth, and cult, while all three simultaneously present an entropic eradication of symbolic identity. In *Noriko* especially, Kumiko, and later Yuka (and to some extent Noriko herself), display fluid, shifting, and unsettled identities – they refuse to take up permanent positions within symbolic rules – while those engulfed by the circle of the Suicide Club willingly sacrifice their own identities. Furthermore, these abject elements cannot be fathomed within the narrative to the extent that a purging ritual can be established or enacted, thus, as in *Uzumaki*, there is no way to redraw the borders and reinforce the symbolic authority under threat.

7.3 I Would Rather Not go Back to the Old House: Fairy Tale in *Hansel and Gretel*

7.3.1 Punctured Automobile in a Forest Desolate

 Completing this chapter, I now turn my attention to the role of fairy tale in Yim Pil-sung's *Hansel and Gretel*. Like myth, cult, and urban legend, fairy tale comes under the rubric of folklore and typically features magical or fantastical motifs to its narrative, distinguishing it from the "real" world. Fairy tale, which tends to take the form of a short story, often originates as an oral tale passed on and changed throughout the years, with many versions then being documented and published. One common trope is the "happy ending" scenario, in which the heroes of the tale always triumph over adversity in the form of obstacles to their happiness, which are usually the machinations of the villainous characters (though much darker implications and events often lie beneath the surface of these ostensibly happy endings).[148] In the case of *Hansel and Gretel*, the tale is of German origin and first recorded and published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812, telling the story of a young brother and sister (the titular Hansel and Gretel) who are captured by a witch in a forest and are taken to her house, which is made of confectionery. The witch plans to kill the children but they escape, burning the witch in her oven before doing so. This film

---

[148] It is not within the remit of the thesis to go into greater detail on the origin of fairy tale. A brief outline of the general direction of the fairy tale is sufficient to situate its aura within the background of this film without detracting from the broader objectives of this thesis.

adaptation visually references many of the key facets of the tale (the saccharine house, the trail of breadcrumbs left by those trying to escape) but departs from it in other aspects (the brother and sister are replaced by one older male character, while the witch is now nominally three perennially ageless children). However, the primary focus of this chapter is to examine how this film can be read alongside abjection theory, rather than dwelling too much on how it compares with the recorded tale. Therefore, it will not be considered specifically as a *Hansel and Gretel* interpretation, but rather as a text that is both ripe for analysis in its own right, as well as part of a cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Throughout the analysis, I will be looking at the main focal points of abjection alongside the film, while many of the prevalent and recurring themes already talked about in great depth will be applicable, particularly the tensions between semiotic and symbolic realms, rites of passage into adulthood, and purification ritual (all of which are central to the concept of borders in abjection). Moreover, abjection theory's reliance on spatial and temporal distortion is relevant to this film.

Hansel and Gretel commences with a toy salesman, Eun-soo (Cheon Jeong-myeong), driving through a forest on a highway while having an argument with his pregnant girlfriend on his mobile phone. Distracted, Eun-soo crashes his car, knocking himself unconscious. He awakens in the middle of a dark forest, where he comes across a young girl, Young-hee (Shim Eun-kyung), who takes him back to their family home, the "House of Happy Children," where he meets a couple, who he initially believes to be the parents, and the two other children, Man-bok (Eun Won-jae), the eldest, and Jung-soon (Jin Ji-hee), the youngest of the three. The family and their house have a strange and uncanny quality: both parents act nervously when they are introduced to Eun-soo, and the following morning a breakfast of only sweet desserts is served, as the children copy each movement of their guest. Furthermore, the house is overtly colourful and child-like, and the portraits and pictures of adult humans have animal heads superimposed over the faces. After several failed attempts to find his way out of the forest – with each journey returning him to the house – Eun-soo is eventually left in sole charge of the kids, finding a note from the parents informing him that they have had to go out of town for a while. Eun-soo begins to investigate his mysterious surroundings and starts to believe that all is not as it seems; in particular, he suspects that the children have some form of supernatural power.

Later, Deacon Byun (Park Hee-soon) and his wife Kyeon-suk (Lydia Park) join the group, having been found by Man-bok in the woods. By this time, Eun-soo has discovered that the children have telekinetic abilities, and the drawings that they make in their notebooks come to pass in reality. It was the children, particularly Man-bok, Eun-soo learns, who were responsible for the disappearance of the "parents" he encountered when he first entered the house. Furthermore, Eun-soo follows Man-bok to a free-standing door in the middle of the forest. Inside this impossible space, Man-bok and his sisters take on a much older appearance, revealing themselves to be in a perpetual state of childhood (through a magic spell) outside these confines. A series of flashbacks augments Eun-soo's investigation, which provides salient detail on the children's origin story: the house was formerly an orphanage, where they lived and were mistreated by the staff, and in a dream, a Santa Claus figure gave Man-bok a *Hansel and Gretel* book. The cruel and unusual punishments depicted within the book impress upon the children, who subsequently believe that they should punish the adults who wronged them in the same manner. Meanwhile, Deacon Byun, shows himself to be a cult leader and child killer. At simultaneous points of past (flashback) and present, Man-bok uses his powers to burn the abusive orphanage caretaker in the fireplace and force Byun to stab himself. Man-bok expects Eun-soo to now be the adult to take care of them and draws such an eventuality in the notebook, but having taken pity on him, Young-hee suddenly informs Eun-soo to burn the notebook to facilitate his escape. The film closes with Eun-soo reconciled with his girlfriend, who has now given birth. He ponders over the preceding events, questioning their reality, but then finds a notebook under his Christmas tree with drawings of the three children, now seemingly content in their life without an adult.

As is the case in many of the contemporary Asian horror films discussed throughout this thesis, the focal points for the horror are situated in the opening sequence(s). Here, a montage of story book images, given a chiaroscuro lighting effect, root the events in the realm of the fairy tale, which signifies the past or an ancient history, while a narrator introduces "this world" as being in "an unimaginable strange place," which points toward the uncanny and impossible spatial dimensions crucial to the film's *modus operandi*. In short, the breakdown of temporal and spatial planes prevails in this

164

Figure 24 *Noriko's Dinner Table*

In an effort to reunite with his two wayward daughters, Tetsuzo enlists the help of a friend to pose as a client (left). When Tetsuzo reveals himself, things take a violent turn (centre and right), but the family reunification is complete when Yuka successfully appeals to continue the session with her father and sister adopting the roles of "father" and "sister" (Kumiko fills in for the absent "mother").

Figure 25 *Hansel and Gretel*

In *Hansel and Gretel*, the demeanor of the "family" and the décor of their house takes on an uncanny, child-like quality.

Figure 26 *Hansel and Gretel*

The uncanniness continues the following morning at breakfast, where only an array of sweet treats are served. The children look to Eun-soo, copying his every action.

narrative and are essential to their connection to abjection theory. In terms of space, several dimensional anomalies contribute to the uncanniness of the narrative. First, the deep forest in which Eun-soo is lost within appears impossible to escape, though evidently several adults can be lured into and/or lost within its confines. In his paper on the uncanny, Freud describes one example of an uncanny feeling as "the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states … after having wandered for a time [and finding oneself] back in the same street" (1919, p.237). In *Hansel and Gretel*, Eun-soo makes numerous attempts to leave the area, always ending up lost or returning back at the house; in contrast, the children can navigate the forest (as well as, the film suggests, alter the geographical layout), as Eun-soo discovers to his dismay when, lost again, he sees Man-bok leading the Deacon and his wife to the house. When Eun-soo investigates strange noises coming from the attic, he discovers the "mother" he met upon his arrival, who, fearing for her life, is hiding from the children.[149] After accidently revealing her whereabouts, she is turned into a china doll by Man-bok; furthermore, the layout of the attic also defies spatial logic, continuing in a seemingly endless repetition of wooden beams.[150] A further example of impossible space in the film is the stand-alone blue door situated deep into the forest, which leads to an old storage room/repository, containing artefacts documenting the children's true past (technically, buried within these woods), source material for their magic book and the drawings used to shape future events, and a place where the true nature of Man-bok and his sisters emerges (it is revealed that they are, in fact, much older than the mid-twenties Eun-soo, with their date of births showing the children as being born in 1959, 1960, and 1965 respectively). The implications of this hidden archive are discussed in greater detail below. Moreover, the spatial dimensions do not necessarily have to be anomalous to provoke feelings of unease. The house itself, as mentioned above, takes on both infantile and magical qualities in its colourful, picturesque appearance, strewn with desserts and child's toys, along with the framed wall pictures and paintings imposing animal heads on adult human bodies.[151]

---

[149] His very first encounter with her in the attic is when he first tentatively approaches the space and is engulfed by her long, black hair, thus evoking another common trope of the cycle.

[150] Repetition is a prominent feature of the uncanny as a psychological experience, while a lack of distinction between human and doll is another of Freud's primary examples (1919, p.235).

[151] In the introduction to their edited collection on Korean horror cinema, Alison Peirse and Daniel Martin discuss folklore and myth surrounding the use of animal iconography in Korean horror, stating that "animal motifs are … specifically Korean, yet share significant commonalities with other pan-Asian folklores and myths" (2013, p.2).

Furthermore, though Freud provides numerous examples of the uncanny, the basic underlying definition is "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (p.241). With regard to *Hansel and Gretel*, So-jin Park observes that the "concept of the uncanny, disrupting the boundaries between the familiar (the comfortable) and the unfamiliar (the disturbing), recurs throughout the film" (p.72). Kristeva's concept of abjection also has its roots in Freudian theory. In particular, it is the revenant of a past semiotic existence, now forcefully cast from the symbolic realm, that is faintly recognised in the process of abjection that chimes with the Freudian interpretation. In all cases, it is the evocation of both the past and the present engaging the subject simultaneously that causes psychological distortion; in other words, the borders between the two have collapsed. In *Hansel and Gretel*, temporal disintegration occurs as soon as Eun-soo enters the house. Time is not measured within the confines of the "House of Happy Children" and even the mechanics in his wristwatch cease to work.[152] Time frames of past and present are conflated to essentially one and the same space when Man-bok's angered scream in a flashback sequence simultaneously destroys both of the evil adults (the caretaker and Deacon Byun). In other words, "the past haunts the present, and … it is neither wholly present or wholly absent but lies beneath the present as a suppressed trauma" (S.A. Lee, 2014, p.285). The perpetual state of childhood self-imposed by Man-bok and his sisters also defies the ageing process and, as I go on to explain, is a method of defying the coming of age process and consciously avoiding symbolic subjectivity.

The abject, as bears repeating, is what does not respect borders and rules, and the conflation of time and space in *Hansel and Gretel* is just one of the ways that it is evoked in the film. Aside from the aberrations in symbolic spatial and temporal logic, the forest, house, and accompanying space within those confines all exist within the semiotic realm crucial to the onset of abjection. Utilising the magic powers bestowed upon them, Man-bok, Young-hee, and Jung-soon reside in an eternal and deliberate state of infancy, refusing to pass into adulthood, having formed the opinion through brutal experience that adults are evil (thus setting up a tense distinction between childhood and adulthood, as Noriko does in *Noriko*). Their supernatural ability also allows them to obtain almost

---

[152] Disruption to contemporary technologies also occurs within the borders of the home. There is no working phone and Eun-soo's mobile phone also ceases to function. Furthermore, the television shows an endless loop of violent animal cartoons and a programme featuring Santa Claus, despite not being plugged in.

anything that they desire, whether it be toys, food, or, most significantly, being able to determine the actions of the adults who arrive at the house.[153] This scenario mirrors the conditions of the semiotic *chora* in Kristeva (and the Lacanian Real), where all needs are fulfilled – here, their own desires and whims are met. Whatever Man-bok draws in his notebook comes true; therefore, the space exists somewhere within the symbolic realm, though not subject to its same laws, and it is also a haven for the three children to act out and fulfil their unbridled needs and desires. Having assumed control of the adults inside the boundaries of this fantastical space, the children, in a permanent pre-symbolic state, have no law of the father to adhere to, and, as is demonstrated in the nervous disposition of the first "mum" and "dad," the adults are often deathly afraid of the children.[154]

Moreover, any discipline that the adults (who are essentially hostages) attempt to impose is usually met with their death and subsequent erasure of their status. The photographs on the wall testify to the impermanence of adult identity in this world.[155] Identity is fluid in *Hansel and Gretel*, but, in their forest saturnalia in semiotic abject space, the pre-symbolic children have established a certain permanent state of identity to speak of, while the adults who come and go from their lives are under the constant threat – as posed by too much engagement with the abject. Any form of identity is shaped and imposed by the children, and those adults who defy or challenge their authority are faced with eradication, lost to their own world external to the forest and either murdered (and in one case, roasted and consumed at the dinner table) or turned into an inanimate object, with all traces of their existence removed.[156]

7.3.2 Man-bok, You'll Never be a Man

In the next section, I start by discussing the theme of coming of age in contemporary Asian horror cinema, specifically citing Korean high-school-based movies. In the following section, adjacent chapters focus on the mother, family, and family home (some

---

[153] Park repeatedly points out that it is only the love of the adults that the children are unable to conjure.
[154] A flashback sequence shows an earlier set of "parents" looking dejected as the untamed children run rampant around the house. Jung-soon accidentally cuts her foot on some shards of glass, which causes the adults to quarrel. Displeased, Man-bok uses his psychic powers to force the father to hover his hand over a boiling pot of water as a deterrent against any future actions that may upset his sisters.
[155] Man-bok is also shown placing cut-outs of respective parents' heads onto the drawings in his Hansel and Gretel book. These images are as replaceable as the actual adults fulfilling the role.
[156] Rather than outright murder the adults, Man-bok uses his psychic powers to force the adults to harm, and ultimately kill, themselves, thus tying into the recurring theme of suicides concomitant with abject contact discussed elsewhere in this chapter and thesis.

themes which have already been touched upon in this chapter). However, in order to position the theme of identity more firmly within the sphere of abjection theory in relation to *Hansel and Gretel*, it is necessary to anticipate these forthcoming features. Above all, a theme of progression from a semiotic state to symbolic subjectivity defines abjection (and runs across the entire the thesis), in turn playing into the narratives of abjection in the films. The majority of contemporary Asian horror films brought to discussion in this thesis highlight an encounter with the abject and attempt to establish a purging ritual in order to banish it once more from society and redraw the boundaries. In *Hansel and Gretel*, this happens to a nominal degree: a dichotomy of good versus evil (typical of a fairy tale narrative) is incorporated into the narrative, mostly by Deacon Byun, who at varying times refers to the children as angels or devils, according to how their controllability suits his machinations.[157] It is Byun's intentions to purge the children of the Devil to make them children of God, but this basic formula proves inapplicable in the dimensions of the realm occupied by the children (and not least because of Byun's true nefarious intentions, which link him to the caretaker of the orphanage). Byun's rituals, which would involve slaughtering the children, starting with Jung-soon, are thwarted and result in the deacon's death in a sequence that conflates the boundaries of past and present. The closest action to a purging ritual that allows Eun-soo to return to his symbolic domain is the burning of the notebook; however, that plot point, in this case, is more a means to an end, and it is by closely following Eun-soon's subjective status and state of identity as the film progresses that allows for an abjection-based reading to unfold.

At the start of the film, Eun-soo is established as a father-to-be, although his argument while on the phone to his partner is centred on convincing her not to abort their child. Moreover, Eun-soo is travelling to see his sick mother (on a basic level, it could already be said that he is heading back toward the maternal, though more nuanced evidence follows). Park observes: "That Eunsu ends up deep in the forest on the way to see his mother is also symbolic" (2015, p.70). Park utilises the Freudian uncanny as a theory to unlock an essential understanding of *Hansel and Gretel*; and although the uncanny contributes vastly to a reading of the film, her statement can also be brought into my analysis using abjection. Taking aside the homographic qualities of *symbolic* here, I have already ascertained that the forest and what is contained within it functions as the abject

---

[157] Soon after arriving at the house, Eun-soo calls the children "angels," which pleases them. He later concocts a fairy tale, where they feature as fairies.

semiotic, which is inherently and inextricably connected with the mother and maternal realm. That Eun-soo gets lost in this semiotic arena only plays further into the hands of an abjection theory reading, in that the sway of the abjection draws him to the place where meaning (in this case, logic, law, and motion as dictated by symbolic rule) and borders have collapsed. The family, in *Hansel and Gretel*, plays an important part in the film's abjection narrative, but like *Noriko*, biological family members are substituted for artificial roles, often forced. Again, father becomes "father," just as mother is now "mother." Bonds between parent and child are forged and forced, and they exist only nominally at the disposition of Man-bok and his sisters, with the adults usually fulfilling the vacancy under duress.

Eun-soo's familial status before he enters the magical forest and enchanted home is precarious: he is a doting and obedient son, but his pending responsibilities as a father hang in the balance. When he is first introduced to Young-hee, she remarks on the gender ambiguity of his name, asking, "What type of name is that for a man?" (the sentiment being brought up again later). He also takes on the surrogate role of both parents when left in sole charge of the children, becoming a conflation of both "mother" and "father"; however, unlike all the other adults that enter their lives, the children do not refer to him as either, instead calling him "uncle." Put another way, Eun-soo occupies the border between semiotic and symbolic because of his unstable identity in terms of his forthcoming fatherhood, the gendering of his name, and the fact that he now occupies semiotic space. In Kristeva's writings, the child passes from the semiotic to the symbolic through the repetitious process of language learning, while simultaneously casting out the maternal co-dependent (non)existence. At the breakfast table following Eun-soo's first night at the house, the children look to him for guidance, copying his every motion as he tentatively eats a cupcake and drinks the sweet tea, but these actions serve more to infantilise Eun-soo than cast him as a fatherly figure to be looked up to, and that potential guiding role soon disintegrates when the nervous Eun-soo explains that he must leave as soon as possible to visit his sick mother. He passes a remark about some previous animosity between himself and his mother, to which Man-bok stands up and defends the role of the "mother," becoming confrontational in his demeanour. Although he faces a few borderline moments of incurring Man-bok's wrath, such as when he experiences Man-bok gripping his wrists in displeasure at his snooping around the house, Eun-soo is the only adult who avoids fatality in the "House of Happy Children." Eun-soo is mostly manipulated by the younger

girls and demonstrates a fear of Man-bok, having become probably the closest adult to understanding the nature of his powers (again, aligning Eun-soo more with the semiotic realm). When he tells the children his own fairy tale, his narrative is interrupted and amended by Man-bok, who provides his own conclusion. This is again repeated toward the end of the film, when Man-bok pens his own version of the happy-ever-after ending, by which he decrees that Eun-soo must stay with them forever as their carer.

However, Eun-soo – by this point, having realised the truth about their dates of birth – has implored the children to exit the "curse" (as he refers to it) of perpetual childhood. They must, he decrees, begin to trust adults and re-enter society. It is here that Young-hee takes pity on him (it is interesting to note how Eun-soo evokes little more than pity and annoyance from the children, where other adults have produced fear, anger, and violence) and provides him with the solution to return to the symbolic realm – the method being to destroy the means of non-lingual communication and its subsequent action (the drawings in the book). The film concludes with Eun-soo returned to his status in the real world as a father, having passed through various stages in the film's narrative, from gender-ambiguous to semiotic to surrogate parent to "uncle," which ostensibly points to one of the more conservative conclusions in the array of films under scrutiny. And while that may be the case, it must, nevertheless, be observed that, unlike many of his symbolic counterparts in other films, Eun-soo cannot eradicate the memory of his experience in the semiotic abject house and forest, even though the mechanics of the situation does not compute with his own notions of logic. He tries to dismiss it, but his experience is too "real." What is more, he still shows signs of yearning for such a place, wondering what became of the children that he grew so close to. When he discovers the children's notebook left under his Christmas tree, the drawing shows that Man-bok and his sisters are now happy, yet they remain in the guise of children and are now without an adult. Perhaps the threat of abjection will no longer be a danger to adults passing through the forest, but at the same time, the semiotic place still exists as a spatial anomaly within symbolic realms, and the three children continue to elude the boundaries of time, and the mandate to come of age that together rule symbolic life.

7.4 Conclusion: Now, Today, Tomorrow, and Always: Temporal and Spatial Abjection

 Throughout this chapter, I have analysed four films, each with their roots steeped in either myth, urban legend, cult, or fairy tale. Although these films are not the only contemporary Asian horror films rooted in these ancient and fantastical narratives, nor do they only contain this singular theme, one major point that can be observed from building upon this focal point is that by such heritage being lent to the narrative, both spatial and temporal planes are frequently distorted, thereby collapsing significant borders when read alongside abjection theory. In *Noroi*, the demon Kagutaba emerges from an ancient past into the present when the ritual to summon him is performed. *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*, on the other hand, eschew the supernatural elements of most films in this cycle, but the suicide club that pervades the backdrops of this shared film world extends its boundaries to engulf society, moving across the city and into the wider world, while the timeframe is modified and protracted to move it beyond mere phenomena into a wider cultural epidemic. Finally, Man-bok's psychokinetic abilities inside his semiotic realm in *Hansel and Gretel* allow him to regularly defy all borders of space and time, even conflating them while in a fit of rage. In all films, the past and the present regularly intertwine, which rounds off this section of analysis by adding the ancient and underlying to the contemporary and modern, with both modes of analysis intrinsically linked to the first analysis chapter, which focuses on narratives of abjection and how they shape contemporary Asian horror cinema. The chapter also anticipates several of the prominent themes to be discussed in greater depth: the coming of age narrative, the mother, the family, and the family home.

Other themes that have inescapably come to the fore when introducing abjection theory to these films are the presence and subsequent collapsing of borders, tensions in the semiotic-symbolic dyad, identity crises, and the introduction (and ambivalence) of purification rituals to banish the abject from society. The dissolution of borders and boundaries is another essential tenet of abjection and is found even beyond the tremendous scope of spatial and temporal dimensions. For one thing, the ethos of the Suicide Club in the film of the same name and in *Noriko* situates the subject on the crucial border between life and death, which, one of its representatives claims, enhances the value of life through the proximity to death. Symbolic and semiotic realms are also established in all four films, and borders are constantly drawn and erased in a cycle that demonstrates how the two

spheres are inextricably bound, though they often operate in principle as two separate entities. In other words, the conflation of the infantile, the natural, and the animalistic in *Noroi* or the tensions between childhood and adulthood in *Noriko* and *Hansel and Gretel* help to set up such distinctions, yet despite the symbolic's necessity to cast aside all association with the semiotic, the two realms always meet, thus making abjection present. Where identity is concerned, I have already demonstrated how excess contact with abjection results in subjective annihilation (or at least the threat of). Once more, this theme is prevalent across the films. In *Noroi*, *Suicide Club*, and *Noriko*, we again see how suicides play a part. In the latter film, the blank, non-discreet dots represent the individual once they play their part in the club's ideology (a chaotic disruption to symbolic order), while across the board identity is also fluid and malleable, as shown with the multiple adaptations and adoptions of personalities and roles in *Noriko*, which also appears as a theme in *Hansel and Gretel* with regard to the interchangeability of the designated parents. Finally, several rituals are established in *Noroi*, to both summon and purge the demon. Naturally, the ritual goes awry, allowing the abject spirit into society. At the same time, when Kobayashi believes that he has finally enacted the correct procedure to purge Kagutaba, he finds that it is his newly adopted son who is the personification of this abjection. The film's "true" conclusion shows that nothing is purged or abated. The same applies to *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*, although this is mostly through the lack of a purging ritual, which itself is due to those in positions of authority being unable to comprehend the magnitude or the rules of the club, as it fails to fit in the remit of their understanding. In *Hansel and Gretel*, the plot moves beyond the traditional good versus evil theme of the fairy tale, and the ritual set up by Deacon Byun to murder the enchanted, perpetual children is by no means given as an established rite to quell their abjectness inside their semiotic realm. The burning of the notebook is the nominal means, which does point toward both the redrawing of cultural boundaries and the confirmation of symbolic status for Eun-soo, but the coda of the film hints that the semiotic forest existing within symbolic society is still in operation. Moreover, it is still populated by those who use its non-symbolic lack of logic and rule to constantly defy the codes and dictates set upon entry into symbolic subjectivity.

Through the concluding chapter of a three-part analysis, I have now been able to delve further into some of the specific key themes of abjection that are instrumental to a greater understanding of this cycle of contemporary Asian horror films in line with the

theory. In the first chapter, I established the narrative of abjection and demonstrated how it helped toward a greater understanding of both the films and the theory. In the subsequent chapters, I have looked at two themes that persist throughout that opening analysis chapter: modern technologies (in Chapter VI) and myth, cult, and fairy tale (present chapter). Given that abjection, building somewhat on the Freudian uncanny, sees the subject challenged by the return of a remnant of a past existence, hitherto repressed, elements pertaining to both past and present in these texts invitingly align with the broader narratives of abjection chapter to enhance the detail of the study.

On the whole, both the narratives of abjection that are essential to contemporary Asian horror cinema and two of its key themes have been extended beyond a foundational basis to show the compatibility between the films and the theory. Moving forward, other themes already broached will be discussed in the next section: the high school and coming of age narrative; the mother, the family, and the family home; and the Creedian concept of the monstrous-feminine.

Section Three: The High School, the Home, and the Monstrous-Feminine

Chapter VIII: The Teachers are Afraid of the Pupils: High School Horror in *Whispering Corridors*, *Death Bell*, *Memento Mori*, and *Wishing Stairs*

> High school is, first and foremost, the site of oppression and repression where narrative conflicts await various generic solutions. (Choi, 2010, p.117)

In the previous section, I discussed narratives of abjection in several examples of contemporary Asian horror cinema, before delving into the more nuanced themes of technology and myth, cult, and fairy tale in the subsequent chapters. Of these themes, the former – narratives of abjection – recurs continuously throughout the entire thesis.[158] This new section, however, moves on to group together the high school, the family and family home, and the concept of the monstrous-feminine. This specific chapter focuses on a selection of South Korean horror films set within high schools, which initially suggests that the analysis is concentrated on a specialised area of contemporary Asian horror cinema. There may be an element of truth in that statement, but at the same time, this motif will prove to be a good launching point for a set of recurring themes that are essential subject matters for the following two chapters in this section. From a thematic point of view, this chapter organises its films according to their diegetic settings (therefore, the theme is relevant to the subject matter of the films), while the second chapter of this section takes a broader theme that could be argued as specific to both the theory and the films, and finally, the third chapter is structured around a concept directly tied to the theory (thereby moving the section's focal point from film to theory across three chapters). However, throughout the section, whether it is the film or theory that shapes the chapter, I will be demonstrating the intrinsic relationship between film and theory upon which this thesis hinges. In each of these chapters, the following themes will be raised: the borders

---

[158] Although not discussed in depth throughout this chapter, narratives of abjection are still prevalent and important to understanding the abject in relation to this cycle of films. Prime examples of the narratives of abjection in these films can be found in both *Whispering Corridors* and *Death Bell*, where solution in the form of purging rituals is sought for once the horror is unleashed within the school; however, this again seems to take the form of trial and error, with *Whispering Corridors'* Eun-young eventually having to embrace another student in a scene similar to the ending of *Dark Water*, only with her taking into her arms a living student rather than the revenant of her past, while in *Death Bell*, the terrorised staff and pupils believe they have put an end to the killings by capturing Ji-won's mother in the act, and subsequently killing her. It transpires, however, that the confession of Mr. Hwang's role in Ji-won's death, and his subsequent stabbing to death at the hands of Ji-won's father, is the only true solution to the spate of deaths.

(and collapse of same) that are crucial to abjection theory, particularly those that divide the semiotic and the symbolic in all their forms and representations; the mother and the family as the locus of horror and abjection; the representation of the semiotic as abject and monstrous-feminine, and the implications this has on an abjection theory reading; and purification rituals, their ties to narratives of abjection, and how they contribute to an ideological interpretation of the films.

Of the four films analysed in this chapter, the first three, *Whispering Corridors*, *Memento Mori*, and *Wishing Stairs* are marketed as a trilogy (later, as the initial trio of five connected films), though sharing only a common setting and the revisiting of the same themes, not a continuous plot or recurring characters. The fourth film, *Death Bell*, differs from the other three in that it is set in a mixed-gender school, as opposed to an all-girls high school; however, the subject matter still deals with many shared themes. Moreover, the high school setting provides fertile ground for bringing to the fore several key themes of abjection prevalent across these films, specifically the representation of the harsh nature of the South Korean education system. Through analysing the role of the teachers as representatives of symbolic authority and as primers for entry into the symbolic system of subjectivity, this representation enacts the abjecting of close bonds and friendships, resulting in those not succeeding within the system experiencing isolation, loneliness, and eventually death. For example, I have previously discussed Kristeva's concept of the semiotic, a realm associated with instinct, emotion, and chaos, and one intrinsically tied to the mother. Kristeva posits the semiotic as oppositional (but nevertheless entwined with) the symbolic – social law with concomitant social practices, as in the Lacanian paternal law – identified with language, law, and order. In order for a child to pass into the symbolic as a functioning adult complete with a sense of identity, they must cut their ties with the maternal semiotic (*abject* it – as many times as necessary, for it returns in the form of abjection); the mother is expected to play a critical role in this transition by way of her responsibility of primal mapping. In this selection of films, the schools' status as a formal institution positions them firmly as a symbolic authority; however, their important role in preparing the child for entry into the realm of adulthood mirrors the maternal (therefore, semiotic) obligations of primal mapping, conflating two connected but opposing spheres into conflicting responsibilities. Furthermore, within these extreme and violent realities, borders are traversed and transgressed through non-symbolic forms of communication and community among the students, as well the return of abjected students

as vengeful spirits haunting the classrooms. Finally, the theme of coming of age (and associated tropes of innocence and purity) is crucial to understanding these films and how Kristeva's abjection provides a useful method of reading them.

8.1 Belligerent Ghouls in South Korean Schools

Given the high school setting for this cluster of films, it is inevitable that they reflect the pupils' experience of secondary education. In South Korean high schools, immense amounts of pressure are put on students to perform well academically. Students are often expected to work extended curricular hours to supplement their class-time learning, and consequently the school becomes a site of anxiety and conflict, as students are pitted against each other in academic rivalry. Jinhee Choi describes students going through "examination hell" from as early as kindergarten in order to win a place at a prestigious establishment, in addition to the ten to twelve-hour extracurricular study periods (2010, p.117).[159] In *Whispering Corridors*, the nature of this system is made patently clear when the fearsome Mr. Oh (Park Yong-soo) directly tells the class that they are in competition with one another and shows clear favouritism toward the highest-ranking pupil, So-young (Park Jin-hee). In *Wishing Stairs*, the competition for a spot at the prestigious Russian ballet school is so fierce that it causes an irreparable lesion in the friendship of Jin-sung (Song Ji-hyo) and So-hee (Park Han-byul), while in *Death Bell* the cutthroat nature of academic competition is reflected in exam-style questions set by the killers, the solving of which, under extreme pressure, is literally the difference between life and death.[160]

In this chapter, I go on to discuss the impact of border creation and collapse and how this ties into the Kristevan themes of the semiotic and symbolic, as well as the recurring trope of subjective development and sexual maturity; however, it is first relevant to analyse how the mechanism that is Korean high school education begins to function as an agent of abjection in this selection of texts. In each film, the harsh and abusive teachers

---

[159] J.K. Lee also makes reference to "elitism" and "drastic competition between or among schools, parents, and students" within the South Korean education system, particularly noting "various problems" stemming from "abnormal school teaching" and "excessive competition among the students," and as a direct result of the emphasis on school and student rankings (2006, p.10). Lee also comments upon "social disharmony between the classes … on account of excessive private tutoring" (see below on *Death Bell* and I-na's contempt toward the PTA students) and the repression of "students' personalities [,] ignored because of the uniformity of school education" (see examples below of the codification of the pupils) (p.10).

[160] Taken to extreme consequences by pitting students against one another in a kill-or-be-killed environment, Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* (2000) offers a similar critique of the harsh, competitive nature of the Japanese education system.

first begin to separate students from one another, usually to ensure that the more studious of the pupils can fulfil their potential, at least academically. *Whispering Corridors* details the separation of Eun-young (Lee Mi-yeon) and Jin-ju, which is later mirrored by the broken relationship of So-young and Jung-sook (Yun Ji-hye).[161] Once the closest of friends, Eun-young and Jin-ju were forced apart by the staff to enable Eun-young's scholarly progression. The film takes place with Eun-young having returned to the school as a teacher, while it is revealed that Jin-ju perished in a tragic accident. The creation of borders and boundaries is a key element of Kristeva's abjection, where the abjected material is jettisoned to one side of the border, and in *Whispering Corridors*, as in the other three films, the teaching staff erect these barriers between friendships to separate the academic from the average. The estrangement between the two former pupils is heightened by the contrasting fortunes of the now-adult Eun-young, who has returned as an educator, compared to Jin-ju, who periodically returns as a spirit to haunt the school, though, crucially, always in the guise of another pupil, perpetually and systemically repeating the high-school experience. In other words, Eun-young's return to the school is a crossing of the teacher-pupil and adult-child (symbolic-semiotic) borders, whereas Jin-ju is unable to pass through. *Whispering Corridors* echoes the effect of this broken bond through So-young and Jung-sook (the former studious and scholarly, the latter ungifted and unpopular), who, along with two other students, the talented but superstitious artist Ji-oh (Kim Gyu-ri) and the timid Jae-yi (Choi Se-yeon), become entwined in a nexus that connects them and Eun-young to the ghostly Jin-ju and the abandoned (and reportedly haunted) art storeroom.

This theme resonates through the other films analysed in this chapter. Adding to the ruthless realities played out in *Wishing Stairs* and *Death Bell* (above), in *Memento Mori*, the merciless regime of the classroom contributes towards the social ostracism of the homosexual lovers Shi-eun (Lee Young-jin) and Hyo-shin (Park Ye-jin), which eventually leads to the irreparable dissolution of their relationship. Furthermore, the education system proves to be a brutal and violent experience for many of the students that pass through it. Students in all four films are frequently on the receiving end of verbal and physical abuse. Mr. Oh, nicknamed "Mad Dog," violently beats Ji-Oh in front of the class in *Whispering Corridors* for painting an image of the deceased Mrs. Park (Lee Yong-nyeo), herself

---

[161] Close bonds between female students are discussed below in the section on semiotic communications.

nicknamed "Old Fox" and revealed to be equally sadistic through a flashback sequence, while in *Memento Mori*, Shi-eun suffers a similar humiliating experience. Moreover, *Memento Mori* is littered with examples of teachers verbally degrading the pupils in addition to physical maltreatment: for example, during the class physicals, the teacher consistently belittles the girls over their various sizes and shapes, appearing to have no sympathy or empathy for the anxieties of mental and physical developments experienced by their students. In *Death Bell*, the regular class joker Kang Hyun (Bum Kim) is initially accused of tampering with the PA system when the killer first broadcasts to the school and, although innocent, is consequently assaulted by Mr. Lee.

These examples of regular abuse and clear favouritism toward the brighter students demonstrate the tough environment for those within the education system. For those students that fall by the wayside, such as those separated from their friends or those falling below the radar of the school's ranking system, the high school experience is one of loneliness, solitude, and social invisibility. For instance, Jin-ju in *Whispering Corridors* dies alone in an abandoned building. Figuratively a ghost while alive, Jin-ju returns to the school each year unnoticed by her former teachers, and it is only when Mrs. Park discovers this secret that Jin-ju becomes murderous. Art Black notes that "[a]s a literal victim of the scholastic system, Jin-ju haunts the classrooms, unable or unwilling to move on. But the film makes it clear that she is only one victim among many" (2003, p.193). Jin-ju, an abject and abjected student, perpetually resides within the school building and operates within its systems; however, it is only when her presence is acknowledged and faced that she begins to threaten the lives of the students and teachers. In terms of abjection, Jin-ju represents the repressed semiotic remainder consigned to the side of the border marked for waste, only to continually resurface. Her ability to straddle both sides of this border, which here also demarcates life and death, as well as the ability to possess other bodies, is a reminder of the arbitrary and fragile nature of these boundaries in that the repressed material will continue to resurface. Like the abject, the acknowledgement of her presence – here, when Mrs. Park is fastidiously checking the records of past school yearbooks, telephoning the discovery to Eun-young immediately before she is murdered – forces the

establishment to try and banish Jin-ju once more, having been confronted with that which they have tried to jettison.[162]

The harshest consequence of the pressures of school life is, ultimately, death. In all four films, the death count (both shown and implied) is made up of many forms of demise. Jin-ju dies in a freak accident, although the film implies that it was indirectly caused by her social ostracism experienced within the school and education system. In *Death Bell*, however, there is a more direct cause-and-effect that implicates the school in Ji-won's death. The fierce, competitive nature of the classroom is so inscribed onto Ji-won and her parents that her mother had bribed her form teacher, Mr. Hwang (Lee Beom-soo), into providing examination answers in advance, ensuring that Ji-won became the top-ranking student (ultimately, the desired goal set out by the school); however, after he has a change of heart, Ji-won is disqualified and slips down the rankings. A desperate Ji-won tries to blackmail Mr. Hwang, who then strangles her to death to cover up his corruption.[163] In both *Wishing Stairs* and *Memento Mori*, So-hee and Hyo-shin commit suicide as a direct consequence of the break-up of a close relationship with another student (the former wedge driven through school competitiveness, while the latter arises from the pressures of a relationship outside heteronormative symbolic dictates). Suicide is also a theme connecting the three films from the *Whispering Corridors* series: in the first film, Mrs. Park's murder is framed as a hanging suicide, mirrored later on by Jung-sook's actual suicide, when she hangs herself from the same bridge where Mrs. Park's body was discovered; in *Memento Mori*, several of Hyo-shin's classmates discuss her death as the sixth suicide at the school (one more will result in the school being closed down, they superstitiously believe). Furthermore, in *Death Bell*, Ji-won's murder is, like the death of Mrs. Park, presented as a suicide. Throughout the films, murder and suicide conflate, but both implicate the education system.

---

[162] It is the discovery of Jin-ju's presence that forces the narrative of abjection. In a similar manner to the end sequence to *Dark Water*, it is through Eun-young embracing Ji-oh and promising to make amends for previous injustices to Jin-ju, that stops the hauntings. However, the film also suggests that these are likely only deferred, for a new student witnesses the aforementioned resolution, but as she walks off down the corridor, it is revealed that she is the ghost of Jung-sook – *ergo*, as one ghost departs, a new one arrives bringing with her a new set of hauntings.

[163] It is also implied that the mothers of the school's PTA students are continuing to bribe Mr. Hwang and others, which would explain I-na's hostile attitude toward them on the morning following Ji-won's possession of her body.

Finally, the majority of the deaths are caused by a vengeful female spirit – the *wonhon* – who seeks revenge on the people and the system that wronged them when they were alive, thus tapping into one of the most prominent tropes in this cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema. Each film features the return of a dead female pupil coded in this fashion (usually a similar appearance to the Japanese *Yureii*) who is out to avenge the injustices they have suffered. In *Whispering Corridors*, Jin-ju targets the two teachers that mistreated her, while also venting her anger at the friend that abandoned her. Furthermore, Hyo-shin returns in *Memento Mori* to wreak havoc on an entire school system that shunned her relationship with Shi-eun, while in *Wishing Stairs*, So-hee targets both the enemies of the bullied Hye-ju (Jo An), whom she briefly possesses, and the friend that betrayed her, for whom she still has affection. However, it is in *Death Bell* where an interesting twist is put on this trope. The motive for the killings is most clearly revenge, and the kidnappings and killings are contrived to suggest that they are being carried out by the ghost of Ji-won; yet, it is the grieving (and very much living) mother and father – the mother's appearance, furthermore, contrived to resemble the *wonhon* – who exact the revenge on their daughter's behalf. Meanwhile, Ji-won's ghost has possessed I-na's body but goes largely unnoticed by her classmates throughout the film.[164] Nominally the monster of the film,[165] the revenants of the dead female pupils are equally symptomatic of harsh and corrupt educational bodies, with Choi observing that the "real monstrosity resides in the school itself and, more specifically, the Korean education system, which deprives students of individual freedoms and happiness" (2010, p.130). The manifestation of the ghost girls that return to haunt their respective schools in each of the films stems from either a murder, a suicide, or an isolated death, with each school presented as responsible in some way. These spirits cross the living-dead border to return to the site of their deaths to both avenge their mistreatment, as is the case in *Memento Mori* and *Wishing Stairs*, and to perpetually revisit the school experience denied to them in life, a systemic

---

[164] The only pupil to notice is Beom, who is institutionalised for attacking I-na after hallucinating an image of Ji-won when they meet in the school corridor. Beom later escapes but is murdered before he can convince anyone that Ji-won has taken possession of I-na's body. It is later revealed via a flashback that he was the sole witness to Ji-won's strangulation but had stayed silent, thus providing a plausible interpretation of his visions of Ji-won as a manifestation of his guilt.

[165] And would constitute an example of the monstrous-feminine in Creed in that they pose a threat to the stability of the symbolic order. By way of their ability to pass between symbolic and semiotic, life and death, and even through corporeal matter in terms of possessing other students, the ghost pupils in these films constitute both the abjected and the abject.

Figure 27 *Whispering Corridors*, *Death Bell*, and *Memento Mori*

Mr. Oh, the strict disciplinarian, admonishes his students in *Whispering Corridors* (left). Kang Hyun is physically assaulted by Mr. Lee in *Death Bell* (centre). In *Memento Mori*, students are also subjected to psychological humiliation, seen here on physical examination day (right).

Figure 28 *Memento Mori*, *Whispering Corridors*, and *Death Bell*

Death Becomes Them: Hyo-shin commits suicide in *Memento Mori* as a result of social ostracism (left), as does So-hee in *Wishing Stairs*. Mrs. Fox's death is framed as a suicide in *Whispering Corridors* (centre). In *Death Bell*, failure to provide the correct answer within the alloted time frame results in a student's death (right).
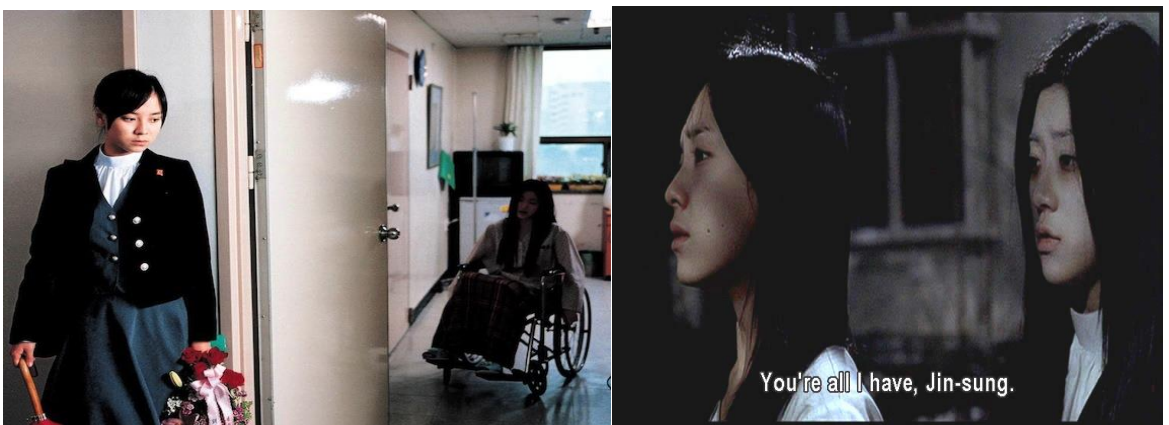
Figure 29 *Wishing Stairs*

Sonyeo Sensibilities 1: In *Wishing Stairs*, So-hee and Jin-sung are best friends and share a close, intimate relationship defined as *sonyeo*. However, the competitive nature of the ballet school drives a wedge between them. So-hee is left hospitalised after a fight between the two girls, costing her a place in a prestigious Russian ballet school (left). So-hee longs to be with Jin-sung, even in death (right).

repetition that results in no form of "graduation" to full symbolic status within the usual process. *Death Bell*'s Ji-won simply intends to return to the position of top student (albeit *sans* the "meaning" infused in that position, for Ji-won would be unable to move into adult life, which education ostensibly prepares the student for), while her parents, unable to secure that spot with bribery, kill off the competition. *Whispering Corridors*' Jin-ju fits both descriptions; having passed under the radar for many years, she vicariously experiences the "normal" school life that she always craved, but she soon turns murderous and vengeful against the teachers that abused her the moment she is discovered.

Furthermore, Choi states that in South Korea, the "responsibility for a child's education often falls on the mother, who in the modern era has been portrayed as one who bribes the child's homeroom teacher in order to secure favoritism at school" (p.117). Choi, here, is referring to the competitive market of education as well as the mother's role in ensuring the child's success within the system. In the three films from the *Whispering Corridors* series, however, mothers are largely absent; instead, this role falls to the teachers, who assume a dual function as educators and carers. If education systems are presented as both an establishment of symbolic authority and a primal mapper in terms of the pupils' development into the symbolic realm, it is interesting to observe how they perform in both roles. As a symbolic institute, the schools operate on the basis that the students must follow the demands of their dictates, which stretch to include dress code,[166] alliances (for instance, many are severed to segregate the achievers from the non-achievers), the undertaking of onerous study regimes, and the passing of rigorous examinations. As the films show, failure to comply results in humiliation, exclusion, isolation, physical assault, and death. On the other hand, the implied role of the teachers as nurturers is undermined by their future and respective actions as the narratives unfold. In *Whispering Corridors*, *Memento Mori*, and *Death Bell*, there is initially a dichotomy put in place between two types of teachers: the strict and violent authoritarian pitted against the caring, relatable educator. Mrs. Park and Mr. Oh are clear disciplinarians, but the friendlier former pupil Eun-young is equally implicated by former friend Jin-ju for complicity within this system in *Whispering Corridors*. *Memento Mori* has its fair share of abusive teachers, but it is the understanding Mr. Goh who crosses the line of the relationship between teacher and pupil and spends an intimate night with a student, Hyo-shin, who holds him

---

[166] I discuss below how the coding of the pupils forms a barrier that prevents them from easily passing into the adult realm.

responsible, at least in part, for her break up with Shi-eun, and murders him in the process of terrorising her former classmates. Finally, the least violent of the male teachers, as well as the most helpful in solving the clues in the deadly games, in the earlier part of *Death Bell*'s plot, Mr. Hwang, is ultimately revealed as Ji-won's murderer, and his extracted confession during the memorial service for the dead students is what truly brings an end to the killings. In short, Mr. Hwang is directly responsible for one student's death, as well as indirectly for several others while he held on to his secret.

What this section of analysis has shown is that contemporary Asian horror films set in schools, particularly those emanating from South Korea, highlight a cruel and unpleasant experience for the students. Many suffer from loneliness, isolation, and are victims of repeated verbal and physical abuse, with suicide and murder a prevalent theme; the films, in turn, reflect back this experience in the form of the vengeful *wonhon*, who takes retribution on the system. Furthermore, the school functions as a dual site of conflated public and private space, assuming symbolic and semiotic responsibilities, but tellingly, the brutal nature of their operations, as demonstrated above, show them to be predominantly concerned with the social law of symbolic interest; those cast aside – abjected – come to represent the perpetually-returning semiotic remainder that, Kristeva asserts, is forever and inextricably tied to and within symbolic systems.

8.2 *Sonyeo* in High School

Given that education systems blur the boundaries between public and private spaces in a pressurised educational system, whose demands on the students consume the bulk of their lives, for many students, the school is therefore a space that absorbs both the public and private spheres, with many students in these films living in dormitories on the schools' premises**.** Consequently, the pupils not only seek out their own private spaces away from the gaze of the institution (for instance, the hollow underside of the piano in *Memento Mori*, where Hyo-shin and Shi-eun maintain their shrine to one another), but also communicate in their own private languages that operate outside of the school's discourse. Often, these languages use the medium of artistic expression in such a way as would reflect Kristeva's distinction between semiotic and symbolic discourses.

Kristeva posits art, music, and literature at the semiotic end of the inseparable signifying spectrum, with law and language (as patriarchal discourse) at the symbolic end;

the former, she considers, are disrupting elements of the grammatical rules of such language (see Chapter II). It is, therefore, interesting to observe that in these films many of the high school students have artistic interests and hobbies, or characteristic inclinations towards these types of artistic practices. For example, the abandoned art storeroom in *Whispering Corridors* is not only the site of Jin-ju's death (who died trying to salvage a sculpture of Eun-young), but it also hosts the convergence of the four students entangled within the immediate hauntings in the film: Ji-oh and Jae-yi use the room to practice painting,[167] discovering that So-young hides there to conceal her smoking habit and that Jung-sook retreats to the space due to her isolation from other students. It is both the reclusive nature of the space and its concomitant association with artistic practices that unites the four girls with Eun-young and Jin-ju. In *Memento Mori*, it is the maintenance of the diegetic shared red diary as a private world for Hyo-shin and Shi-eun, as well as the extradiegetic musical score, that unites the two girls in an abject and semiotic status. The diary, it is important to note, is highly-decorative and made up of disparate images, collages, and styles of writing and notation, rather than a straight-forward written replication of language. Music also features prominently throughout the film to signify their relationship. Not only does the hollow underside of the piano contain a continuation of their "world" – a diary extending beyond its bound pages – but also Hyo-shin plays a dark, brooding passage on the piano, which she beseeches Shi-eun to remember. When she returns to haunt the school later, the same eerie notes can be heard emanating from the music room. Both the presence of the diary and the score (diegetic and extra-diegetic) denote the separate world that the girls occupy to escape the symbolic school system that shuns them: Hyo-shin tells Shi-eun that "the world is made of sounds … you'll hear a whole new world," and in one scene, the two girls share a set of headphones as they listen to Hyo-shin's Walkman, with the sound also shielded from the spectator, who watches on as the two girls bob their head along to the rhythms and melodies of their own private universe. Furthermore, in the flashback scene that places Hyo-shin with Mr. Goh in a bar away from school premises, she tells him, "You don't know about music," which is again used to reinforce the barriers between the two: teacher-pupil, heterosexual-homosexual, symbolic-semiotic. In *Wishing Stairs*, sculpting is the hobby of the near-obese outcast Hae-ju, while ballet as a form of expression later becomes the source of resentment and

---

[167] Ji-oh is not only a talented painter but shows an aptitude for drawing (demonstrated by her sketch of Mrs. Park). She is also superstitious and tries to communicate with the spirits via séance, although this practice is deemed "childish" when she undertakes it within the confines of the classroom.

separation for Jin-sung and So-hee. Like *Whispering Corridors*, an abandoned art storeroom also features as a locus for some of the hauntings, and a spot to which the lonesome students such as Hae-ju retreat. Finally, in addition to the creative nature of the deadly games in *Death Bell*, the film also utilises musical score, where a wistful excerpt of classical music plays into the school sound system to signify the start of each game.

As I have mentioned throughout this chapter so far, these films, particularly the three making up the *Whispering Corridors* series, focus on close bonds between two female students. Often, these relationships are presented in a form of *sonyeo* sensibility, which, Choi explains, is a specifically gendered term, referring to females (2009, pp.39-40). The term *Sonyeo*, according to Choi, generally refers to a "female adolescent sensitivity and sensibility" (p.43). Pointing to the all-girls high school setting of these three films, Choi asserts that, in Korean films, an all-boys setting would most realistically result in physical violence to settle conflicts, whereas in all-girl settings those conflicts are endured and suffered internally and often without being confronted (2009, p.44; 2010, p.128). Though Choi does not connect her readings to Kristeva's concept of the abject and abjection, a similarity can be observed through the role of "semiotic" communication that often takes place between girls in a *sonyeo* friendship or relationship. Describing the structure and nature of *sonyeo* friendships, Choi observes that they are strictly dyadic relationships, permitting no outsiders or replacements, an exclusive bond or union (2010, p.130) – in other words, these bonds shun all outside influence and float independently of symbolic markers and processes, as demonstrated, say, in *Memento Mori*, where the two girls engage in their own world outside of the pressures and violence of their symbolic reality within the confines of the school. Choi, furthermore, goes on to claim that "[u]nderneath the *sonyeo* sensibility manifest in Korean horror films … one must uncover a collective fantasy: a form of female bonding and sexual performance that may or may not be socially sanctioned" (2010, p.127). Again, *Memento Mori* renders the most overt evidence for this point, although the affections displayed by Eun-young and Jin-ju (in flashback scenes to when they were both pupils) and Jin-sung and So-hee are certainly tinged with a suggestion that there is more than just friendship at stake. Homosexuality, moreover, contravenes the basic symbolic desires of heteronormativity, and is one source of "Othering" discussed by many critics.[168] Creed examines aberrant sexualities,

---

[168] One example would be Harry M. Benshoff in *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (1997).

specifically female, which position them as monstrous (as well as abjected) in the ideology of the horror movie. In the three films under the banner of the *Whispering Corridors* series, these examples of *sonyeo* sensibilities do, indeed, result in abjection of one of the girls, which is followed by their vengeance-seeking returns as the nominal monster[169] of the film.[170]

Under severe pressure from the ruthless and brutal nature of academic life and rejected by their tutors and peers, many of the abjected characters (and those involved in friendships of *sonyeo* sensibility) seek refuge in alternate spaces away from the gaze and scorn of the schoolroom. In both *Whispering Corridors* and *Wishing Stairs* it is the aforementioned abandoned art rooms that provide a place of sanctuary. These spaces resonate as semiotic in the narrative through their positioning as waste or remainder (that which is discarded as excess by the school, as well as that which connotes the arts and its disruption to symbolic language and order). It is crucial to Kristeva's concept of abjection that the symbolic subject always remains both symbolic *and* semiotic. It is when those two spheres conflate (the collapse of boundaries, such as the border between public and private arenas, as well as the resulting dual role of the teachers as a result of this first collapse) that abjection arises. Still annexed to the school, these spaces can neither be fully cast aside, nor can they themselves exist independently of the symbolic function of the school, and in the films, these temporary sanctuaries also become the location of horror and, in some cases, death;[171] therefore, the retreat that they provide illustrates Kristeva's assertion of the "constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (1982, p.13).

In both *Memento Mori* and *Death Bell*, the school rooftop becomes a space for friendships to privately blossom. I-na (Nam Gyu-ri) and Myung-hyo (Son Yeo-eun) converse above their dormitory and plot to sneak out to a nightclub. For Hyo-shin and Shi-eun, many of the defining moments of their relationship take place up on the roof. Two such moments are of key interest: first, the girls abscond here after skipping out on physical class. This scene is important, for they are deliberately avoiding a class that is

---

[169] At least in terms of them returning as a ghost or spirit; in other words, non-human.

[170] These examples also play out the breaking of semiotic bonds required (as Kristeva explains it) for a subject to pass into the symbolic. In *Whispering Corridors*, Eun-young passes and joins the symbolic system as a teacher, while, conversely, Jin-ju's subjectivity is annihilated completely, as is the case with Hyo-shin, So-hee, and even Ji-won in *Death Bell*.

[171] For example, Jin-ju in *Whispering Corridors*, as well as the site of Hae-ju's possession by the spirit of So-hee in *Wishing Stairs*, where she murders Yun-ji.

designed to measure and monitor physical growth and development, thus their absence evades the symbolic oversight of maturity into adulthood.[172] It is also where Hyo-shin confesses to have spent an intimate night with Mr. Goh, surrounding which are the rumours that Shi-eun is pregnant, and therefore this is the real reason why she missed the class.[173] The rooftop is also the scene of Hyo-shin and Shi-eun's break-up, and, consequently, Hyo-shin's suicide. This latter scene follows on from the former, with Black suggesting that it was Hyo-shin's sexual liaison with a teacher that was the cause of their split, even going on to say that "[h]eterosexuality, in the context of the film, is corrupting and evil" (2003, p.196). While the three scenes – confession, break-up, suicide – are linked, there is another crucial scene that must be factored into the analysis. That is, when Hyo-shin openly declares her love for Shi-eun and kisses her in front of the class. Both girls have been ostracized and cast out for this relationship, and this derision is brought to a head when a teacher confiscates their diary, reads out the contents to the class, and then hits Shi-eun with violent force. However, where the weight of this pressure has spurred Hyo-shin to be defiant of the class's scorn, it has pushed Shi-eun away. The kiss (also disrupted by the cuts between long shot and off-centre close-up, 360-degree rotation of the camera, and partial obscurity due to the shot being blocked by the backs of the onlooking and disgusted students) is the catalyst for their demise. Hyo-shin wishes to succumb to her feelings and desires, whereas Shi-eun, under the strain of ridicule and rejection, herself rejects Hyo-shin's advances. This scene, when considered with the rooftop scenes, also demonstrates that their personal lives cannot be separated from their school experience.

So far, it is evident that in this cluster of films, boundaries are frequently blurred and collapsed. Such examples include the dualistic function of the school and its teachers, the subsequent conflation of public and private space, and, consequently, the undermining of the border between semiotic and symbolic realms. The latter is shown as a constant dissolution and reformation of borders, which is actually instigated from each end of the symbolic-semiotic spectrum: the schools attempt to create a divide between friendships, as well as setting rigorous academic success regimes that constitute the symbolic frontier; on the other hand, the female students sharing *sonyeo* sensibilities strive to secure their own secluded sites of refuge away from the schoolroom (though, crucially, still *within* the

---

[172] The theme of coming of age is discussed below.
[173] Shi-eun claims that she only slept with her teacher out of pity, and, indeed, a later flashback sequence suggests that this was the case. Interestingly, the pathetic figure of Mr. Goh is here contrasted to the sympathetic Shi-eun, thus reversing the role of the carer.

school's boundaries). Therefore, the continual disintegration of border and boundaries in these films facilitates a commingling of symbolic and semiotic (itself a key component of abjection), as they cannot be contained by the barriers hitherto erected; in turn, this allows for greater mobility between realms. This is visible in many ways across these films. For example, the ability to communicate non-verbally – to bypass the symbolic function of language: in *Whispering Corridors*, Ji-oh is superstitiously believed to be able to contact the spirits mentally; in *Wishing Stairs*, the pupils can access a fox spirit to grant them a wish by counting aloud an excess step on the school's "wishing stairs"; in *Memento Mori*, telepathy is established as a credible method of cerebral communication. Another fallout from the collapse of boundaries is the ability for ghosts and spirits to traverse into symbolic reality and possess other bodies.[174] All four films' plots hinge on such a device, familiar within this cycle; however, in reading alongside Kristeva's abjection, this mechanism offers further insight into the blurring of aforementioned boundaries. The abjected Jin-ju is able to possess the bodies of students on a recurring basis, allowing her to return under a different guise to complete, but not pass beyond, the school year. Ji-won has similar abilities put to the same purpose. Each girl crosses the borders of living-dead, symbolic-semiotic, and self-other to retake a position within the education system that was cruelly denied to them in life. So-hee's possession of Hae-ju enables murderous revenge for both girls, but it is Hae-ju who instigates the crossing over of spiritual world into living world by wishing for So-hee to return to her.[175] In *Memento Mori*, the high-angled distorted shots distinguish the ghostly Hyo-shin's point of view from that of the teachers and students that she is haunting: the use of alternating cuts between her distinctive angles and that of the "normal" shot of the pupils, specifically when she attacks Min-ah (Kim Min-sun), illustrates the ease with which the abjected characters can switch between one realm and the other. Furthermore, the nonlinear plots, making heavy use of flashback sequences, add to the sense that the authority of the linear, continuous reality of the symbolic, as dictated by its laws, structures, and grammar, is being disrupted or undermined, with each sequence contributing salient plot detail through additional, contradictory, or explanatory information, often from the perspective of the victimised,

---

[174] Creed specifically lists "woman as possessed body" and "woman as life-in-death" as two examples of the monstrous-feminine (1993, p.1).

[175] Hae-ju has another wish granted: to be slimmer. The depiction of this transformation could also be read as abject, not only in the shedding of excess material from her body, but also the violent fit of vomiting that this change results in following excessive consumption in the cafeteria.

Figure 30 *Memento Mori*

Sonyeo Sensibilties 2: Shi-eun and Hyo-shin share an intimate moment to the exclusion of the rest of the world (and the spectator) in *Mememto Mori* (left). However, the intimate kiss shared in front of the class brings further ridicule, scorn, and social exclusion for the girls (right). Consequently, Shi-eun begins to distance herself from Hyo-shin, resulting in Hyo-shin's suicide.

Figure 31 *Memento Mori* and *Death Bell*

The school rooftop provides one of the few private spaces available to the students in South Korean high school horror films. In *Memento Mori*, Shi-eun and Hyo-shin share many private moments in the open-air space above the school (above). In *Death Bell*, this space is also connected with purity and innocence through the symbol of the clean, white laundry (below).

shunned, and abjected students.

8.3 You Understand Change, and You Think it's Essential

 Thus far, this chapter has discussed both the blurring and collapsing of borders and boundaries, as well as the implications in relation to Kristeva's abject and associated concepts of the semiotic and symbolic. Another key theme across these films that ties into the theoretical material is the pupils' coming of age into adulthood, or, more precisely, their status as being on the cusp of maturation. In the processes of abjection, Kristeva asserts that social practices dictate that the subject must reject and cast aside (and also repress) all psychological material associated with the semiotic; that is, the early conjunctive ties with the maternal and all that it represents and that represents it (nature, waste, defilement, and so on), in order to take a position as a fully-symbolic subject. This procedure involves, again, constructing a border through which to pass, leaving this semiotic remainder on the other side. The mother – or maternal figure or substitute – plays an important role in assisting the child through this ritual by demarcating where these lines should be drawn via the process of primal mapping.

Having established above that the schools take on a binary function in both semiotic and symbolic realms,[176] surrogating for the (mostly) absent mothers, it is clear to see where the lines are created by the state education system: academic achievement through strict discipline and strenuous study regimes, as well as the abjecting of close friendships, which inevitably results in one partner being left behind in the semiotic realm.[177] It also clear in these films that all of the students are on the cusp of sexual maturity, and it is this theme that, furthermore, sets up and reinforces a distinction between teachers and students that reflects the aforementioned social boundaries. One of the ways in which these borders are formed is through the coding of the students by way of school uniform. Choi notes that in South Korea, "middle and high school students have been mandated to wear school uniforms, deterring them from easily passing into the adult realm" (2010, p.117). In other words, this codification fixes them as children in the pre-

---

[176] A dual role also ascribed to the maternal figure (see Chapter II).
[177] Again, the fates of Eun-young and Jin-ju illustrate this point perfectly: the former is able to grow into adulthood and join the symbolic ranks as a teacher, while the latter must perpetually repeat the school experience as a child.

symbolic, not yet passing into adulthood.[178] Another indicator of having attained full socio-symbolic status, according to Kristeva's re-modelled process of psychosexual development, is the acquisition of language – essential for passing into the (and as) symbolic. With language comes symbolic *identity*. It is interesting to observe, therefore, that many of the minor characters and extras across these films are rendered indistinct when compared to others, by virtue of the matching uniforms and stylistic choices that present them with identical haircuts, hair length, and hair colour; they do not display any individual characteristics that suggest a definitive identity.

If the uniforms and general codification of the students are methods of keeping them in symbolic check, then the biological transition into adulthood is something that disrupts the social order. As noted in Chapter II, E. Ann Kaplan distinguishes the maternal body as having "biological movement … that cannot be appropriated by patriarchy" (1992, p.41). This plays into the dichotomy of the maternal body, where menstruation heralds the onset of fertility (necessary for symbolic continuance) but is also affiliated with discharge, blood, and waste, which signals semiotic remainder and operates outside (and, more threateningly to its order, *within*) symbolic systems. It is for these reasons that Creed devotes a considerable amount of space in her text to showing how the menstruating woman is constructed as monstrous-feminine in Western horror. C.Y. Shin reinforces this opinion, reading the onset of menstruation as the transformation into a monstrous Other in *Carrie* and *Ginger Snaps*. Moving on to *Death Bell*, Shin states that "[I-na]'s bleeding is explicitly linked to the transformation that her body has gone through after her encounter with the ghostly [Ji-won]" (2013, p.133). In the opening scene, I-na dreams of burning school desks and an inescapable confrontation with a host of ghostly reincarnations of her deceased classmate; she wakes, and the camera then cuts to a shot of her legs, as her white bed sheets become stained with blood. This theme recurs when I-na and Myung-hyo retreat to the rooftop to hang out their white, pristine laundry, while they talk of sexual fantasies: purity and innocence is directly juxtaposed with sexual maturity.[179] Shin goes on to observe that "[m]enstruation and motherhood are central to the construction of the monstrous-feminine in *Death Bell* because they are directly linked to the female

---

[178] By direct contrast, many of the students are sexualised in the uniforms: for instance, short skirts and tightly-buttoned shirts. Often, this is reinforced by shots that focus and linger on this detail. This also contrasts to the codification of Ikuko in school uniform in the final scene of *Dark Water*, where it is used to symbolise that the mother has enacted primary separation to permit her daughter access to the education that will gain her symbolic subjectivity.

[179] The shots resting between the schoolgirls' legs also features multiple times throughout the film.

reproductive system: that which must first *produce* something abominable before it can be expelled" (p.135). It is also not just the encounter with Ji-won that is explicitly linked to menstruation, but also Ji-won's possession of I-na that is signified by it. The following day at school, I-na has a noticeably changed attitude towards her classmates, showing particular contempt for the PTE students, against whom Ji-won held a grudge. Furthermore, the difficult exam-style questions set for the students to solve in order to save their classmates serve to determine which of the kidnapped pupils will die before attaining adulthood and which of them will survive. The clues are language-based, and it falls to the students to comprehend and replicate the correct rhetoric to ensure the possibility of symbolic development and continuance.

Symbols of purity and purification abound throughout the three *Whispering Corridors* series films, too. Water, which is associated with the demarcating of clean and unclean boundaries in primal mapping, is a featured motif. In the opening sequence of *Whispering Corridors*, a low-lying shot of a girl's bare feet in a puddle is augmented with the sounds of dripping rain, followed by lightning strike behind the image of the school at night as the camera pans upwards, presenting the image as foreboding. This imagery can be likened to the hide-and-seek sequence in *Dark Water* as analysed in Chapter V. As well as the use of ominous rainfall, *Memento Mori* opens with a sequence that cuts between images of the creation of the red diary and the two girls drowning in the school swimming pool, with each sequence overlaid by narration of the almost-nursery-rhyme-like mantra that tells of a girl dying each day up to the sixth day (evoked later in the film when the schoolgirls talk superstitiously of a requisite number of suicides that will close the school). This scene is prescient of the danger that awaits Hyo-shin and Shi-eun, and it segues into a sequence where the two girls, as a punishment, have to clean the pool, which is empty of water. In my analysis of *Dark Water*, I observe that the distinction between clean and polluted water becomes obscured, which leads to danger by way of contact with the abject element. *Wishing Stairs* also blurs such divisions after So-hee's spirit has returned to haunt the school when shower water, used for bodily cleansing, becomes mixed with blood. Water, therefore, becomes both a medium and a symbol of purity and of danger.

Finally, coming of age is also marked in *Memento Mori* and *Wishing Stairs* with the theme of birthdays. Simplified, the birthday marks another year older and a year closer to (or reaching) adulthood. In *Memento Mori*, Hyo-shin enters Shi-eun's birthday on the

list of birthdays on the wall of her classroom. Later, when Min-ah wishes Shi-eun a happy birthday, Shi-eun denies that it is her birthday. In the final sequences, which show recorded footage of the two lovers on the rooftop, Hyo-shin is holding the camera and singing "happy birthday to you" toward Shi-eun. In *Wishing Stairs¸* Hae-ju, alone, sings to herself before gorging an entire birthday cake. Following So-hee's death, the celebratory cake for Jin-sung is shoved into her face as a form of admonishment from her classmates for her role in her former friend's suicide. In each film, the passing of age (which, again, will eventually signal the passing into symbolic maturity) is denied to some of the students, while those that they have been abjected from – for instance, Shi-eun – continue into symbolic subjectivity, which is marked by the occasion of their birthdays in the film. However, it is interesting that Shi-eun denies the event, perhaps looking for psychological retreat in the semiotic realm by refusing to pass into adulthood,[180] thus demonstrating that the collapsing of the public-private space distinction, and concomitant correlatives tied into abjection, blurs all boundaries between semiotic and symbolic realms.

8.4 Conclusion: Give Up Education as a Bad Mistake

Taken together, this chapter, having analysed four films set in Korean high schools, further adds to the study of abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema in the following way: first, by critiquing the violent and abusive nature of state education systems, as well as the enormous pressure placed upon students to pass rigorous examinations (and also in relation to how this fits into symbolic systems of subjectivity). By teasing out the dual functionality of the state educators, it becomes evident that forms of abjection take place as a direct result of these conditions. In turn, this contributes to the collapsing of borders and boundaries that separate, among other things, semiotic-symbolic, teacher-pupil, self-other, and life-death. Subsequently, the dissolution of dividing lines causes a collision of two realms hitherto kept distinct by said boundaries, thus facilitating the creation of the monstrous in the form of the vengeful spirit returning to haunt the school as either ghost or possessor of another body. These boundaries are constantly reformed and ruptured in many guises – the coding of pupils through dress and

---

[180] It could also be read as Hyo-shin enacting such abjection by creating a marker for passing into adulthood for her friend while simultaneously ensuring that she will not reach full maturity by her suicide. Another instance to support this claim is the scene where she rejects the proffering of a milk carton – a similar analogy of the rejection of the skin on the surface of milk as a method of subjective establishment can be found directly in Kristeva (1982, p.3).

appearance, then challenged by the trope of coming of age, as one example – thus proving those boundaries to be fragile in their very nature, as well as illustrating abjection as a cycle that impacts upon individuale, and which provides a synergetic lens through which to read the narratives and imagery of these films. The next chapter of this section will continue to examine the collapse of meaning and distinction in public and private space by shifting its focus to the family and family home, before moving on to discuss the monstrous-feminine, a product of indistinct and eradicated borders, at the close of the section.

Chapter IX: So How Can You Call this Home, When You Know it's a Grave?: The Family and the Home in *Ju-On: The Grudge*, *A Tale of Two Sisters*, *Acacia*, and *The Eye*

> [I]t is the rarely analysed Asian horror film that remains mired in the milieu of home and hearth, evincing an increasing generic exchange between the horror genre and the family melodrama. (Seet, 2009, p.143)

In the previous chapter, I discussed how private and public space is absorbed into one blurred entity, giving rise to abjection, in cinematic representations of high school life within contemporary Asian horror cinema. Such analysis may beg the question, "is there a true familial home space depicted within these films?" It is now necessary to turn attention to this theme more specifically as another set of recurring tropes that connects contemporary Asian horror cinema with Kristeva's abjection and post-Kristevan application of the theory: the family, the mother, and the family home. Whether discussing regional or national cinemas, many critics have touched upon these themes as essential to the cycle, usually showing them to be the site of dysfunction and dystopia, and often the locus for the horror.[181] Moreover, Kristeva's symbolic is essentially synonymous with patriarchal society, whereas her semiotic is both feminine and maternal, thus evoking the family unit (where there exists a mother and a father, there need also be a child) rather than a simple biological gender binary. In order to work through the key tropes associated with the family in contemporary Asian horror cinema, I have divided this chapter into two parts, with each part having two films as its primary source of analysis. The first part will look at the break-up and dysfunction of the traditional family unit, particularly when an outsider is introduced into the family home, in *A Tale of Two Sisters* and *Acacia*. The second will consider liminal spaces and juxtapositions and tensions between created borders in *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *The Eye*. Furthermore, both Kristeva and, following on, Creed take a particular interest in the maternal role in the processes of abjection. The mother's representation in these films is crucial to a reading of abjection; and, as established in Chapter V, the mother is pivotal in the narratives of abjection that run through many of

---

[181] For example, Richards (2010), Chung (2013), and Oh (2013).

these films. For this reason, I make a return to the analysis of such narratives of abjection as a continual thread throughout the chapter.

9.1 Ambiguous Outsiders

Loosely based on an old Korean fairy tale, *A Tale of Two Sisters* is told from the perspective of one of the two titular sisters, who are relocated to a remote home by the lake with their distant father (Kim Kap-su) and cruel, domineering stepmother, Eun-joo (Yum Jung-ah).[182] Tensions are fraught between the sisters, the stepmother, and the father, with the elder sister, Soo-mi (Lim Soo-jung), particularly resenting Eun-joo for coming between the girls and their father, her role in the fate of their mother (a suicide), and her cruelty toward the younger sister, Soo-yeon (Moon Geun-young). The twist in the tale is that Soo-yeon is revealed to have been dead throughout the entire duration of the film and is merely a projection of Soo-mi's grief-stricken mind, unable to cope with her sister's death. Soo-mi's version of Eun-joo is also somewhat fabricated and, therefore, unreliable, as she is reimagining their confrontational scenarios as she processes the tragedy. In *Acacia*, a young boy is adopted into the family of a married but childless couple, who also live with the husband's ageing father. Eventually, the couple have a child of their own, following which the boy, Kim Jin-seong (Mun Oh-bin), begins to act out against his adoptive family, including an attempt to smother the new baby, causing irreparable tensions in the household. Jin-seung has also developed an unhealthy fascination with the acacia tree in the garden, believing it to be the reincarnation of his biological mother. His new parents decide to chop down the tree, which leads to Jin-seung running away, and the film follows the mother's suffering and the resultant deterioration of her marriage; it is revealed at the film's conclusion that Jin-seung is not missing but has been inadvertently injured by the mother and killed off by the father, the pair then colluding to bury him next to the acacia tree. The role of the maternal figure is crucial for understanding this film in relation to the abject, as is the case with *A Tale of Two Sisters*. Also, in both films, the themes of a broken family home and the disruption of those family units following the introduction of an outsider are prevalent throughout.

---

[182] Noted in Dupuy (2007), the film is a modernisation of *Jonghwa Hongryeon*, particularly in its "thematic focus on the figure of an evil stepmother and the vulnerable children under her 'care'" (p.64).

9.1.1 Stepchild, with Every Petty Swipe, You Just Might Find You're Fighting for Your Life

The notion of a broken family beset with horror is represented on the film's promotional posters and Tartan UK DVD cover. Posing for a family photograph, the image shows the two girls sat in front of the upright father and stepmother. Both Soo-mi and Soo-yeon are wearing white dresses heavily splattered with blood, with Soo-yeon collapsed and prostrate, appearing to at least be unconscious. The father and stepmother are dressed in black with sombre countenances, as though in mourning. Physical confrontation between Eun-joo and Soo-mi is foreshadowed by Eun-yoo's grip on her stepdaughter's shoulders; just as revealing, the father is not making physical contact with anybody in the picture. The poster itself thus demonstrates that the theme of the broken family unit pervades the text, before the spectator even takes their seat in the cinema or inserts the disc into their DVD player.

After an enigmatic opening sequence in *A Tale of Two Sisters*, when the narrative starts, where a doctor at a psychiatric unit interviews an unresponsive patient (later confirmed to be Soo-mi, though presently indistinguishable because of the long, black hair obscuring her face and her oversized white hospital garments – itself reminiscent of the spirits pervading contemporary Asian horror films), there is a cut to the two sisters returning home from an unspecified destination to their family home in the countryside. The spectator's first encounter with Eun-joo is when she greets her stepdaughters in the hallway with a combination of rapid-fire questions and criticism. The camera then zooms in to a close-up of the sisters, who clutch hands tightly, thus conveying their fear of the stepmother. The discord between the sisters and the stepmother is further highlighted through Eun-joo being repeatedly referred to as "that woman" throughout the film, implying a rejection on the part of Soo-mi and Soo-yeon; in turn, the level of verbal and physical cruelty reciprocated by Eun-joo escalates throughout the film (from snide comments to imprisoning Soo-yeon in the closet). She also tries to impose her status as their new mother on the girls, telling them that she is now the only person that they can address by that term. Their father, cold, distant, and thoroughly despondent, seems rarely aware of the malignant relationship, and rarer still does he intervene or interact with the female characters. The film, therefore, creates a sense of hostility, tension, and anxiety that pervades the home space, reinforced through dimly-lit shots of the house's interior, the impact of which is reinforced by irregular shot angles, such as the low-upwards angle

Figure 32 *A Tale of Two Sisters*
Promotional poster for *A Tale of Two Sisters*.

during the dinner table scene, that concoct a sense of distortion, unease, and, crucially, unfamiliarity; the latter of which contradicts the nominal purpose of the space.

Treated as an intruder to the family home, and through the depiction of her barbarous acts and neglectful manner, Eun-joo is set up as the film's monster in line with Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine. Creed states: "when woman is represented as monstrous, it is usually in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (1993, p.7). Eunha Oh asserts that mothers "occupy a central position in Korean horror film. … all kinds of mothers – stepmothers, mothers-in-law, sacrificing mothers, benevolent mothers and indifferent mothers – are monsters" (2013, p.60). It is interesting that, though not the biological mother to the two girls, Eun-joo asserts herself in that role, irrespective of Soo-mi and Soo-yeon's objections. It is the imposed role of primal mapper that connects both Kristeva's and Creed's mother to the monstrous (Creed delineates the monstrous mother through the *excremental* and *menstrual*); yet, although Eun-joo is not shown to have any involvement in sphincteral training rituals, there is one key scene that connects the stepmother, the dead biological mother, and the two sisters through biology by way of their menstrual cycle. Framed within a nightmare, the ghost of the girls' biological mother crawls out from beneath Soo-mi's bed and proceeds to stand over her daughter, while Soo-mi writhes in fear. Marked by Asian horror film's "metonym for death" (Dupuy, 2007, p.68), with her long black hair obscuring her facial features, she also sports a visibly broken neck;[183] then, as the shot focuses on Soo-mi's terrified face from behind and through the back of the ghost mother's legs, a trickle of blood emerges from between the mother's legs, which is immediately followed by a hand rushing out from the same place and a sudden-but-brief close-up of the mother's pale face, just about visible through her black hair. This is the second time that the image of the *wonhon* is evoked following Soo-mi's appearance in the psychiatric unit in the opening sequence (thus showing a connection between mother and daughter). As Soo-mi attempts to wash the bloodied sheets unnoticed, she is confronted by the step mother; after passing it off as her period, the stepmother confirms that she is also experiencing her menstruation. Stressing the juxtaposing themes of pollution and purity, the next sequence contrasts the previous with a

---

[183] Later, it is revealed that the girls' mother hung herself in Soo-yeon's closet. Soo-yeon attempts to pull her down, but the body falls on top of her and smothers her to death. Eun-joo has witnessed the accident but refuses to help following a quarrel with Soo-mi, even telling Soo-mi that she will later come to regret her harsh words.

shot of white washing hanging to dry outside the house.[184] K. K. Seet identifies the shot of Soo-mi between the mother's splayed legs as "a reworking of the primal scene" (2007, p.149).[185] It also connects the monstrous to the mother and the broken family home by way of abjection. First, the home is steeped in the tragedy of the mother's and younger sister's death. Second, Soo-mi is associated with both her biological mother and stepmother through the theme of menstruation, which in turn is affiliated with semiotic remainder and constructed monstrosity in Kristeva and Creed. Furthermore, the mothers and the elder daughter have a three-way connective tissue in the narrative. Soo-mi's likeness to her mother by way of the aforementioned linking shots connotes the trope of the ghost (both a reminder of the corpse and a collapse of physical and psychological boundaries within the film's context, as well as through one of the two polluting elements of abjection), while she is more visibly associated with Eun-joo through their menstrual cycles. Seet states that "Su-mi seems unable to forge an identity apart from her mother and sister" (p.147). While this is another valid observation (and is discussed below in relation to narratives of abjection), the connection between mother, daughter, and stepmother is equally entangled in the monstrous and abject.

Harking back to the discussion in the previous chapter, the only safe space or space of refuge that appears to be available to the sisters is the small jetty on the edge of the lake. Contrasted with the dark, claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* of the home, the open, clear, and tranquil surroundings of this area are framed in a similar way to the rooftop spaces in the high school narratives of Chapter VIII (and like these spaces, it is distinct but still within the extended boundaries of the centre of horror: the home). In section two of her text, when coupling her abjection-based readings with Freudian psychoanalysis, Creed declares that the "symbolization of the womb as house/room/cellar or any other enclosed space is central to the iconography of the horror film" (1993, p.55). The womb, or in Kristevan parlance *chora*, is, in her model of psychosexual development, crucial to the process of abjection and abjecting within primal repression – both essential for identity formation and inextricably tied to the mother. Indeed, the house itself, which fits Creed's criteria for symbolising a womb-like space and is clearly the locus of the horror, is the site upon which abjection takes place. However, even within the home, there are two recurring

---

[184] Similar contrasts are shown in *Death Bell*.
[185] Although Seet distinguishes between the birth scene and the primal scheme in the preceding paragraph, this interpretation differs from the standard Freudian interpretation of a child first witnessing a sex act (usually of the parents) as the primal scene.

tropes that pinpoint this connection more precisely: Soo-yeon's closet and the bulging, bloodied sack that appears in the film's third act.

Both the sack and the closet are indicators of Soo-mi's fragile and fragmented mental state, as she processes tragedy through acting and re-enacting trauma by way of abjection. To understand the connection to abjection, it is important to consider how identity functions within the film, as well as how these scenes contribute to the film's narrative of abjection. Having already established that there exists an intricate network associating Soo-mi inextricably within the realm of the mother, stepmother, and deceased sister's identities, it is clear that identity itself is at stake within the abjection narrative of the film.[186] Throughout the text, identity is both established, blurred, and under constant threat of being erased.[187] Soo-mi's projections of her sister and stepmother forge a set of identities offered to the spectator, which, though shown to be unreliable, are the primary and consistent representations of those figures; through her re-enactment/imagination of brutal and traumatic scenarios, the film, through Soo-mi's warped and partial perspective, positions Eun-joo as monstrous and Soo-yeon as victim.[188] The womb-like spaces in which these scenarios are played out add to the symbolism and imagery that links Soo-mi's need to replay trauma to the pre-*thetic* stages of abjection, which, in Kristeva's theory precedes maternal separation, and the attainment of symbolic identity. In two scenes of cruelty, the spectator witnesses Eun-joo lock Soo-yeon in the closet, while the sight of her dragging a bloodied and twitching sack across the home precedes the final, violent confrontation between Soo-mi and Eun-joo, after Soo-mi convinces herself that the sack must contain her sister.[189] Soo-mi's attempt to free her sister from both spaces, the latter with a pair of scissors, which she ultimately contrives to use as a weapon against her stepmother, are attempts to re-enact this traumatic scene to give her sister back the life that she had taken away from her. These scenes also relate to the image of the ghost mother discussed above.

---

[186] Established as a psychological process in Chapter V.

[187] In addition to identity being blurred as a result of unreliable point-of-view/narration, Eun-joo's image on photographs has been physically erased or cut out by Soo-mi (another marker of this cycle of films, introduced as early as *Ringu*).

[188] The flashback scene of Eun-joo allowing Soo-yeon to suffocate does lend a great deal of support to Soo-mi's conception of her stepmother. The return of Soo-yeon's ghost to confront Eun-joo toward the end of the film (complete with off-camera screams to suggest Eun-joo's death) provides the resolution that Soo-mi craves but is unable to realise.

[189] When the film reveals that both Soo-yeon and Eun-joo are merely projections of Soo-mi's mind, the sack is shown to contain nothing but a porcelain doll.

Seet states that "the majority of the female characters in [the film] are … suffering from primal bereavement and abandonment fears and anxieties involving mothers who have forfeited their nurturing roles, by choice or design, as primary caregivers" (2009, p.144). This is certainly true of Soo-mi and her relationship to the mother and stepmother in that those maternal figures have relinquished maternal nurturing through acts of suicide and violence. Seet goes on to say that abjection enters the narrative once "patriarchal authority and bourgeois family values have been undermined or jettisoned" (pp.144-5). Again, this is observable in *A Tale of Two Sisters* through the dissociation of the father from the events taking place around him, and this argument could be taken further with consideration that Soo-mi's semiotic projections and re-enactments of events (whether past or imaginary) constitute what is played out on screen for the majority of the film's run time. Only once does the father intercede in the proceedings by interacting with his daughter, attempting to ground Soo-mi's hallucinatory fantasies with the authoritative statement that Soo-yeon is, in fact, categorically dead (although it should be added that his role in Soo-mi's committal to a mental institution, the scenes of confirmation bookending the narrative, definitively frames the fantasy within the realms of semiotic authority).[190] However, abjection is evidently a consistent theme throughout the narrative, which incorporates both the monster-making of the maternal figures and the challenge to symbolic authority, and the constant playing out of primal, pre-*thetic*, abject scenarios in Soo-mi's mind. It is here that Seet's otherwise solid overview of the film in relation to Kristeva's abject comes unstuck. Failing to capitalise on having already pointed out that the psychological trauma is primal, Seet deviates from Kristeva as a theoretical grounding by pointing out a perceived lack in the theory: "When Kristeva discusses the constitution of the subject, she pays insufficient attention to its gender, even though clearly it is of the utmost importance" (p.148). This criticism has arisen previously in post-Kristevan scholarship – from Jardine (1993) to West (2007), all addressed in Chapter II – but Seet neglects to provide an adequate follow-up on this point, instead detouring via a discussion of the theories of Mulvey (1975), Clover (1987), Linda Williams (1984), and Doane (1984),[191] before introducing a wholly different field of study in his conclusory remarks

---

[190] Though a common plot device in several horror movies, dating as far back as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), the authoritative framing of *A Tale of Two Sisters* does not always register its effects within the rest of the narrative. In other words, the focus of the narrative authority tends toward the events unfolding in the family home, however unreliable the framing narrative renders those events.

[191] All valid and insightful theories that can be both compatible and distinct from Kristeva's abjection; however, Seet does not establish his understanding of these concepts as in any way challenging to Kristeva, nor does he utilise them in such a way as to explain and correct the perceived lack.

(analytical gender studies in Japan and South Korea) and signing off with the declaration that film is the art that has now succeeded religion as the site of abject purification (essentially already established in Creed; I have also made this statement in Chapter II with supporting argument of other critics who have realised the same). Where Seet is missing the point is that with the extra intermediary stage of the Kristevan model of psychosexual development, the stress is not on gender but a lack of identity (gendered or otherwise) outside of that of the mother: it is pre-abjection, pre-separation, pre-*thetic*. Furthermore, because abjection takes place as a primal repression ("a precondition of narcissism") it precedes symbolic authority and, moreover, is the catalyst for a harkening back to this hearth of indistinct *semiotic* identity *within* symbolic existence. This thesis has already elsewhere established that the consequence of abjection is the dissolution of identity, which arises in many forms (but always essentially through the collapsing or absorption of borders and boundaries). In Kristeva's words, it is the fear of "sinking irretrievably into the mother" (1982, p.64). It is telling, then, that Soo-yeon's death (and eradication of identity before reaching adulthood) comes after being literally smothered by the mother, for whom both girls grieve following their separation. It is also significant that Soo-mi is unable to construct an identity that is distinct from the film's maternal figures. The repetitive nature of her fantasies (or perhaps better *phantasies*) is an attempt to re-enact forms of primal birthing and separation. Purification rituals are also methods of enacting the processes of abjection and usually take the forefront of the narratives of abjection within cinema. Here, they are simultaneously a representation of Soo-mi's state of mind, and a process through which identity can be established. She is unable to achieve a state of identity independent of the maternal because of her regression to a semiotic state brought on by the traumatic experiences (the deaths of her mother and sister, in addition to potentially cruel treatment from the stepmother – with the former two incidents a definite trigger of abjection: involving the corpse). Her inability to form a separate identity, furthermore, excludes her from the father's domain, thus he commits her to a psychological institution. By following the argument through, and persevering with Kristeva and abjection theory, I have demonstrated that the theory is key to unlocking a deeper reading of this film and, by extension, crucial to this cycle of contemporary Asian horror films. It is a reading that explores the crux of abjection theory in terms of subject and identity formation within the Kristevan realms of the semiotic and symbolic, placing it within the functional processes of border and boundary collapse, which demonstrates the

unification of the abject as a psychological and physical reaction, both of which are central to the films.

9.1.2 Smother me, Mother

In my analysis of *A Tale of Two Sisters* above, I discussed the dysfunction and aberrance of the expected maternal role and the impact that it has on the family unit. Eun-joo, portrayed as a stepmother and a stranger to the household, is conspicuous in the events that contribute towards the family's dissolution. In *Acacia*, the theme of the broken family home through the introduction of an outsider is perhaps even more prominent, and significantly supports this reading of the film alongside various components of the theory of abjection. The relationship between the mother and the adopted child is of key importance, for it is from this bond – both forged and broken – that the formation and disintegration of all other relationships take their cues.

Acacia concerns the Kim family household, which is initially shown to be a married but childless couple, Do-il (Kim Jin-geun) and Mi-sook (Shim Hye-jin), and the paternal grandfather, though this unit soon becomes extended with the adoption of six-year-old Jin-seong (Mun Oh-bin); a new-born baby girl, Hae-sung; and the presence and influence of the maternal grandmother. As a couple without children, Mi-sook faces pressure to assume a maternal role. Eunah Oh explains the pervading ideology of Korean society in relation to expected motherly and familial responsibilities:

> The goal of family life in traditional Korea has been to maintain the family lineage, through the male child as heir. As such, the mother has a tremendous responsibility to protect the child and raise him well for the sake of family honour; if she fails, her life is meaningless. The only possible way for a woman to achieve success in this culture is to have a son and raise him to be a respectful member of society, and to produce heirs of his own. (2013, p.62)

What Oh describes is concomitant with the ruling dictates of symbolic authority: continuation through reproduction and lineage. It also places the mother within the role of primal mapper, assuming responsibility for preparing the child for entry into the symbolic order. In the film, it is Do-il who first brings the notion of adoption up for discussion, having already discussed it with his father; Mi-sook responds with indignation, retorting that the decision appears to have already been made and that there is nothing left for her to do but to obediently adopt and raise a child. Mi-sook makes it clear initially that adoption

is not her chosen course of action, constituting an early rejection of her ascribed role, thus challenging those norms that Oh describes as commonplace in Korean society.

Furthermore, there is an interesting dichotomy of rejection and acceptance throughout the film where the branching lineage of the family is concerned. As mentioned above, the husband and his father are keen to promote the route of adoption as a means of attaining what they cannot achieve biologically; on the other hand, the mother is initially disinclined to give up her career to become a carer, a stance that is reinforced from the maternal side of the family, with Mi-sook's mother also sceptical of taking on an outsider to be raised as one their own. This calls forth one of abjection theory's key motifs: the relationship between semiotic and the symbolic. If dutiful symbolic authority wins out with the decision to adopt, it is the realm of the semiotic feeling and emotion that pervades the final choice. Mi-sook chooses Jin-seong because of his love of drawing and painting, artistic expressions shared with the mother figure, whose job is connected to the arts and to whose attention Jin-seong had been previously brought, after she rejected his talented painting for a prize because she had initially believed him to have had parental assistance.[192] This sequence of events moves the mother's standing from rejection of patriarchal imposition to an acceptance and bonding based on semiotic expressions (she says, "It's strange, I feel like I've always waited for him).[193] The grandmother, however, still refuses to accept Jin-seong as one of the family. Instead, she adopts the prevailing ideological standpoint (as per Oh, above) and continues to encourage her daughter that having her own natural child is still possible, invoking superstition when handing on a good luck totem in the form of a fan passed on by a fortune teller. Again, semiotic superstition and impulse is in tension with symbolic ideology and logic.

The duality of rejection-acceptance and semiotic-symbolic facilitates a Kristevan reading of abjection in the film. The more obvious connotations of the semiotic-symbolic spectrum have been discussed throughout the thesis thus far; while, to make clearer, the notion of abjecting or being abject is based upon a gamut of rejection and acceptance, particularly the rejection of the maternal and the semiotic, in order to accept and embrace symbolic subjectivity. At the same time, the abject sets upon a subject when the

---

[192] Mi-sook tells her colleague that if Jin-seong had not in fact received help, then he would be praised for his accomplishments further on in life.

[193] Therefore, prioritising emotion and instinct over rationality, which, in turn, dismantles the notion of temporality.

psychological distance created from the initial severance of semiotic ties is dissolved and narrowed, meaning that the subject comes closer to that realm where they did not exist in their current state of subjectivity, and thus threatens to eradicate that subjectivity. In *Acacia*, Jin-seong becomes both an abject figure and an abjecting figure through his actions in relation to both symbolic and semiotic practices. In the scene following the confirmation of Mi-sook's pregnancy, she notices plumes of smoke emanating from the garden shed. Her panicked investigation, heightened by the shaky camera, leads to her to find that the shed has been set on fire; on putting it out with an extinguisher, she notices Jin-seong hunched in the corner, and as the camera pans down from the boy it is suggested that the fire started because he had tried to burn the emblematic fan, which he believes to have aided his new mother's expectancy. Tellingly, the mother's first concern is to pick up the fan. She only hugs and reassures the boy that his status as their child is not under threat once the grandfather with whom the shed has hitherto been associated with returns to find them in the smoke and debris.

This scene provides both an interesting and complex nexus of rejections, associated with both the semiotic and symbolic. Jin-seong is attempting to destroy the semiotic totem that has been connected with superstition and motherhood (an acting out of the pre-*thetic* abjecting not previously experienced between Jin-seong and Mi-sook due to having no biological connection), while the dark, cavernous interior of the shed connotes those womb-like spaces already established as abounding in contemporary Asian horror cinema. However, the space is also associated with the paternal lineage of the family, so Jin-seong's rejections and abjections are an assault on both domains. His rejection of symbolic status is reinforced when he signs one of his drawings under the family name Lee, not Kim, which Mi-sook takes issue with and admonishes him for. The intricacy of the implications of the burning shed sequence can be delved into further with an analysis of Mi-sook's actions and reactions: namely, that her primary concern appears to be the lucky talisman; therefore, if Jin-seong's actions have constituted an abjection from the maternal, her response has been another rejection of the child. When the head of the family tree returns, it is his philosophical reinforcement of her maternal role that makes her comfort Jin-seong. Through this duality, the mother comes to represent both semiotic and symbolic to Jin-seong, thereby tying them into one continuum. Jin-seong, on the one hand, is rejecting both; on the other hand, the semiotic-symbolic distinction for the young boy ceases to come from the differing roles and genders within his household, but rather from

Figure 33 *A Tale of Two Sisters*

The ghost of the dead mother visits Soo-mi in the night. The camera captures Soo-mi's look of horror in a shot from between and behind the mother's legs (left). A trickle of blood runs down the mother's legs (right), before Soo-mi awakens to discover that she is beginning her menstrual cycle.

Figure 34 *Acacia*

After her adopted son has set the garden shed alight in *Acacia*, Mi-sook's primary concern is the totemic fan given to her by her mother (left). Jin-seong feels a stronger connection to his dead biological mother, whom he believes has returned to nature in the form of the acaica tree in the garden (right).

Figure 35 *Acacia*

The acacia tree becomes protective of Jin-seong, causing the maternal grandmother to vomit blood after smelling a falling leaf (left) and sending a army of ants to attack the paternal grandfather, having first cut his face with a branch (right).

between his old identity as *Kim* Jin-seong (and what he subsequently associates with his deceased mother) and his new family, Lee.

This point can be developed further through the multiple roles of mothers in the film, which are complicated by the varying associations (sometimes dual, sometimes contradictory) to semiotic and symbolic domains. Mi-sook is both an adoptive and, later, biological mother, while there is also the absent biological mother of Jin-seong. It is this latter, abstract figure that provides the semiotic security for Jin-seong to sway toward following the numerous rejections and rejecting of his new adoptive family; a security that takes the form of the formerly dying, now blooming acacia tree in the garden. It is also of importance that the tree connotes nature, which is associated with the semiotic. Concerned over the boy's growing obsession with the tree, Do-il intends to chop it down but is prevented from doing so by Mi-sook. As the film progresses and Jin-seong becomes more withdrawn from his new family, while his connection to the acacia tree, which he believes is his biological mother, becomes more profound. Eventually, the tree becomes protective of the young child, gaining a measure of sentience: first, the grandmother is hospitalised after smelling a falling leaf and becoming violently ill; second, the grandfather is killed by an army of ants after he pulls down a branch from the tree. On one level, these attacks could be read as a tension between semiotic nature and symbolic culture, with the grandfather standing as the head of this line of patriarchy, while the grandmother colludes with, as earlier alluded to, the prevailing symbolic ideologies, despite sitting on the maternal branch of the family tree.[194] After both scenes, the camera pans upward to establish an aerial shot of the tree blowing gently in the breeze, with a tense and frantic orchestral background score to further implicate its role in the menace.[195] The belief that his mother somehow resides in (or is) the tree causes irreparable tension among the family. Primarily, it serves as a rejection of Jin-seong's new family in favour of the semiotic realm of the mother, as well as positioning Jin-seong within the semiotic through his belief in the reincarnation of mother as tree, as well as through his desire to return to that sphere instead of forming a new identity through his symbolic family. However, it also serves to connect his adoptive mother to him in her function as semiotic, for when Jin-seong is absent (the

---

[194] Furthermore, this point can be likened to that made during my analysis of *Ringu* in Section One, which is to say that while some critics have a propensity to throw a blanket conservative reading over these films (and other horror films) when applying abjection theory, there is, at some level, clear and irreversible collateral damage caused to the symbolic system, thus proving it to be fallible, thereby undermining and exposing its foundation as an authoritative and exclusive ideological structure.
[195] Remarkably similar to the score of Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

spectator initially led to believe that he had ran away) the mother begins to hear Jin-seong's voice from the tree and comes to believe that that is where he has gone. This complex connection can be reinforced through the presence of knitted red wool symbolising blood, the umbilical cord, and the connections that link Mi-sook to Jin-seong via semiotic communication. Earlier in the film, Jin-seong is shown unweaving the thread of one of Mi-sook's tapestries immediately after he has overheard the grandmother rejecting his place in the family. He then has a dream where his room is covered with the red wool, which wraps around and smothers him, as though forewarning him of the consequences of retreating into a semiotic state. Later, when he is missing, the father returns home to find the house covered in the same material; the thread leads him to another woven tapestry, this time depicting him murdering Jin-seong. The presence of the material in Jin-seong's dream and its re-emergence in the real world at the hands of the mother semiotically ties Jin-seong to Mi-sook, in addition to their growing connection with regards the acacia tree, which begins to place Jin-seong as an abject figure; it also brings back the analysis to the point that Jin-seong's withdrawal into a semiotic abject status is the catalyst for the destruction of the family unit. Immediately after Do-il discovers his wife's expression of him killing their adoptive child, the two have a fight of intense physical violence, where Mi-sook becomes the protective (and, by proxy in terms of abjection analysis, monstrous) mother, denying the father his other child, Hae-sung. Each accuses the other of killing Jin-seong before a flashback reveals that Mi-sook gravely injured him before Do-il finished the job with a shovel, burying him by the acacia tree. The film concludes with the mother killing the father before committing suicide, thus completing the eradication and annihilation of the family unit. In an earlier chapter, when discussing *Ringu*, I pointed to a level of collateral damage that impacted upon the patriarchal symbolic, and though in *Acacia*, there is clear evidence of the mother(s) as monstrous,[196] as well as a demarcation between the rational, logical symbolic and the irrational and emotional semiotic, the impact that the introduction of an outsider has on these symbolic systems results in an even greater degree of damage. Moreover, in my analysis of *A Tale of Two Sisters* above, I draw on Seet's assertion that the undermining or jettisoning of family values is what brings about the abject; this is true of *Acacia* also, and

---

[196] In both *A Tale of Two Sisters* and *Acacia*, the monstrous-feminine's weapon of choice is a pair of scissors, thus connecting their monstrosity to the vengeful figure in *Carved*.

it is that abject figure that disrupts, disconcerts, and destroys the most basic of symbolic values, all within the family and the home.

9.2 You Say, "Break Up The Family"

In *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *The Eye*, the concept and on-screen representation of families and the family home takes different forms. *Ju-On*'s events centre round a broken home that becomes a haunted house; initially the scene of rage, violence, and murderous revenge, the house is cursed with the vengeful spirit (the *onryou*) of the murdered mother, subsequently haunting, terrorising, and, in many cases, killing a succession of the property's new owners. *The Eye*, a pan-Asian production (see Chapter III), concerns the link between two families across different nations (Hong Kong and Thailand) that result from Mun's (Angleica Lee) cornea transplant. Her new eyes grant her psychic abilities that allow her to see mysterious figures that foreshadow the deaths of others. For the next part of this chapter, I will analyse each film in relation to themes of liminal spaces; collapsing of borders and spatial and temporal frames; the juxtaposition of oppositional elements either side of those borders; and the formation and eradication of identity, as well as their narrative structures. All of these are important components for a reading that teases out the relevance of abjection theory, particularly in relation to the family and its structure.

In part one of this chapter, as throughout the thesis, I draw attention to the tensions between symbolic and semiotic realms and practice; the films provide an arena for such a struggle to take place.[197] I have continually used examples of flashback sequences to point to where the structured and ordered narrative can be undermined, challenged, or contradicted as a means of inserting the semiotic position within, and as a disruption to, the steady, linear narrative of logical symbolic discipline.[198] *Ju-On*'s fragmented and non-linear narrative, therefore, serves as a disorder to film's form, not just its content. *Ju-On* is divided into seven segments, with each section named after a character or a family that interact with the cursed abode;[199] however, unlike *Uzumaki*, where the four distinct parts relay linear progression from one point to the next (even if they still break down

---

[197] As established earlier in the thesis, Kristeva posits that art and literature have taken the place of religion as the site to play out and purge abjection; post-Kristevan scholars have since put forward the case that film is a more compatible medium.

[198] For instance, in *Ringu*, *Whispering Corridors*, and *Death Bell*.

[199] Eight, counting the brief introduction that explains what a "Ju-On" is: a curse from someone who died in anger, which continues to reside in the place where they died.

"traditional" forms of narrative into a semiotic representation of events), the non-linear segments of *Ju-On* reject all forms of chronological progression, thus also eliminating the solution to any investigation of a mystery, as prominent in other films from this cycle (for instance, *Ringu*), and eradicating any particular focus on one central character, thus problematising spectator identification. In doing so, the film conflates the spatial and temporal, which in turn removes and challenges borders, and consequently enables the text to act out elements of abjection. In contrast, *The Eye* does make use of linear narrative, with a rudimentary summary being that the first half of the film takes place in Hong Kong, the second half in Thailand; however, a flat reading of the film as conforming to a typical linear plot development is undermined (and explored further below) by Mun's simultaneous occupation of two different worlds: her own and Ling's (the cornea donor, [Chutcha Rujinanon]). Here, the film displays a different approach to the exploration of spatial and temporal fissures. In each film, it is the result of such border collapsing, both in terms of the arbitrary nature of the dividing line and the juxtaposition of opposing elements separated by such a division, that I shall utilise as a means to demonstrate further compatibility between abjection theory and contemporary Asian horror cinema.

9.2.1 The Father Who Must be Killed is the Blight Upon Your Blighted Life

 In the opening scene of *Ju-On*, an establishing shot of the house in black and white is followed by a series of close-up cuts, alternating between high and low angles, of Takeo (Takashi Matsuyama) trembling in violent agitation and in the process of murdering his wife, Kayako (Takako Fuji), and the family cat; their child, Toshio (Yuya Ozeki) appears to crawl away, and it is not clear, though it is heavily suggested, whether he is also killed by his father. What this prelude establishes is not just the events that propel the plot forward, but also that the locus of the horror is at the heart of the family and the home; most importantly, the film establishes the broken and violent family home, with the residing family unable to co-operate and cohabitate from the outset, a scenario where the symbolic illusion of control of the household has already been shattered. The juxtaposition of the familial and horrific conflates into an uncanny space that, McRoy suggests, represents an abridgement of past, present, and future. He states:

> As liminal, hybrid entities demanding the attention of those [that the mother and son ghosts] encounter, they are perhaps the most appropriate models for exploring a radically transforming Japanese culture in which

> tensions between an undead past and the unborn future find articulation
> in the transforming family of a haunted, interstitial present. (2005, p.177)

Here, McRoy directs his critique down the path of cultural specificity; however, his key points can be equally applied to a reading through abjection. The ghosts of Kayako and Toshio represent an infiltration of the past into the present, a returning and recurring resurrection of a repressed semiotic, subjected to violence and brutality from and within the symbolic homestead. In this sense, they represent a spatial and temporal breach of borders (between life and death, between semiotic and symbolic realms): they occupy the liminal space where abjection thrives. If, as McRoy further suggests, the "mother-centred" family in *Ju-On* is a reaction to patriarchy (p.180), then it can just as readily be understood in terms of tensions between symbolic and semiotic, culture and nature, and paternal and maternal.[200]

To further illustrate this point, it will be fruitful to examine a selection of scenes from *Ju-on* to pick out where these commonplace themes of abjection criticism develop to demonstrate the importance of the theory for understanding the film in this context. The first two segments of the film, though chronologically reversed in the narrative timeline, are from the point of view of Rika (Megumi Okina),[201] a social worker assigned to care for an elderly resident of the cursed house, and Katsuya (Kanji Tsuda), the businessman and head of the Tokunaga family, who now reside in the house. Rika's first encounter with the uncanny home space is to discover it in dilapidation and disrepair, as the camera pans round the littered, un-liveable living room. Primarily there to check upon Sachie (Chikako Isomura), the Tokunaga matriarch, Rika receives no response, so she begins to investigate the premises, first finding a soiled Sachie crawling on the floor in the adjacent room. Further inspection yields a torn family photograph of Takeo, Kayako, and Toshio, with Kayako's face cut out and removed from the frame (another example of the eradication of identity that features prominently in these films)[202] and a strange noise emitting from a

---

[200] Perhaps this should be *mother-centred families*. Of the curse's victims, the latest family at the dwelling is the Tokunaga family, consisting of man, wife, and his mother – in other words, the maternal lineage sits as the elder of the family.

[201] Although *Ju-On* does not focus on one particular character or characters, Megumi Okina, a former J-Pop star, is usually credited as the main actress. Her character, Rika, is nominally the person leading the investigation into the curse (a near-equivalent to Reiko – in name and role – of *Ringu*); however, the unfolding of plot in non-linear segments reduces the impact and importance of that investigative role, as well as shares it among other characters in scenes and segments not involving Rika.

[202] The consistent use of photographs to show blurred or expunged identity is an indication that the eradication of subjectivity, of which abjection threatens to enact, seeps over into existing symbolic evidence

sealed cupboard in an upstairs bedroom. The wailing of a startled cat seems to initially explain the noise for Rika, though this is merely an indication that perhaps the cat also prowls the property in spirit form and does not deter Rika from tentatively tearing off the tape to reveal a young boy, who she discovers to be Toshio, residing in the closet.[203] Rika hastily queries the catatonic and unresponsive Sachie about the boy, but receiving no answer she telephones her employers about her discovery. The scene culminates with Rika witnessing a shadowy, black figure emitting a death rattle similar to the noise heard coming from the cupboard, which engulfs Sachie; a pair of distinctly human eyes cast a glance toward Rika, who faints before the camera pans up to reveal Toshio stood in the doorway.

The next segment is confirmed as the precursor to the previous section by the depiction of Katsuya, his wife Kazumi (Shuri Matsuda), and mother Sachie having recently moved into the cursed house. After Katsuya leaves for work, Kazumi (fore)shadows the role of Rika in caring for Sachie; she is also distracted by an unusual sound, and, finding a locked door has been opened, begins to investigate, finding and following a cat that appears to be dragged away by an off-screen assailant at the top of the stairs. Framed only from the legs in a behind-subject shot, Kazumi then witnesses a boy running from the landing to one of the bedrooms. Continuing to follow, Kazumi screams in terror as an extreme close-up draws attention to her fear-stricken eyes, while the hiss of a cat is heard from an-off camera space. The film then cuts to Katsuya returning from work. He searches for Kazumi, finding her prostrate on the bed. The closet from the first segment is clearly visible on the left-hand side of the shot. He is then confronted by the ghost of Toshio, who appears suddenly from behind the bed, his pallid, blue skin clearly marking him as Other, in comparison to the previous segment, where his status as a ghost is unclear. The camera cuts between Toshio's bulging eyes and Katsuya in a passive position on the floor; the boy then emits an inhuman sound that is somewhere between the cat's hiss and the death rattle of the mother's ghost heard previously. Toward the end of the scene, Kazumi's sister, Hitomi (Misaka Itô), arrives at the house. Believing nobody to be home, she begins to investigate the property, and finds Katsuya on the stairs, also possessed by a malevolent spirit. The segment finishes with the camera zooming into a

---

of that former subjectivity. In other words, the photograph which captures life in still frame cannot preserve that identity once subject to annihilation through abjection.

[203] Again, contemporary Asian horror texts make use of concealed womb-like space as a container for elements of the horror. The use of a bedroom closet as such a space is also evident in *A Tale of Two Sisters*.

window at the top of the stairs, where the faint spirit of Kayako can be seen pressed against it; it is later confirmed that Katsuya, Kazumi, and Hitomi all died at this point, leaving Sachie alone in the house. What these two juxtaposed segments reinforce is that the curses frequenting contemporary Asian horror films are inextricably linked to the semiotic realm through the broken home. Toshio, though his death is not shown, clearly perished with his mother and the family pet. His link to the semiotic maternal and nature is made through his Othering as a ghost in the second segment, as well as the technique of doubling him with both his dead mother and pet through the camera's focus on their eyes and the sounds that they make. Their animalistic noises and rattling hums fall outside of recognisable symbolic language structure. In a wider context, Toshio shares similarities with *Ringu*'s Sadako and *Dark Water*'s Mitsuko in that he is a child murdered before properly entering the symbolic's systems of subjectivity. Therefore, he remains eternally with the mother, sharing in her semiotic nature and practice. These consecutive segments place the operational family home, an idealised symbolic structure, against the repressed (in this case, violently and fatally) semiotic remainder – that which threatened to break up the façade of the family – with the borders between the two spheres completely collapsed. The abject and abjected semiotic ghosts occupy the same temporal and spatial frame as the living, and the two worlds infiltrate one another with little difficulty. This serves to demonstrate Kristeva's assertion that the semiotic and the symbolic are inextricably intertwined, and that the abject is always-already within the symbolic. Furthermore, it illustrates the symbolic's attempt to keep the abject at bay (the duct tape sealing the closet), which is released by Rika during her investigation of the property.

The final segment of *Ju-On* is, though titled "Kayako," set much later in the timeline of the film's events.[204] Rika is meeting for lunch with an old friend, Mariko (Kayoko Shibata), a school teacher who is planning a visit to Toshio's house because, although registered as a student, he has never turned up for class. In the restaurant, Rika is taken aback when she feels a black cat brush against her legs under the table; she recoils in shock when lifting the table cloth to see Toshio sitting underneath. Later, she dreams of a clowder of black cats in her room. The pale blue backlight of the shot frames it as a dream in comparison with the brightly lit room in the shot when she awakes; the colour also links her dream and its contents to the ghost family. Already in a state of agitation, she receives

---

[204] The intermittent segments have focused on Hitomi; Toyoma (Yôji Tanaka), a retired detective who once worked on the case of the first murder; the Tokunaga family; and Izumi (Misa Uehara), Toyoma's daughter.

a phone call from Mariko, who is calling from the haunted house. Rika races to save her, but it is too late. Mariko has already succumbed to the curse.

This segment is particularly important for an abjection-based reading of the film on three counts. First, Rika has to revisit and reinvestigate the cursed home, thus demonstrating the inescapable pull and sway of the curse. The presence of Mr. Saitô (Isao Yatsu) is also fundamental to understanding *Ju-On* in this context. Mr. Saitô is an elderly man in a nursing home and one of Rika's clients. Before Rika meets up with Mariko, she is outside the home on the telephone to her friend. Behind the window, Mr. Saitô is making faces and playing a game of peek-a-boo, though nobody is visible in his line of sight (he even waves away a passing young man who tries to patronisingly play along). Later, when Rika is back in the old house, she suddenly realises the importance of Mr. Saitô's actions and their relevance to other key moments in the film. By making a shield (or a temporary border) with his hand, through which he looks, he is able to see the semiotic ghosts occupying the symbolic space. A flashback shows Rika remembering Sachie doing a similar action before the shadowy spirit consumed her, as well as showing that at various points, characters have come into contact with the ghosts by looking through a makeshift border: Rika through the tablecloth at the restaurant or Hitomi encountering Toshio under the bedsheets (in the "Hitomi" segment). This demonstrates the arbitrary nature of borders in that it shows them to be easily constructed and just as easily deconstructed in order to separate two differing realms, thus also showing the ease in which they can be navigated and traversed.[205] This method of viewing the spirits also points towards the idea of spectatorship and ways of looking/viewing in horror cinema. Where earlier I observed how Seet takes a circumlocutory route through Mulvey, Williams, and others when encountering a tricky concept in Kristeva, here we can see how the idea of spectatorship and "looking" ties in to the idea of tensions between the inseparable but incompatible realms of the semiotic and symbolic, and, importantly, the fragile and arbitrary nature of the borders erected to control the former. Interestingly, Mr. Saitô, whose patriarchal association is reiterated by Rika stating that he is to become a great-grandfather, is the key to unlocking the correct mode of viewing. He is not exempt from requiring a safe distance through which to engage with the spirits; at the same time, he is forearmed with the knowledge to put up such a barrier, and thus is not consumed with the threat of abjection

---

[205] Arguably, this is also reflected back in the film's segmented form.

that they carry. Finally, when Rika realises how to encounter the spirits, she is immediately visited by Kayako, who emerges from beneath her legs, captured by an overhead shot. Here, we see Rika metaphorically giving birth to the ghost, thus associating her with the maternal and semiotic otherworld, and also mirroring back the scene where she freed Toshio from his womb-like containment in the opening segment. The film ends when Rika releases the spirits from another repressed space in the attic, concluding with the ominous death rattle upon her doing so. This scene reveals that the father's ghost has also survived in a form of repetitive limbo: whoever is possessed by Kayako is doomed to be murdered over and over again by Takeo. If on the one hand, then, the patriarchal violence continues to be enacted in an inescapable loop, with those drawn into the abject curse fated to meet the same consequence; on the other hand, the inability of such underlying brutality to be eradicated, shut out, or repressed is also a reminder that that which is buried or cast out to shape symbolic ideological structures will always return to haunt the oppressive system in which it will forever remain.

9.2.2 Just Supposed I'm Juxtaposed with You

If *Ju-On* takes a fragmented approach to its narrative structure, *The Eye* follows a more conventional linear sequence. However, the key recurring themes of the family and of juxtapositions and borders are at the forefront of both texts and vital to understanding them through an abjection-based reading. *Ju-On*'s segmented sequence removes any consistent character focus, instead exploring the cursed family and haunted home at various points in time, illustrating a recurring and deep-rooted abjection that occupies spatial and temporal frames within the symbolic. In contrast, *The Eye* particularly focuses on Mun, a blind classical violinist who undergoes a cornea transplant. After discovering that she is witnessing strange events, her post-op psychologist, Dr. Wah (Lawrence Chou), to whom she has become close, accompanies Mun on a trip to Thailand to track down the eye donor's family. Once there, they encounter secrecy and hostility from the local villagers and Ling's mother (Sue Yuen Wang). Rejected as an outsider and a jinx for her psychic ability to foresee death, Ling committed suicide (with which her mother has not yet reconciled herself). Furthermore, the juxtaposed borders present in *The Eye* lend

Figure 36 *Ju-On: The Grudge*

In *Ju-On*, the mother and child are linked semiotically through their status as abject spirits, as well as their connection to the natural and animalistic (specifically, to the black cats). They are frequently signified in the film by a pale, blue hue that marks them as Other (above and below).

Figure 37 *Ju-On: The Grudge*

Peek-a-Boo: Mr. Saito shows the way in *Ju-On* (left). Crossing the symbolic-semiotic border is achievable by constructing a temporary one, Rika realises (centre). Upon performing this sequence, Rika inadvertently summons Kayako, who appears between her legs, providing a metaphorical enactment of the primal birth scene (right).

Figure 38 *The Eye*

Mun misrecognises her own image in *The Eye* (left). Since her cornea transplant, Mun sees the ghostly revenants of a spiritual realm. One such being flies toward her during a calligraphy class (right).

themselves to a reading by way of abjection narrative, one which evokes abjection by way of such contrasts, particularly concerning semiotic and symbolic tensions that tie into a reading concomitant with the film's narrative of abjection.

Comparisons of paradoxical juxtapositions begin in *The Eye* as early as the pre-credit sequence, where the world is described as both ugly and beautiful, as narrated by Mun over a blurred and out-of-focus shot. She indicates that the following events are specifically related to her point of view by concluding that she "is about to see the world with fresh eyes." Following the opening credits, the film begins in black and white, only restoring to colour once Mun has undergone her operation (signalled by a brief flash of white light on the screen), again aligning the film's perspective with that of Mun's. Another way of looking at these scenes is to intuit that Mun is about to encounter a series of juxtapositions and paradoxes from an untainted viewpoint; this is, of course, undermined by the presence of another person's point of objectivity that remains in the donated corneas,[206] as well as from the innate characteristics of abjection that relate to the fields of semiotic and symbolic in line with border dissolution that contribute toward the following reading of the film. Almost immediately after it is confirmed that the operation was a success, Mun encounters what is probably the most important instance of border collapsing, juxtaposition, and merging of two distinct domains: her ability to see two different worlds simultaneously. Although not blind from birth (Mun lost her sight when she was two years old), Mun has no memory of any previous vision; therefore, her understanding of this anomaly does not initially arouse her suspicion; she does not realise what is happening. This void of awareness places Mun's conception of seeing the world afresh into basic terms of having just been born, which can be read alongside the idea of psychosexual development raised in Lacan, Kristeva, and others – as well as following the specifically Kristevan notion of having to transfer from one domain to the other in order to acquire full subjectivity. She needs to acquire certain knowledge to fill that void, which is reinforced in the film when her surgeon, Dr. Lo (Edmund Chen), explains to Mun that she must readjust her life to accommodate sight, having previously relied on touch as her primary sense of navigating the world.

---

[206] The residue of Ling that lingers in the corneas after her death is tantamount to a curse transmitted to another person through an object or from proximity – Sadako's curse via the tape in *Ringu* or the Ju-on in *Ju-On*, for instance.

In terms of families and their relationships, and how they play a vital role in the film, Mun is aligned with the maternal and the feminine, even though her mother is mentioned only once in the film in the context that her parents are divorced, thus leaving another void in Mun's life (an absent mother). She has grown up in the care of her grandmother (Ping Ko-Yin) and sister (Candy Lo); her father has long ago relocated to Toronto. There is also the consideration of Dr. Lo and his nephew Dr. Wah, two male doctors. Both play a prominent role in Mun's life throughout the film: the former as her surgeon, the latter as post-operative psychologist. However, while both men represent the rational, scientific, and logical realm of contemporary medical practice (and have the title to support it), they themselves are contrasted in antagonistic roles that aligns one with the symbolic (Lo) and the other with the semiotic (Wah). Having successfully performed the operation, it is Dr. Lo who calls upon a prescriptive period of recovery and adjustment, denoting stages for Mun to pass through as she becomes accustomed to the acquisition of sight. In contradistinction, Dr. Wah is more open to Mun's notions of superstition and the presence of the supernatural when she begins to suspect that her visions are preternatural. This notion is dismissed as nonsense by Dr. Lo, and tensions arise between uncle and nephew when the former realises that Dr. Wah believes Mun's perception of events. Their increasingly-hostile relationship comes to a head when the uncle tells the nephew that he must have been reincarnated in the wrong body, the barb evoking both a gendered division between the rational and the superstitious, as well as undermining the credibility of his own position by revealing his own dependence on beliefs that lie outside of the scientific discourse of the rational and logical. Therefore, such distinctions put the delicate balance of the semiotic-symbolic spectrum at the fore.

Furthermore, Mun's association to the semiotic is built up throughout the film. First, it is in relation to her all-female immediate family; secondly, her blindness is put into perspective as an obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of symbolic subjectivity – as further indicated with its eradication being put in terms of being born again or for the first time proper, infantilising Mun in the process; thirdly, her deprived senses have attuned her to become inclined toward rhythm and music, another artistic expression that is associated with semiotic dwelling. As her relationship with Dr. Wah develops, this association is compounded, which is further illustrated through the use of juxtapositions between the two opposing worlds in the film. In the process and instruction of regulating her life in line with her acquired vision, Mun gains aspirations to be able to read and write, which is to

understand and communicate language, thus contributing toward the completion of symbolic status. It is also a form of independence for Mun, who has hitherto relied on others. In stark contrast, she is forced to give up her chair in the blind orchestra, a sure analogy for relinquishing the semiotic connotations that once defined her in order to progress toward a symbolic identity. In the way that the film, therefore, positions Mun, it is possible to read her as occupying liminal space between identities and realms, one which mirrors her dual vision of the living and the dead, and because of this she occupies a form of limbo in the film's narrative. Abjection, as it has been thus far put forward, occurs and flourishes in such spaces where borders have dissolved. It is of no surprise, then, that Mun encounters scenes of horror in scenarios that represent both her old semiotic existence and the symbolic identity that she is compelled to attain. Mun shows up for orchestra practise, despite having previously been asked to leave, and begins to furiously play her violin. The shot shifts into a series of rapid cuts, giving off the impression of a montage, with various irregular angles and a 360-degree rotation of the discombobulated player, as though itself going against the idea of linear shot progression, once more affiliating its movement with the semiotic Mun. Unable to sustain such a practice (in some ways, both Mun *and* the camera), Mun faints as the playing comes to a conclusion and the shot fades out. Here, we witness Mun compelled to return to the semiotic functions that she is familiar and comfortable with but whose security she is no longer able to adequately rely on; in contrast, the next scene demonstrates that while still retaining traces of a semiotic existence, Mun will meet with obstructions as she strives for symbolic independence. While at a calligraphy class, Mun is suddenly tormented by one of the spirits of the dead after having briefly witnessed the image of a young girl in the corner.[207] Typically, the spirits that Mun encounters are undertaking perfunctory actions that re-enact elements of their life that usually pertain to their deaths; in other words, Mun is merely a passive observer. However, this particular spirit begins to omit an aggressive sound and suddenly flies towards Mun in a jump-scare sequence while Mun is practicing her writing. The intensity of this encounter in comparison to those that have come before indicates a form of hostility toward Mun taking those further steps toward attaining her subjective status.

---

[207] The dead people that Mun sees are distinguishable by the black shadows that engulf their eye sockets, thus drawing visible similarities to the obscured pictorial facial features that denote eradicated identities, as already discussed as a recurring theme throughout the films.

Following up on their intuition that Mun is seeing irregular images, Dr. Wah traces the donor (without his uncle's knowledge because "he's a professional, after all") to a girl named Ling, who lived in a rural village in Thailand. Suspicions of a post-operative anomaly are confirmed when Dr. Wah shows Mun a collage made in her honour by Ying Ying, a young cancer patient in the same hospital ward as Mun. Crucially, Mun does not recognise her own image. In Lacanian models of psychosexual development, this scene chimes with the *méconnaisance* of the mirror stage, which consequently draws attention to a disharmony between illusions of subjective wholeness and a belying fragmentary reality. The juxtapositions continue here, as the grey metropolis of Hong Kong is contrasted with the green and brown fields and blue skies of rural Thailand. Adam Knee also picks up on this recurring theme, observing that:

> Most central to the plot may be the interaction of modern, positivist, empirically derived (and largely Western in origin) medical knowledge with traditional, Asian identified spiritual beliefs, that is, the juxtaposition of the scientific and supernatural. (2009, p.74)

Knee goes on to observe that "*The Eye* points to a range of tensions underneath the relatively stable surface of present East and Southeast Asia" (p.81), likening the difference to a tension between East and West.[208] For the purposes of continuing with the current mode of analysis, that discord can also translate as further evidence of symbolic-semiotic distinctions that are both connected to and at odds with each other, which is reinforced by the paradoxical locales. In Chapter V, I commented on the use of rural outposts in the form of Japanese islands as the origin point for the curse, which is then transmitted to the urban centre. In *The Eye*, Thailand, where a "strong[er] belief in the coexistence of the material and the spiritual realms is prevalent" (Ancuta, 2014, p.238), is set up as oppositional to the scientifically-developed metropolitan Hong Kong city.

Once there, Mun and Dr. Wah encounter difficulties and hostilities in their pursuit of Ling's family, eventually learning that, in life, Ling was outcast and abjected by the villagers, who interpreted her psychic ability as a bad omen, considering her Other in the form of a witch or harbinger of death.[209] Depressed by her status as abject and monstrous, Ling committed suicide. Superstitious beliefs once more come into play, for Mun soon discovers that suicides cannot pass through the life-death border, and are instead trapped in

---

[208] A similar theme can be observed in *Dumplings*, which is discussed in the next chapter.
[209] Drawing similarities to Sadako's fate in *Ringu*.

the liminal spaces in-between, a form of limbo akin to the ambiguous temporal plain that Mun can see through Ling's retina retention.[210] Those trapped in this space are forced to repeat their deaths *ad nauseum* until they can pass through to the other side, if at all. While staying with Ling's desolate and dejected mother, Mun is drawn into the same patterns and rituals as Ling is condemned to, thus reinforcing her semiotic and now abject and monstrous status through these actions (as well as the connection through her corneas), and unwillingly attempts to hang herself in Ling's bedroom. At this point, some key comparisons to the mechanics of *Ju-On*'s narrative can be made. First, the curse is at its most potent and effective at the place of tragedy, violence, and death: and that is in the family home. Second, those stricken by the curse are compelled to enter a loop of repetition, enacting the same turbulent horror until it can be broken. The primary difference between the two films, in terms of how an abjection-reading is supported, is that while *Ju-On* does not offer a resolution, *The Eye*'s narrative is more compatible with the narratives of abjection line of analysis.

Mun is prevented from committing suicide by Ling's mother and Dr. Wah, which turns out to break the cycle and, in turn, the curse. As already established, abjection narratives, on a basic level, require a disruption of symbolic reality, usually by a form of curse and via a collapsing of the borders previously erected to keep that curse at bay, followed by a purification or purging ritual, which to some degree redraws boundaries anew to banish the abject element. When considering this formula in many, but certainly not all, films analysed in this thesis, I also take into consideration whether the texts simply redraw these lines to re-establish symbolic authority and law, or whether there is a form of collateral damage or enduring impact on these systems (and, of course, whether the abject can be banished at all). In *The Eye*, it is not just the prevention of Mun's suicide that resolves the curse, but rather the two events in its aftermath. Ling's mother's involvement in the process is cathartic for her, and the idea of a composite family unit is again evoked when Mun and Ling's mother embrace in a surrogate union similar to Yoshimi and Mitsuko in *Dark Water*. For each person, a void is filled – they were each hitherto missing the counterpart in the mother-daughter relationship. Furthermore, the mother's closure

---

[210] Knee also draws attention to the dichotomy of logic and superstition, stating that "women become linked with the spiritual, the emotional, the bodily" compared to "the positivist, the rational, the intellectual, the modern"; as such, he continues, women are therefore able to transgress borders with considerable ease, whereas the "rigid, linear thinking" of men "requires them to occupy clearly defined and delimited territories" (p.79).

allows her to lay her biological daughter to rest via a ritualistic, spiritualistic, and traditional burial, which they understand will allow her to pass from limbo into death.[211] However, while these scenes serve a purpose to resolve Ling's impasse and sever Mun's psychic connection to her, it does leave Mun with the same psychic ability (which has been treated as a, or *the*, curse). On returning to Hong Kong, Mun and Dr. Wah are caught in a traffic jam, where Mun then foresees a major catastrophe about to happen. She tries to warn the other road users but is dismissed as hysterical; when the leaking gas from the toppled truck ignites, causing a massive explosion in a crowded area, Mun is again blinded as a result of flying glass shards in the debris. Although her narrative arc is reset to the starting position, Mun considers this prospect a happy resolution, having claimed to have seen beauty and having united with Dr. Wah at the conclusion of the film. The important aspect to conclude from this final sequence of events is that Mun has returned to her previous condition, which ostensibly means that she can return to a semiotic state of being (such as returning to the orchestra and, subsequently, abandoning the pursuit of literacy). There is clear potential to read Mun's return to blindness as a punishment for the extra-symbolic activities; on the other hand, she finds herself both psychologically and physically able to reject the appeal of attaining that normative symbolic subjectivity that is pressed upon her throughout the film, yet she can also do so triumphantly and in peace, without erasing her own identity in the process.

9.3 Conclusion: Home is a Question Mark

 Throughout this chapter, I have considered the important themes of the family and the family home in relation to abjection theory in contemporary Asian horror cinema, citing examples from films that span the nations of Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand. In order to make a more robust point, I have taken into account not just representations of such units, but I have also demonstrated how the common themes of abjection – particularly dissension in the semiotic-symbolic spectrum and the collapsing of borders – play a vital role in how the family comes to be both a key factor and theme for the subject matter of this chapter. The realms of the semiotic and symbolic are inherently familial in their significations, and they become significant factors for understanding the films under the lens of abjection theory. In both *A Tale of Two Sisters* and *Acacia*, it is an

---

[211] While this turns out to be a false method of resolution for Sadako in *Ringu*, it does appear to be effective for Ling here.

outsider to the biological bloodline that acts as the catalyst for abjection to break down the barriers that shore up the family unit; however, in the midst of the catastrophic and cataclysmic events that lead up to this conclusion, the family unit itself is shown to be frail and fraught with horror from the onset. Analysing both *Ju-On* and *The Eye*, I investigated juxtapositions and borders, all tying back into the domain of the family and family home. The subsequent dissolution of these borders and adversarial nature of the juxtaposed elements results in the conflation of temporal and spatial plains, where abjection can thrive at the heart of the family. In both films, a form of curse is enacted, one which resides most strongly at the site of violence and death; in both cases, this site is the family domicile. In the introductory paragraph, I asked the question, "is there a true familial home space depicted within these films?". A simplistic answer would suggest that there is not. A more complex and nuanced response would argue that if there exists such a space, that space resides in the liminal frames between the fragile borders that hold together the concept of the family unit. That space is the site and source of the horror consistently in these examples of films from the cycle under scrutiny; it is a breeding ground for the abject and abjection.

Chapter X: Pretty Girls Make Graves: The Monstrous-Feminine in *Audition*, *Dream Home*, *Dumplings*, *Lady Vengeance*, and *Nang Nak*

> The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature.
> (Creed, 1993, p.11)

This chapter concludes a trilogy of trilogies – the third part of the third section of the thesis. In section one, I established theory, films, and method; in section two, I applied my findings to a selection of contemporary Asian horror films, analysing narratives of abjection and two immediate counterparts and themes stemming from these initial observations: technologies and urban legend. Throughout this final section, I have so far critiqued the high school and the family home. This points towards the significance of place and location (the spatial) in determining and understanding abjection; however, this final chapter of analysis must now take into account a more physical and bodily presence: the monstrous-feminine. The concept of the monstrous-feminine is taken from Barbara Creed and is crucial to Creed's challenge of previous theories and interpretations of sexual difference; it is also through this figure that Creed introduces Kristeva's theory of abjection to her analysis. The monstrous-feminine is, she tells us, predicated on the premise of woman-as-monster, as opposed to passive victim, and is "defined in terms of her sexuality" (1993, p.3). "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine," Creed asserts, and this figure threatens the symbolic order, drawing attention to its frailty (p.1, p.23). She appears in many guises, including some of the following (fully listed in Chapter II): the possessed woman, the witch, the vampire, the primeval, the castrating mother, and *femmes castratrice* and *fatale*.

Creed supports the concept of the monstrous-feminine by using Kristeva's theory, and for the purpose of utilising Kristeva for my own inquiry into contemporary Asian horror cinema in this thesis, the monstrous-feminine is also useful. Taking the monstrous-feminine as a base concept, and importantly an *abject* one (that is, a woman who is portrayed as or conceived of as monstrous and/or abject), I am interested in how she is constructed and deconstructed in the texts. If she is an abject figure, then how does she become abject? Kristeva, again, reminds us that it is at the collapsing of known and established borders where abjection arises. In turn, this is inextricably linked to tensions between semiotic and symbolic realms; therefore, these motifs must be prominent factors

in the presence of the monstrous-feminine. Moreover, both Kristeva and Creed place particular emphasis on the role of the mother and the maternal in their writings, and the monstrous-feminine is often associated with motherhood (at times, even conflated with it). Both concepts also connote a universality that pervades all cultures; here, I demonstrate its presence in filmic texts spanning all four nations covered throughout this thesis.

Above, I commented on how the previous two chapters of this section deal with some of the arenas in which the abject and abjection occurs. The monstrous-feminine is always, to some degree, present at these sites – is she therefore a catalyst, conductor, or conduit for abjection? Each of the five films analysed in this chapter features at least one female who is central to the plot and who, by the terms laid down by Creed and the concept of abjection conceived by Kristeva, could easily be considered a monstrous-feminine figure. To break down such analysis, I have split the chapter into four parts, the concerns of which can be briefly summarised as follows: construction of monster, borders, motherhood, and deconstruction of monster. Each part fits in with the themes discussed above and will be crucial to drawing a conclusion that enhances and speaks to the previous analysis in both this section and the wider thesis. The films selected for this chapter are *Audition*, *Lady Vengeance*, *Nang Nak*, *Dream Home*, and *Dumplings*.[212]

10.1 Making the Monster: Agency, Perspective, Narrative, Point-of-View

From the outset, Creed situates her study primarily within "Kristeva's discussion of the construction of abjection in the human subject" in relation to the border, mother-child relationship, and feminine body (p.8). For Creed, the subject *is* the monstrous and the feminine, the monstrous-feminine. The compartmentalisation of border, mother-child relationship, and feminine body identify three key, inescapable themes of Kristeva's abjection, all of which have been placed under scrutiny thus far and will be vital again in this chapter. However, a fourth term jumps out at the observant reader here, and that is *construction*. There may initially be somewhat of a potential conflict in terms of discussing the monstrous-feminine in terms of construction, for much of the argument put forward in

---

[212] Due to its inclusion as the third part of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, following *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) and *Oldboy* (2003), *Lady Vengeance* is typically categorised within the action or thriller genres. However, though perhaps an outlier to the cycle, its main themes overlap with many of the tropes that I use to define contemporary Asian horror cinema in Chapter III, which I shall go on to demonstrate in this chapter. Furthermore, its international distribution under the Tartan Asia Extreme branding places it alongside other contemporary Asian horror films within a wider, global market.

the early stages of the thesis hinges on the abject being universally latent, in various guises, but Kristeva's theory explains and examines the conflict and cause that arises when institutional and ideological constructions (chiefly in the form of borders) collapse because they cannot keep out what their superficial perimeters intend to eliminate. Perhaps that is the essential difference between the abject and the monstrous-feminine, though the two frequently conflate: the former is fundamental, the latter forged. If so, who is constructing and how is the monstrous-feminine being constructed? The most profitable way to understand what underlies these constructions and how they feed into the theory of abjection is to examine a selection of case studies.

10.1.1 We Put Her in the World's Glare, and She Turned into a Killer

In *Audition*, a seven-years widowed film producer, Aoyama (Ryo Ishibashi), at the behest of his son, Shigehiko (Tetsu Sawaki), and colleague, Yoshikawa (Jun Kunimura), sets up a bogus casting audition in order to find himself a new wife. Initially silent and disinterested throughout the parade of potential (but misapprehended) partners, Aoyama is eventually struck by one particular candidate, Asami (Eihi Shiina), whose affections he resolves to pursue. Aoyama telephones Asami and they go on several dates. Eventually, Asami agrees to spend the weekend at a hotel with Aoyama. At the hotel, Asami reveals her scarred legs, explaining that she was burned in an accident as a child. Before making love, Asami makes Aoyama pledge his love to her to the exclusion of all others. Aoyama wakes the next morning to discover that Asami has left the hotel without explanation. Desperate and rejected, he attempts to track down Asami through the contacts on her résumé, but he becomes increasingly concerned at what he finds: first, he visits her run-down old ballet studio where he encounters the disabled old man who it is implied abused Asami; and second, he discovers that the bar she claimed to work at has been closed down for the last year because a barman was murdered, and, according to a passer-by, three extra fingers, an extra ear, and an extra tongue were found at the murder scene. During Aoyama's search, Asami visits his home, kills his dog, and drugs his liquor. Upon returning home, Aoyama drinks the poisoned liquor, whereupon Asami injects him with a paralysing drug that immobilises his body but keeps the nerve endings receptive to pain. Asami proceeds to torture Aoyama by inserting needles into his stomach and eyes before using a wire saw to cut off his foot. She explains that she is doing it to him because he has betrayed his promise to love her and her alone by keeping alive the memory of his ex-wife and caring

229

for his son. Shigehiko returns home and struggles with Asami, culminating in Asami falling down the stairs and breaking her neck. The film concludes with the paralysed lovers staring at each other, and Asami tells Aoyama that she feels lucky to have met him.

One of the most striking visual aspects of *Audition* is its use of a flashback/dream-like sequence that takes effect from the scene in which Aoyama wakes up alone in the hotel. Like *Ringu*'s cursed videotape, the images appear as a montage of non-linear, absurd, and disturbing episodes, including shots of Asami vomiting into a bowl and feeding the contents to a mutilated man crawling out of a burlap sack at her apartment. The film distinguishes itself from many others in the cycle, however, through its use of gratuitous violence that appears to contradict the typical style of the cycle. While the level of violence might lack the subtlety that many contemporary Asian horror films are characterised by, it does illuminate aspects of Kristeva's abjection much more akin to Creed's application: namely, the visual display of violence, wounds, and blood, and also, crucially, in the depiction of Asami as an abject figure and monstrous-feminine (she fits the criteria as *femme fatale* and vengeful woman).[213] Interestingly, most of these counter-idiosyncrasies of the cycle are represented in the hallucinatory montage, which splits the film into two halves, the latter framing Asami as a vengeful female responding to the male misogyny and objectification of women that takes place in the first half. In situating Asami's violent rebuttal within the breakdown of its narrative cohesion, the film produces a similar effect of instability as seen in the closing montages of *Uzumaki*; namely, that the symbolic framing of the text is unable to withstand the intrusion of an abjection that has infiltrated its borders. In other words, to convey an unrepresentable form (the abject), the linear narrative of the film is deconstructed to a series of images, allying it stylistically with the Kristevan semiotic (that which problematise linearity and logic); consequently, the relationship between the symbolic and the semiotic is shown to be in a state of flux. It also calls into question the reliability of the text at this point, in the sense of how it constructs Asami. These sequences might also be read as projections of the drug-induced Aoyama's psyche or as a manifestation of his latent guilt for his attitude towards women in the first half of the film. Most notably, moreover, all of Asami's violent actions occur after the abrupt shift in the film's cinematography, thus further complicating the reliability of

---

[213] Richards states that "Asami is part of a long tradition of wronged and avenging females in Japanese storytelling traditions, and even though she's no ghost there are suggestions that she might be some kind of manifestation of Aoyama's guilt-ridden psyche" (2010, p.67).

the film's perspective and narrative construction of Asami as monstrous.[214] In other words, Asami's portrayal as a monstrous and violent figure is undermined by the unreliability of narratorial perspective within the realms of the symbolic universe in which it is initially establishhed.[215] Robert Hyland reads all violent scenes in the movie as part of Aoyama's dream and argues that the film "can be interpreted as a sophisticated analysis of patriarchy's projection upon the female body" (2009, p.205, p.214). Hyland suggests that the construction of Asami as monstrous is a projection of guilt by the symbolic order onto that which threatens its continuation. More importantly, Asami's representation as abject and semiotic (and representation *through* the latter "semiotic" hallucinatory scenes) construes her as monstrous in a way that poses a direct threat to the family, the family home, and as I shall elaborate in the next section her role as a surrogate mother.

Another line of argument might suggest that Asami's violent rebuttal in the second half of the film is inevitable in that she is a product of the environment in which she is constructed. This theme can be explored in greater detail in *Lady Vengeance*, *Dream Home*, and *Dumplings*. In short, *Lady Vengeance* is the story of Lee Geum-Ja (Lee Yeong-ae), a woman who has just been released from prison after serving time for the murder of a young child that she did not commit. With the help of some of the friends and acquaintances that she has acquired during her time in prison, she sets out on a mission of revenge and exposure against the man responsible for the murder. However, the story does not always unfold exclusively from Geum-ja's perspective. The film regularly cuts back to her time spent in prison, indicating the formation of the vengeance-seeking Geum-ja that would emerge from incarnation. These scenes are pieced together from the perspective of several of her inmates, including Eun-joo (Seo Ji-hee), So-young (Kim Bu-seon), Seon-sook (Kim Jin-goo), and Su-hee (Ra Mi-ran), the latter a murderess and cannibal, all of whom narrate their relationship with Geum-ja and (often unwittingly) provide her with assistance after she is released, with each person becoming a vital component in her overall revenge plot (for instance, by providing accommodation and access to weapons). Additionally, a third-person narrator often interjects and shapes Geum-ja's story,

---

[214] This shift occurs approximately half way through the film, when Aoyama wakes up alone in the hotel. From this point on, the connective tissue between events becomes looser, making it difficult for the spectator to distinguish current events, flashbacks, and projected fantasy. Visual indicators include the pale blue backlighting in some sequences, and the warmer reds, yellows, and oranges in the backlighting of some of the more horrific scenes.

[215] Rob Daniel and Dave Wood state that it "ultimately remains an open question whether Asami's monstrousness is real or fantasy" (2005, p.289).

sometimes expressing unseen emotion to the spectator, such as conveying that she finds no redemption in the closing scene of the film, and occasionally being privy to events that Geum-ja is unaware of.[216] Taken together, these perspectives assemble the figure of Geum-ja.

One of the prisoners relates a story of how Geum-ja dealt with the prison bully. Over the course of three years, Geum-ja had, under the pretence of attending to this inmate, been slowly killing her by feeding her bleach. As a result, Geum-ja earned the contrasting nicknames of "the kind-hearted" (which is also how the narrator introduces her in the opening scene) and "the witch" due to the evil nature of those actions (a name which instantly connotes the monstrous-feminine), which are perceived as both a monstrous and as acts of kindness, benefitting her fellow inmates. Furthermore, the intrusive media[217] has thrust Geum-ja into the global spotlight, having become fascinated with the nature of the murder and her subsequent conviction. Her external image is generated solely by the television exposure, equally convicting her of monstrosity, and her post-imprisonment persona has also been shaped by external narratives outwith her agency. Furthermore, though innocent of the heinous crime for which she was convicted, Geum-ja becomes a killer while in prison; at the same time, she harbours a drive to plot a brutal and violent revenge against those who have wronged her.[218] Her media representation and legally-confirmed status of excessive criminality is assured in error, and it is evident here that the punishment has spawned the monster, not the other way around. In other words, Geum-ja has, at least in part, become a monster *because* of the conditions and predicament thrust upon her.

Lai-sheung (Josie Ho), the protagonist of *Dream Home*, is framed as a product of her environment over the opening titles, where the national average income in Hong Kong is contrasted to the inflated housing market and high levels of poverty, further underlining the statistics as being decidedly post-handover. The film is further framed as "real" in that it dispenses with the supernatural elements often popular in this cycle and, the titles claim, is based on "true events." These conditions impact Lai-sheung because underlying her

---

[216] These more formally challenging aspects of *Lady Vengeance* contribute to a sense of breakdown of "reality" within its structure that highlights the instabilities of symbolic authority pointed out in this chapter and throughout the thesis; particularly, here, with regard to this film and *Audition*.

[217] Often played to caricaturist proportions.

[218] In a way becoming a corporeal embodiment of the vengeful spirits, such as the *wonhon*, that pervade contemporary Asian horror cinema.

present status as a young, single bank employee, working two jobs to fund an attempted property purchase, a series of intermittent flashbacks reveal a childhood of poverty, oppression, the threat of relocation, and, to some degree, physical and emotional abuse from her father. These flashbacks firmly root Lai-sheung's future motivations within her ties to the family. Her close childhood relationship with her grandfather, a former sailor working at the harbour, instilled in her a desire of obtaining an apartment near his place of employment and with a sea view; however, the idea of owning her own property far exceeds the conditions of her impoverished upbringing, and despite her withdrawal from all forms of expenditure but those that are necessary to survive, Lai-sheung finds herself in virtually the same conditions in the present day.[219] For instance, her cramped office space, separated by only glass partitions (thus denying any privacy), mirrors the densely-populated areas of high-rise flats and crowded living conditions of her youth. Furthermore, Lai-sheung is seen cold-calling customers, utilising the latest office-communications technologies, who reply with expletives, which reflects as a bleaker scenario in the present day to its flashback counterpart: her conversations with another child in the opposite building using only cups and string to communicate (and signing off each communication with the word "arsehole" instead of "over").

The "dream home" of the title is specifically the address One Victoria Place (a near-literal translation from its Cantonese title).[220] However, another flashback reveals that although she once came close to matching the required deposit, she was denied by the mortgage-lenders and inflexible property owners, the latter of whom pulled out of the initial deal because they believed that they could get a better price for their property. Consequently, Lai-sheung seeks to resolve this situation by committing a spree of murders in the local neighbourhood, thus decreasing the value of properties in the vicinity.

---

[219] For example, she does not join in with the ventures and activities of her friends at the bank due to the necessity of saving money for the deposit. Lai-sheung also regularly meets a married man for sex, and the first time that one of these encounters is shown, she asks for the hourly rate on the hotel room, awaking the next morning dejected to find out that her paramour has not only left without paying but that she will be charged for the full night.

[220] The location, situated within the Causeway Bay area of the city, is one of the most affluent areas of Hong Kong. Furthermore, its construction displaced many of the poorer residents (as shown in the film), thus creating an economic dividing line. Lai-sheung's murder spree, therefore, is of significance to her movement from one side of this border to the other; it also positions her as a returning remnant of the repressed past of the area – more specifically, a child of the uprooted poor returning to take revenge on the more affluent residents for whom they were displaced.

Figure 39 *Audition*

In *Audition*, Asami waits for Aoyami's call (left). In the backgroud, a twitching burlap sack contains one of her mutilated victims. On the right, Asami begins to dismember Aoyami, believing him to have broken his promise to commit to her unconditionally.

Figure 40 *Dream Home*

In *Dream Home*, Lai-sheung's motivations for owning property stem from her childhood, having been brought up in poverty and displaced from her neighbourhood. In a flashback sequence, a young Lai-sheung is shown communicating with a neigbourhood friend through a tin can telephone (left). Back in the present day, Lai-sheung is required to cold-call customers as just one of the jobs that she works in order to afford to live in the city (right).

Figure 41 *Dumplings* and *Lady Vengeance*

The camera focuses on Mei's chopping hand and the cleaver in *Dumplings* (left). In *Lady Vengeance*, Geum-ja chops off her own finger as an offering to the parents of the murdered child, despite being innocent of the crime (right).

Although the drastic measures that she takes are undoubtedly beyond reasonable causality, Lai-sheung's formative years and her socioeconomic conditions are clear factors that contribute towards the proceeding events that ultimately define her as monstrous. Further evidence is visible in the scene where Lai-sheung first views the apartment from the inside. Having been discouraged from buying the property by the estate agent because it appears beyond her price range, Lai-sheung gazes forlornly through the window; the camera on the other side captures both Lai-sheung's disconsolate look and the reflection of the imposing city landscape, both shots superimposed within the frame of the window to indicate her ties to the city and the financial bind that it places upon her.

In *Dumplings*, the former mainland surgeon, occasional practicing illegal abortionist, and producer of the rejuvenating, sought-after dumplings (made with the aborted foeti) Aunt Mei (Bai Ling) is also, to some extent a product of her environment. Like Lai-sheung, she lives in a run-down tenement apartment in a poverty-stricken neighbourhood of Hong Kong. Mei primarily makes a living by selling her dumplings to high-end clients (always female) who wish to rejuvenate and regain their youthful looks. As the next section expands upon, Mei's origins in mainland China and the political and social climate in which she lives contribute to the circumstances that give birth to this monstrous persona, as well as her attitude toward her own status.[221] Vivian P.Y. Lee considers Mei a "social subversive" other, whose "interactions with female clients also reveal a deep-seated frustration and disillusionment with the sexist, chauvinistic social institution in which women are no more than men's sexual spoils" (2009, p.195). In other words, Lee describes a woman reacting against her oppressive environment. Mei's main client throughout the film is Mrs. Li (Miriam Yeung), a former actress who wishes to regain her good looks to once more get the attention of her philandering husband, who is having an affair with his masseuse, a younger woman in her early twenties. Frequent references are made to the body, in the sense that Mei relates it to being an object of desire and separate from concepts such as age and love (for example, she tells Mrs. Li that all men desire the body of a twenty-year old).[222] Furthermore, the body is shown in its

---

[221] For instance, China's one-child policy recurs during the film. It is both an initial contributory factor for Mei's move to Hong Kong, as well as a means of providing opportunity to obtain the foeti via black market abortions.

[222] Mei, in a sense, proves this theory of a disconnected body later in the film when she has sex with Mr. Li. Her body has retained the shape, appearance, and firmness of an early- to mid-thirties woman because of the effect of eating her own dumplings. Mei is, in fact, somewhere in her mid-sixties. Mr. Li discovers this but continues his aggressive love-making, demonstrating his desire for the body as separate to the concept of age.

component parts, and like the individual tales that comprise Geum-ja in *Lady Vengeance*, the close-up shots of Mei's arm and hand, clutching a cleaver and chopping down on foeti-filled dumplings provides a cinematic synecdoche for her overall monstrosity.

For each female protagonist discussed above, monstrosity is constructed in many forms. In the case of Asami or Geum-ja, their monstrous acts are mostly conceived through the piecing together of narrative outside of their agency. For Asami, it is the dissolution of narrative perspective that both constructs and calls into question the very nature of actions, while Geum-ja has several people shaping the overall context of her story, intentions, and motivations. Geum-ja as the cold, deadly killer is also a creation of her circumstance, in much the same way that Lai-sheung in *Dream Home* is constricted by the socio-economic conditions of contemporary Hong Kong. Socio-economic status is inextricably tied to geo-political considerations in *Dumplings*, and Mei's practices and morality are inescapable from those surroundings. Her skills and status are also incongruous, and this also contributes to her role in a black market driven by both vanity and necessity and is very much dependent on the presence of borders in the film, which I shall discuss in more detail in the next part. The titular Nang (Inthira Charoenpura) of *Nang Nak* is yet to feature in this chapter, though her monstrosity, like Mei's (and the others), also hinges on the function of borders in the film.

10.2 Border Crossing and Liminal Space

Throughout the thesis, the theme of borders (and collapse/dissolution thereof) has frequently returned. This concept is essential to understanding Kristeva's abjection and its significance to contemporary Asian horror cinema. It is the disintegration of established dividing lines marking out ideological and symbolic realms that facilitates abjection in the resulting liminal space. It is an attempt to redraw these lines to banish the abject that takes place in purification rituals. Such utilisation of borders can also construct the monstrous-feminine and define her actions accordingly.

10.2.1 Life is Nothing Much to Lose; It's Just So Lonely Here Without You

In *Nang Nak*, borders are initially created by separation. Set in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Nak's husband, Mak (Winai Kaributr), is conscripted to war, thus parting him from his teenage bride. While Mak is away, Nak gives birth to their first child,

but both mother and baby die from complications shortly afterwards. When a wounded Mak returns home, he resumes his life with wife and child, unaware that they are ghosts. The local villagers attempt to warn him; however, Nak convinces Mak that the neighbours are merely spreading false rumours out of an unwarranted hatred that they developed for her while he was away at war. Mak believes his wife and, consequently, shuns his former friends. Those who attempt to warn Mak are also killed during the night by Nak, and he eventually realises the truth. Subsequently, Mak and the villagers turn to spiritualistic practices to try to send Nak to the netherworld with the other dead souls, ultimately succeeding when a Buddhist monk frees her spirit from its corporeal form (the deceased and buried body) and contains it within a brooch.

The film presents Nak as monstrous in two ways: first, she defies even the most elemental of borders: that which separates life and death; second, as will be discussed in the next part of the chapter, with regard to her function as a mother who will not give up her child. In relation to her refusal to adhere to commonplace borders, Nak occupies and traverses liminal space.[223] She is able to infiltrate other homes and poses a threat to the families of Mak's friends, particularly those who try to warn Mak, thus attempting to redraw the borders by forcing a second separation between the two lovers. Mak first realises that the other villagers are telling the truth when, having crawled beneath the space underneath the floorboards of their hut (an area that Nak had hitherto discouraged him from entering), he unearths a corpse. Following this, he witnesses Nak's hand extended below the gaps in the floorboards at an impossible angle to retrieve an item that she has dropped. When the villagers turn to the Buddhist monk, known as The High Dignitary, he organises the villagers to sit round Mak and chant a spiritualistic ritual. The camera circles round them in a 360-degree shot, but Nak appears from overhead, with a bird's eye angle initially focusing on one of the frightened participants pointing at "ghost Nak." The High Dignitary pleads with Nak to begone, claiming that she must give up human life in an attempt to redraw those boundaries.[224] Nak still refuses, and it is only another ritual of separating her corporeal body (her corpse) from her spirit that can redraw these lines. Nak, therefore, not only defies the borders of life and death but also patriarchal values and belief

---

[223] *Dream Home* also depicts Lai-sheung operating in the spaces outside of patriarchal surveillance. In an early scene, a security guard in charge of monitoring a range of closed-circuit television cameras is seen asleep at his post. While the multitude of television screens show nothing out of the ordinary, Lai-sheung sneaks up behind the guard and garrottes him.

[224] Earlier, when the villagers attempt to burn down Nak's house, one of them tells her that "ghosts must be with ghosts."

systems – here, Buddhism, which Adam Knee points out is the "'official' version of reality" in the film (2005, pp.144-145). Like Geum-ja in *Lady Vengeance*, Nak acquires contradictory traits, which Katarzyna Ancuta describes as both "a malignant spirit and an eternally obedient wife" (2011, p.134). However, it is Nak's ability to cross, collapse, and conflate the borders between those two different (though not opposing) traits (as well as between two different worlds: corporeal and spiritual) that positions her as a monstrous threat to established order.

In *Dumplings*, the opening scene depicts a more literal crossing of borders. Returning home to Hong Kong from China, Mei passes through the border control section of the airport, placing a food container through a scanner (the foeti concealed in the bottom pot beneath the noodle dish). Going undetected, Mei immediately demonstrates her traits as a monstrous-feminine character; although not a ghost or spirit like Nak, she can easily pass through constructed borders all the while concealing her monstrous crime. Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh and Neda Hei-Tung Ng (2009) hint at the concept of the abject border throughout their paper, pointing to the relationship between China and Hong Kong and Western versus Eastern medicinal practices, as well as the aborted foeti, for evidence of such a concept.[225] Mei's frequent crossing of the geo-political borders also points to how she is defined on either side of the dividing line. Categorising herself as a mainlander (at one points she uses the phrase "we mainlanders" to Mrs. Li), Mei was once respected as a talented surgeon; back in Hong Kong, where she now resides, Mei is unable to practice legally so survives by selling her dumplings and performing black market abortions.[226] When explaining this to Mrs. Li, her client tries to morally justify Mei's position (one of many times that the flexibility of the morality border is brought into play) by stating that she once saved lives, although Mei prefers to think of this as "purifying" them. However, when Mei crosses the international borders, she is doing so to obtain the aborted foeti from her old place of work (an abortion clinic in Shenzen).

In addition to contributing to the argument that Mei's actions are dictated by her circumstances in that her change in status forces this mode of operating, there is also further scope to discuss borders and dividing lines. The line that divides morality from

---

[225] Lee also points out that Mei is both a "Western-trained surgeon" and "a practitioner of forbidden ancient crafts" (2009, p.199).
[226] Unlike *The Eye*, where the sprawling metropolis of Hong Kong is contrasted against the rural space of Thailand, Mei's residential area is run down, dilapidated, and the tenants live in squalor.

immorality is extremely malleable and constantly shifting throughout *Dumplings*. Mrs. Li is at first horrified when she catches a glimpse of Mei putting her secret ingredient in the dumplings; however, her morals become more compromised throughout the film in line with her desire to reap the benefits of the dumplings, with her moral compass changing direction the more she sees the rejuvenating effects that they have on her. By the end of the film, Mrs. Li appears to be going into business for herself. She is seen calmly chatting with her husband's now-pregnant mistress, explaining that she intends to abort the foetus and purchase it from her. She retains the same calm demeanour when explaining to the abortion practitioner the precise conditions under which he must abort the foetus (following Mei's instructions for retaining the purity and potency). The last scene of the film is a close-up of Mrs. Li's hand bringing down a cleaver on to the now-acquired ingredient, thus cinematically linking her with Mei and demonstrating how she herself has become monstrous.[227] Furthermore, when Mr. Li goes to Mei's home to confront her, she justifies her practices, which are essentially cannibalistic, as having roots in ancient and historical (and often necessary, desired, and approved) practices, as well as being acceptable in traditional medicinal recipes. She also evokes the Japan-China war and national famines, in addition to stating that cannibalism occurs in *Water Margin*,[228] as justification for her actions. In other words, Mei evokes archaic text and practice to rationalise her abject operations and perspective, a stance which, Lee asserts, "embodies the subversive force that disrupts the social and *natural* order of life and death [and] morality and immorality" (2009, p.199).

The line between moral and immoral and the concept of good versus evil is also explored in *Lady Vengeance*. In the section above, I discussed how Geum-ja's portrayal as a monster precedes and fosters subsequent monstrous acts. In an early scene depicting Geum-ja's stint in prison, she talks of invoking an angel from within her, which is believed to have led her to become an exemplary prisoner, thus assuring her release.[229] However, the pieced-together testimony from other inmates reveals that this angelic persona was

---

[227] Monstrosity is also linked to the female and semiotic through superstitious belief, as it is in many other films in the cycle. Throughout *Dumplings*, the concept of a first-born being the most nutritious and valuable is believed without question, while in contradiction the idea of eating a cursed child (such as the one Mei aborts from a fifteen-year-old girl impregnated by her own "monstrous" father) as having detrimental effect is born out when Mrs. Li comes out in a rash and notices that her skin smells of fish.

[228] Considered one of the four great novels of ancient Chinese literature (generally attributed to Shi Nai'an, circa fourteenth century).

[229] Upon release, Geum-ja also rejects the offering of tofu from the local church group, a white substance meant to be emblematic of the released prisoner's clean slate and new life.

contrived with release as the end goal in mind; furthermore, it was a means to achieving another end, her revenge against the real child killer, Mr. Baek (Choi Min-sik). Again, Geum-ja demonstrates how easily such lines can be crossed and infiltrated. In *Audition*, Asami straddles the border between life and death. Being both an abject figure and a site of projected abjection, she operates as a monstrous-feminine figure within the symbolic realm (specifically in the latter half of the film). In her audition application essay, which Aoyama finds captivating and is instinctively drawn toward, she describes how an injury curtailed her ballet career. Ballet was the most important thing in Asami's life, and she explains that being without it is "in a sense . . . similar to accepting death." It also another example of a form of artistic expression being intrinsically tied to the feminine and semiotic, particularly in one who is conveyed as monstrous. Without her connection to the semiotic via ballet, Asami has no apparent symbolic status; therefore, to give it up is to accept her own subjective annihilation. Throughout all the films discussed in this chapter, it is evident that the collapse of borders and, more specifically, the ability to manipulate the borders by the lead female character contributes toward their portrayal as monstrous-feminines, one which evokes the abject and the semiotic and thus paints them as a threat to established order.

10.3 The Mother in the Monstrous-Feminine

Another inescapable feature of the monstrous-feminine and her construction in film is her association with motherhood and the maternal. In Chapter II, I discussed the importance of the maternal to Kristeva's abjection. It is an essential addition to her revised model of psychosexual development, but even before *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva states in *Revolution in Poetic Language* that the mother's body "mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*" (1984, p.95). The mother as semiotic is what poses the threat to the symbolic order, for it is both within and outside of its control, its boundaries. Kristeva continues in *Powers of Horror*: "one sees everywhere the importance, both social and symbolic, of women and particularly the mother" (1982, p.70). Published in the same year as Creed's *Monstrous-Feminine* but taking a different tack, Marie-Hélène Huit's *Monstrous Imagination* also traces back the representation and conflation of the feminine and the monster, particularly with regard to her maternal functions. Although reducing the references to Kristeva's abjection to a single end note, Huit explores similar themes to Kristeva and Creed: for

instance, stating that the "nature of sexual difference is monstrous" (1993, p.88). Huit's main line of argument is that, historically, the birthing of a monster was inextricably rooted in the maternal imagination, which contributed to the erasure of paternity and pronounced the dangers of the female imagination (p.1). Huit further connects the monstrous to the feminine by observing that "the monster is truly that which resembles *what is not* his father" (p.35) and concluding with the statement that "the monster … is nothing more than a sign of *disorder* in a system" (p.47). While Huit's text does not necessarily contribute further to abjection theory (or its representation in cinema), it does provide an interesting parallel that demonstrates further examples of the connection between the feminine, the maternal, and the monster as universally consistent and persistent, albeit as a representation that has necessitated challenge. It is this inherent connection to motherhood, and what it represents within the symbolic realm, that both Kristeva and Creed identify as a threat to symbolic systems. It is, therefore, a crucial component of the monstrous-feminine and the threat that she specifically represents in cinema.

10.3.1 And You Ran Back to Ma, Which Set the Pace for the Rest of Your Days

 Though the monstrous-feminine and the mother are often innately invoked, *Audition* commences with the elimination of the biological mother in a flashback scene, shot mostly from a bird's eye angle, narrating her death through the memory of her surviving husband and son. When the scene is then juxtaposed with the son encouraging his father to find a new wife (eventually leading to the fatal auditions), it is implied that Asami is also in line to become a surrogate or substitute mother. This role for her is often overlooked in analyses of the film because of her multiple identities as abandoned and abused daughter, failed ballet dancer, aspiring actress, prospective wife, and as a proponent of violence and destruction against the family unit.[230] The role as stepmother also initially appears superfluous, as the child, Shigehiko, has already passed into the symbolic. However, the climactic scene that shows Shigehiko throwing Asami down the stairs is visible as a

---

[230] Neither Lai-sheung in *Dream Home* nor Mei in *Dumplings* are mothers; however, Lai-sheung becomes literally marked by the monstrousness of murdering a pregnant woman – later the unborn foeti is considered a "plus one" in addition to the confirmed eleven murders at the conclusion of Lai-sheung's killing spree. Mei's association with the maternal is her connection to abortions and the procurement of foeti to serve in her dumplings. In both cases, she denies the foeti progression beyond what would be a semiotic state in Kristeva's model of psychosexual development, while serving them up to her clients evokes associations of cannibalism and absorbing life to gain the appearance of youth.

metaphor of the child re-enacting the necessary rejection of the mother figure, after the original separation between mother and child (as shown in the opening flashback scene) was painful and abrupt. In other words, Shigehiko's actions attempt to reassert some sense of symbolic order in the wake of the physical destruction and cinematographic deconstruction that has descended during the second half of the film. The hitherto rendering of Asami as a monstrous threat to patriarchy provides Shigehiko with the necessary motive to render her paralysed. The threat to the symbolic order is encountered and removed, thus thrusting the film's narrative into an ostensibly conservative conclusion. Additionally, the twitching sack, first shown when Asami is sitting by the phone in her apartment, functions like an external womb, which later enacts a monstrous birth and doubles the signification of Asami as an abject monstrous-feminine and surrogate mother.[231] Creed asserts that "[i]n the horror film the ancient connection drawn between woman, womb and the monstrous is frequently invoked" (1993, p.43). Substitute wombs, Creed continues, reflect the presence of abjection in horror cinema:

> Horror films that depict monstrous births play on the inside/outside distinction in order to point to the inherently monstrous nature of the womb as well as the impossibility of ever completely banishing the abject from the human domain. … The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces. (p.49)

The disfigured body that emerges from the womb-like sack is both fully-formed (he is an adult subject) and partially-formed (he lacks certain mutilated body parts); furthermore, his severed tongue denies him the meaningful language of a speaking symbolic subject. Asami's status as the monstrous-feminine is therefore assured through her monstrous acts (murder and mutilation) and her role as a monstrous mother, begetting (visibly, at least) a monstrous body.

In *Nang Nak*, it is Nak's role as an abject and protecting mother that assures her monstrousness, equally alongside her spiritual abilities to cross borders and boundaries. At frequent points throughout the film, Nak is shown cradling her (usually swathed) child, although it clear to all but Mak (diegetically and extra-diegetically) that baby Dang did not survive long after being born, if at all. The representation of the abject mother is

---

[231] The mutilated body that crawls from the sack in the fantasy/dream sequence later is missing an ear, a tongue, and three fingers, connecting Asami with the murder at the bar.

established and discussed in Chapter V; here, Nak's unbreakable bond with her child is both abject and semiotic in that, like Yoshimi in *Dark Water*, she will not give up her connection to Dang and also because the child will remain always-already and forever semiotic, having passed away before being able to break that bond with the mother. Therefore, Nak and Dang represent the abject semiotic realm calling to Mak, the sway of abjection that threatens to eradicate symbolic subjectivity; the villagers, spiritualists, and the High Dignitary all represent the established form of symbolic order who enact a series of (religious) purification rituals to banish her presence and redraw the boundaries between life and death, however superstitious these rituals may seem.

In Creed's study of horror cinema through Kristeva, she observes that "Kristeva traces the representation of the birthing woman as unclean back to the representation of impurity in the Bible. Leviticus draws a parallel between the unclean maternal body and the decaying body. The two are associated through childbirth" (1993, p.47). Mak, and her specific persona as a mother, is also conflated with monstrousness via death, disease, and decay (all prime tenets and markers of abjection) through a series of cross-cutting sequences. During the war, Mak suffers a near-fatal chest wound and requires intensive care at a village far from his home; however, his friend Prig is killed, which traumatises Mak emotionally as much as he is damaged physically. While recovering from his injury, Mak has a fever dream about his fallen comrade which is spliced with imagery of blood, wounds, and corpses. At the same time, Nak goes into labour after collapsing on a muddied open plain on her way home from seeing a spiritualist – the terrain in the shot and framing of subsequent shots visibly links the wounded soldier with Nak's childbirth, further connected by the technique of cross-cutting. Both Mak and Nak are independently surrounded by villagers lending medical support of the traditional, ritualistic variety, while calling out for one another; yet, while Mak barely survives his ordeal, Nak and her child do not. This sets the tone for the remainder of the film: Nak's monstrous motherhood is punished, and she returns as an abject spirit to try and entice Mak to join the revenants of his family in her realm, with Mak having teetered at the border of life and death once before.

Figure 42 *Nang Nak*

Nang Nak: Ghost Nak appears from above as the villagers perform an incantation to ward off her spirit (left). The effective purging ritual involves the exhuming of Nak's corporeal remains (right). The corpse, in abjection, is the ultimate of all borders: death infecting life.

Figure 43 *Dumplings*

Dumplings: Mei obtains the foeti for her rejuvinating dumplings from an abortion clinic in Shenzen on the mainland (left). When she carries the illicit ingredients through customs (the geopolitical borders of China and Hong Kong) the camera again provides a truncated close-up shot of Mei's hand (centre). The alternative to procuring the foeti from across the border is for Mei to perform black market abortions (right).

Figure 44 *Nang Nak*

In *Nang Nak*, Nak's labour (left) is contrasted with Mak's fever dream (right) by means of cross-cutting. Nak dies in labour; Mak survives his ordeal.

Geum-ja in *Lady Vengeance* is also a biological mother, and it is the notion of a mother committing such an atrocious and horrific crime that both shocks and fascinates the media. However, her motherhood (and a concomitant feeling of maternal duty) is key to her confession to the crime, which she did not commit, thus instrumental to the way that she is turned into a monster. Later in the film, it is revealed that Geum-ja only confessed because Mr. Baek was holding her young daughter hostage and had threatened to murder her if she did not take the blame for his crime. While serving her sentence, Geum-ja's daughter was adopted by a family in Australia, which Geum-ja discovers surreptitiously after being released, deciding to fly to Australia to reconnect with her daughter (now rechristened as Jenny). Jenny (Kwon Yea-young) is initially sceptical about trusting a mother whom she feels had abandoned her, but curiosity of this new, mysterious figure, along with her Korean heritage, soon turns her mind and she threatens to kill herself if Geum-ja does not take her back to Korea. The distraught adoptive parents agree, although it seems to have been against Geum-ja's initial wishes. Here, a series of barriers and obstacles become prominent in the film that modify Geum-ja's story of monstrosity and vengeance into a tale inextricable from her motherhood.

The most salient of these examples is the language barrier that exists between the two. Jenny has grown up speaking English from a very early age and speaks no Korean.[232] This obstacle forces the two to try to bond at a very basic level, including Jenny asking what the Korean for "mother" is and Geum-ja responding with her own name (thus cementing herself as *the* mother). However, the translation impediments are not overcome, and eventually – as per a prior condition of her travel overseas – Jenny's adoptive mother and father come to collect her. The narrator is now required to step in to aid communication between Geum-ja and Jenny. This sequence is framed as Geum-ja traversing through her memories alongside images of their present-day interactions, as the narrator mediates their emotions that, among other things, addresses the issues of abandonment and neglect. The film concludes with a scene that focuses on Geum-ja's motherhood. She is standing outside on a blanket of snow as snowfall fills the air. She feeds Jenny from a white-iced cake and the two embrace, thus showing some connection to the early scene of the rejected tofu, which establishes the imagery and symbolism of purity

---

[232] This hindrance is also evoked when Jenny sees a vision of Won-ho while staying with her biological mother. Unfazed by the appearance of a ghost, Jenny becomes resigned that he does not speak English and goes back to sleep. This scene demonstrates a self-awareness of the genre, particularly when the narrator chimes in that Geum-ja may be distraught if she was privy to this information.

connoted in the *mise-en-scène*. Geum-ja, though having found no redemption for herself (as confirmed by the narrator), attempts to purify the daughter that she will shortly relinquish to the resumption of her adoptive symbolic life back in Australia. Though both clearly fitting the remit of the monstrous-feminine, these actions would be contradictory to Nak's; however, while Geum-ja does relinquish the maternal bond and escape any form of onscreen punishment (such as, for instance, the fatality retrospectively doled out to Reiko in *Ringu 2*), she equally does not receive any true reward for her actions (again, the spectator is reminded of her finding no redemption). Her vengeance is to hand a captive Mr. Baek over to the parents of the murdered children,[233] who eventually commit a collective act of mutilation and murder. Geum-ja's monstrosity is constructed and created by many components external to her agency; her role as an avenging angel is to facilitate the deconstruction of the real monster through multiple vengeance-seeking sources.

10.4 Deconstructing the Monster: Mutilation, Dismemberment, and Bodily Excess

 In the first section of this chapter, I considered how the figure of the monstrous-feminine is constructed from numerous component parts. External narration, focus on particular body parts, and socioeconomic or socio-political environments all play a part in how this figure is represented on screen. In line with Creed's thinking, the construction of the monstrous-feminine positions her as a threat to patriarchal structures; in Creed's roundabout conclusion that all horror films are conservative in ideology, it is ultimately her containment that redraws the boundaries. An interesting observation that can be made throughout the entire analysis of contemporary Asian horror cinema is that once such a monster is created, she does begin to hack away at the established rules, laws, and order of the symbolic. Her ultimate containment is, of course, at stake in determining the ideological value(s) of the film(s), but often it is more than a simple case of whether or not the lines are redrawn and, rather, one of the impact and damage created when all borders have collapsed and the threat of abjection is present. One way to consider the impact of the

---

[233] After capturing and binding Mr. Baek, she discovers a series of trinkets attached to his mobile phone alongside the murdered child Won-ho's prized marble, which implicates him in several child murders (eventually, the videotape evidence is also unearthed). An alarm on Mr. Baek's mobile phone then goes off with the sound of a child's voice saying, "wake up, teacher." Along with the collection of toys and other items, this adds an uncanny childishness to the predatory Mr. Baek and somewhat infantilises him, as he cuts a pathetic figure in the face of his imminent torture and death. Therefore, it is perhaps fitting that as a child-murderer he is killed while connoting an air of childishness; likewise, Geum-ja, now a reputed child killer facilitates the murder of one.

monstrous-feminine in this area of cinema is to look at the signs of her deconstruction within the films.

10.4.1 I Would Happily Lose Both of My Legs, If It Meant You Could be Free

At the end of the previous section, I referred to the pact of grieving parents who mutilate and murder Mr. Baek, as facilitated by Geum-ja, in *Lady Vengeance*. The irony is that while it takes numerous sources outside of her agency to construct Geum-ja as monstrous in the text, it is Geum-ja the monster whose agency orchestrates the dissection and physical deconstruction of Mr. Baek. Earlier on, the notion of good versus evil is discussed in the film, and Geum-ja ends up with contrasting nicknames of "kind-hearted" and "witch"; however, she goes to specific measures to deconstruct the former of those personas. When asked why she has started to wear blood-red eye shadow after her release from prison, Geum-ja responds, "because I don't want to look kind-hearted." In other words, Geum-ja intends to become the monster that her circumstances have dictated that she is. Moreover, if Geum-ja is composed of individual fragments that contribute to her overall monstrosity, then Mr. Baek is equally identified as the real culprit through a collection of other component parts (namely the children's trinkets that he has kept on a key chain attached to his mobile phone, but also in the individual video tapes that capture the torture and murder of his young victims). It perhaps seems fitting, then, that Mr. Baek is physically reduced to component parts as punishment.

The disassembling of the female also takes a more physical sense in the film. After her release, Geum-ja visits the parents of Won-ho and throws herself prostrate on their mercy. To demonstrate her sincere remorse, Geum-ja chops off one of her own fingers. In tracing the history of the monster in cultural representation, Huet observes that "[s]ome monsters lacked an essential part of the body, others claimed an extra member" (1993, p.1). Such an act of self-mutilation serves as another mark of her monstrosity, despite (again) being innocent of the crime. Mutilation is also prevalent in several of the other films analysed in this chapter, and its presence shows not only how the monstrous-feminine is marked but also how she makes her mark as a disruptive and destructive force, attacking symbolic values and exposing ideological structures. In *Audition*, dismemberment and lack becomes synonymous with Asami's revenge (or the projection of Asami's revenge) throughout the latter half of the film. In addition to cutting off Aoyama's feet with piano wire toward the end of the film, Asami is heavily linked with the murder at

the bar through elements of mutilation pertinent to the crime scene; here, however, the mutilation is relayed in terms of excess – the police found extra fingers, an ear, and a tongue – and her former ballet teacher is confined to a wheelchair and wears prosthetic feet. When the film cuts to the mutilated man crawling out of the sack, he is lacking several of these component parts of his body, and his lack ties in to the excessive body parts of the other scenes, as well as the consumption of Asami's excess bodily waste (he greedily consumes Asami's vomit from a dog bowl). The result is that the captured man is confined and (mis)treated like an animal; his lack of a tongue, and therefore the ability to offer recognisable communication, renders him without any discernible symbolic subjectivity.

Asami herself is also marked by the burns and scars on her legs, which she claims signify her as a victim of abuse and torture. Like Geum-ja and Asami, Lai-sheung of *Dream Home* also receives a "mark of monstrosity" during her killing spree. In the process of invading a family home in her desired residential neighbourhood, Lai-sheung chases down a pregnant woman into a shower; however, the woman procures a knife and offers resistance to Lai-sheung's attack, managing to inflict a large cut in her left cheek that remains as a permanent and visible scar. This scene renders Lai-sheung as particularly monstrous because she is now marked *by* the mother; furthermore, the mother's symbolic function as a biological necessity is under attack, though it is interesting that the unborn, pre-symbolic foetus is only considered as a "plus-one" or extra death in the final count.[234]

Mutilation, dismemberment, and bodily excess continues throughout *Dream Home*. During the scene in the partying flat, Lai-sheung murders several young people intoxicated on drugs and alcohol, as well as their drug dealer. She arrives while the male partiers are about to engage in sexual acts with the naked and near-unconscious females. Setting the scene is important here because Lai-sheung's murderous spree includes the removal of the intestines of the one of the male partygoers as well as the severing of another's penis. This can be interpreted in multiple ways: first, it is a further example of the monstrous-feminine engaging in acts of mutilation and deconstruction; second, though perhaps inadvertently in the narrative, it serves as an act of revenge on the males who are in the process of committing rape, thus in some ways likening Lai-sheung, however briefly, to the

---

[234] It is also interesting that in *Dumplings*, the procurement, dissection, and consumption of unborn foeti is relayed as cannibalism, which verbally, at least, shifts the status of the unborn to that of the human.

projection of Asami in *Audition*;[235] third, the proximity of violence, sex, mutilation, death, and excess bodily parts and fluids to one another connects them in a network of abject elements that not only ties the presence of abjection to the cycle of films and the character of the monstrous-feminine, but which also shows the monstrous-feminine's reduction to component parts, as well as her ability to dismantle others. To elaborate, Lai-sheung vomits in the sink after killing the family earlier in the films; during the party murder sequence, one of the drugged and drunken girls also vomits as a cause and sign of excess, thus linking bodily expulsion in the film to the feminine, one of whom is already designated as an abject figure. A further crossing between the films can then be established with the visual similarities to Asami, an abject monstrous-feminine figure, vomiting in the dog bowl. Conversely, the dismemberment and mutilation carried out by Lai-sheung and Asami in their respective films, as well as the killing of Mr. Baek organised by Geum-ja in *Lady Vengeance*, is primarily enacted upon representatives of the symbolic (the patriarchy that mistreats and objectifies women in *Audition*, the state educator in *Lady Vengeance*, and both potential rapists and possessor of the gaze in *Dream Home*). Furthermore, Lai-sheung kills both police officers who turn up at the partying flat to investigate a noise complaint. In the process of one of the murders, she cuts the younger officer's face, leaving behind a large gash that mirrors her own scar; in other words, she is transferring her mark of monstrosity onto symbolic authority before eliminating their presence.

---

[235] Lai-sheung does, however, proceed to murder the two girls, including impaling one of them through the face with a wooden bed post. This act is, in part at least, a form of self-preservation, for one of the girls manages to twice lash out at Lai-sheung, including piercing her ankle tendons with Lai-sheung's own knife.

Figure 45 *Lady Vengeance*

In *Lady Vengeance*, Geum-ja attempts to converse with her biological daughter, but the language barrier means that a narrator is required to mediate.

Figure 46 *Lady Vengeance*

Any reunification between mother and daughter is only fleeting in *Lady Vengeance*, for Jenny must return to her adoptive parents in Australia. The narrator tells us that Geum-ja received no redemption from her revenge on Mr. Baek.

Figure 47 *Audition* and *Dream Home*

The markings of the monstrous-feminine: Asami's scarred legs in *Audition* (left) and Lai-sheung's scarred face in *Dream Home* (right).

10.5 Conclusion: I Never Wanted to Kill, I am Not Naturally Evil

Throughout this chapter, I have examined the presence of the monstrous-feminine in several examples of contemporary Asian horror cinema and demonstrated the ways in which she is constructed and dismantled in these texts. Her construction in the text can be through external narration or from multiple view-points (Geum-ja) or even through the cinematography (Asami). In many ways, all the female characters (or monstrous-feminine*s*) represented in these films are products of an environment in which they are forced to live. For instance, poverty, socio-economic, and socio-political conditions to a large extent dictate how both Lai-sheung and Mei are forced to act respectively in *Dream Home* and *Dumplings*. Meanwhile, Geum-ja has monstrosity forced upon her erroneously in *Lady Vengeance*, yet the resulting circumstances foster the subsequent monstrous acts. Furthermore, the narrative structures of *Lady Vengeance* and, especially, *Audition*, create an air of unreliability concerning the validity of the monstrous acts. The latter half of *Audition* is widely considered to be a fantastical projection of guilt and violence, which draws attention to the whole element of constructed monstrosity that renders it as just that, a construction, in much the same way as the presence of abjection and abject elements draws attention to the frailty of the borders and laws that prop up symbolic systems.[236] Moreover, in films such as *Lady Vengeance* and *Audition*, the representation of the semiotic realm on screen supports readings that explore the tensions between the semiotic and symbolic where abjection arises,[237] as well as demonstrating how the monstrous-feminine can adopt multiple personas (which itself poses as problematic for the symbolic in that she cannot be tied down or categorised for elimination or banishment quite so readily). The abrupt shifts in form in both *Audition* and *Lady Vengeance* subsequently challenge the spectator to question the validity of the screen image, in that a narrative resolution is either missing or unreliable; in turn, this lack of closure throws into doubt any reassertion of diegetic symbolic borders or dividing lines in terms of abjection banishment, thereby indicating more radical elements to the texts serving to undermine the notion of widespread conservative conclusions within the genre.

---

[236] Nevertheless, an interesting counter-argument remains. Like with *A Tale of Two Sisters*, which is bookended by a framing device which renders the bulk of the events unreliable, the fact that the gratuitous violence is most prominent within *Audition* leaves open the possibility that it takes precedence in the received understanding of the film.

[237] Similar readings for sections of films have been put forward in the analysis of *Ringu*, *Uzumaki*, *The Eye*, and others.

The construction of the monstrous-feminine can also be examined alongside two other vital components of abjection criticism: the concept of the border, and the role of the mother/maternal figure. Motherhood is key to abjection and monstrosity in *Nang Nak* and *Lady Vengeance*. Nak's entire monstrous persona is constructed on the basis that she is an abject mother who crosses and dissolves all established socio-symbolic borders, while Geum-ja's legal but incorrect conviction as a murderer stems from her protection of her child. In *Nang Nak*, Nak can traverse the borders between life and death, which is perhaps the most crucial dividing line within hers or any society. Her refusal to give up her child or her place in the family positions her as abject, while her child is also an abject semiotic being because he can never take up his place in the symbolic; therefore, by crossing the border and attempting to continue family life, she is posing a threat to the established systems and practices. Furthermore, Nak uses her spiritualistic border-crossing abilities to infiltrate and destroy other families in her community as a means to protect herself and conceal her deception. Asami also infiltrates a family, potentially supplanting the dead mother as prospective stepmother. Again, she becomes an agent of chaos and destruction within these systems. Moreover, while also not a biological mother, Mei's procurement of foeti by way of abortions contradicts the life-giving and nurturing role expected of a maternal figure; simultaneously, she crosses geo-political borders to import her secret ingredient.

Earlier on in the chapter, I pondered the questions, for what purpose(s) is the monstrous-feminine created, and who by? I initially touched on the point that they are created within and by the text but deferred further resolution until after the case studies. Creed reminds us that the monstrous-feminine is the woman-as-monster in horror film, not the passive victim, and she is defined and constructed through and by her sexuality (sexual difference). She appears in many guises in all forms of human society and poses a threat to the stability of social, symbolic, and ideological systems, which Creed ties into Kristeva writings on abjection. Furthermore, this section of thesis, over three chapters, argues that Kristeva's assertion that the arts is the prime site for abjection purification to take place is borne out in contemporary Asian horror cinema. If the film is the primary medium for acting out abjection, the high school and the family home, as discussed in the previous two chapters, are vital locations within the medium for setting out this practice. However, the high school and the family, while pivotal, are also be more conceptual in nature, for they represent ideological symbolic systems that function to preserve symbolic continuity: the

education system assists with the child's preparation into the adult symbolic, while the family represents the continuation of this system through the strictures and expectations placed upon each of its members, and how they are expected to function within society. Within these physical and conceptual counterparts in which abjection purification can take place, the monstrous-feminine is a both a physical and conceptual manifestation of the threat to such systems. She emerges from her dual position as a biological and sexual Other who is also necessary to the symbolic's continuation (this idea is particularly relevant when discussing the role of the mother). Her construction and subsequent threat can, theoretically, be contained and the boundaries be renewed and strengthened. This complies with Kristeva's general notion of abject purification and supports Creed's line of argument for a sweeping conservatism across horror cinema.

However, this selection of case studies proves that a full analysis of contemporary Asian horror film alongside Kristeva's abjection yields a more complex nexus of results than a simple declaration that all the films in the genre must be conservative in ideology. Moreover, the process of purification rituals, as described by Kristeva, can be (and has been) elaborated via readings through the narratives of abjection established earlier in the thesis. These readings are what illustrate the complexity inherent in these texts, thus determining such straight-forward readings as too simplistic. Across this selection of films, the monstrous-feminine is sometimes created as such through means external to her own agency;[238] however, once constituted within the text, she begins to dismember, mutilate, and generally cause disorder within systems (which thus positions her as abject). Furthermore, many of these female characters bear a mark to indicate their monstrosity: Asami's scarred legs or Lai-sheung's facial cut, for example. It is this level of destruction, or collateral damage (as I earlier refer to it), that renders its own mark on symbolic systems and thus cannot be overlooked in final reckoning. For instance, I note that *Audition* has an ostensibly conservative conclusion; however, the doubt cast over the unreliable narrative immediately shows that though the threat that Asami poses is ultimately contained, there is evidently an existing instability in the system already that is forced to create such a threat, yet it cannot be sustained within the realms of its own structures, hence the abrupt shift in cinematography when Asami begins her *Sturm und Drang* of violent revenge. The film represents Hal Foster's ultimate marker of abjection: the "symbolic order in crisis" (1996,

---

[238] A lack of agency also implies a lack of symbolic subjectivity; therefore, in instances where the monstrous-feminine is creating in such a way, she becomes always-already semiotic.

p.121). Moreover, it illustrates how Kristeva positions the gendered division of roles in societal cleansing ritualization, where the power between sexes is also separated:

> In societies where it occurs, ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women. The latter, apparently put in the position of passive objects, are none the less felt to be wily powers, 'baleful schemers' from whom rightful beneficiaries must protect themselves. (1982, p.70)

A fantasy of violence against the symbolic order is projected onto Asami's body to justify the containment of that threat (although its success is not only debatable given the widespread damage caused but is also questionable due to the disintegration of the established symbolic realm before any act of purification takes place). This analysis categorises the film alongside the likes of *Uzumaki*, which has a significantly starker outlook than a simplistic rendering of redrawn boundaries would entail. Finally, "[i]f we see Asami as a figure in the Japanese tradition of the female avenger," as Steffen Hantke asserts, "her capacity for violence and destruction is directed against Aoyami as a proponent of a reactionary ideology of the family" (2005, p.60). Hantke goes on to state that any "sense of ambivalence about this attack" could occur because the family is already seen as dysfunctional, or perhaps the patriarchal authority is always-already undermined, thus softening the blow against any of the film's radical elements (p.60).

Nang Nak may provide the closest presentation of Creed's assertions on horror film ideology. In this film, a purging ritual is eventually established, one which is religious and ritualistic in practice, and eventually sends Nak back into the spiritual dimension. However, there is essentially a lack of any purging or ritualistic elements in *Dumplings* and *Dream Home*. Mei continues to import, chop, and cook the foeti for her famed dumplings and suffers no repercussions on screen (nor is it even implied that any is forthcoming) when she feeds Mrs. Li a cursed foeti, which has physical implications (another mark of monstrosity), nor when the underage girl suffers serious side effects in public after the black-market abortion that procures the cursed foeti. The only confrontation of Mei's actions occurs when Mrs. Li's husband, like his wife shows initial disgust at the practice but is soon convinced (to the point where he has sex with Mei). In fact, the film's closure displays Mrs. Li as a visual double for Mei, who will continue the practice for the purposes of rejuvenation and vanity. The closest thing to a purification ritual in the film is the abortion procedure that Mei has taught Mrs. Li (and is framed in

terms of "purification" in the way that Mei justifies her surgical practices); here, the "purification" is only to ensure that the foeti retain the necessary properties to work in the manner intended. In *Dream Home*, Lai-sheung escapes any detection for her crimes and achieves the purchase of her dream home at an affordable price, while her list of victims includes a family (with expectant mother) and officers of the law, two types of agency associated with the symbolic. The only hint of any sort of comeuppance, or even irony, is the radio broadcast playing as the film fades out, which relays details of the declining subprime mortgage crisis that will have global repercussions on house prices and the housing market. Finally, in *Lady Vengeance*, the punishment and designation of monstrosity occurs ahead of Geum-ja's acts of murder and system disruption. Geum-ja is able to adopt a false persona while in prison to ensure an early release and subsequent assistance from her fellow inmates to gain vengeance against the real monster (a state educator). Geum-ja's threat is not so much contained, but nor is it rewarded. She does undertake a form of purification with her daughter at the end of the film, which in turn will result in her releasing the child back to her adoptive parents (abjecting/being abjected), although this is a form of catharsis for Geum-ja, who does not attain any satisfaction for the murderous revenge that she facilitates. In other words, banishment and containment is uneven and inconsistent throughout these films, and the threat created and unleashed through the construction of the abject monstrous-feminine can only demonstrate that a widespread conservative resolution is not applicable when reading Kristeva's abjection alongside contemporary Asian horror cinema.

Conclusion

> A language of abjection of which the writer is both subject and victim, witness and topple … [i]nto nothing more than the effervescence of passion and language we call style, where any ideology, thesis, interpretation, mania, collectivity, threat, or hope become drowned. … Music, rhythm, rigadoon, without end, for no reason. (Kristeva, 1983, p.206)

To conclude this thesis, I approach this chapter in two parts: the first revisits the aims and intentions of the thesis set out in Chapter I; the second part directly answers the research questions. Abjection, as mentioned earlier, is a notoriously slippery concept, and the application of the theory to literary and cultural texts has been fraught with inconsistencies and gaps, which in turn has evoked criticism about its widespread application and ideological impact. By structuring the chapter in this way, I will synthesize both methodology and conclusion, approach and analysis, demonstrating why my understanding of abjection theory, when applied through the model I have shaped as a result of that understanding, informs a sustainable method of theory application, and how it contributes to new and original knowledge in this field.

11.1: I Started Something: Revisiting the Aims and Intentions of this Thesis

Back in Chapter I (p.3), I stated the main target of this thesis: "[T]o construct and (re)define an interpretive theoretical framework through which to read contemporary Asian horror cinema by way of abjection." To achieve this, I first set out to provide a clear and definitive understanding of Kristeva's concept of the abject and abjection from which to proceed into a series of analysis chapters/case studies of films.

One of the first crucial observations I made about abjection theory was its relevance to and inseparability from some of Kristeva's earlier seminal works, which developed her approach to the theory in *Powers of Horror*. The development of the concepts of semiotic and symbolic, which germinate from Kristeva's re-worked model of psychosexual development, is crucial to Kristeva's writings on abjection. Kristeva's ideas resonate in both psychological and physical manifestations of numerous dividing lines that distinguish nature and culture, chaos and order, dependence and subjectivity, and maternal

and paternal, and are rooted in a critique of language systems. In turn, the dialectics between semiotic and symbolic have been essential to most of my readings throughout the thesis. Language, in other words, is an expression of social (symbolic) law, and is separable from poetic language (those deviations from symbolic grammar), which is semiotic and treated as remainder and waste from the signifying practices of social law. It is therefore *abjected*.

The introduction of the idea that all non-verbal signifying systems are semiotic in nature, yet at the same time are inextricably intertwined with the symbolic has also been crucial to developing my own treatise on abjection theory application with contemporary Asian horror cinema. Symbolic and semiotic realms are frequently expressed through dissenting, antithetical discourses in these films; nevertheless, they are inextricable from one another – two ends of a spectrum. Tensions exist, therefore, between these two domains. Moreover, in most leading models of psychosexual development, the symbolic is a "state" or "stage" that the subject progresses toward; in Kristeva, the (non-speaking, non-) subject becomes symbolic upon the acquisition of language, thus entering its world of intersubjectivity, which is equated to social law, order, and authority (of the father). Moreover, to pass to this (final) stage of subject development, the symbolic insists on abjecting that hitherto indistinguishable connection to the semiotic realm.

Here, two key themes of abjection important to this thesis arise: the concept of borders and boundaries, and the enactment of purging rituals. In Kristeva's theory, borders (such as the one between semiotic and symbolic erected after the former is socially excluded from the latter) are frequently constructed within the symbolic realm, but those borders are both collapsed *through* and give rise *to* abjection. In contemporary Asian horror cinema, a contrast between urban and rural locales is often evoked (for example, *Ringu* and *The Eye*) to convey both a spatial and temporal sense of past versus present, which in turn sets off another chain of juxtapositions, borders, and tensions.[239] The impingement of past upon present is usually indicated by supernatural presence and/or a curse that disrupts symbolic logic and threatens its inhabitants with subjective annihilation. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva refers to the corpse as the "border that has encroached upon everything" (1982, p.3). It is the result of too much expulsion (too much *abjection*) and

---

[239] Other examples that recur frequently in the films would include the juxtaposition of past and present (for instance, *Ju-On*), the opposition of symbolic logic to semiotic superstition, and the confliction or conflation between public and private space (see Chapter VIII).

propels one beyond the limit of the ultimate border: life and death. Without this border (and by extension, all such borders), Kristeva attests, one cannot continue to *be* (*ergo*, subjectivity is eradicated). The ghosts and vengeful spirits that populate contemporary Asian horror cinema are both the remnants of a repressed past re-emerging in the present and the disruption to social borders, thus posing the threat of death and eradication of *being*.

One of the predominant methods of establishing and re-establishing social borders and boundaries is through the intervention of purging rituals and purification rites. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies this process as a universalised concept, varying only among each individual society's cultural specifications, while Creed utilises the concept in her study of horror film to determine that abjection yields a decidedly conservative ideology (I elaborate on my response to this statement in part two). The impact of the outcome (and in several cases, *lack* of a specific outcome) of these rituals in the case studies are analysed further in response to the research questions in the second part; however, they often require a character to establish a logistical understanding or explanation of the horror (again, usually manifested in the form of a curse or vengeful spirit).[240] The ritual is then the process that must be followed in order to banish, expel, or eradicate the horrific or *abject element* (a phrase that I have introduced in this thesis to denote the object, entity, anathema, or threat introduced as abject and/or semiotic to the narrative). Discussing the prevalence of this theme in most contemporary Asian horror films, I have observed that despite the overwhelming incorporation of what I have termed a *narrative of abjection* in the plots,[241] many of the purging/purification rituals in the films offer only false or temporary resolutions/conclusions. For example, in *Ringu*, exhuming Sadako from the well in which she has been entombed for three decades does not lift the curse. The ritual burials of Natre in *Shutter* and Ling in *The Eye* also fail to mitigate their vengeful curses, while the performance of an ancient ritual in *Noroi* cannot abate the demon Kagutaba.

---

[240] Throughout the thesis, I have considered investigation as a plot device. Typically, there are simultaneous investigations taking place in any given film utilising this trope: one from a position of symbolic authority (usually male); the other, an independent investigation frequently conducted by a character associated with the semiotic (usually female, but not exclusively).

[241] Some films do not always have an obvious narrative of abjection (*Uzumaki*) and some omit one altogether (*Suicide Club*). Of course, some films also contain an abject element that is not represented in the form of a curse or vengeful spirit (*Dream Home*, *Lady Vengeance*).

The processes and plot devices that contribute to either a specific narrative of abjection or which engender abjection theory readings do not always conform to the same specifications, as I have repeatedly pointed out. Of course, it was important to isolate and highlight certain patterns of repetition from within the cycle of films in order to establish a certain "sameness" that justifies the application of the theory; at the same time (and as I have stated from the beginning) it is equally if not more important to avoid entering the thesis with one prevailing outcome in mind, thus producing a generalised and potentially problematic conclusion. Instead, it has always been my intention to incorporate any differences, nuances, and contradictions, confident that addressing them could prove even more fruitful for a complex study of a wider area of contemporary Asian horror cinema.

This was my criteria for the study from the start, and in order to adequately set out a new critical model or different way of thinking about the application of the theory, it was first important to consider any existing models. From an extensive review of existing literature, I have identified Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* as the leading text in the field. Creed, however, reads her case studies through the lens of abjection theory, only to arrive at an overall conclusion that all horror films are conservative in ideology; in other words, they redraw and re-strengthen the patriarchal and social boundaries. This resolution has drawn some criticism from Tyler, Freeland, and others, who state that the approach is reductive, overly selective, and neglectful.

One of the reasons that I have identified Creed's approach as problematic is through this sweeping assessment concerning the prevailing ideology of horror film. Granted, her study pre-dates my chosen cycle, but at the same time, such methods do not allow for difference, nuance, and contradiction. Moreover, as shall be reasserted in part two, my findings do not show that the narratives of my case studies redraw, restore, or reinforce the boundaries of social (symbolic) order. Furthermore, when Creed incorporates patriarchal law (synonymous with Kristeva's symbolic, as utilised in this thesis), there is an immediate evocation of a dividing line separating that society from what is cast outside its boundaries. Namely, for Creed, the figure of the monstrous-feminine; in this thesis, the abject is that which is semiotic (the reject, re-ejected material within symbolic domain). In turn, gender binaries are inextricable from the discussion, and it is at this juncture where critical arguments attempting to understand abjection theory and its implications become

complex and unstable. The response to my second research question (below) elaborates on this point, but for now it is sufficient to note that the evocation of gendered roles usually necessitates the introduction of the family unit, rather than straight-forward gender binaries (in Kristeva, as well as frequently in the films, as I have shown throughout). The family unit is crucial to a precise understanding of abjection theory because in Kristeva's redeveloped model of psychosexual development, she stresses the importance of the maternal through the insertion (and to some extent, the forceful assertion) of the mother into proceedings. Through primal mapping, the mother prepares (or is *expected* to prepare) the child for symbolic status, assisting it to abject, before finally being abjected herself.[242] Here, the semiotic is conflated with the maternal, and in turn, the feminine. In the films, the mother can be an actual biological mother (Reiko in *Ringu* as a prime example) or a substitute or surrogate mother (Yoshimi is both biological and surrogate in *Dark Water*), which can take many forms: Eun-joo in *A Tale of Two Sisters* is the evil stepmother, for instance; however, Eun-soo of *Hansel and Gretel* also takes on a similar role, as do teachers both male and female in the high school horror narratives discussed in Chapter VIII. *Ergo*, some of the issues around abjection and abjecting are based on the gendering of that which is deemed semiotic, as opposed to biological gender,[243] though gendering is crucially an operation that is enacted within symbolic discourse (where such binaries exist – compared with a true semiotic realm, where gender indistinction and pre-subjectivity reign). This distinction is important to my interpretation of abjection theory, as the second part elaborates.

Ultimately, what is at stake in both Kristeva's theory of abjection and through abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema is subjectivity – more accurately, *symbolic* subjectivity. Stated another way, for a subject to become symbolic, he or she must abject the semiotic; to retain symbolic subjectivity, he or she must continue to ward off the lure of the semiotic abject, usually by way of a cultural purging or purification ritual. Here is another crucial distinction brought about by my interpretation of abjection theory: initial (primary) abjection is pre-symbolic; further (secondary) abjection is post-symbolic.[244]

---

[242] Paradoxically, she is also cast as an abject figure if she refuses to relinquish the child from her semiotic realm.

[243] As stated earlier, sometimes the conductor of the extra-symbolic investigation is male, but frequently that character is associated with the semiotic realm in some way (for example, Eun-soo in *Hansel and Gretel*).

[244] In Chapter II, I discussed Hanjo Berressem's pluralization of abjection (2007), where not all forms of abjection are equal and can be distinguished by real-time cultural engagement and mediated abjection in film. In this thesis, the focus has been predominantly on how abjection is manifested in the texts, as opposed to how the spectator engages within it. However, there is certainly merit in differentiating between "types" of

Moreover, abjection is not a one-time process for most subjects. Instead, and this is a salient point, the abject is both a force and a state that is in constant process with and *within* symbolic systems. The threat that abjection poses to the symbolic is that of subjective annihilation, by way of attracting the subject back to the semiotic sway of a previous non-existence that is not concomitant with symbolic logic and law. The purification rituals can ward off this threat under the guise of banishment, but, as Kristeva indicates through her works, it is only being held at arm's length, never wholly erased from symbolic society.

In my study of contemporary Asian horror cinema, I have demonstrated how these processes occur within various representations of symbolic societies. Contact with abjection in Kristeva's theory equates to certain death, and more specifically the aforementioned subjective annihilation. In my readings of the films, I regularly establish how the threat of abjection is manifested on screen, be it through the representation of a curse, vengeful spirit, or ghost, or even in more abstract form such as the concept of a suicide club in *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*, or an unconscious attraction to spirals (in both physical form and as an abstract concept) in *Uzumaki*, all of which lead to death, disintegration, and general eradication of subjectivity. Furthermore, I have also identified how the consequence of excessive abject contact is illustrated in the films, in addition to death tolls fitting for any horror cycle. For instance, many films contain visual markers such as the blurring or distortion of facial features, denoting the shift from a subject's recognisable (and unique) visual identity to indistinction.[245] Such tropes occur in *Ringu* and *Shutter*, among others, while in *Pulse* those characters marked by abjection literally disintegrate on screen.

Abjection can also be found in the frequently-recurring motif of coming of age. This theme usually depicts a character designated as a child passing into adulthood, which can be interpreted as the equivalent of moving from semiotic to symbolic status within their society's dictates. The child's abjection of the mother and all things semiotic, before moving into the intersubjective system of patriarchal language and adulthood, is valued in

---

abjection, which is why the distinction between primary and secondary abjection is important: the former takes place in the semiotic realm, on the cusp of the symbolic; the latter can only be experienced within the symbolic after subjectivity.

[245] This can also occur by the physical removing of facial features from a photograph. For instance, by cutting out the heads on photographs, as seen in *Phone* and *One Missed Call*. In *Hansel and Gretel*, the facial image is replaced by the head of an animal.

symbolic society. However, such representation can take many forms. In *Dark Water*, the age of seven is established as associated with the law of the father in culture, an age that the living, biological child, Ikuko, is approaching but one which the ghost child, Mitsuko, can never reach. In the cluster of South Korean high school horror films, *sonyeo* sensibility often prevails, which takes on a semiotic association that presents the living school children as on the cusp of symbolic status, though very much still semiotic (by contrast, the dead ones returning as ghosts have greater mobility to traverse between realms). A similar distinction is set up in *Noriko*, while in *Hansel and Gretel*, the "children" use the magic powers granted to them and their occupation of semiotic spacetime to refuse to pass into symbolic maturity.

In the first of two extensive literature reviews, I articulated my stance regarding the application of abjection theory. Namely, I justified the use of abjection (though with appropriate caution) as a founding moment for all subjects (taken from Anna Smith, 1996) and a universally resonant experience (taken from Arya, 2014) that is cross-cultural, historical, and which is expressed most accurately as a form of psychoanalytic literary theory within certain cultural texts. Furthermore, I argued that readings rooted in cultural and geographical specificity can be constraining, instead demonstrating that transnational production, distribution, and consumption of these texts (as well as cross-cultural influences from national, regional, and overseas sources) make them accessible for wider study. Drawing upon the realm of the arts as a prime arena for abjection theory engagement, I further identified contemporary Asian horror cinema (having hitherto identified cinema as generally an ideal medium of the arts, following reviews of Chanter [2001], Goodnow [2014], and others) as a fruitful area for application and testing of the theory, having established a gap in existing critical fields and the potential to expand upon Creed while simultaneously redefining the process of abjection theory application. Here, we are reminded of Goodnow's assertion that "film acts as a base for concretizing and explicating Kristeva's proposals" (p.28).

As a founding moment for all subjects, primary abjection isolates and identifies one specific moment in space and time; however, secondary abjections disrupt, distort, and disintegrate the notion of permanence in both the spatial (bidirectional) and the temporal (unidirectional). Abjection collapses and conflates both past and present, it "disrupts the

stability of the here and now" to borrow a quotation from Ramie Takashi (2003, p.295),[246] by way of harking back to a period of non-time and singular (only) space experienced in a pre-subjective semiotic state, a sort of abject spacetime that does not concur with the logical order and dimension of space and time dictated by law and logic of symbolic subjectivity. The latter such notions are obliterated in many of the films, including *Ringu*, *Shutter*, and *Phone* (all films where the "curse" is predicated on a repressed past re-emerging in the present), and in the conflation and/or eradication of space and time in *The Eye* and *Hansel and Gretel*. Furthermore, this theme brings this review back around to the arbitrary borders of symbolic society, which the abject can dissolve and collapse just as easily as they are erected, thus also re-affirming the importance of semiotic-symbolic distinctions and interactions to abjection theory. It is these distinctions, along with those others elaborated above, that constitute my understanding of abjection theory, along with its significance to this area of cinema. I have established an original and distinct application of the theory, and just as substantially have assessed the weight of its application against potential pitfalls and criticisms. Having now established the aims of this thesis – simply restated as to provide a unique and original understanding of abjection theory, as well as an approach to its application to a selection of contemporary Asian horror films – the most important task remaining is to provide a direct response to the research questions set out in the first chapter.

11.2: Answering the Research Questions

Back in the introductory chapter (p.6), I stated that my thesis would be guided by the following two research questions:

1. To what extent can Kristeva's theory of the abject and abjection be applied as an underpinning theoretical model to inform a wider discussion concerning the visual and narrative properties of a range of contemporary Asian horror films?

2. Taking into account Kristeva's assertion that contact with the abject constitutes a purging ritual and a rite of passage into ordered society, to what extent does abjection and the horror film narrative reflect the discourses specific to contemporary Asian horror cinema? Do the narratives engage with the abject in

---

[246] Elaborating on the impingement of past onto present in *Ringu*.

similar and consistent ways, and do they confirm or challenge – or even complicate – the prevailing ideologies formed by this discourse?

In response to the first research question, the introduction of the phrase *narratives of abjection* is important to further our understanding of contemporary Asian horror cinema through the lens of abjection. *Narratives of abjection*, on a basic level, refers to the methods through which the film(s) introduces the *abject element* into its(their) narrative(s), and then how it is dealt with (more on this latter part below). Narratives of abjection can be introduced by way of both visual imagery *and* through plot devices. Being a primarily visual medium, it seems natural and inescapable that visual representation of the abject and abjection must be present in film. Creed's model of abjection theory application, furthermore, states its reliance on visual and visceral imagery; for instance, drawing particular attention to horrific images such as the "grotesque bodily invasions" in *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) (1993, p.17) as just one example. In contemporary Asian horror cinema, atmospheric, psychological fear takes precedence over graphic gore and violence, although some extreme cases do exist (*Audition*, for example). Nevertheless, visual imagery is important to the conveyance of abjection on screen. Visual abjection, for instance, could include Sadako emerging from the television screen or the framing of the long, narrow, dark, and damp well that entombs her for three decades in *Ringu*. These scenes, and many other similar sequences across the range of chosen texts, chime with the notion of re-enacting a primal birth scene, which is inherently connected to Kristeva's theory through the abjecting processes she describes; yet it is not simply a case of counting examples of blood, wounds, and corpses alone that strengthen the visual association with the abject. On a simplistic level, the visual manifestation of the abject element, whether as ghost, vengeful spirit, or monstrous-feminine, can alone signal abjection's presence. Quite frequently, the abject element appears at or emerges through the liminal space at the cusp of a border (or that border's physical representation): such examples would include the white smear on the developed negatives in *Shutter* and the threshold between cleanliness and defilement in *Dark Water* or *Wishing Stairs*. In other instances, however, the abject element can take on a more abstract form, though still with some physical representation, such as the spirals in *Uzumaki* (which are indicative of a recessive psychological concept rather than an immediate physical threat), or the suicide club of *Suicide Club* and *Noriko*. In other cases, the abject element invariably takes on a physical shell or conduit through

which it can be manifested on screen and transmitted in the narratives: for example, the videotape in *Ringu* or mobile phones in *Phone* and *One Missed Call*.

On the other hand, narrative properties are equally, if not more, important to my own model of theory application, hence the introduction and frequent use of the *narrative of abjection* tag. Narratives of abjection, as I state above, concern the wider process of introducing and dealing with the abject element in film. They can run concurrent with the plot (for instance, in *Noroi*) or can be the most significant aspect of the plot (or a plot device) that foregrounds how a given film introduces and manages the abject element at the most crucial moment, thus tying in to the crux of story arc (as opposed to overlooking other aspects). The introduction of the concept of a narrative of abjection has proved a useful tool for framing the power of the abject and its impact within these horror texts; at the same time, a widespread and repetitious application of a standardised model is not necessary or sufficient to prove the presence of abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema, for, as I have shown immediately above, such narratives of abjection may be absent from some texts, while having less impact within others. Additionally, the narrative properties of any given film selected for case study in this thesis can be important to the furthering of an abjection theory reading, regardless of the prominence or strength of its abjection narrative, though considering the presence or absence of abjection narrative remains a valuable starting point at all times. Some films (particularly *Audition* but also *A Tale of Two Sisters*, *Ju-On*, and *Lady Vengeance*) can also challenge the validity and sustainability of narrative structures by calling into question the reliability of narrative, linearity, and viewpoint in a way that corresponds to the presence of abjection (but does not necessitate it). In doing so, these films draw attention to the frailty and arbitrariness of the nature-culture/semiotic-symbolic dividing lines, thus again foregrounding the power and prominence of abjection within their own narrative structures (or *decon*-structures).

The primary (but, I repeat, not the only) way in which an abjection narrative can be established in contemporary Asian horror cinema texts is through the introduction of a purging ritual, frequently sought (and mostly established) to banish the abject element from symbolic society represented within film. Creed gives this narrative element prominence in her text, drawing the aforementioned sweeping conclusion that all horror films are conservative. Again, the second research question summarises a direct answer to the matter of ideology, amassed throughout the thesis. This, moreover, will explain why

my approach has yielded a fuller, more incorporative outlook on abjection in horror cinema, while still maintaining the importance of the theory to the texts. It is, in other words, clear to see that a symbiotic relationship exists between theory and film. The application of the theory to an analysis of the films contributes towards a clearer and deeper understanding of those texts; at the same time, the process of implementing these readings has allowed me to expound and refine the crucial components of an abjection theory reading, thus providing a better understanding of abjection theory and its importance to film studies. To return to the first research question, particularly to the phrase "[t]o what extent," I put forward that abjection theory can be applied to a significant extent.

In some ways, the second research question follows on from the first in more than sequential numbering in that the purging rituals taken as axiomatic by Kristeva are established as fundamental to each film's narrative of abjection. Furthermore, the question was concocted specifically to address a reservation with the Creedian outlook on abjection theory in horror cinema. I pointed out in Chapter II that Creed's broad accusation of conservatism in the genre is echoed by Seet (2009) (and others). While I invariably disagree with this outcome, it is important as a base from which to project my own findings. In answering the first question, I determined that theory and text enmesh and are compatible in a critical model, but for this second question I require an answer that determines the specificities of the cycle of films under scrutiny in relation to their prevailing discourses and ideologies. What follows is a brief synthesis of six chapters of film analysis, particularly with regard to my conclusions concerning those films' narratives of abjection.

What ultimately is at stake here are the implications of redrawing social and cultural boundaries after symbolic society has come into contact with the abject element (if those boundaries are redrawn at all). If the result is that symbolic society is restored (and/or renewed), then I would be inclined to agree with Creed. However, not all films yield the same outcome, nor are the purging rituals consistent; therefore, while abjection is dealt with in similar ways across some of the films, vital differences and nuances occur. For example, taking the first film analysed in this thesis, *Ringu*, I have demonstrated that despite the film following an abjection narrative that depicts Reiko as a monstrous mother and a primal mapper, the consequence of her ensuring that her son transfers into the

symbolic is at the expense of his patriarchal bloodline. In other words, irreversible collateral damage and disequilibrium is irrevocably introduced through the abject element. More to the point, the abject element is shown as being persistent within society, lurking and waiting to be re-released by the next unsuspecting viewer. Purging rituals can only temporarily abate abjection; they do not banish it completely, and they are therefore unable to truly redraw any form of social boundary that re-establishes the patriarchal authority associated with law and logic as the sole authority (as it would lack control over the semiotic abject within its boundaries).

In the interests of overall clarity, it would not be advantageous to go into great depth with regard to the overall ideological conclusions of all twenty-six films. The relevant chapters of analysis have already provided such detail; however, a brief summary of the wider findings of each chapter is warranted in order to continue answering the question. *Ringu 2* has some overarching conservative elements to its narrative, but the constant undermining of symbolic authority by the destructive force of abjection, plus once again the inability to permanently banish its threat, retains certain radical elements that go against the grain of the ideological conclusions argued for by Creed. *Dark Water* focuses its narrative of abjection on the *thetic* break, while *Carved* establishes another narrative of abjection that relies upon the severance of ties with the mother figure. Both *Dark Water* and *Carved* also provide further examples of the remaining "pull" of abjection and the impossibility of eradicating its presence from society. Finally, *Uzumaki* is a film that dispenses with the established narrative of abjection, its characters unable to discern any form of purification ritual to prevent their town becoming enveloped in an abject state and experiencing almost-total subjective annihilation (one inhabitant survives to tell the story). What these five films already show is that the purging of abjection in order to strengthen a symbolic stronghold does not automatically inhere within the narratives of contemporary Asian horror films. Some of these films engage with the abject in different ways and to different levels, and while some conservatism may be apparent in the way that the narratives play out, the abject is ever present as a radical and disruptive force, one that the symbolic cannot fully exclude through borders.

A similar trajectory of outcomes is noticeable in the films discussed in Chapter VI, where false and temporary resolutions result in the abject ultimately being at large in symbolic society, with *Pulse* yielding a bleaker outlook similar to *Uzumaki*. In Chapter

VII, *Noroi* follows what could be described as a near-ideal narrative of abjection, with my analysis from the first minute of the film to the last aligning itself with the film's plot direction. What is important to take away from the film, however, is that while more than one purging ritual is established, these hopes prove to be false for the characters, and the film ends with the abject element at large in society. *Suicide Club* and *Noriko* have greater levels of verisimilitude with our known universe (no ghosts or spirits), but the suicide club grows into a more abstract and radical concept as the films progress, dealing with pertinent abjection themes and highlighting a universal resonance. On the other hand, *Hansel and Gretel* offers a slightly more conservative approach, and is one of a handful of films in this thesis that suggest a reading more in line with Creed.

The four high school narratives in Chapter VIII all establish purging rituals aimed at banishing the abject spirits that return to haunt the classrooms, claiming victims in teacher and student alike, as well as introducing and dealing with specific themes of or relating to abjection theory. In all cases, the abject element either remains unabated or, in the case of *Death Bell*, goes unnoticed. Meanwhile, the purification rituals established in *A Tale of Two Sisters* in Chapter IX focus on the process of the primary abjection being re-enacted in secondary stages (and beyond). Soo-mi is unable to reach a state of full symbolic subjectivity, instead she is cursed to re-enact a trauma that casts her into the semiotic realm in a perpetual loop. However, the framing of the film posits a clear destabilisation of narrative (thereby suggesting a level of unreliability) that allows for the acting out of vengeance toward the family unit. The piecemeal structure of *Ju-On* gives a more radical effect, while *Acacia* also centres on the acquisition of symbolic identity, offering moments of resistance and collateral damage. *The Eye*, on the other hand, does incorporate what might be a more "classic" narrative of abjection with purging ritual; however, once more the trope of false resolution is incorporated into the text. In my final chapter of analysis, *Nang Nak* follows a largely conservative narrative of abjection, establishing a means of banishing Nak's ghostly presence and restoring some semblance of order. However, other monstrous-feminine figures in *Audition*, *Dream Home*, *Dumplings*, and *Lady Vengeance* offer more radical incursions into symbolic subjectivity.

To summarise: throughout a wide range of contemporary Asian horror cinema texts, can the abject be permanently banished in order to fully redraw (and, as Creed suggests, strengthen) symbolic boundaries? I state that it cannot and have consistently

demonstrated this to be the case. There is too much collateral damage to symbolic structures to simply state that boundaries are redrawn, and in most cases the abject element is not (re)cast from society. Furthermore, not all films produce the same ideological outcome, with certain variations and some contradictions; yet, this difference is found across a definitive "sameness" (one which allows me to accurately cluster these texts under the banner *contemporary Asian horror cinema*), meaning that it is counterproductive to apply one sweeping assumption to an entire sub-cycle. Simultaneously, the overwhelming compatibility between this cycle of cinema and abjection theory retains the usefulness of a theory application in order to provide a greater understanding of the texts (and by extension the theory itself). To finalise my answer to this question, I will briefly turn to two commonly-recurring themes associated with my verdict: the false resolution and the gendering of the subject/subjective gendering.

The false resolutions often offered by purging rituals in contemporary Asian horror cinema are essential to my argument in that they propose radical elements, rather than conservative conclusions. By drawing attention to frailty of all dividing lines, the abject poses a significant and radical threat to organised symbolic society, with the fundamental consequences being both death of the subject and annihilation of the subjectivity that is necessary to be symbolic. The purging rituals established within these films are more often than not ineffective (hence, a *false resolution*), nor do they permanently redraw and re-establish the full boundaries of the prevailing order.[247] When Reiko exhumes Sadako's drenched, limp corpse from the bottom of the well in *Ringu*, she believes that freeing her from the place of her entombment will put an end to her vengeful and violent curse. Instead, what follows is the death of her ex-husband (and the father figure in the film) and ultimately her own father when she learns that the curse must be eternally deferred rather than halted. Similar false resolutions occur in *The Eye* and *Shutter*, where a burial service for the corporeal remains of the vengeful spirit is offered as an appeasement but fails to prevent further hauntings. While the performance of an ancient rite is successful in banishing Nak in *Nang Nak*, further false resolutions occur in the forms of errant purification rituals in *Noroi* (Kagutaba is set free and remains at large at the conclusion), *One Missed Call* (in both the surrogate mother-child union and through the live television exorcism), and *Carved* (again through a sacrifice to – and then *of* – the mother figure),

---

[247] With some exceptions, of course.

269

among others. Combined with a sizeable number of instances where the abject element still remains as a presence within – and more importantly, a threat to – symbolic systems, it is clear to see that the plot device of the false resolution is indicative of a wider presence of abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema narrative, and most significantly, contributes to the more radical elements of these narratives. By returning in waves of secondary abjection (and so on), the exclusion of the abject element is rarely guaranteed by these texts, yet its everlasting presence as a force of disruption is asserted.

A final point to make at the end of this thesis concerns gender and subjectivity in relation to semiotic and symbolic discourses, tying in to the idea of a primary abjection differing from secondary and tertiary instances of abjection. This point also responds to some criticisms levelled against Kristeva, as raised in Chapter II. In particular: Tyler (2009), who states that abjection reproduces violent histories against women; Stone (1983), who berates Kristeva for reinforcing sexist notions about the female body (as well as scolding her for being a bad feminist); Grosz (1990), who describes the relationship between abjection theory and feminine discourse as "politically problematic" (p.98); Rose (1993), who is concerned that the semiotic cannot escape the symbolic within Kristeva's theorisation; and Jardine (1993), who declares that abjection is exclusive to males (a sentiment echoed in West [2007]). The purpose of resurrecting such criticisms is to address a remaining concern, one which I have rebutted in the literature review and responded to in the case studies, but reiterating it here will assist in concluding the thesis.

Abjection theory, as extrapolated from a wider range of Kristevan scholarship extending slightly outside of the boundaries of *Powers of Horror*, sets up the dialectic between semiotic and symbolic realms, where the latter insists on the rejection (the *ab*jection) of the former. However, the continual condition of symbolic subjectivity is reliant on both a primary abjection and then subsequent abjections where necessary (hence a variety of purging rituals across numerous societies). That primary abjection, Kristeva insists, takes place *before* the separation of child and mother, in the place where the child is indistinct from the maternal figure, knowing only the satisfaction of basic need (pre-desire); at this stage, it is important to reiterate, the child is within the Kristevan semiotic realm. Such cultural binaries as male-female, maternal-paternal, and semiotic-symbolic exist only within the symbolic realm, occurring as a result of language acquisition and the arrival of symbolic (inter)subjectivity. Therefore, primary abjection, which is associated

with the semiotic realm, is itself not specific to biological gender, for it pre-dates the symbolic expression of gender, a boundary resisted within the semiotic. A difference exists between biological gender and the *gendering* of the subject (in the case of abjection theory, this would equate to marking as "semiotic"). It is precisely more a case of a cultural expression of *gendering* that takes place within symbolic subjectivity. The semiotic realm is associated with the maternal and the feminine, while in contrast the symbolic is driven by paternal affiliation; however, while this often runs concurrently with post-subjective divisions of biological gender, it does not exclude oppositional gendering within those binaries. For example, in the films analysed, it is true that many of those cast as semiotic are female (most of the ghosts, plus the majority of the extra-symbolic investigators), yet the fundamental core to abjection is *subjectivity*, which acts as the primary dividing line (the main border) between semiotic and symbolic realms. As a result, those lacking symbolic subjectivity are cast as semiotic regardless of their biological gender (one example would be Eun-soo in *Hansel and Gretel*, whose symbolic subjectivity is constantly under threat). My findings also show that the onset of abjection can be indiscriminate toward biology when threatening subjectivity (*Uzumaki*, *Pulse*, and the earlier victims in *Phone*, for example), and those experiencing the phenomena (as a psychological experience, often with physical manifestation) are not exclusively male.

The discourses that arise as a result of (or necessitate) abjection are marked as semiotic and symbolic. The semiotic, as already demonstrated, exists both externally to, and inextricable from, the symbolic. It is also accurate to point out that semiotic discourse is often expressed through or within symbolic codification of language; Kristeva herself attests that the semiotic must express itself *within* symbolic systems. However, while that may be a concern for some, it must be noted that, consequently, the symbolic can never truly cast off that which reminds it of an archaic pre-subjective past (and to some extent, the illusion of pre-*mastery*), of the maternal. This same semiotic remnant threatens the symbolic's arbitrary structures of law, language, and authority. When expressed through the abject and abjection in contemporary Asian horror cinema, this results in the abject element becoming a chaotic, deconstructive, and uncontrollable force, which my case studies articulate as a continual presence underlying symbolic society. These moments of resistance and radical elements are, therefore, offered through the two realms' intertwining, which casts doubt on the authority of symbolic law and its dictates. Abjection-based readings do not necessarily reproduce violence or sexism, but instead

highlight the processes of a system and, crucially, undermine the authority of that system, exposing its fragile nature through the collapse of the borders that structure it. Examing the relatively fresh cycle of contemporary Asian horror cinema by way of this original approach to abjection theory application, I have demonstrated the traction, credibility, and value of Kristeva's theory in a post-Creedian environment.

References

Agar, J. (2013). *Constant Touch: A Global History of the Mobile Phone*. London: Icon Books Ltd.

Ahn, B. K. (Director). (2002). *Phone.* [Film]. South Korea: Toilet Pictures.

Ainslie, M. (2011). Contemporary Thai Horror: The Horrific Incarnation of *Shutter*. *Asian Cinema, 22(1)*, 45-57.

Altman, R. (1999). *Film/Genre*. London: BFI.

Ancuta, K. (2011). Global Spectrologies: Contemporary Thai Horror Films and the Globalization of the Supernatural. *Horror Studies, 2(1)*, 131-134.

Ancuta, K. (2014). Spirits in Suburbia: Ghosts, Global Desires and the Rise of Thai Middle-Class Horror. *Horror Studies, 5(2)*, 233-247.

Ancuta, K. (2015). *Ringu* and the Vortex of Horror: Contemporary Japanese Horror and the Technology of Chaos. *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society, 1*, 23-42.

Arya, R. (2014). *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Asano, S. (Director). (1898a). *Bake Jizo*. [Film]. Japan.

Asano, S. (Director). (1898b). *Shinin no Sosei.* [Film]. Japan.

Asou, M. (Director). (2006). *One Missed Call: Final*. [Film]. Japan: CJ Entertainment.

Bacchilega, C. (2010). *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies.* Pennsylvania: U of Pennsylvania Press.

Balmain, C. (2008). *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Barrett, E. (2011). *Kristeva Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts.* London: I.B. Tauris.

Beardsworth, S. (2004a). *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*. Albany: State of New York Press.

Beardsworth, S. (2004b). Kristeva's Idea of Sublimation. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, 42*(1), 122-136.

Beardsworth, S. (2005a). Freud's Oedipus and Kristeva's Narcissus: Three Heterogeneities. *Hypatia, 20*(1), 54-77.

Beardsworth, S. (2005b). From Revolution to Revolt Culture. In E. Ziarek & T. Chanter (Eds.), *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis* (pp. 37-56). Albany: State of New York Press.

Benshoff, H. M. (1997). *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

Berressem, H. (2007). The Abject of Desire. In K. Kutzbach & M. Mueller (Eds.), *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (pp. 19-48). New York: Rodopi.

Bettelheim, B. (1976). *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Black, A. (2003). Coming of Age: The South Korean Horror Film. In S.J. Schneider (Ed.), *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe* (pp. 185-203). Surrey: FAB Press.

Byrne, J. (2014). Wigs and Rings: Cross-Cultural Exchange in the South Korean and Japanese Horror Film. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema, 6*(2), 184-201.

Campion, J. (Director). (1993). *The Piano*. [Film]. New Zealand: Jan Chapman Productions.

Caputi, M. (1993). The Abject Maternal: Kristeva's Theoretical Consistency. *Women and Language, 16*(2), 32.

Carpenter, J. (Director). (1978). *Halloween.* [Film]. United States: Compass International.

Carpenter, J. (Director). (1982). *The Thing*. [Film]. United States: Universal Pictures.

Carroll, N. & Choi, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*. Malden: Blackwell.

Chan, F. (Director). (2004). *Dumplings.* [Film]. Hong Kong: Applause Pictures.

Chang. (Director). (2008). *Death Bell.* [Film]. South Korea: Core Contents Media.

Chanter, T. (2001). Abject Images: Kristeva, Art, and the Third Cinema. *Philosophy Today, 45,* 83-98.

Cheung, J. (Director). (1992). *Cageman.* [Film]. Hong Kong: Filmagica Productions.

Choi, J. (2006). National Cinema, the Very Idea. In N. Carroll & J. Choi (Eds.), *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (pp. 310-319). Malden: Blackwell.

Choi, J. (2009). A Cinema of Girlhood: *Sonyeo* Sensibility and the Decorative Impulse in the Korean Horror Cinema. In J. Choi & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 39-56). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Choi, J. (2010). *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*. Connecticut: Wesleyan UP.

Choi, J. & Wada-Marciano, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Chung, H. S. (2013) *Acacia* and Adoption Anxiety in Korean Horror Cinema. In A. Perise & D. Martin (Eds.), *Korean Horror Cinema* (pp. 87-100). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Cixous, H. (1975). The Laugh of the Medusa (Trans. K. Cohen & P. Cohen, 1976). *Signs 1*, 878.

Clover, C. J. (1987). Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film. *Representations* 20, 187-228.

Clover, C. J. (1992). *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film.* New Jersey: Princeton UP.

Craven, W. (Director). (1996). *Scream.* [Film]. United States: Woods Entertainment.

Craven, W. (Director). (1997). *Scream 2*. [Film]. United States: Konrad Pictures.

Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.

Cronenberg, D. (Director). (1979). *The Brood*. [Film]. Canada: Canadian Film Development Corporation.

Daniel, R. & Wood, D. (2005). Pain Threshold: The Cinema of Takashi Miike. In S.J. Schneider & T. Williams (Eds.). *Horror International* (pp.285-293). Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Davis, D. W. & Yueh-Yu, Y. (2001). Warning! Category III: The Other Hong Kong Cinema. *Film Quarterly, 54(4)*, 12-26.

De Palma, B. (Director). (1976). *Carrie*. [Film]. United States: Red Bank Films.

De Saussure, F. (1916). (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, Eds.). [1977]. *Course in General Linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.). Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.

Deodato, R. (Director). (1980). *Cannibal Holocaust*. [Film]. Italy: F.D. Cinematografica.

Doane, M. A. (1984). The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address. In M.A. Doane, P. Mellenchamp, and L. Williams (Eds.), *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (pp.283-297). Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London: Routledge.

Dowd, G. & Rulyova, N. (Eds.). (2015). *Genre Trajectories: Identifying, Mapping, Projecting*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Dupuy, C. (2007). 'Why Don't You Remember? Are You Crazy?': Korean Gothic and Psychosis in *A Tale of Two Sisters*. *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies, 3,* 64-77.

Fawcett, J. (Director). (2000). *Ginger Snaps*. [Film]. Canada / United States: Copperheart Entertainment.

Felluga, D. (2015). Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development. *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Purdue U. Retrieved 31st October, 2015. <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevelop.html>

Foucault, M. (1982). Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault – October 25th, 1982. In L.H. Martin et al., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 9-15). (1988). London: Tavistock.

Foster, H. (1996). Obscene, Abject, Traumatic. *October, 78 (Autumn, 1996),* 106-124.

Freeland, C. A. (2004). Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films. In L. Braudy & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism* (6th ed.) (pp. 742-763). Oxford: Oxford UP.

Freud, S. (1919). The Uncanny. *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. XVII* [1917-1919] (pp.217-252) (2001). London: Vintage

Friedkin, W. (Director). (1973). *The Exorcist*. [Film]. United States: Hoya Productions.

Goodnow, K. (2014). *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis*. New York: Berghahn.

Grant, B. K. (Ed.). (2003). *Film Genre Reader III*. Austin: U of Texas Press.

Grosz, E. (1990). The Body of Signification. In J. Fletcher & A. Benjamin (Eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Works of Julia Kristeva* (pp. 80-103). London: Routledge.

Gottleib, N. & McLelland, M. (2003). The Internet in Japan. In N. Gottlieb & M. McLelland (Eds.), *Japanese Cybercultures (Asia's Transformations/Asia.com)* (pp.1-16). New York: Routledge.

Hand, R. J. (2005). Aesthetics of Cruelty: Traditional Japanese Theatre and the Horror Film. In J. McRoy (Ed.), *Japanese Horror Cinema* (pp. 18-28). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Hantke, S. (2005). Japanese Horror Under Western Eyes: Social Class and Global Culture in Miike Takashi's *Audition*. In J. McRoy (Eds.), *Japanese Horror Cinema* (pp.54-65). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Harper, J. (2008). *Flowers from Hell: The Modern Japanese Horror Film.* London: Noir.

Heffernan, K. (2009). Inner Senses and the Changing Face of Hong Kong Cinema. In J. Choi & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 57-68). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Hey, D. (2014). Cinematic Narratives of Abjection: The Abject and the Asian Horror Film. University of Salford. Unpublished Dissertation.

Higuchinsky. (Director). (2000). *Uzumaki*. [Film]. Japan: Omega Micott.

Hills, M. (2005). Ringing the Changes: Cult Distinctions and Cultural Differences in US Fans' Readings of Japanese Horror Cinema. In J. McRoy (Eds.), *Japanese Horror Cinema* (pp.161-174). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Hitchcock, A. (Director). (1960). *Psycho.* [Film]. United States: Shamley Productions.

Hjorth, L. (2003). Cute@ ketai .com. In N. Gottlieb & M. McLelland (Eds.), *Japanese Cybercultures (Asia's Transformations/Asia.com)* (pp.68-77). New York: Routledge.

Hoile, C. (1984). The Uncanny and the Fairy Tale in Kubrick's *The Shining. Literature/Film Quarterly 12*(1), 5-12.

Honda, I. (Director). (1954). *Godzilla*. [Film]. Japan: Toho.

Horney, K. (1967). *Feminine Psychology*. New York: Norton.

Huit, M. H. (1993). *Monstrous Imagination*. London: Harvard.

Hutchings, P. (2004). *The Horror Film*. Harlow: Longman.

Hyland, R. (2009). A Politics of Excess: Violence and Violation in Miike Takashi's *Audition*. In J. Choi & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 199-218). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

International Movie Database (IMDb). Trivia for *Ring* (1998). Retrieved 19th June, 2007, from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0178868/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv

Iversen, M. (1994). What is a Photograph?. *Art History 17*(3), 450-463.

Ives, K. (2010). *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: The Jouissance of French Feminism* (4th ed.). Kent: Crescent Moon.

Jancovich, M. (1996). *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

Jancovich, M. (Ed.). (2002). *Horror, The Film Reader*. London: Routledge.

Jardine, A. (1993). Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts: The Political Difference of Julia Kristeva. In K. Oliver (Ed.), *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing* (pp. 23-31). New York: Routledge.

Jeong, Y. K. (Director). (2004). *The Doll Master.* [Film]. South Korea: Ma-in Entertainment.

Jordan, N. (Director). (1992). *The Crying Game*. [Film]. United Kingdom: Palace Pictures.

Kaplan, E. A. (1992). *Motherhood and Representation in Popular Culture and Melodrama.* London: Routledge.

Keltner, S. K. (2010). *Kristeva*. Cambridge: Polity.

Keltner, S. K. & Oliver, K. (2009). *Psychoanalysis, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Work of Julia Kristeva.* Albany: State of New York Press.

Khoshoo, T. N. (2002). *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology.* The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI).

Kim, D. B. (Director). (1999). *Ring Virus.* [Film]. South Korea: AFDF.

Kim, J. W. (Director). (2003). *A Tale of Two Sisters.* [Film]. South Korea: B.O.M. Film.

Kim, T. Y. & Min, K. D. (Directors). (1999). *Memento Mori*. [Film]. South Korea: Cine-2000.

Kinoshita, C. (2009). The Mummy Complex in Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Loft* and J-horror. In J. Choi & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 103-122). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Knee, A. (2005). Thailand Haunted: The Power of the Past in Contemporary Thai Horror Film. In S.J. Schneider & T. Williams (Eds.), *Horror International* (pp. 141-159). Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Knee, A. (2009). The Pan-Asian Outlook of *The Eye.* In J. Choi & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 69-84). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Kobayashi, M. (Director). (1965). *Kwaidan*. [Film]. Japan: Bengei Pro.

Korean Film. (1999). *Koreanfilm.org.* Retrieved 19th June, 2017, from http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm98.html

Kristeva, J. (1969). Semiotics: A Critical Science and/or a Critique of Science. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (pp. 74-88). Oxford: Blackwell.

Kristeva, J. (1973). The System and the Speaking Subject. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (pp. 24-33). Oxford: Blackwell.

Kristeva, J. (1977). Stabat Mater. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (pp. 160-186). Oxford: Blackwell.

Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (T. Gora, A. Jardine, & L. Roudiez, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (L. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia UP.

Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in Poetic Language* (L. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia UP.

Kristeva, J. (1995). *New Maladies of the Soul.* New York: Columbia UP.

Kubrick, S. (Director). (1980). *The Shining.* [Film]. United States: Warner Bros.

Kurosawa, K. (Director). (1957). *Throne of Blood.* [Film]. Japan: Toho.

Kurosawa, K. (Director). (2001). *Pulse.* [Film]. Japan: Toho.

Kutzbach, K. & Mueller, M. Introduction. In K. Kutzbach & M. Mueller (Eds.), *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (pp. 7-17). New York: Rodopi.

Lacan, J. (1964). (J.A. Miller, Ed.). [1977]. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Norton.

Lacan, J. (1977a). *Écrits: A Selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Norton.

Lacan, J. (1977b). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Norton.

Lee, D. & Tang, B. (Directors). (1992). *Dr. Lamb.* (Film). Hong Kong: Grand River Film Ltd.

Lee, H. S. (Director). (1986). *Woman's Wail.* [Film]. South Korea: Kukje Movies.

Lee, J. K. (2006). Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa, 8.1 (2006).*

Lee, S. A. (2014). Fairy-Tale Scripts and Intercultural Conceptual Blending in Modern Korean Film and Television Drama. In V. Joosen & G. Lathey (Eds.), *Grimm's Tales Around the Globe: The Dynamics of Their International Reception* (pp.275-293). Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Lee, S. Y. (Director). (2003). *The Uninvited.* [Film]. South Korea: B.O.M. Film.

Lee, V. P. Y. (2009). *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Lee, Y. S. (Director). (1970). *Mother's Grudge.* [Film]. South Korea: Jeil Films.

Leigh, M. (Director). (1996). *Secrets & Lies.* [Film]. United Kingdom: Thin Man Films.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1976). *Structural Anthropology, Volume 2* (M. Layton, Trans.). New York: Penguin.

Maclean, A. (Director). (1989). *Kitchen Sink.* [Film]. New Zealand: Hibiscus Films.

Mak, J. (Director). (2013). *Rigor Mortis.* [Film]. Hong Kong: Kudos Films.

Martin, D. (2009). Japan's *Blair Witch*: Restraint, Maturity, and Generic Canons in the British Critical Reception of *Ring*. *Cinema Journal, 48.3 (Spring 2009)*, 35-51.

Martin, D. (2013). Between the Local and the Global: 'Asian Horror' in Ahn Byung-ki's *Phone* and *Bunshinsaba.* In A. Peirse & D. Martin (Eds.), *Korean Horror Cinema* (pp. 145-157). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Mayer, S. (2007). American Environmentalism and Encounters with the Abject: T. Coraghessen Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*. In K. Kutzbach & M. Mueller (Eds.), *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (pp. 221-234). New York: Rodopi.

McAfee, N. (1993). Abject Strangers: Towards and Ethics of Respect. In K. Oliver (Ed.), *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing* (pp. 116-134). New York: Routledge.

McAfee, N. (2004). *Julia Kristeva.* New York: Routledge.

McRoy, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Japanese Horror Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

McRoy, J. (2008). *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*. New York: Rodopi.

Mehta, D. (Director). (1996). *Fire.* [Film]. Canada / India: Kaleidoscope Entertatinment.

Miike, T. (Director). (1999). *Audition*. [Film]. Japan: Omega Project.

Miike, T. (Director). (2003). *One Missed Call*. [Film]. Japan: Kadokawa Pictures.

Miike, T. (Director). (2003). *Gozu.* [Film]. Japan: Cinema Epoch.

Moeithaisong, T. (Director). (2009). *The Meat Grinder.* [Film]. Thailand: Phra Nakorn Film Co.

Moi, T. (Ed.). (1986). *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16 (3), 6-18.

Myrick, D. & Sánchez, E. (Directors). (1999). *The Blair Witch Project.* [Film]. United States: Haxan Films.

Namboku, T. (1825). *Tōkaidō Yotsua Kaidan.* Retrieved 3rd July, 2017, from http://www.kabuki21.com/yotsuya_kaidan.php

Nakagawa, N. (Director). (1959). *Tōkaidō Yotsua Kaidan.* [Film]. Japan: Shintoho.

Nakata, H. (Director). (1998). *Ringu*. [Film]. Japan: Basara Pictures.

Nakata, H. (Director). (1998). *Ringu 2*. [Film]. Japan: Asmik Ace Entertainment.

Nakata, H. (Director). (2002). *Dark Water*. [Film]. Japan: Oz.

Neale, S. (2003). Questions of Genre. In B.K. Grant (Ed.), *Film Genre Reader III* (pp. 160-184). Austin: U of Texas Press.

Nimibutr, N. (Director). (1999). *Nang Nak.* [Film]. Thailand: Tai Entertainment.

Nowell, R. (2011). *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle.* London: Continuum.

O'Connor, N. (1990). The An-Arche of Psychotherapy. In J. Fletcher & A. Benjamin (Eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Works of Julia Kristeva* (pp. 42-52). London: Routledge.

Obayashi, N. (Director). (1977). *House*. [Film]. Japan: Toho.

Ogura, S. (Director). (1985). *Ginî Piggu: Akuma no Jikken.* [Film]. Japan: Sai Enterprise.

Oh, E. (2013). *Mother's Grudge* and *Woman's Wail*: The Monster-Mother and Korean Horror Film. In A. Peirse & D. Martin (Eds.), *Korean Horror Cinema* (pp. 60-70). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Otmazgin, N. K. (2008). Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, 8*(1), pp.73-101.

Pang Brothers. (Directors). (2002). *The Eye.* [Film]. Hong Kong / Singapore: Mediacorp Raintree Pictures.

Pang, H. C. (Director). (2007). *Exodus*. [Film]. Hong Kong: Filmko Entertainment.

Pang, H. C. (Director). (2010). *Dream Home*. [Film]. Hong Kong: 852 Films.

Pang, O. C. (Director). (2004). *Ab-Normal Beauty.* [Film]. Hong King: Tartan Films.

Park, C. W. (Director). (2002). *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance.* [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment.

Park, C. W. (Director). (2003). *Oldboy.* [Film]. South Korea: Show East.

Park, C. W. (Director). (2005). *Lady Vengeance.* [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment.

Park, K. H. (Director). (1998). *Whispering Corridors*. [Film]. South Korea: Cine-2000 Film Production.

Park, K. H. (Director). (2003). *Acacia*. [Film]. South Korea: Show East.

Park, S. J. (2015). Mothers Are Not Obtainable with Magic: The Uncanny and the Construction of Orphan Children's Desires in Yim Pil-Sung's *Hansel and Gretel. International Research in Children's Literature* 24.1, 61-74.

Peirse, A. & Martin, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Korean Horror Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Pisanthanakun, B. & Wongpoom, P. (Directors). (2004). *Shutter.* [Film]. Thailand: GMM Pictures Co.

Richards, A. (2010). *Asian Horror*. Herts: Kamera Books.

Richie, D. (2005). *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Rev. & Upd.). Tokyo: Kodansha.

Rose, J. (1993). Julia Kristeva – Take Two. In K. Oliver (Ed.), *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing* (pp. 41-61). New York: Routledge.

Roudiez, L. S. (1980). Introduction. In J. Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (L.S. Roudiez, Ed.) (pp. 1-20). Oxford: Blackwell.

Sakdaphisit, S. (Director). (2011). *Ladda Land.* [Film]. Thailand: GTH & Jorkwang Film.

Salles, W. (Director). (2005). *Dark Water.* [Film]. USA: Touchstone Pictures.

Sayad, C. (2016). Found-Footage Horror and the Frame's Undoing. *Cinema Journal, 55.2 (Winter 2016)*, 43-66.

Schneider, S. J. & Williams, T. (Eds.). (2005). *Horror International.* Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Scott, R. (Director). (1979). *Alien*. [Film]. United Kingdom / United States: Brandywine Productions.

Seet, K. K. (2009). Mothers and Daughters: Abjection and the Monstrous-Feminine in Japan's *Dark Water* and South Korea's *A Tale of Two Sisters. Camera Obscura, 24*(71), 139-159.

Shakespeare, W. (1600). (C. Rutter, Ed.). [2015]. *Macbeth.* London: Penguin Classics.

Sharrett, C. (2005). Preface: Japanese Horror Cinema. In J. McRoy (Ed.), *Japanese Horror Cinema* (pp. xi-xiv). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Shimizu, T. (Director). (2002). *Ju-On: The Grudge.* [Film]. Japan: Pioneer LDC.

Shimizu, T. (Director). (2004). *The Grudge*. [Film]. USA: Ghost House Pictures.

Shin, C. Y. (2009). The Art of Branding: Tartan 'Asia Extreme Films'. In J. Choi & M. Wada- Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 85-100). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Shin, C. Y. (2013). *Death Bell* and High-School Horror. In A. Peirse & D. Martin (Eds.), *Korean Horror Cinema* (pp. 131-141). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Shindo, K. (Director). (1964). *Onibaba.* [Film]. Japan: Toho.

Shiraishi, K. (Director). (2005). *Noroi: The Curse.* [Film]. Xanadeux Company.

Shiraishi, K. (Director). (2007). *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman.* [Film]. Japan: Tornado Film.

Shuk-Ting, K. Y. (2011). *East Asian Cinema and Cultural Heritage from China, Hong Kong, Tawian to Japan and South Korea.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Smith, A. (1996). *Julia Kristeva: Readings of Exile and Estrangement*. London: MacMillan.

Smith, A. M. (1998). *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable*. London: Pluto.

Sono, S. (Director). (2001). *Suicide Club.* [Film]. Japan: Omega Project.

Sono, S. (Director). (2005). *Noriko's Dinner Table.* [Film]. Japan: Mother Ark Co.

Stone, J. (1983). Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva. In F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iversen, & D. Loxley (Eds.), *The Politics of Theory* (pp. 38-48). Colchester: U of Essex.

Stringer, J. (1999). Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong. In C. Sharrett (Ed.), *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media* (pp. 361-379). Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Takashi, R. (2003). The Japanese Horror Film Series: *Ring* and *Eko Eko Azarak.* In S.J. Schneider (Ed.), *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe* (pp.295-304). Surrey: FAB Press.

Teo, S. (1997). *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimension*. London: BFI.

Tsukamoto, R. (Director). (2005). *One Missed Call 2.* [Film]. Japan: Toho Company.

Tsukamoto, S. (Director). (1989). *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. [Film]. Japan: Kaijyu Theatres.

Tudor, A. (2003). Genre. In B.K. Grant (Ed.), *Film Genre Reader III* (pp. 3-11). Austin: U of Texas Press.

Tyler, I. (2009). Against Abjection. *Feminist Theory, 10*(1), 77-98.

Verbinski, G. (Director). (2002). *The Ring.* [Film]. United States: Dreamworks.

Wada-Marciano, M. (2009). J-Horror: New Media's Impact on Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema. In J. Choi, & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp. 15-37). Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP.

Wada-Marciano, M. (2012). *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Press.

Ward, V. (Director). (1984). *Vigil.* [Film]. New Zealand: John Maynard Productions.

Wayans, K. I. (Director). (2000). *Scary Movie.* [Film]. Dimension Films.

Wee, V. (2011). Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing: Comparing *Ringu* and *The Ring. Cinema Journal, 50.2 (Winter 2011)*, 41-60.

Weir, A. (1993). Identification with the Divided Mother: Kristeva's Ambivalence. In K. Oliver (Ed.), *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writings* (pp. 79-91). New York: Routledge.

Wells, P. (2000). *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch*. London: Wallflower.

West, R. (2007). Abject Cannibalism: Anthropophagic Poetics in Conrad, White, and Tennant Towards a Critique of Julia Kristeva's Theory of the Abject. In K. Kutzbach & M. Mueller (Eds.), *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (pp. 235-254). New York: Rodopi.

White, E. (2005). Case Study: Nakata Hideo's *Ringu* and *Ringu 2*. In J. McRoy (Ed.), *Japanese Horror Cinema* (pp. 38-47). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Wiene, R. (Director). (1920). *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. [Film]. Germany: Declar-Bioscop.

Williams, L. (1984). When the Woman Looks. In M.A. Doane, P. Mellenchamp, and L. Williams (Eds.), *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (pp.283-297). Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America.

Williams, L. (1991). Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly 44.4 (1991)*, 2-13.

Williams, T. (2005). Hong Kong Social Horror: Tragedy and Farce in Category 3. In S.J. Schneider & T. Williams (Eds.), *Horror International* (pp. 203-219). Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Wood, R. (1986). *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan.* New York: Columbia UP.

Yau, H. (Director). (1993). *The Eight Immortals Restaurant: The Untold Story.* Hong Kong: Heroes United Films Ltd.

Yim, P. S. (Director). (2007). *Hansel and Gretel.* [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment.

Yoo, Y. J., Lyytinen, K. & Yang, H. D. (2005). The Role of Standards in Innovation and Diffusion of Broadband Mobile Services: The Case of South Korea. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems 14 (2005)*, 323-353.

Yoshimito, M. (2005). *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema.* Durham: Duke UP.

Yueh-Yu Yeh, E. & Hei-Tung Ng, N. (2009). Magic, Medicine, Cannibalism: The China Demon in Hong Kong Horror. In J. Choi & M. Wada-Marciano (Eds.), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (pp.145-159).

Yun, J. Y. (Director). (2003). *Wishing Stairs.* [Film]. South Korea: Cine-2000.

Ziarek, E. & Chanter, T. (Eds.). (2005.) *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*. Albany: State of New York Press.

Zipes, J. (2010). *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films.* New York: Routledge.