The Slasher and the Slashed: Horror's Endless Ring

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Sister, burn the temple, and stand beneath the moon,

The sound of the ocean is dead

It's just the echo of the blood in your head…

Acid Bath, "Dead Girl"

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"That's right, Samuels definitely personified fate. In Samuels' writing, fate is immovable, like a mountain; it stands where man passes away. Fate never changes..."

So croons the teacher, noticing not the implications of her statement for a student who has just traded stares out the window with a murderer. Who is this man, and who is this woman? None other than the slasher, Michael Myers, peering at his slashed, Laurie, in John Carpenter's 1978 horror classic *Halloween* (1978). This teacher has summarized, unknowingly, the tenet of the genre: "Samuels" posits not an abstract philosophical question, but the central conflict toyed with by Castle and Raimi and Romero and Cronenberg and countless other directors. Horror aims, in fact, to join slasher and slashed perpetually in a ring of dialogue over who controls fate. This interplay reaches fruition in the aptly named *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), Japanese for "Ring." Released two years before the new millennium, *Ringu* propounds and resolves two crucial questions in the genre: Who is the slasher? And who is the slashed?

Prior to these films, the answer seemed straightforward. Classic slasher movies contain something along the lines of a usually male slasher, armed with a phallic object, such as a knife, who receives physical pleasure, often orgasmic, from slaughtering humans, in the end focusing usually on a "final girl." Slashers, as such, generally rely upon physical stimulation to capture their audience. Such physical stimulation seems also to be the only way the audience can interact with the killer. The audience knows when the killer is on the prowl because the film cues the ear with suspenseful, often clamorous music, as in the recurring soundtracks of *Profondo Rosso* (Argento, 1975) and *Halloween*. The protagonist on the screen also shrieks and runs away, indicating with physical movements the killer's presence and elevating viewers' heart rates.

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Often the camera itself cues the audience into harrowing anticipation of the crime, because right before the slaughter happens, the point of view switches to the killer's audiovisual perspective.

In fact, this audiovisual perspective characterizes the slasher films particularly, and its prevalence forces the interpretation that viewers can never sympathize with a slasher at the moment of murder. *Halloween* exaggerates this idea when, during Michael's first murder, Michael dons a mask. The mask throws the entire frame into pitch with the exception of two eyeslits which allow the audience to witness the murder. This unnatural perspective makes viewers feel that they are *inside* Michael's face, perhaps inside his head. However, this internal space, from which originate feelings and thoughts, is purposely obscured by the black surface. As soon as the mask is taken off, we switch immediately out of the POV shot. Thus psychologically, we know nothing about Michael, and can experience him only physically, through his lighted vision, his heavy breathing, and the ticking, equally inscrutable nondiegetic music that accompanies each ambush. Though *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960) and *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) feature slashers with whom we may sympathize, Mark and Norman's emotions are evident only from external perspectives, rendering the emotions during an actual murder explicable only physically.

This uncomfortable physical sympathy manifests itself in the "bodily" reactions it produces in viewers. We scream when we see the serration, wince as it pierces, and follow with our eyes the traveling blood, usually the only movement in an otherwise still frame. Many slashers seduce our senses immediately with amber colors that dissolve alluringly scarlet, wicked harmonies that beg perpetual resolution, or flickering images that we want to stop shaking. *Halloween* grins us in with a pumpkin that trembles in time to a piano alongside crimsoning yellow letters. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) irritates us with a blathering

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radio, directing our attention to the majestic pan of glossy orange cadavers against a blood-gold sky. *A Nightmare on Elm Street*'s (Craven, 1984) metallic squeals lilt us in as Tina scurries through intermittent flashes of industrial light upon a red pail, a red sweater, a red alarm. These slashers maintain our attention with audiovisual cacophony that persists nonstop; *Texas*, especially, never gives us a break: if our ears are not assaulted by the noise of the chainsaw they are annoyed by Frank's voice or disturbed by incessant howling and giggling, as our eyes blink rapidly to a wild, panicked camera that slips from bone to bone and eye to eye in faster and faster cuts. Even after Sally flees, the camera does not rest; it spins around as Leatherface spins the saw as sunlight spins upon the spinning saw. None of these objects even spin at the same speed.

This stunning display of physical disruption is induced by technological power. The camera moves swiftly; the editing is spastic; the music is often percussive and agitated. The movements of these technologically enabled elements ignite the horror in slashers. And thematically, slashers *rely* upon a technological substitution: that of the fleshy male phallus replaced with some other invention that penetrates inside the skin, with much more lethal effects. The existence of these technological substitutions of the male phallus has been cited by numerous critics ranging from Mulvey to Clover. In *Nightmare*, fingers are replaced with metal spikes; in *Texas*, the chain saw, hammer, and meat hook stab the teens; in *Halloween*, clothes hangers and sewing needles join the equipage. In *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), not only are poles, guns, and poisonous arrows employed, a penile rock is actually inserted into someone's vagina. Thus slashers horrify us because of a sort of "technological rape." When females do the slashing, as in *Sisters* (De Palma, 1973) or *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), we have a technological "reverse rape" of the male body.

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In complete contrast, films starring the "slashed" concentrate power on the physical, and threaten the technological element of human existence. Whereas slasher films rely upon entrails, lust, bedlam, and industrial chaos, "slashed" films depend upon transparency, emptiness, decay, and natural erosion. If "slashers" are individuals who derive physical pleasure from killing, which induces in our bodies great physical discomfort, the "slashed" are individuals whose primary goal seems to be to rid us of all physical pleasures we deem pleasurable, which we have facilitated with technology.

The best "slashed," thus, are ghosts – individuals who are no longer physically relevant on a physical planet. Most ghost movies, especially the Japanese ones, thus play upon our fear of the drab ending nature has ordained. Unlike slashers, in which the eye is assaulted with flaming colors and visual contrasts (the piercing midnight blue of the *Texas* night versus the blood in the house, and red on green in *Cannibal*), slashed movies suck away our energy with cold, anemic shades like white, pale blue, and dull greys, greens, and browns. In *Ringu*, Tomoko, the first to die, wears a blue sweater over a green shirt, in a house marked by browns, in contrast with her friend who lives, and wears a bright red sweatshirt – unlike the final girl in *Texas*, who actually wears a light blue shirt against her background of blood reds and bright lights. *The Blair Witch Project* (Sánchez, Myrick, 1999) feels the need to switch into black and white occasionally for the same reason. Even when slashed films depict blood, that blood is duller than the invigorating liquids in *Rosso* and *Texas*. When *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2002) begins, a tinged maroon mottles the sick white- and violet- gray background; in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), the blood crashing over the elevators is a rummy opaque.

Also in slashed films, visual and audio motion is mostly slow or stopped, consisting of many still frames, gradual zooms and pans, and long orchestral notes, unlike the swift tracking,

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cutting, and percussions of the slasher. The slow cadaver pan in *Texas* is undermined by chaos of the shaking credits and the annoying radio; *Rosso* begins stealthily, but falls quickly to jazz and progressive rock. Unlike these synthetic beginnings, which offer besides many close-ups, the camera in *The Shining* swoops majestically over a massive mountain range as deep brasses boom to stereophonic avian caws.

In fact, this reduction of technological contrivances like fast camera movements and noticeably rat-a-tat music constitutes the key reversal differentiating slashed from slashers. In slashers, the slasher appropriates a technological object as a weapon against natural life and existential resistance against murder; in slashed, the slashed uses nature to debunk all technological objects usually employed to artificially extend human life. Though slashers may be stabbed or decapitated, ghosts cannot be technologically eliminated because they are already dead – hence the resurgence of Jason despite his mother's death in *Friday*. Ghosts will not stop at doors, windows, walls, or even more philosophical human barriers like space and time. In *Ju-On*, for example, the ghost appears in Hitomi's bed and emerges from inside Rika's body, physically impossible acts even for the most talented slasher. Laurie can hide in a closet and Sally can escape in a car, but in slashed films, being in either the closet (in *Poltergeist* – Hooper, 1982, or *Ju-On*) or the car (as in *Shutter*, Pisanthanakun and Wongpoom, 2004) results in death. Similarly, inventions that usually function as lifelines of technological assistance from other humans become themselves sources of danger, as in the televisions in *Poltergeist* and *Ringu*, the phones in *Ringu* and *Ju-On*, and computer screens in *Pulse* (Kurosawa, 2001). Even domesticated natural objects used for defense or shelter become reabsorbed into nature and commit treason against their human masters; in *Blair Witch*, piles of rocks portend evil, trees obscure vision, and a bundle of branches that looks like firewood actually contains severed body

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parts. Hence we discover that the overpowering water that begins *Ringu* is enjoyed by the slashed (Shizuko, who converses with it daily) but abhorred by the regulars (the sea kills fishermen every year). In *Ringu*, the television and the water make the same sound, but we know to whom the television answers, for its crackling noise consistently forms a sound bridge to the rage of the ocean or the staccato of a thunderstorm. Most representatively, in *Poltergeist*, the suburban stronghold is simply demolished and slurped back into the earth.

These films' different emphases create for viewers fundamentally different types of horror. The slasher horrifies because it uses technology to mutilate the body, stirring in us physical discomfort; the slashed horrifies because it uses the body to mutilate the technological, psychological framework humans use to deny their insignificance in the face of nature. The "scariest" object in the slasher is the technological phallus, but the "scariest" object in the slashed is merely the slashed's presence inside realms we have deemed technologically safe (a house, behind a door, under the blanket of a bed, etc.). Whereas the slasher *must* have a clear weapon of destruction to be frightening – be it a knife, an axe, or the physical strength he uses to kill, all the slashed needs to do to terrify is show up. When Laurie thinks she has disarmed and killed Michael, she desists screaming and calms down, yet the mere sight of two little girls standing still in a corridor sends people careening off their chairs. Thus with ghosts, the murder weapon *is* the body, and the body terrifies because it cannot be thwarted by technological or societal constraints.

The menace of the human body in the slashed becomes understandable if we think about it as a type of ominous mirror, collated by the reflective mechanism of slashed murders. Slasher victims notably *turn* and *run* from slashers, but slashed victims *cannot* look away as soon as the ghost besoughts them. Whereas slasher victims are often slaughtered from the back, slashed

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victims seem universally slaughtered from the front. In *Ringu*, Sadako's zombielike movement as she emerges from the television immediately induces similarly unnatural twisting and snapping from Ryuji. And when Sadako's inverted eye throws a death glare, victims' eyes are similarly inverted, in shots of their heads taken backwards and upside-down.

This "mirroring" goes beyond the physical, its ultimate goal being to identify victims with their own dead selves – a process not nearly as underscored in slashers. Mirrors are often used directly in the slashed – as in all the movies in which words repeated at a mirror conjure a ghost (*Candyman*, Rose, 1992 being a prime example). Formally, many of these films nudge us to believe that mirrors essentially *produce* the ghost, for we usually see the ghost for the first time in a mirror. Many critics have expressed the idea that the mirror itself results in the "uncanny" feeling – Freud in his famed essay of the same name, and others who have identified the mirror as representing various psychoanalytic conflicts, especially the original complex of sexual differentiation. In slashers, this "mirroring" is often metaphysical and inferred from thematic content, such as the exchange of the technological phallus.

In slashed films, however, the direct usage of the mirror implies a more direct connection, not between Slasher A and Slashed B but between Slasher C and Slashed C. Formally, in *Ringu*, during a shot-reverse shot sequence of the television interview, Reiko's hair covers in the first reverse shot one-fourth of the frame, then one-third, then half, until eventually the mass of hair eclipses the human interviewee. The only other person with such oppressive hair, of course, is the slashed, Sadako. In *Ju-On*, the moment of revelation comes when Rika looks in the mirror and sees *herself* as the murdered wife who began the curse of the grudge.

This type of revelation the camera also supports, as a rule. In slasher films, during the exact moment of death, we are often inside the perspective of the slasher or a neutral perspective

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as we see the victim killed. But in slashed films, during the exact moment of death, we are never inside the perspective of the ghost. The most the camera shows us is a close-up of the victim's face, or some kind of blackout. The reason the camera refuses to show this perspective is that the ghost is the victim's mirror. Since mirrors have no eyes, we can never see their perspective. So while slashers show no psychological perspective, slashed shows no perspective at all. In the slasher, homicide reigns; in the slashed, suicide.

What makes slashed films so shocking, therefore, seems to be a physically undetectable, extremely psychological horror – supported of course by the fact that victims of ghosts are practically physically paralyzed and therefore senseless when the ghost appears; they die not from physical disembowelment as in the slasher but from psychological shock. Slashers scare by lurking offscreen, but ghosts terrify by inserting various parts of their diseased bodies into the frame – such as the hand on Rika's head or the image in the mirror[1]. What astounds victims in these cases is the invitation to their own death contained in the slashed's all-too human eyes and mouth. Instead of soulful eyes, verbal communication, and oral pleasure, we get from the bloody eyes and bloody mouths of ghosts in *Ju-On*, the destruction of these endearing faculties and the certainty of eternal silence. A knife in one hand or a wit in head can defeat the knife of another, but life cannot defeat death. Thus Ryuji's statement in *Ringu*: "You can't be sure you'll die" is fundamentally ironic.

Yet despite the two brands of scare induced by slasher and slashed films, all horror films contain both types. Obviously, if a film has a slasher, it must have a slashed. Some slashers morph into slashed – as in *Nightmare* when we find that Freddy Krueger has been dead, just as

[1] With the exceptions of films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Haunting* (Wise, 1963), in which the "slashed" manifests itself as the surrounding nature or the treasonous house itself.

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some slashed films morph into slashers – as in *The Shining* when the twins give way to an actual Jack Torrance. Other films have people slashing on behalf of a slashed, such as the mother in *Friday* and Danielle in *Sisters*. Still others have slashers reincarnating as slashed then slasher then slashed again, such as *Halloween* in which the slashed Michael constantly resurrects.

Rather than deposing the dichotomy, however, the formal, exegetic, and thematic components of these two formulas provide open palettes from which auteurs mix masterpieces. In fact, exemplars of the horror genre sprinkle in just the right places doses of both slasher and slashed, in an endless ring of exchange between life and death, natural and technological, supra- and super-natural, man and woman, offscreen and onscreen. The chill of *Audition* (Miike, 1999) comes from the sudden scarlet-yellow tint inflicted upon an otherwise bland house; the horror of *Ju-On* arises from the diseased, pock-like bloodstains that dot pale faces. Euphonious nursery music flirts with jazz, piano, and progressive rock in *Rosso*, as the banging wheels of Danny's tricycle intersperse with the cymbalic *shining* noise and the silence and the hooting. Even historiographically, slashed populations becomes slasher and vice versa. Male slashers lusted over the rippling manes of slashed sex goddesses in '78, but the same males recoil in horror at the lethal strands that now obscure faces of the classic creepy little Asian girls. *Audition* especially plays on this. The stereotypically dolce, coy Asami appears at her audition as slashed, as a frontal shot of the men, in which her back faces us, the hair spread over the head like the hair in the front of a long-haired ghost, personality clipped inside patriarchal society. When she turns slasher, however, we adopt the POV of the male victim, in a bloodcurdling sequence in which the slasher straddles us and sticks needles slightly below the camera's perspective – right below our eyes, in one of the most brutal reverse rapes that have penetrated horror. Asami appears to avenge as slasher the legions of slashed women before her. A similar phenomenon

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occurs in *Ringu*, in which Sadako's hair falls off, presenting an androgynous skeleton. As soon as the hair disintegrates, the audience sees the girl as human, not girl, and the protagonist expresses our sympathy by hugging the skeleton.

Yet the questions, *Who is the slasher?* and *Who is the slashed*? extend beyond individual incidents like these, even if such individuals are viewed as role-players spanning the whole genre. Horror deals not with just one person or group of people delving into and against death, but humanity as a whole, which always questions and fights against the return to dust. And in this battle, it is *impossible* to separate slasher from slashed, because anyone or anything may play those roles anytime:

Table: Examples of Different Protagonists, Slashers, and Slashed:

	Children/ Beginning of Life	**Youths/ Middle-Aged/ Middle of Life**	**Senior Citizens/ End of Life**	**Natural Elements**	**Synthetic/ Technological Elements**
Protagonists/ Supporting Characters	Danny, *The Shining*	Final girls in slasher films; news reporters	Brother of Shizuko, *Ringu*; Tangina in *Poltergeist*	Human body prior in wholesome, nourished state	Human body as defended by bulwarks of civilization

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Slasher Role	Antichrist babies, as in *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*	Michael Myers, *Halloween*; most male slashers	Roman and Minnie in *Rosemary's Baby*; assorted creepy old ladies	Zombies; cannibals; haunted houses; monsters in sci-fi horror; Dracula	Frankenstein's monster; TV and computer screens; telephones
Slashed Role	All creepy long-haired girls	Victims before the final girl; wives; all Marcus's assistants in *Rosso*	Grandmother in *Ju-On*; Hallorann, *The Shining*; anyone who rises from a grave	Human bodies, in slasher films	Human inventions, in slashed films

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If everyone and everything in the horror film is a potential agent of death, it becomes even harder to identify an agent of birth. Physically, only women birth, with the assistance of a phallus; but in horror films, the birth process is confounded by the substitution of technological or supernatural phalluses. This aberration results in birth birthing death, death birthing death, death birthing birth, and all sorts of physically invalid circles of creation and destruction (as exemplified in *Ringu*, in which the ring of the well spins counterclockwise instead of clockwise). In slashers, the conjugal act produces not babies but an opportunity for the slasher to snuff the

oxytocin rush forever. In "demon baby" films like *The Omen* (Donner, 1976), *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968), and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), Satan or some other delegate of the underworld infiltrates the female womb. Zombie movies in particular depend on deaths begetting even more deaths. Furthermore, technology itself seems to procreate naturally, as in when various screens pump out ghosts, photographs make grisly artwork of people's faces, and so on. This bizarre copying mechanism continues in *Ringu*, in which the mother accidentally kills the son she gave birth to by placing the deadly tape in her house. Ironically, she can only save her son by allowing him to symbolically birth more death – that is, by having him make a *copy* of the film to show someone else – in other words, being midwife for the fatal media.

Fundamentally, therefore, the horror genre allows us to explore fate – both the one from which we were born and the one towards which we end – in the most extreme, shocking manners possible. In no other genre persists such balanced convergence of birth and death. In the slashers, we see the final girl use technology to escape her natural death at the hands of the killer; in the slashed, we see nature killing us despite civilization's tools. A converse interpretation is equally valid: in slashers, the natural ecstasy of an orgasm is destroyed by technological phallic substitution; in the slashed, technological and artificial limitations do not prevent, and even facilitate, individuals' resurrection from natural death.

So when critics ask us today: have we lost horror as a genre? we can at least posit an answer: no, as long as we wonder about the phenomenon of slashing. True, there are only so many times one can remake a remake of a remake of a sequel of another sequel, only so many times individual will cower at predictable, clichéd suspensions, nasty zombies, or clammy dames. But these superficialities mask horror's true intent, which is to address the terrifying existentialism that has dominated and will dominate human thought for as long as the human

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being can feel. As long as we wonder why we are here and when we will leave and if we will come back and if so how, as long as we are scared by the answer or lack thereof or even of looking the question in the bloody eye, we will love horror and we will circle its ring “for-ever, and-ever, and-ever.”

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