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# Women on the Edge: Femininity and the Barrier of the Screen

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## Abstract

Philosophers, social theorists, feminists, and anthropologists over the years have identified a connection between femininity and boundaries. My paper will take on this association by looking at the barrier of the screen. Analyzing *Ringu* (1998)/*The Ring* (2002), I argue that women's relationship to the screen is one that complicates, breaks, undermines and transcends the 'fourth wall' barrier it represents. In film and TV, female characters are regularly made to come out through the screen at the viewer—provoking horror, wonderment, disgust, arousal, and alarm. These 'women on the edge' ultimately reveal the fact that the boundary of the screen—physically, sensorially, psychologically, emotionally—is less stable and definitive than we may think. Screens are porous, leaky, reactive, and extend outwards into our bodily assemblage; they are 'media' in the truest sense of the word. By dwelling on this association between women and the screen-boundary that is so pervasive in culture, I will add to a definition of femininity that purposefully foregrounds notions of disruption, linkage across borders, breakage, and ambivalence. Using theories of critical femininities, I suggest that the dangerous liminality assigned to femme characters and people is an essential aspect of femininity itself, rather than an aberration of corruption of its 'true' nature.

## Keywords

media, borders, screens, horror, embodiment, cultural history

## Introduction

The theme of liminality is one that is central to my work, especially as it relates to gender and femininities. My primary fields of interest are media technologies, materiality, the body, and cultural studies, and this paper will explore the ways in which women's liminality manifests within culture, and, especially, in relationships to the screen. I will begin by discussing the border as a culturally constructed phenomenon as it applies to the nation-state and the human body. Then, I will go on to discuss the relationship between women and liminality as it manifests culturally, across several historical examples. Finally, I will relate this to my own research into breaking into/through screens, by looking at perhaps the most famous depiction of this phenomenon: *Ringu* (1998)/*The Ring* (2002).

## Borders/Boundaries/Barriers

Borders are everywhere in our world—they manifest physically, metaphysically, politically, spatially, and emotionally. Nations are defined by their borders—and those who are disallowed from entry are marked as Other, undesirable, or illegal. The nation is often compared to the human body in this way, conceived as bounded as a unitary individual by the skin, discrete from the bodies of others and the world around it. Various mechanisms, from the skin itself to the immune system, are utilised to keep out pathogens which pose a threat to bodily health and integrity. Of course, this conceptualization of the body is inaccurate in many ways and has been critiqued extensively by the academic discipline of body studies as a point of view entrenched in eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment thought. According to key body theorist Lisa Blackman, the body

Is not bounded by the skin, where we understand the skin to be a kind of container for the self, but rather our bodies always extend and connect to other bodies, human and nonhuman, to practices, techniques, technologies and objects which produce different kinds of bodies and different ways, arguably, of enacting what it means to be human. (2008, 1)

An example of this way of thinking about the body can be seen in the sub-field of sensory studies. Scholars who have looked at the sense of touch have argued that it encapsulates the open, intersubjective, and dynamic nature of the body, contrary to 'common sense' imagination. Touch is the reflexive sense (Anzieu 1985): for instance, in using one hand to touch the other, we are at once the subject and object of touch (Merleau-Ponty 1968), and when touching another person or an object, we are always simultaneously being touched in return. Looking at touch from a body studies perspective thus opens up avenues for rejecting Enlightenment-inherited ideas of the discrete, closed-off and individual body—allowing instead for the inherently liminal existence of *being* and *having* a body (Crossley 2006).

Notably, it was also during the Enlightenment period that the previously mentioned notions of national borders emerged. This period saw the massive consolidation of the British imperial project and the intellectual entrenchment of such ideas as eugenics, a theory of racial hierarchy which justified the colonization and genocide of people of colour across the world. In this way, the pervasiveness of the symbol of the border is such in Western culture that understandings of body and nation reinforce one another, in that the body is likened to the nation, and the nation to the body. Indeed, by drawing on ideas of immunology and pathogens, anti-immigration discourse and the reality of the border itself are "utterly naturalised and vanish [...] from view" (De Genova 2013, 1182). Assumptions such as "the body is individual and unitary", "strong national borders lead to greater security," and "both body and nation are vulnerable to invasion from hostile outside forces" are rarely questioned and usually seen as common sense. However, when viewed critically, it is clear that such ideas are entirely socially and culturally constructed. Nicholas de Genova articulates how, for migrants, "the border is effectively everywhere" (2013, 1183): in the physical landscape, in airports and seaports, when applying for jobs, anywhere where documents are inspected and/or one's 'illegality' is called into question. Borders "are enacted (and thus

performed) through such practices,” Genova explains, practices that coalesce to form what he calls “the border spectacle” (2013, 1183). Boundaries between inside and outside, whether they apply to the nation or the body, are embedded in cultural meaning; and are always more mutable and porous (literally, in the case of the skin) than they first appear.

Porousness, ambivalence, fluidity, liminality—these are unacceptable states of being in cultures that prioritize and uphold borders in the name of security, cleanliness, and order. These qualities represent threat, and so must be eliminated. The most famous work of theory on cultural boundaries, Mary Douglas’s 1966 work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, argues that societies tend towards a rejection of liminal states—dirt and disorder, chaos and contradiction—and attempt to retain purity through boundary maintenance rituals and practices. Genova’s border spectacle can be seen as an example of a boundary maintenance practice, whereby the border is reified and visible, policed by the state and enacted through such procedures as airport security, immigration raids and deportations. Douglas argued that “danger lies in transitional states [...] The person who must pass from one to another is [themselves] in danger and emanates danger to others” (1966, 78). This person can be a migrant, as expressed above, or a teenager entering puberty, who must undergo a rite of passage in order to navigate the border between childhood and adulthood, or, as this paper argues, anyone occupying the category of woman.

## Women and Borders

Women are typically heavily implicated in the boundary maintenance practices identified by Douglas. Regularly seen as inherently liminal, leaky, and disruptive, women are often positioned on the fraught line between public and private, sin and orthodoxy, and the body and the mind. In European cultural history, women have been viewed as more susceptible to the influence of supernatural and demonic forces, and female sexuality is viewed as the weak point in a family’s

honour, leaving the possibility open for cuckoldry and illegitimacy (Sinclair, 1993, 30).

Silvia Federici is a key scholar in exploring the relationships between women, the body, capitalism, and discipline. Her seminal work *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004) argues that the witch-hunts of medieval Europe were part of a massive campaign by the state to appropriate the reproductive capabilities of women, degrading their social power and knowledge as part of the “primitive accumulation” process identified by Marx, wherein the common lands of Europe were divided up and privatized as “enclosures” (Marx 1867, 204) Federici identifies the “new cultural canons [that] were constructed maximizing the differences between women and men,” which categorized women as “excessively emotional and lusty, unable to govern themselves—and had to be placed under male control” (2004, 100-1). Accompanying this sharpening of gender divisions and the denigration of femininity was the establishment of systems of discipline to enforce this new order; alongside the witch hunts, these included “new laws and new forms of torture” which aimed to “control women’s behaviour in and out of the home” (Federici 2004, 101). Federici links this program of discipline to the treatment of Indigenous women in the ‘New World,’ arguing that both were in the service of “expropriation”: “the demonisation of the American indigenous [sic] people served to justify their enslavement and that plunder of their resources. In Europe, the attack waged on women justified the appropriation of their [reproductive] labour by men” (2004, 102).

As she is exploring the link between medieval witch-hunts and the process of enclosure/primitive accumulation, Federici conceptualizes the sharpening of gender divisions and the horrifying discipline of women and Indigenous people alike in terms of their inherent resources: for women, their ability to give birth; for Indigenous people, their occupation of the land of the Americas. However, I would argue that just as important as reproductive labour in this process is femininity’s association with

liminality, and that discipline of this sort is also born out the boundary maintenance practices identified by Douglas. It is important to note that an emphasis on feminine liminality allows for an analysis that accounts for those who fall under the label of femininity, without being able to give birth or otherwise have their reproductive labour expropriated. Trans women, post-menopausal women, infertile women—these versions of womanhood fall outside Federici's definition, yet nonetheless experience much of the same forms of discipline. These forms of femininity are Othered, portrayed as dangerous, perverse, broken, and in need of male control. For example, for trans women, the misogyny experienced by cis women is heightened as it combines with homophobia, transphobia, and anti-sex worker discourse (Serano 2007). Of course, womanhood during the period studied by Federici was synonymous with what we would now call cisgender people who were assigned female at birth. Nonetheless, expanding her analysis of reproductive expropriation by looking at the dangerous liminality associated with femaleness adds a vital dimension of the importance of culture in mass movements such as the medieval witch-hunts.

### **Race, Sexuality, Class**

The fact that the misogyny experienced by trans and otherwise non-reproductive women does not derive from reproductive expropriation demonstrates the need for intersectionality in studying gender (Crenshaw 1989). Aspects of class, race, ability, age, and sexuality refract through the lived experience of womanhood and affect the way misogyny is enacted; this has led to the creation of new terms which reflect this, such as transmisogyny and misogynoir, the latter which describes the particular type of hate experienced by Black women (Bailey 2021). In turn, liminality and the transgression of borders must too be viewed in light of this refraction, as to do otherwise would continue the erasure of marginalized women's experiences of gender.

One scholar who has examined the

phenomenon of liminal femininities is Anne McClintock, studying the cultural context of the nineteenth century British Empire. McClintock's work allows for an analysis that takes into account the fact that different kinds of femininity are not treated the same, nor viewed in terms of the same type of liminality. McClintock demonstrates the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and class when looking at the confluence of women as boundary-markers and -breakers. She identifies how "[f]emale figures were planted like fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact, at the borders and orifices of the contest zone" (1995, 24), while differently deployed according to various socio-cultural categories. In the imperial project, the myth of the virgin lands was an essential component of colonizers' justification for invasion of the 'New World.' As colonizers from European nations arrived in the Americas, bringing Christianity, trade goods, violence, and disease, it became essential to claim 'discovery' of these already-occupied lands. McClintock identifies maps, woodcuts, and drawings from the sixteenth century onwards where the Americas are represented as an enticing, virginal woman, facilitating the male guardianship and sexual conquering of the land.

McClintock is keen to stress the central role of the Victorian cult of domesticity in sharpening the cultural binary between the colonies and the metropole, and that it in turn placed middle-class, white women as the determiners and markers of the boundaries of civilization (McClintock 1995, 36). The association between middle-class, white women and civilization has a long history, such as the assumption found in the seventeenth century Americas that male-dominated colonies tended to be wilder and more dangerous. The presence of (acceptable, white) femininity indicated the full 'taming' of the 'New World,' its domestication and capture: when the rough-hewn male pioneers of America settled into homesteads and settlements with respectable, (re)productive white wives, they had successfully completed their task of civilizing the previously 'savage' land (Horn 1998, 182).

Finally, the nineteenth century also saw the juggernaut of the Industrial Revolution enter its full swing. In the creation of an industrial proletariat class, working-class women were “on the threshold between the white and black races” (McClintock 1995, 56)—and were seen as dangerously liminal in this regard. In particular, sex workers transgressed middle-class boundaries such as marriage/market, private/public, paid/unpaid work, and so were cast out of femininity and, to an extent, whiteness (McClintock 1995, 56).

Through these examples from the British Empire through the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries—the myth of the virgin lands, the domesticating presence of white femininity, and the dangerous ambiguity of working-class women—it is clear that liminality is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Due to the pervasive nature of borders in Western culture, thresholds and spaces-in-between also proliferate. Within femininity, too, there are liminalities, often based on categories of intersectional analysis.

The final section of this essay will complete the whistle-stop tour of European cultural history by focusing on the turn of the twenty-first century. I will examine the films *Ringu* (1998) and *The Ring* (2002) in terms of liminal femininities, in particular the way in which the women in these films break through the border of the TV screen.

## Women Breaking Through the Screen

My work centres around the materiality of the domestic screen, from the 1950s to the present day, and in particular its changing relationship with the human body. Therefore, I am fascinated by instances in art and popular culture from this period of people breaking in, out, and through screens. I see the motif of screen-breaking as indicative of a cultural preoccupation or anxiety about the boundary between the real and the virtual, the subjective and the objective, and technology and the body. Screens mark this boundary, yet just like the skin, they are porous and open, serving as a conduit or point of contact

between the body and the virtual. Acting as a window, screens both provide and restrict access, facilitate and prevent sensory experience—shown also in the double meaning of the verb ‘to screen’ (Friedberg 2006). Therefore, screens share a characteristic of liminality with femininity.

To explore this further, I will end by analysing perhaps the most well-known example of a screen-breaking woman in popular culture: the films *The Ring* (2002) and *Ringu* (1998). Based on a Japanese novel by Koji Suzuki, both *Ringu* (1998) and the American 2002 remake depict a monster of media contagion: a video tape that, when watched, will cause the viewer to die seven days later. In both films, the monster (Sadako in the Japanese version, Samara in the American) and protagonist (Reiko/Rachel) are women—not uncommon within the horror genre, which often engages with contrasting femininities. For instance, a mainstay trope consists of a contrast between the “bad girl”—who has premarital sex, drinks, smokes, etc.—and the “good girl,” who does not engage in these behaviours and instead remains virginal and obedient. The bad girl is often killed early in the film as a warning of the dangers of incorrect or uncontrolled femininity, whereas the good girl survives to overcome the horror, becoming the “final girl” (Clover 1992).

Yet in these films, especially in the Japanese version, the two characters are not pitted against each other in terms of their womanhood. Both exhibit unacceptable forms of womanhood—single motherhood, careerism, and happiness in independence for Reiko/Rachel, and violence, grotesqueness, and monstrosity from Sadako/Samara. In *Ringu* (1998), we see a moment of touching compassion between the two women as Reiko locates Sadako’s body at the bottom of a well, and witnesses her horrifying death via flashback. Although it is a grisly sight, and Reiko is trapped in filthy shoulder-high water with the decomposed skeleton, she tenderly holds the skull close to her as a mother would hold a child, as the skull seems to cry.

The terror of the films revolves around the screen as a boundary-marker. Lacefield, in the edited volume *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in The Ring*, argues that the horror of the story

“originates in its shocking representation of the dissolving border that separates the imaginary from the real, the virtual from the actual, the subjective from the objective” (2010, 15). Rather than subverting or upending the cultural meaning of the screen, the films simply make explicit the screen’s pre-existing liminal status: it is porous, allowing passage between the real and the virtual, facilitating and preventing contact between the two simultaneously. It is the destabilizing of boundaries and binaries that is at the heart of *The Ring/Ringu*—both in their horror and their appeal. *Sadako/Samara*’s uncanny ability to transgress the boundary of the screen, as well as both hers and *Rachel/Reiko*’s liminal femininity, emphasises this central theme. These films are an example of what makes the phenomenon of screen-breaking so interesting from a cultural perspective, and such a fruitful topic for those interested in media technologies, gender and embodiment.

### **Conclusion: Womanhood, Media, and Boundaries**

“Media” refers to the state of being in-between—a messenger or substance that allows communication to take place between two different entities. Both women and screens reveal the central place that liminality has in the cultural imagination. Screen-breaking women, such as *Sadako/Samara*, show how the boundaries between monstrosity and normality, acceptable and unacceptable femininity, the virtual and the actual, the subjective and the objective, and the body and technology, are not as binary nor absolute as they are commonly perceived. Instead, these barriers are porous, leaky, and blurred, leaving space for femininities that embrace rather than reject liminality—not a fixed category but media in the truest sense of the word.

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## Author Biography

Anna Young is a second-year PhD student in the York/TMU Programme in Communication and Culture, on the York side. Coming from rural northern England, Anna undertook undergraduate studies and MA degrees in London, where she focused on cultural history and online hate communities. Anna moved to Canada in September 2021, where her research now centres around body studies and media materiality, with a focus on digital spaces and screens. Outside of academia, Anna is involved in work concerning housing justice and queer/trans community-building, going to raves, and hanging out with my cat.