In Praise of Trash;

Or, a Feminist Responds to Electronic Waste

In Gore Verbinski's *The Ring*, Naomi Watts advances the career-making critique of the entertainment industry that she began in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* by smashing open a videocassette. Watts' character, Rachel, must figure out why the ghost of an oddly Americanized Japanese orphan is killing innocent video viewers with pirated VHS tapes; that is, she must figure out why our dying media is killing us. To achieve this goal, Rachel breaks apart the videocassette whose obsolescence cannot come fast enough, but when she discovers that destroying electronics does not make them disappear, she tries to burn the evidence of her media ghost instead. Like most media consumers, Rachel would like her entertainment history to just go away and make room for "new" media, but *The Ring* frames that desire in a gendered and heterocentrist discourse that reveals some larger misogynist implications in our celebration of technological advancement. For as a film about media obsolescence, *The Ring* suggests that it is not merely trashy media genres we associate with the feminine, but indeed trash itself, a significant stumbling block for those of us who teach in new media studies.

I have written elsewhere about the cinematic and historic origins of *The Ring*, its relationship to *Universal v. Sony* and the MPAA's war on piracy, but here I would like to use the film as an auspicious entree into our disciplinary aversion to media waste and obsolescence. As a professor of "The History of New Media," I wish to push past the observation that all old media were once new, and that all new media will one day be old, to think about how gendered connotations surrounding "trash" shape our attitudes towards obsolete media and e-waste. In my initial proposal for this panel, I mentioned Atari's

videogame dump outside Alamogordo, NM as part of my call for feminist scholars to address electronic waste. The Atari landfill is legendary both as an ecological atrocity and as a grave, the final resting place of that corporation's dreams of world dominance (now decomposing in the form of fourteen truck-loads of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* videogame cartridges). In our current patriarchal media culture, critics and bloggers frequently describe Atari's ambitions in gendered terms; the head of Atari is a "czar" and the landfill organizers "founding fathers" while the post-crash Atari becomes a dead goose burned out by the overproduction of excess progeny. Our relationship to the corpses of new media thus follows the model of the bachelor machine sketched by Constance Penley: the dream is masculine, but the babies and the corpse bear the mark of *The Monstrous Feminine*.

Out of this tradition comes *The Ring*, in which a little dead girl uses a television screen as a birth canal and a videocassette as a uterus to avenge her obsolescence on the world. *The Ring* femininizes the VCR at the moment of its obsolescence, whereas earlier films like *Videodrome* and *Demon Seed* emphasized the phallic powers of video and video-optics at the time of the media's initial takeover. New media is masculine, in other words, until it becomes outmoded (i.e. feminine). New media studies has of late perpetuated these gender stereotypes through its movement away from embodiment or gendered theories of new media. The 1990s brought a flurry of writing about the body, as well as some less than political theorizing about the existence of the body in cyberspace, but embodied relationships to media dropped from academic favor over the past ten years and have been replaced by reception studies of "early adopters" (mostly male) and disciplinary genealogies that draw on a long line of mostly male, mostly European theorists. I have nothing against theory (clearly); what I object to is the way in which such lines of inquiry

tend to foreclose investigations into how new media perpetuates old gender inequalities. There is important research to be done on the impact of gendered high-tech factory work on Southeast Asian cultures, as well as the social and environmental effects of the *maquiladoras* and toxic waste dumps along the Mexico-U.S. border. To connect these sociological phenomena back to *The Ring*, what I wish to argue is that the birth and decomposition of "new" media are deemphasized (in favor of their "newness") because of historical and theoretical associations of those processes with the feminine. We need a new "History of New Media" that focuses on women and children's exploitation in the Industrial Revolution; on the equation of consumer culture (especially its trash) with women and "feminine products"; and on the iconography of the garbage dump, the allegedly feminine pit waiting to be filled by the cast-offs of a culture that continues to equate the new with masculinity and trash with femininity.