

***Ring (Ringu)* (15)**

1st October 2007

Director: **Hideo Nakata**
Japan 1997

Subtitled. Running time: 95 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Nanako Matsushima** (Reiko Asakawa), **Miki Nakatani** (Mai Takano), **Hiroyuki Sanada** (Ryūji Takayama), **Yūko Takeuchi** (Tomoko Oishi), **Hitomi Sato** (Masami Kurahashi).

SCRIPT: **Hiroshi Takahashi**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Junichirō Hayashi**. EDITING: **Nobuyuki Takahashi**. MUSIC: **Kinji Kawai**.

Ringu took until 2000 to reach western shores but was an instant success, as were its sequel and prequel, prompting an interest in oriental horror that continued with *Dark Water* and *The Grudge*. All of these have since been remade by Hollywood in such a way as to remove the source of their interest in the first place, and their many imitators from Japan, Korea and Thailand continue to be picked up by distributors over here.

So what's so new? Well not much, really. It's more a question of the blend than the ingredients. Nearly all of these films depend for their most chilling moments on the apparition of a vengeful, lank-haired girl, but such images were already present in the Sixties masterpieces *Kwaidan* and *Onibaba*. What clicked with audiences was the combination of this strong Japanese ghostly tradition and the more contemporary tropes of American films like *Scream* – rather the same generic phenomenon as in last season's *Yojimbo*!

The hook is one of those urban legends, in this case concerning a videotape of surreal images which, once viewed, destines the unfortunate victim to die in a week's time (vengeance on the image-obsessed, voyeuristic culture of our times?). The news of this fate is communicated by telephone (mirroring plentiful use of the phone in *Scream*), which rings shortly after the tape has been seen (a voice we the audience never hear). The title, then, has at least two meanings, the other referring to the cycle of events endlessly to be repeated until the restless spirit is satisfied. The curse, of course, depends on the tape being passed on by one victim to the next!

Our heroine, a reporter, becomes involved owing to the death of her niece and the testimony of the latter's traumatised friend. She then views the tape herself under the same conditions as her niece – a hard pill for us to swallow but a necessary one, since it sets in

motion the chain of events and suspenseful countdown of the rest of the movie.

What works so well in the film are the director's grip on this narrative conundrum (how will our heroine evade her fated demise?) and his orchestration of a few hair-raising shock set pieces. There is also the clever use – especially for a Japanese film! – of slightly outdated technology: the videotape rather than disc, carrying with it the mystery of magnetic fields, its physical opacity a suitable barrier to the beyond; then there is the metallic ring of the telephone (no mobiles here), with its shock value and association with bells.

In plot terms we have the pull of the central 'why': Reiko must unravel the mystery behind the phantom recording since it is her only hope of avoiding death – her training as a reporter is thus appropriate, or convenient! At the same time Takahashi adds a twist every so often to crank up the tension or make us reassess our assumptions.

Altogether I found this the most satisfying horror film of recent years. In concept it cuts straight to the heart of the preoccupations of the genre (death and decay) and in execution it achieves the kind of frisson we get from films like Jack Clayton's *The Innocents*, offering glimpses of the supernatural without resorting to gore.

David Clare