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Please note that, while the correct English translation of the series' title is *Ring*, trademark restrictions in the US have necessitated it being released using the transliteration "*Ringu*".



SADAKO'S IMPOSSIBLE MOVES

by Violet Lucca

Standing waist-deep in black well water, Reiko Asakawa (Nanako Matsushima) has reached her physical and mental limit. Her arms ache, and the deadline for her fatal curse is minutes away. Rather than continue draining the fetid well, Reiko starts calling out to Sadako (Rie Inō), the inhuman force whose psychic agony created the VHS tape that damned her – and gets a response. Sadako's pickled, ash-white, fingernail-less hand emerges from the water and snaps around Reiko's wrist. Uncanny rasps and moans grow louder as she rises to the surface. But rather than being terrified, Reiko smiles beatifically, pulls away Sadako's infinite hair and grey skin from her skull, and cradles her like a baby.

This image of mother and desiccated child, embracing inside a dark space where the boundaries between the spectral and terrestrial have been totally dissolved, is at the heart of what makes Hideo Nakata's entries in the *Ringu* series so uniquely unsettling. The basic elements of his first *Ringu* film (1998) seem to be the antithesis of cinematic terror: a paltry body count, an absentee villain, and main characters who spend most of their time analyzing what's essentially a bad student film on a VHS with poor tracking. Yet these counterintuitive desires and this emphasis on procedure build toward something truly arcane: the scene in which Sadako climbs out of the television, with halting movements that are barely human, and scares Ryuji (Hiroyuki Sanada) to death after everything had seemingly been resolved. This sudden shock is an invitation to contemplate the previous clues long after the film has finished – and, in the home video era, to recreate Sadako's emergence each time you popped the film into your VHS player. In *Ringu 2*, the barrier of the mystical and irrational has been breached; the re-investigation of Sadako's curse is imbued with high-pitched emotional terror and feels more akin to a Val Lewton film than to its predecessor. By rejecting clichés – including those contained in its source material – Nakata's *Ringu* has remained one of most influential horror films of the past twenty years, inaugurating a cycle of horror production across Asia and spawning big budget remakes, prequels, and spin-offs.

Ringu was the second adaptation of Kōji Suzuki's 1991 bestselling novel, the previous being a faithful made-for-TV adaptation centered on single-minded male pursuits. In Suzuki's original story, Kazuyuki Asakawa is a disgraced newspaperman whose ignominy was caused by putting too much faith in his "eccentric" friend Ryuji Takayama, who is a psychic and a rapist. Asakawa investigates the VHS, created by Sadako after she was rejected by a beau, because he believes it will help to prove the existence of the supernatural to the public – and, of course, repair his reputation. Hiroshi Takahashi's script is a significant departure from this conventional ego-driven setup. More than simply switching the genders of its characters, he completely reimagined their respective personalities, desires, and emotional baggage.

Reiko Asakawa is a television reporter who probably never had much of a career to begin with, and certainly doesn't now that she's on the urban legend beat. Traditionally, women in Japan are expected to be married before 30 – those who aren't are called 'Christmas cake' because, after the 25th, they're

no longer considered good – and to prioritize homemaking and children. The small percentage of those who do work are typically relegated to lower-paying secretarial jobs and discouraged from advancing in a profession. (In the 21st century, increasingly fewer Japanese have married – a phenomenon of ‘parasite singles’ that some sociologists have described as women’s ‘rebellion’ against these rigid expectations.) During the late-90s, single working mum Reiko would have been even more of an oddity. Given that she does not live at home (and is unable to put her son into childcare), her superiors give her unchallenging assignments, but she still feels pressured to fulfill her duties. The uneasy pull between motherhood and professional obligations is apparent in the brief moments we see of her at home, remorsefully preparing her son Yōichi (Rikiya Ōtaka) a dinner that he can rehearse himself.

Reiko’s willingness to leave her son alone so that she can investigate a hexed VHS changes when she realizes that her niece Tomoko (Yūko Takeuchi) was one of four teenagers to mysteriously die on the same day. Politely marginalized by society, Reiko is in a unique position to, in the parlance of our times, believe teenage girls who would be otherwise written off as superstitious gossips. She bears witness to the devastation her sister and son experience due to Tomoko’s death and, without ever saying she believes in the supernatural, puts her all into the investigation, poring over newspapers, re-viewing the tape, and travelling around Japan with her ex-husband Ryuji. Their matter-of-fact interactions – Ryuji exclusively calls her by her maiden surname, a common practice among friends or colleagues in Japan – gestures toward the reason for their divorce, as does Reiko’s miffed eyeballing of his young assistant Mai Takano (Miki Nakatani). Her urgency intensifies after she finds Yōichi viewing the tape; she loves her son so intensely that at the end of the film, she chooses to condemn her own father to death and the tape’s strange purgatory – an inversion of Sadako’s father’s decision to murder her.

Reiko and Ryuji learn the hard way that Dr. Ikuma’s (Daisuke Ban) motivation for bludgeoning his daughter was more than just run-of-the-mill shame. As her maternal cousin informs them, Sadako wasn’t quite human when she was alive. Through Ryuji’s telepathic experience, we are shown brief moments of Sadako’s life, witnessing her mother’s fatal demonstration of psychic abilities and the creation of the tape. These glimpses reveal that Sadako looks like a *yurei*, a ghost from Japanese folklore: with messy hair cascading over her face, like the unpinned hair of a deceased woman; dangling arms, and a long, white, shapeless dress reminiscent of an Edo-period burial kimono. For the protagonists – and Japanese audiences – her appearance, taken with the conditions of her death, make her seem like an *onryō*, a type of *yurei* that has returned from the dead to seek revenge. As such, liberating her body from its unceremonious burial in the well *should* have relieved her furious soul.

But rather than be satisfied with only taking revenge on those who have wronged her, Sadako directs her fury at the entire world, where she never belonged. Her tape, which is as distorted as her backwards-looped, Butoh-inspired manner of movement, consumes and converts those who view it into its purgatory.¹ The frozen rictuses of her victims are shown in a high-contrast negative still, like that of the VHS. With her head covered, Ryuji repeats the image of the pointing man contained within the tape to clue Reiko towards the *actual* cure for the curse (or perhaps he was always in there.) Instead of being the outcast that is common to American horror, Sadako is an unnatural force of nature that is simply pretending to be ostracized like Reiko, successfully preying upon her motherly instincts.

1 - Butoh is a form of Japanese dance theatre.

The question of “conversion” and abuse of sympathy is central to Nakata’s return to the series, *Ringu 2*. Abandoning the slow-burning, atmospheric style he had perfected in *Ringu* and *Don’t Look Up (Joyū-rei, 1996)*, most of *Ringu 2* operates at an extremely high emotional pitch and is significantly more convoluted, sometimes edging into camp. Taking place shortly after the events of the first *Ringu*, the handful of survivors (and some new victims) of the previous instalment gradually come to understand that Sadako has possessed Yōichi with her rage, and are forced to confront her. However, the various investigators – Reiko’s co-worker Okazaki (Yurei Yanagi); Mai, Ryuji’s assistant with psychic abilities; Sadako’s cousin Takashi (Yōichi Numata); Detective Omuta (Kenjiro Ishimaru); mental hospital doctor and paranormal investigator Dr. Kawajiri (Fumiyo Kohinata), and the now angry and guarded Reiko – don’t congregate until the film’s odd third act. Instead, they circle around each other, unsuccessfully attempting to extract information, which is often more frustrating than spellbinding.

Mai, who keeps seeing visions of Yōichi, in overexposed, surreal shots, silently screaming for help; save for her clairvoyance and telepathy, she is like Reiko in the first film. (I suppose Ryuji has a type.) Even when it is against the interests of furthering the search for the truth, she remains protective and motherly towards the possessed Yōichi, who calls her *oneesan* (“big sister”), an affectionate verbal gesture reserved for special connections – such as his deceased cousin. Rather than the self-interested, institutional figures of Dr. Kawajiri and Detective Omuta, it is Mai who understands the danger of the curse and successfully evades it, much to Sadako’s chagrin. The degree to which these two authority figures bumble and fail is reminiscent of Hitchcock’s portrayals of policemen and the like. After coming to her home unannounced and barking a series of questions at Mai, Omuta, having turned to leave, comes back and bashfully informs her: “I’m sorry, but it’s just such a strange case.” Likewise, as Kawajiri attempts to expunge Sadako’s rage from Yōichi with freshwater and the help of an assortment of medical devices and monitors, he doesn’t seem to consider the fact that Sadako was in a well for over 30 years and remained angry and powerful. (It’s likely he believes *his* gadgets alone can do what others couldn’t.) His elaborate set-up successfully lifts the veil between the sublunary and supernatural, but it is not under his control; almost immediately bewitched, Kawajiri gleefully jumps into the pool, a frothing sea of *hitodama* (floating blue and orange flames that are manifestations of spirits), while holding one of his machines.

It is Mai’s empathetic, intuitive and altruistic search for the truth that saves Yōichi’s soul. (She was only bound to Ryuji by friendship, but decides to keep investigating for Yōichi’s sake; the others are there in a professional capacity or because of blood relations.) Following Kawajiri’s flawed tech-exorcism, Mai and Yōichi are delivered to the well in which Sadako was imprisoned; there, she undergoes similar physical duress to Reiko, at one point dropping a dozen feet into the water below to rescue him. At the bottom of this subterranean hell, Ryuji emerges from the shadows, and asks Yōichi to give him Sadako’s curse – again reversing the intergenerational torment that Dr. Ikuma unleashed upon Sadako. Mai climbs upwards with Yōichi clutching her, the rope from Ryuji and Reiko’s previous visit suddenly manifest, and, after evading Sadako, emerges from the well safe and sound.

This is not the most sophisticated call-back to the previous film, but it is not the only one: Nakata proves himself a master of constructing far eerier moments cut from the same unnatural cloth. Along with the return of photographs that reveal a person’s damnation, the sepia fuzz and odd signifiers of Sadako’s tape start to appear without the aid of a VHS player, as she forces these parts of her psyche

and rage into various characters' minds. These intrusions often prove fatal, as in the moments before Reiko's death when she sees her deceased father, who informs her that the real Yōichi no longer exists, passing by a huddle of people who seem to be gaping at an accident; similarly, Sadako condemns Okazaki to the madhouse by infecting Kanae (Kyoko Fukada), a teenage girl he interviewed about the curse. (In the final moments of the film, it's revealed that she has been permanently bound to him – unerasable, just like the tape with her interview on it – with her hair flung over her leering face.) Both Reiko's father and Kanae have been stripped of their humanity, converted into something that only Sadako, the selfish child, can use.

These moments of possession imply that her power has evolved, and that there is no vaccination that can stop her mental-emotional virus. More than a troubled kid with finite powers she's using to get back a little, she's an unknowable force always seeking to create more devastation. She is an image that looks back in anger, a thing that should not exist and proves her agonized life continues by killing others. While Sadako's emergence from the television might be predictable, the volumes of rage she contains are boundless and permanently frightening.

Violet Lucca is the digital producer of Film Comment magazine and host of The Film Comment Podcast. In addition to creating content for the online and print versions of the magazine – interviews, reviews, features, and multimedia pieces – she regularly contributes writing to Sight & Sound.





RINGU

リング

Original release date: **31 January 1998**
95 minutes

CAST

Nanako Matsushima Reiko Asakawa
Hiroyuki Sanada Ryūji Takayama
Rikiya Ōtaka Yōichi Asakawa
Miki Nakatani Mai Takano
Yūko Takeuchi Tomoko Ōishi
Hitomi Satō Masami Kurahashi

Daisuke Ban Dr Heihachiro Ikuma
Rie Inō Sadako Yamamura
Masako Shizuko Yamamura
Yōichi Numata Takashi Yamamura
Yutaka Matsushige Yoshino
Katsumi Muramatsu Kōichi Asakawa

CREW

Directed by **Hideo Nakata**
Screenplay by **Hiroshi Takahashi**
Based on the novel by **Koji Suzuki**
Produced by **Takashige Ichise, Shinya Kawai** and **Takenori Sentō**
Executive Producer **Masato Hara**
Director of Photography **Jun'ichirō Hayashi**
Music by **Kenji Kawai**
Production Designer **Iwao Saitō**
Film Editor **Nobuyuki Takahashi**





RINGU: THIS VORTEX OF EVIL ENERGY

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

Through its dark poetics, Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ringu* articulates the intoxicating, fascinating, and terrifying tension between the traumas of the past and anxieties about technology's impact on the future like no other cultural phenomenon. With a near-constant emphasis on the primal majesty of the ocean and the unrelenting omnipresence of televisual white noise, these two hissing abstract beasts grant *Ringu* a fundamental gothic texture, evoking what Leslie Fielder once described as 'the pastness of the past... the sense of something lapsed or outlived or irredeemably changed'. This material sense of something lost that finds itself literally embedded in a videotape – which, in 1991 when Koji Suzuki's source novel was published, was a symbol of ubiquitous modern technology – collapses the past into the present and speaks to our fears of an increasingly technology-dominated future. As protagonist Reiko's sidekick Ryūji says early on in Suzuki's novel: "Somewhere, there's this vortex of evil energy. I know. It makes me feel... nostalgic". Revisiting the film on updated digital home entertainment formats in 2018 makes this observation even more profound, and the history of media technology since that 1998 film is now part of the story of *Ringu* and its endurance.

There is, perhaps fittingly, a long history of our fear of technological change and its association to tales of the supernatural. In his book *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Jeffrey Sconce wrote that 'tales of paranormal media are important [...] not as timeless expressions of some underlying electronic superstition, but as a permeable language in which to express a culture's changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies'.¹ Nakata's *Ringu* is a perfect example of this, a tale of a haunted videotape inextricably linked to the tragic story of its supernatural antagonist, Sadako Yamamura (Rie Inō), that causes the viewer's death seven days after viewing. Ryūji's "vortex" foreshadows the dominant visual and narrative motif of the well, an object of profound personal importance to Nakata, who was inspired by the ghost story *Bancho Sarayashiki* and Japanese folkloric and kabuki performance traditions. In an interview with Donato Totaro in 2000, Nakata mentions this tale and says:

When I lived in the countryside in Japan I saw a well, about 5 meters deep, which is maybe not that deep, but for me as a child, it seemed like a bottomless hell. Because I thought once I got inside it I would never get out of it. The relationship between the well and the TV monitor [...] is that the monitor itself is the tube or connection to hell.²

This idea of portals between literal and symbolic dimensions – between past and present, reality and the supernatural – is nowhere clearer than that famous scene in which Sadako slithers out of the well towards the viewer. Not satisfied with merely breaking the fourth wall, she annihilates it completely when she crawls through the television screen, into our world, to kill Ryūji (Hiroyuki Sanada), who

¹ - Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009)

² - Donato Totaro, "The "Ringu" Master: Interview with Hideo Nakata" in *Offscreen*. (Web. Volume 4, Issue 3, July 2000)

watched her cursed tape a week beforehand. Linking her pain of the past with his pain of the present, the antiquity of the haunted well merges with anxieties about contemporary media technology, forming the foundations of a horror movie nightmare like no other.

B4 and After

There is much to be said about the endurance of *Ringu* and its myriad sequels, remakes and reboots, and its parallels with the media's desire to spread and reproduce like a supernatural virus. Suzuki himself commented upon this very phenomenon, noting in 2004 that 'it's a little like the virus idea of *Ringu* itself [...] it just keeps getting replicated'. Despite an earlier (and somewhat pedestrian) attempt to adapt Suzuki's novel to the screen – Chisui Takigawa's 1995 television movie *Ringu: Kanzenban* (or *Ringu: The Complete Edition*) – the series would begin in earnest with Nakata's *Ringu*, followed by the duelling sequels *Rasen* (1998) and Nakata's *Ringu 2* in 1999; *Ringu 0* (2000); *Sadako 3D* (2012), and *Sadako 3D 2* (2013). Hollywood would launch its own reimagining of the material with *The Ringu* (2002), *The Ringu Two* (2005), and F. Javier Gutiérrez's 2017 *Rings*. There was a South Korean adaptation in 1999 directed by Kim Dong-bin called *The Ringu Virus*, and it was adapted by playwright Anita Sullivan for a BBC Radio 4 radio play in 2015. There were the Japanese television series *Ringu: The Final Chapter* (1999) and *Rasen* (1999), and the videogames and *The Ringu: Terror's Realm* and *Ringu: Infinity*, both released in 2000. This is not to forget the horror-franchise mash-ups *Hikiko-san vs Sadako* (2015), *Bunshinsaba vs Sadako* (2016), and *Sadako vs. Kayako* (2016). And of course, the books kept coming, too: after his 1991 novel, Suzuki would continue his series with *Spiral* (1995), *Loop* (1998), *Birthday* (1999), *S* (2012), and *Tide* (2013). In 2005, there was even the manga *The Ringu Volume 0: Birthday* (written by Hiroshi Takahashi, screenwriter of Nakata's two Japanese films and *Ringu 0*).

Ringu is not unique in its status as a Japanese horror film adapted from earlier material; the *Tomie* series and *Uzamaki*, for example, are both based on manga, and Ueda Akinari's 17th century supernatural story collection *Ugetsu Monogatari* was famously turned into one of the great classics of Japanese cinema, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953). Similarly, *Ringu* continues an exploration in Japanese cinema of the relationship between human subjectivity and technology, a theme vibrantly explored in movies including *Akira* (1988) and *Tetsuo: Iron Man* (1989). But it is the sheer scale and longevity of the *Ringu* series that renders it such a unique phenomenon: by 2004, the novel had sold more than ten million copies in Japan alone. While perhaps not reflective of the specific style and tone of Suzuki's writing, its influence and popularity has often been compared to the work of US horror novelist Stephen King.

Upon its initial release in 1991, sales of the novel were at first slow, and it wasn't until Nakata's 1998 film that the story would achieve its impressive status of global blockbuster. While keeping the premise and much of the basic storyline the same, Nakata recast the male protagonist Kazuyuki Asakawa as a struggling single mum, Reiko Asakawa (Nanako Matsushima). He also visually brought Sadako to life explicitly through the iconography of the traditional *onryō* spirit – a *yūrei* or ghost driven by a thirst for vengeance – denoted by her white kimono, messy black hair and white-blue skin color, as well as many of the details within the cursed video itself, which contained wholly new additions by the filmmaker and screenwriter Hiroshi Takahashi. Inspired by, but certainly not entirely loyal to, Suzuki's novel, Nakata's film about the tape of Cabin B4 became one of the most global horror stories of all time.

Revisiting *Ringu*

To undertake a complete study of differences and similarities across all the *Ringu* variations would be an exhaustive (although profoundly fascinating) task, and one that many critics and fans alike have endeavoured to undertake. But at the core remains that haunted videocassette itself: the investigative avenues within all versions of the story are provided by the contents and consequences of that original tape, the primary motivating action across all versions triggered in some way by the deaths it caused, and threatens to cause again. Thanks to a release like the one in your hands, we can revisit *Ringu* with high definition Blu-ray technology rather than the original VHS through which so many discovered the film. Technology is not static; as *Ringu* reminds us, it is radically kinetic. Just as the virus and Sadako's methods of spreading her vengeful curse across the series evolved, so too have the media formats we employ to watch and re-watch *Ringu*. In short, it means something entirely different to talk about a haunted videocassette in 1989 than it does in 2018.

But even before the Hollywood remake was launched, VHS had a very different cultural meaning in Japan at least. The release and sudden popularity of the PlayStation 2 in Japan in 2000 brought DVD viewing to a huge number of Japanese households, its dual function as a DVD player and games console resulting in a direct increase in DVD movie sales. The speed with which the DVD format was embraced by American consumers was also impressive: by mid-2003, DVD rentals outsold videocassettes by a long way. The US Video Software Dealers Association's Sean Devlin Bersell stated at the time that 'Americans have accepted DVDs faster than they did black-and-white TV, color TV, VCRs and CD players,' while Randy Hargrove of Blockbuster Video noted, 'DVD has been the fastest-growing commercial electronic in history.'³

In short, the ubiquity of VCR technology changed very quickly in the early 2000s, but this importantly did not impact its popularity. But surely to watch a film or television series, read a book or manga, or play a computer game about a haunted videocassette at a time where VCRs were the dominant mode of watching pre-recorded movies says something radically different about that technology (or technology in general) when that technology is considered *passé*, particularly for the fashion-conscious adolescent market to whom these narratives were initially aimed. The *Rings* that appear in 1991, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2012, and 2017 by sheer technological advancements and trends are forced to represent videocassette technology in startlingly different ways – from a ubiquitous dominant medium found in every home to one that was, simply and suddenly, a retro nostalgia trip.

At stake here is much more than a curious history of domestic film exhibition technologies. Rather, it raises a vital question: why is Nakata's first *Ringu* film from 1998 still so damned scary, even now that VCRs are virtually non-existent outside the homes of cinephiles, techno-phobic grandparents, and full-throttle hoarders? The answer lies within much broader and more fundamental truths in the film that transcend the specificity of its media format: the inevitability of death, the excruciating long-term torment of unacknowledged abuse, and the loneliness and alienation inherent to late capitalism itself. All of these are threaded together by anxieties about encroaching media technologies and the all-too-pervasive knowledge that – now perhaps even more so than twenty years ago when Nakata's

³ - Anna Bakalis, 'It's unreal: DVD rentals overtake videocassettes' in *The Washington Times* (Web. www.washingtontimes.com/news/2003/jun/20/20030620-113258-1104r. June 20, 2003)

film was first released – we need to decode the media images we are bombarded with every day like our very lives depend on it. Sadako crawls through that television screen from the analogue beyond to determine our fate today as much as she did twenty years ago. The lessons she teaches about the toxicity of viral media is one that feels more urgent now than ever.

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SPIRAL

らせん
Rasen

Original release date: **31 January 1998**
97 minutes

CAST

Kōichi Satō Mitsuo Andō
Miki Nakatani Mai Takano
Hinako Saeki Sadako Yamamura
Shingo Tsurumi Miyashita

Shigemitsu Ogi Maekawa Keibuho
Yutaka Matsushige Yoshino
Daisuke Ban Heihachiro Ikuma
Naoaki Manabe Kobayashi

CREW

Directed by **Jōji Iida**
Screenplay by **Jōji Iida**
Based on the novel by **Koji Suzuki**
Produced by **Takashige Ichise**, **Shinya Kawai** and **Takenori Sentō**
Executive Producer **Masato Hara**
Director of Photography **Makoto Watanabe**
Music by **La Finca**
Production Designer **Iwao Saitō**
Film Editor **Hirohide Abe**





SPIRAL: OUT OF THE LOOP

by Jasper Sharp

Jōji 'George' Iida's *Spiral (Rasen)*, the big-screen adaptation of Kōji Suzuki's sequel to his 1991 hit horror novel *Ringu*, might be considered the bastard offspring of the *Ringu* movie series. While closer in spirit to the increasingly dense and convoluted urban mythology of its literary source, in both tone and timbre it comes across as belonging to a very different world to Hideo Nakata's game-changing rendition of the first story with which it was originally paired upon its theatrical release on 31 January 1998.

If *Spiral* was viewed as the lesser of the two films in the eyes of critics and audiences at the time, one has to remember the unusual way in which it was conceived, produced and released concurrently as a sequel to a title that had yet to establish itself on its own terms, and one whose impact at this point could scarcely have been guessed at.

Nevertheless, as Denis Meikle observes in *The Ringu Companion*, 'the viewing of [*Spiral*] immediately after *Ringu* in the manner that their distributor intended led to a level of disappointment among audiences that would have registered as high on the Richter scale as the Kanto earthquake'.¹ As *Ringu* was raved about, *Spiral* merely registered as a faint echo, and so a new sequel was planned that effectively overwrote its existence. Nakata returned to the helm with a script by Hiroshi Takahashi that had only the most tenuous connection with Suzuki's novels, and *Ringu 2* was released almost exactly a year later on 23 January 1999. By the time Nakata stepped aside to make way for Norio Tsuruta to direct Sadako's origin story, *Ringu 0* – released on 22 January 2000 to conclude a trilogy that would define J-horror among global audiences – Iida had been pretty much written out of the picture.

And so *Spiral* found itself left off the roster of the first wave of English-language releases of the *Ringu* films from Tartan, the company primarily associated with fostering the fashion for Asian horror internationally at the turn of the millennium. Its first official airing in the West came almost five years later with a straight-to-DVD release under the title *The Spiral* courtesy of Artsmagic in 2002.²

1 - Denis Meikle, *The Ringu Companion*. (London: Titan Books, 2005) 121

2 - *Spiral* was released to UK home video as *The Spiral* on 20 August 2002 by Artsmagic, several years after the original trilogy. *Ringu* had been first shown theatrically at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London from 18 August 2000, while *Ringu 2* opened at the same venue on 18 December 2000, with Tartan releasing the VHS and DVD of the original on 1 March 2001 and this "new" sequel on 12 July 2001. *Ringu 0* was not released theatrically, but went to home-video from Tartan on 25 February 2002. All these release dates are listed on the British Board of Film Censors website and with none of the films officially distributed in North America, outside of festival screenings, until after Gore Verbinski's US remake *The Ringu* (2002), can be considered the first English-language release dates. *Rasen* was first released in the United States directly to video by DreamWorks on 23 August 2005, over seven years after its Japanese cinema release. To add to the confusion as to where the film sat not just in relation to the original trilogy but the broader landscape of J-horror, another Japanese cult curio from around the same period, *Uzumaki* (2000), played North American film festivals under the title of *Spiral*, although the UK home-video release in 2003, also by Artsmagic, stuck with the Japanese title to avoid confusion with Iida's film. The original translates more precisely as "whirlpool" or "vortex", although unlike *Rasen*, its plot actually does feature deadly spirals invading a small provincial town. It also features Hinako Saeki in a prominent role, the actress who plays Sadako in Iida's film.

Given that the rights to the two Suzuki novels had been acquired and developed at the same time and by the same production committee consisting of executive producer Masato Hara and the triumvirate of Takashige Ichise, Takenori Sentō and Shinya Kawai, it seems almost perverse in hindsight that any sense of cohesion or convergence appears to have been so far from the minds of anyone involved in either project. The nature of the shoot partly rendered this inevitable. As Meikle observes, 'all but one of the many flashbacks to events in *Ringu* (that of Reiko arriving at the rental cabin) had, through necessity, to be *re-staged* rather than simply be sampled for the "sequel" [...] Disconcertingly, it is like watching clips from a film which one vaguely remembers having seen but cannot quite place'.³

The reality is that the *Ringu* movie trilogy ultimately diverged down a different path to its literary one, after Nakata and screenwriter Takahashi made significant changes to the original novel and refashioned it as a modern-day ghost story. Indeed, with Nakata voluntarily moving aside after *Ringu 2* (although he was grudgingly roped back into the world of Sadako, or rather Samara, for the 2005 sequel to the American remake, *The Ringu Two*), if there is any underlying unity between the three 'official' *Ringu* films, it might be better attributed to horror specialist screenwriter Hiroshi Takahashi than their directors.⁴

lida is much more faithful to the New Age-inspired pseudoscience of his source. "You can't link a video that kills to a tumour on a blood vessel," the pathologist protagonist Mitsuo Andō (Kōichi Satō) pontificates to Mai Tomono (Miki Nakatani), the lover of the former friend and rival from med school he has just dissected. Nevertheless, *Spiral* attempts to do just that, in a plot that strives, perhaps too hard, to rationalize the seminal urban myth of the cursed video in the language of molecular genetics, cell biology, optics and telepathy. The result is a work that sits within the twilight zone between horror and science-fiction.

lida's connection to the project came through his prior involvement as the scriptwriter of the first screen version of the original novel, *Ringu: Kanzenban* (*Ringu: Complete Edition*), directed by Chisui Takigawa. This feature-length TV movie, first broadcast by Fuji Television on the Friday night of August 11, 1995 to accompany the publication date of novel *Spiral* – propitiously, two days ahead of the start of the annual Obon Festival of the Dead – presented a much more literal interpretation of Suzuki's vision.⁵

While writing this television version, lida had come to know Suzuki quite well. They first met just three days after the author submitted the manuscript for *Spiral*. With a number of films and TV series already under his belt as a director, lida was a natural choice to take up the reins for the theatrical version of this new work. As he later explained, 'I liked the novel of *Spiral* more than *Ringu*. *Ringu* falls into horror, while *Spiral* falls into science fiction [...] The world both the author and I wanted to depict was

3 - Op. cit. Meikle, 121

4 - With regards to stylistic unity, it is worth pointing out that Nakata's gloomy atmospherics on the first two films are perfectly served by soundtracks composed by Kenji Kawai, perhaps best known for his work on Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* films. Kawai also contributed the soundtracks to Nakata's subsequent *Sleeping Bride* (*Garasu no nō*, 2000), *Chaos* (*Kaosu*, 2000) and *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002). The score for *Rasen* is credited to LA FINCA, better known as Yoshihiro Ike, a composer more associated with television and anime work who also scored the *Ringu: Kanzenban* TV movie and lida's later theatrical feature *Dragon Head* (*Doragon heddo*, 2003). *Ringu 0* was scored by Shinichirō Ogata, whose only other really significant film score was the J-horror *Kakashi* (Norio Tsuruta, 2001), adapted from the manga by the Junji Itō (*Uzumaki*) about killer scarecrows.

5 - It was released later in the same year to the video sell-through market in a slightly extended, sexed-up version.

completely different from that of *Ringu* [...] I had no intention of making a horror film out of *Spiral* but created it under the theme of how life grows'.⁶

If one can forgive the fact that it does not follow fastidiously in the footsteps of its forebear (a film that, as already detailed, had yet to be seen at the time), nor does it feature such standout payoff moments as the memorable flesh-tingling emergence of the grudgeful spirit, *Spiral* is actually rather a fascinating work that benefits from further consideration within lida's wider oeuvre as a filmmaker, as well as the writer of several novels, manga, and television and anime series, all of which can be characterized by an overriding concern with the paranormal rather than the supernatural.

Born in Suwashi, in the mountainous Nagano prefecture, on March 1, 1959, lida started making 8mm films around the age of 18. After moving to Tokyo, where he enrolled at and then dropped out of Meiji University, he became involved in the burgeoning *jishu eiga* ("self-made") scene of self-produced and self-financed low-budget indie works. Like others of his generation who made their names in this field, such as Sōgo Ishii, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Shiota Akihiko and Nagasaki Shunichi (a figure, in the context of J-horror, best known for directing *Shikoku*, with which *Ringu 2* was released on double bills in 1999), he received a significant boost through the Pia Film Festival, established in 1977 to discover and foster fledgling talent working outside of the commercial industry and still going strong to this day. His 10-minute 8mm experimental work *Intermission* (*Kyūkei*, 1980), in which images of jumbled landscapes of telegraph poles and wires coalesce to form the basis of a massive nervous system at the epicentre of which is a young woman, played in competition at the festival in 1981.

lida's commercial debut came with the straight-to-video *Cyclops* (*Kikuropusu*) in 1987, the same year that Nakata, then a trainee at Nikkatsu working on the Roman Porno films of director Masaru Konuma, made his own first foray into the *jishu eiga* world with the 16mm 30-minute silent short *Summer Month's Story* (*Natsutsuku monogatari*). *Cyclops* is a gory sci-fi monster movie about a one-eyed mutant running amok after escaping from the lab where it was created. This was followed by his first 35mm theatrical feature, the eccentric horror comedy *Battle Heater* (*Batoru hiitaa*, 1989), in which a runaway man-heating *kotatsu* (a cosy table-shaped room heater commonly seen in Japanese households) chews its way through the residents of a rundown apartment block. lida later described it as an attempt to out-do the B-movie silliness of the likes of *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (1978) and Troma, although the film received a promotional boost when real-life newcomer rock group Bakufu Slump, who play the rowdy rockers who have set up their rehearsal room in the building, fortuitously hit the big time during production with their best-known hit single 'Runner'.

Science fiction as a cinematic genre was neither particularly popular nor prevalent in Japan around this point, but this was the domain in which lida's interests lay, and fortunately television provided a channel for his talents at a time when the local film industry was just about at its lowest ebb in economic terms. Two episodes as a writer and director on Fuji Television's *Strange Happenings* (*Kimyō na dekgoto*, 1989) – followed by a more substantial role overseeing much of the similar series *Tales of the Unusual* (*Yo no mo Kimyō na monogatari*, 1992), the same year that Nakata made his directing debut on episodes of TV Asahi's *Scary True Stories* (*Honto ni atta kowai hanashi*) – paved the way for

6 - All quotes are from the 'Interview with Joji lida' video on *The Spiral* DVD (Artsmagic, 2003), interview conducted in Tokyo by Jasper Sharp on 11 April 2003.



lida to indulge his interests in things Fortean, directing the 21 episodes of *Night Head* (1992-93) from his own scripts.

The set-up of *Night Head* concerns two psychic brothers – one with specialist mind-reading abilities, the other expressing his violent emotions telekinetically – on the run from the confines of the clandestine paranormal research center in which they were imprisoned as children. It was something akin to a superhero movie without the costumes, and more than a little reminiscent of De Palma's *The Fury* (1978) and Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981). One could detect parallels, too, with another more famous US television show that began its first series around the same time in 1993, *The X-Files*, highlighting a pre-millennial pop-cultural predilection for the paranormal during the mid-1990s that was globally shared.

lida also penned several *Night Head* manga and a long-running series of novelizations, incidentally published by the same Kadokawa company as Kōji Suzuki's *Ringu* books. After directing the straight-to-video *Tokyo Babylon 1999* (1993), adapted from a manga about a gang of teenagers with occult powers inherited from the Heian period, he helmed a theatrical spin-off from the series in 1994, in which the two brothers are pitted against an evil psychic who wishes to use their powers for his own nefarious ends. Later down the line, the series received the anime treatment with *Night Head Genesis* (2006).

Ultimately, *Spiral* might be best viewed as a continuation of the themes and approach of *Night Head* and the *Ringu* television adaptation, with their preoccupation with spiritual energy, psychic powers and various anomalous phenomena. As lida plainly put it, '*Ringu* depicts the fear of the unknown. On the other hand, *Spiral* shows realistically how to explain 'the unknown' in the physical world,' no doubt referring to a more straightforward cinematic conception rather than any stricter definition of what is meant by the term 'realistic' against Nakata's more expressionistic approach.

lida's literal and expository treatment of Suzuki may not be scarier than Nakata's spare and restrained *kaidan* classicism, but as is apparent from the outset, his film is certainly gorier in the clinical Cronenbergian sense, with the lengthy scene of the autopsy of Ryūji, the partner of Reiko Asagawa from the first film, bringing the horror back to the human body from the ghost in the machine.

One key point that sets *Spiral* apart from the others in the *Ringu* franchise is that the story unwinds through the eyes of a male lead. Just as lida had retained the original investigative protagonist of Suzuki's novel, Kazuyuki Asakawa, for the *Ringu* television feature, while the character was transformed to a single mother and renamed Reiko Asakawa in Takahashi's script for Nakata's film, here the protagonist is Andō (played by Kōichi Satō, son of veteran film performer Rentarō Mikuni), a brooding pathologist drawn to the void after the death of his young son by drowning. Interestingly Mai Tomono, the sole survivor of the first story and the only substantial living link between its two cinematic offshoots, would move from the dramatic periphery in *Spiral* to play a more central part in *Ringu 2*.⁷

7 - The actress would also appear in Nakata's intricately plotted kidnap thriller *Chaos* (*Kaosu*, 2000) Outside of J-horror, she is best known in the West for her monumental performance in Tetsuya Nakashima's *Memories of Matsuko* (*Kiraware Matsuko no isshō*, 2006)

The most obvious difference with regards to gender in a story that trades in ideas of replication and reproduction is the portrayal of Sadako herself, embodied by the 20-year-old Hinako Saeki as an altogether more sympathetic, not to mention more carnal figure than the soon-to-become-iconic lurching, expressionless monstrous feminine conjured up by Nakata, who herself owed less to Suzuki's written description than the prowling spectral presence lurking behind the scenes of Nakata's 35mm debut, *Ghost Actress* (*Jōyūrei*, 1996).

Spiral also explores such ideas as the morality of passing on bad genes to the next generation, areas that had been very much part of Suzuki's wider musings around the subject of fatherhood (Suzuki, incidentally, can be spotted playing the family man while Andō thinks dark thoughts in the brief scene in the amusement park midway through the film). Following the success of the *Ringu* films, the writer seemed to tire temporarily with horror and wandered off in other directions, authoring a string of essays about parenthood with titles such as *Bonds of Family* (*Kazoku no kizuna*, 1998), *Papa-ism* (*Papa-izumu*, 1999) and *Birth of Paternity* (*Fusei no tanjō*, 2000) and translating the British humor writer and former radio producer Simon Brett's fictional comedic diaries from a baby's viewpoint, *How to be a Little Sod* (1992), into Japanese as *Warugaki nikki: Boku wa abunai O-sai ko* (2000). Parental guilt had also been the subject of his short story *Floating Water* (*Fuyū suru mizu*), contained within the 1996 collection that would lend its name to Hideo Nakata's return to the supernatural genre in 2002 with *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*), a film that further demonstrated the director's preference for putting female protagonists at the heart of his horrors.

lida returned to his comfort zone with one of his most accomplished and entertaining films, *Another Heaven* (*Anaza heben*, 2000), a sci-fi/horror/police genre hybrid not too dissimilar to Jack Sholder's *The Hidden* (1987). It featured two detectives on the trail of a malevolent psychic force behind a series of gruesome and senseless homicides, which adopts its victims as a physical host before feasting on their brains to leave just their corpses. It was adapted from his own original novel, published by Kadokawa in 1997, which also spawned numerous other published works and a TV series, scripted and part-directed by the director. Since then, his only other film has been *Dragon Head* (*Doragon heddo*, 2003), a dystopic fantasy set in future Japan but shot in Uzbekistan, which at the time was hyped for its ground-breaking use of CGI (for a Japanese live-action feature, at least), although he is still prevalent in television and fiction writing.

While lida's version of *Spiral* signals paths not taken within the wider film series, it is worth pointing out that it was not the final attempt at bringing Suzuki's second Sadako novel to the screen. In 1999, Fuji TV took a stab at combining both the *Ringu* and *Spiral* stories in the 12-part series *Ringu: The Final Chapter* (*Ringu: Saishūshō*) which, as its title spells out, should have been the last word on the subject, were it not for its massive popularity with viewers. Unwilling to give up the ghost, the producers curiously decided to adapt it again, with the 13-part *Spiral* TV series airing a few months later that same year, although this time the story was effectively a direct continuation from the earlier series, its various plot strands spiralling ever further away from Suzuki's original.

Jasper Sharp is a film critic specializing in Japanese cinema and the author of Behind the Pink Curtain (2008) and The Historical Dictionary of Japanese Cinema (2011). He is the co-director of The Creeping Garden (2014), a documentary about plasmodial slime moulds.



RINGU2

リング2

Original release date: 23 January 1999
95 minutes

CAST

Miki Nakatani Mai Takano
Rikiya Otaka Yōichi Asakawa
Nanako Matsushima Reiko Asakawa
Yōichi Numata Takashi Yamamura
Rie Inō Yamamura Sadako
Mebuki Tsuchida Young Sadako
Kyoko Fukada Kanae Sawaguchi

Hitomi Satō Masami Kurahashi
Yūrei Yanagi Okazaki
Hiroyuki Sanada Ryuji Takayama
Fumiyo Kohinata Ishi Kawajiri
Kenjiro Ishimaru Detective Keiji Omuta
Masako Shizuko Yamamura

CREW

Directed by **Hideo Nakata**
Screenplay by **Hiroshi Takahashi**
Story by **Koji Suzuki**
Produced by **Takashige Ichise** and **Makoto Ishihara**
Executive Producer **Masato Hara**
Director of Photography **Hideo Yamamoto**
Music by **Kenji Kawai**
Production Designer **Iwao Saitō**
Film Editor **Nobuyuki Takahashi**





EXPLORING THE CHAOS AND TECHNOPHOBIA IN *RINGU 2*

by Kieran Fisher

Following the success of *Ringu* and the failure of the original sequel, *Spiral (Rasen)*, 1998), the *Ringu* franchise found itself at a crossroads. Audiences clearly weren't enamored of the direction *Spiral* took, but that unfortunate misfire wasn't to be the death knell for this spooky saga. So, in a bid to get the series back up and running, the producers fast-tracked a brand new sequel that would mark a return to the series' supernatural roots and deviate from Koji Suzuki's literary source material.

Their first move was to bring back the people who helped make the first movie the highest grossing Japanese horror film ever at the time. Hideo Nakata returned to oversee the project. So did Hiroshi Takahashi, who penned the script, along with core cast members who reprised their roles from the first instalment. Things were looking up again.

Ringu 2 was released in January 1999 as a double bill with Shinichi Nagasaki's chiller *Shikoku*. The gamble they took in retconning the previous attempt at a sequel was worth it in the end: *Ringu 2* was a big box office success, earning 2.1 billion yen during its theatrical release. More importantly, though, the sequel re-established the mythos and themes that *Ringu* introduced, thus becoming the official second entry in the franchise's canon.

Picking up a week or so after the events of *Ringu*, the story follows Mai (Miki Nakatani) who, still mourning the death of her colleague, Ryuji (Hiroyuki Sanada), tracks down Reiko (Nanako Matsushima), who has disappeared with her young son, Yôichi (Rikiya Otaka). Naturally, it doesn't take long until Mai's investigation leads her into the heart of darkness. All of a sudden, the urban legend of the cursed tape doesn't seem like some made-up folktale after all.

Proceedings commence with a surprising revelation. The opening scenes depict an autopsy on Sadako's resurfaced corpse, the results of which reveal that she'd only been dead for a couple of years when her physical body was exhumed from its watery tomb. That's right – Sadako survived at the bottom of the well for thirty years before she eventually bit the dust. This makes her anger towards the world somewhat understandable and, to an extent, justified. You might even sympathize with her.

With the follow-up, Nakata and co don't set out to divert from the tried and tested formula that made the first movie such a critically acclaimed hit. Like the first film, *Ringu 2* is interested in horror that cultivates atmosphere and a sense of dread, as opposed to pushing the boundaries of violence and acceptability.

Ringu 2's framework is similar to its predecessor in some regards. Both movies are essentially detective mysteries led by strong female protagonists, both of whom possess maternal qualities that come to light when protecting Yōichi becomes their ultimate priority. Furthermore, both movies reach their climaxes in water. However, the sequel is still very much its own beast, and there are some eerie surprises in store for viewers looking for nightmare fuel and some depressing thoughts to ponder for good measure.

This instalment further explores ideas pertaining to society and humanity that were introduced in Nakata's inaugural franchise entry. Some of these themes have since become trademarks of the director's work – a filmography that's littered with stories about loners, deep-seated concerns about technology, collective fears, a fascination with water. By no means is *Ringu 2* the most notable film in Nakata's impressive oeuvre, but his distinct stamp is peppered all over it.

As is commonplace in Nakata's horror offerings, *Ringu 2* examines the relationship between Japan's traditional past and modernity. In this case, Sadako unleashing horrors on those who witness the cursed videotape represents a native past invading a technologically advanced contemporary society. As Peter Hutchings notes, 'the Japanese tradition of the vengeful female ghost was here intertwined with modern technology in a way that made technology itself appear ghostly and alienating'.¹

Thanks to the popularity of the first two *Ringu* movies, this notion of old versus new was a cornerstone of the Japanese horror boom during the pre- and post-millennium golden age. Popular chillers that followed in the wake of *Ringu* and its sequel, such as *Dark Water (Honogurai mizu no soko kara, 2002)* and *Ju-on: The Grudge (2002)*, effectively resurrected old-school Japanese horror staples and applied them to swanky new social settings. Sadako, however, remains the poster spook that all others aspire to be like.

In *Ringu 2*, Sadako's ghostly form – which is reminiscent of the *onryō* spectres of native folktales and horror stories – appearing on TV screens is one way in which we're reminded of Japan's traditional heritage imposing itself on modern times. This clashing of elements is further enhanced through Sadako's projected image of mirrors. Throughout history, mirrors have been associated with superstitions, myths, legends, and religious customs, some of which are synonymous with death and the supernatural. Naturally, these surfaces lend themselves perfectly to horror cinema and are commonly depicted as passages for spirits to make their presence known in our world.

The most prominent mirror to appear in *Ringu 2* is heavily linked to Japan's spiritual past and cultural identity. This oval-shaped object is significant to Shintoism and boasts a myriad of meanings. For example, it is believed that the oval mirror functions as a spirit-body which allows corporeal entities to take physical form, thus acting as a connection between the land of the living and the realm of the dead. In native mythology, the oval mirror embodied the sun goddess, Amaterasu, but she's not the only spirit believed to communicate through this device. Needless to say, this reflective surface has a supernatural legacy that isn't horrific per se, but in the right hands could be re-envisioned as such.

1 - Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema*. 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) 231

Ringu 2 doesn't feature Amaterasu, but the film portrays the mirror to spine-chilling effect by showing Sadako's dead mother's reflection as she calmly combs her hair. The first time we see her, the image is so off-putting that it makes our terrified protagonist smash up a television, rip the videotape to shreds, and faint. In another scene she breaks a mirror hanging on the wall, not caring that she probably inherited seven years of bad luck by doing so. The image of the oval mirror and its supernatural connotations alone are enough to send a shiver down one's spine. At the same time, these scenes reinforce the notion that the past is invading the present to disturb progress and unleash chaos.

Disrupting societal progress is Sadako's thing, though, and her chaotic nature is brought to the forefront in *Ringu 2*. As Katarzyna Ancuta highlights in her essay 'Ringu and the Vortex of Horror', Sadako is the incarnation of chaos, 'threatening and terrifying to the Japanese order'.² We can blame the spirit's mother and troubled family life for making her this way.

Ringu 2 proposes that Sadako's desire to disrupt the modern order stems from the fact she's the product of a broken family unit. In the film, Sadako's uncle tells Mai that she was born in a cave by the sea, where unwanted babies were left in the hopes the tide would sweep in and take them away. Unfortunately, the waves decided not to take Sadako on that day. As if that's not enough drama, we also discover in this film that Sadako's father is a mystery, suggesting that she's possibly illegitimate. The next instalment in the series explores her origins in more detail, but that's another story for another day.

The *Ringu* movies also propose that chaos affects children. That explains why some youngsters were victimized by Sadako and her evil ways. In *Ringu 2*, Yōichi, a child of divorce and eventually, an orphan, is possessed by her spirit for a substantial portion of the film. However, when you look at all of the young people in the *Ringu* movies, they are inexplicably linked to chaos and disorder in one way or another.

Following the country's recession in the early 1990s and the subsequent socio-economic downturn and deprived social conditions, unemployment spiked and crime rates rose, including among the youth. As a result, young people became more reclusive, alienated, or deviant. That's why so many horror films from this period were full of broken homes and revolved around members of the youth population who weren't normal by conventional standards.

Ringu 2's commentary isn't unique when compared to other films produced during the time period. Like its peers, the film merely addresses the collective anxieties felt by a nation where many on the populace felt that order was collapsing. Horror cinema observed the events and responded accordingly, as it always should.

In *Ringu* and the sequel, teenagers aren't a major focal point of each film's narrative. But they are the root cause of the tape's legend spreading, which of course leads to some havoc unfolding. In some cases, they can even be directly blamed for the harm caused by the cursed video. In *Ringu 2*, Masami (Hitomi Sato), an institutionalized teenager whose friend was killed by Sadako in the first movie, is presented as a danger to those around her when she's in close proximity to a television set. Her exposure to the tape in the past has made her an agent of Sadako's chaos, even if it's not by choice.

2 - Katarzyna Ancuta, 'Ringu and the Vortex of Horror: Contemporary Japanese Horror and the Technology of Chaos' in *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society*. (Vol. 1, No. 1, February 2007)



Masami's journey is shrouded in misery from the outset of the *Ringu* series. By the time the sequel ends, she's hit rock bottom and then some.

Of course, all the madness that occurs in *Ringu 2* is caused by scary images appearing on screens. If horror cinema has taught us anything throughout the years, it's that technology is just as detrimental to our well-being as spirits, killers, monsters, and other rascals intent on causing harm. Even though she's reminiscent of the silky-haired vengeful spirits from Japan's supernatural lore, Sadako is a technologically-defined spook that not only symbolizes a collective fear of chaos, but also humankind's obsession with machines.

This viewpoint is echoed by critic Jui-Hua Tseng, who claims the film reflects the way 'inhuman technology and machines dominate our lives and beings'. In the *Ringu* series, once the tape has been viewed, the curse is nearly impossible to break. People make copies of the tape, hoping to pass it on and get them off Sadako's radar, but what are they really accomplishing? The virus just spreads and dooms more unfortunate souls, much like technology is widespread and affecting everyone – for better or worse. But what kind of horror film would this be if it did not stress that technology is harmful?

This idea of technology controlling people is enforced in *Ringu 2* through the depiction of the tape's surviving victims as infected beings. Coming into contact with the cursed conduit and living to see another day has caused most of these poor souls to lose their identities and personalities. Those who've been affected act as Sadako's transmitters and end up spreading the contagious images. This is exemplified in a scene where Masami comes within range of a television set in the hospital and sends a room full of patients into an erratic state when the creepy images manifest onscreen. They really don't enjoy Sadako's idea of entertainment in this hospital.

The moral of the story is: humanity is a slave to technology and it will be as long as machines and devices pervade our daily lives. It's a grim and thoroughly bleak observation that unfortunately carries some weight. Still, this unapologetically negative worldview is what makes *Ringu 2* such an effective continuation of one of the most influential Asian horror films of all time. The tech-wary message is as strong as it was in the first film, and the chills are more than satisfying.

Unfortunately, not everyone appreciated *Ringu 2* upon release. Despite the film's success, the consensus was that the suspense and mystery of *Ringu* had been replaced with more conventional scare tactics and ghostly set-pieces. Since then, the sequel has been overshadowed by the original film's legacy and the American remake, which carved its own notable legacy in the prestigious halls of spooktacular cinema.

Maybe *Ringu 2* doesn't reach the same iconic heights as its predecessor, but no sequel was ever going to. Nakata captured lightning in a bottle with the original, and few horror movies have captured the pop culture imagination in quite the same way since. But, as a piece of spine-tingling fright fare that encourages us to be wary of technology becoming our overlord, it hits the spot quite nicely.

Kieran Fisher writes for Diabolique Magazine and Film School Rejects.





RINGUØ

リングØ バースデイ
Ringu Zero: Bāsudei

Original release date: **22 January 2000**
99 minutes

CAST

Yukie Nakama Sadako Yamamura
Seiichi Tanabe Hiroshi Toyama
Kumiko Aso Etsuko Tachihara
Takeshi Wakamatsu Yusaku Shigemori
Ryushi Mizukami Wataru Kuno
Kaoru Okunuki Aiko Hazuki
Yasuji Kimura Togashi

Daisuke Ban Heihachiro Ikuma
Masako Shizuko Yamamura
Mahito Ōba Takashi Yamamura
Kazue Tsunogae Mrs Sudo
Atsuko Takahata Kaoru Arima
Yoshiko Tanaka Akiko Miyaji

CREW

Directed by **Norio Tsuruta**
Screenplay by **Hiroshi Takahashi**
Based on the novel *Lemon Heart* by **Koji Suzuki**
Produced by **Takashige Ichise, Masao Nagai** and **Shinji Ogawa**
Executive Producer **Masato Hara**
Director of Photography **Takahide Shibanushi**
Music by **Shinichiro Ogata**
Production Designer **Shū Yamaguchi**
Film Editor **Hiroshi Sunaga**





IF I COULD BE REBORN: BECOMING SADAKO

by Kat Ellinger

Twenty years on from the release of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), the character of Sadako Yamamura is firmly established in the lexicon of horror monsters, as an internationally recognised folk devil. The long black hair, obscuring a (perhaps) hideously mutated face; the staring, singular eye; the white dress; the swagger, clicking bones and disjointed movement are all unmistakable. And yet, in Norio Tsuruta's prequel *Ringu 0 (Ringu Zero: Bāsuidei, 2000)*, what we find is nothing of this terror, at least not for most of the duration of the film. Instead what is revealed is a poignant tale of a girl who just wants to fit in but is rejected as an outsider by the rest of the members of the theater troupe she has joined. She is human, just like us, and has the same hopes, fears, dreams and insecurities. This essay will explore how the construction of Sadako holds a connection to traditional Japanese ghost stories and Western horror, in both the prequel and Hideo Nakata's original film.

The idea to humanize a monster might seem novel to Western audiences – although Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* admittedly falls into this territory – but if you delve into traditional Japanese ghost tales (*Kaidan*, an oral tradition dating back to the 1600s), it was common practice. In Japan, death comes with its own set of responsibilities based on a combination of Buddhist and Shinto practices. Any number of factors, if ignored or neglected, in the immediate post-death period can cause a spirit to remain tied to the earth. Western ghosts revolve around similar ideas, in that they are entities left on earth due to some sort of unfinished business. However, this is where the likeness ends.

This is the major difference between Japanese horror and its Western counterpart. Western horror descended from Gothic fiction, which is founded on a Judeo-Christian belief system. At the heart of this is the concept of sin, which Gothic literature has continued to explore over the last two centuries. Within this paradigm, ghosts have become separated from the living and are instead constructed in terms of an invading outsider with the potential to corrupt. The fact that a ghost was once a living person, part of this world and everyday life, is all but forgotten. By contrast, in Japan, things are not so clear cut. The dead remain part of life long after they have moved on and their needs are considered just as important as those of the living. If something goes wrong, it is up to the living to ensure the restless spirit can move on to the next life, in order to attain eventual enlightenment, transcendence, or rebirth. In essence, ghosts (known as *yūrei*) in Japan never lose their connection to humanity, no matter how vengeful they may become.

Zack Davisson, in his study on *yūrei*, organizes the spirits into two distinct groups: ghosts of love and ghosts of hate.¹ There are many different kinds of *yūrei* that fall into these two camps. For example, *Funayūrei* are spirits that have died at sea and haunt sailors. There is the *Kosodate yūrei*, the mother spirit, bound by maternal obligation, who remains in *kono-yo* (“the living world”) to care for her child; while the *Ubume*, or birth woman, stays behind in order to carry and give birth to her child. The *yūrei* that Western horror fans are most likely to recognise is the *onryō*, or grudge spirit, and it is to this latter camp which Sadako belongs. While contrasting the evolution of *kaidan* films with Western horror in his study *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*, Davisson proposes that

yūrei [...] have passed through time rigidly, refusing to bow to zeitgeist and fashion. This immutability adds authenticity and a sense of reality. Scaring someone with a vampire has become difficult; they are too much monsters of cinema and long since disassociated with their roots. By contrast, a glimpse of a white face with dark eyes and darker hair, black and wriggling like Medusa’s serpents, is enough to make even the most stalwart heart shudder [...] There is a sense that Dracula and the Wolfman are clearly fictitious, *yūrei* are real. Real life is always scarier than fiction.²

The writer highlights that in Japanese culture there are three ghosts that stand head-and-shoulders above the others: Oiwa, Otsuya, and Okiku. Collectively they are known as *San O-yūrei* (*Three Great yūrei*). Davisson states: ‘Since they first made their appearances – Otsuya in 1666 and Oiwa in 1825 – they have been a constant part of Japanese storytelling, perennial characters re-invented and re-told for each successive generation.’³

In making *Ringu*, Hideo Nakata drew heavily from *kaidan* tradition. As he explains,

During the pre-production of *Ringu* I watched many horror movies; American, British, and Japanese. *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (*The Ghost of Yotsuya*, 1959) by Nobuo Nakagawa influenced me most. It was a very traditional ghost story, which played at *kabuki* theater and has been remade several times as films as well.⁴

Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan is one of the nastiest sagas to spring from *kaidan*. This is probably why it translates so well to horror cinema. As well as evil characters, the disfigured ghost at the center of the action offers so much potential for the grotesque visual themes that horror thrives upon. This original play on which the later films were based features Oiwa, the archetype of the dramatic vengeful ghost, and consists of five acts. Act one introduces the character of lemon, Oiwa’s husband, a despicable ronin who kills his father-in-law following a heated argument. lemon then forms a pact with another

murderer, by the name of Naosuke, and together they put the blame for their consecutive killings on someone else’s shoulders. During act two, Oiwa’s face is horribly disfigured with poison by a love rival, causing lemon to call off their marriage. He plans to have her raped, so that he can blame her for infidelity and marry the other girl, but things go awry. Instead, Oiwa accidentally kills herself after facing her own reflection, and she curses lemon with her last breath. The final three acts involve lemon’s descent into madness following the curse. Oiwa returns to wreak revenge, causing lemon to kill his new bride on their wedding night, as well as her family.

Although *Ringu 0* focuses more on Sadako’s ‘normal’ life and eventual becoming, we see a similar plot structure develop. Sadako, even as a monstrous grudge spirit, is the victim of the piece. She enters the theater troupe in good faith, wanting to do well, but struggles to fit in because of her obvious otherness. She is bullied by the other members of the troupe, who eventually send her over the edge, when there is nowhere else for her to turn. It is her vengeance which is eventually unleashed when Sadako becomes an *onryō*. Beyond the film, as we know from the earlier *Ringu* films, this revenge then takes on a life of its own through a cursed video tape.

The second of the *San O-yūrei* to which the *Ringu* franchise owes a great debt is Okiku, who is less represented in cinema than her two counterparts, Otsuya and Oiwa. That doesn’t mean her presence cannot be felt, however. It is also important to note that, of the three, Okiku has more folktale variants than the others. The basic story, *Banchō Sarayashiki*, weaves the tragic tale of a servant girl who breaks a valuable plate, and commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. She returns nightly as a *yūrei* to count the plates. The story was initially filmed in 1914, and again in 1927. 1957’s *Banchō Sarayashiki* (*The Ghost in the Well*) is one of the few versions available. It is interesting because of the way it changes the relationship between Okiku and the Lord to illicit lovers who defy their master/servant dynamic. The pair are engaged in a deep love affair, but the Lord is promised to a woman of aristocratic standing. When Okiku accidentally damages one of the plates intended for a wedding gift, it sparks a row, ending in her bloody death. She returns from the well to haunt her lover, until they can be together again in death.

Okiku also differs from her peers in that she is a spirit tied to a certain physical location – a trope later seen in the series of *Grudge* films – rather than a curse or person. Similarly, the idea of a spirit lurking in the bottom of a well also crops up in *Ringu*. Nakata’s later film, *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002), another adaptation of Koji Suzuki’s work from the short story collection of the same name, replaces a well with an enclosed water tank in a similar line of thinking. *Ringu 0* departs from the well motif (until its closing, damning frames), but it does feature the notion of romance with a dangerous flavor, somewhat in line with the Okiku tale.

Hiroshi Takahashi’s screenplay for the film takes something of a departure from Koji Suzuki’s original story *Lemon Heart*, upon which *Ringu 0* is based. It is within this transgression that some of the film’s most Western influences come into play. Suzuki’s text takes the form of a short story, which appears as part of the collection *Birthday* (*Basudei*) – which was published in 1999 and constitutes the fourth edition in Suzuki’s overall *Ringu* saga. The book contains three tales set in the *Ringu* universe – *Lemon*

1 - Zack Davisson, *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. (Seattle: Chin Music Press, 2015)

2 - Op. cit. 161

3 - Op. cit. 87

4 - Kat Ellinger, ‘From Kwaidan, to Kaidan: Hideo Nakata discusses the evolution of Japanese horror cinema: Interview with Hideo Nakata’ in *Diabolique Magazine* 27 (Summer 2017)



Heart is the third – all of which relate to the themes of death and rebirth (in one tale, Sadako is literally reborn in human form). Like the film, *Lemon Heart* takes place in a theatrical setting, and Sadako is an intern who is due to take her first major role on stage, when she is called in as the understudy replacement because the main actress falls sick. This is where the similarity between text and film ends. Suzuki's Sadako in *Lemon Heart*, while demonstrating some form of psychic power, appears to have no backstory linking to her mother's humiliation, when her own powers are made into a spectacle.

Although the girl is described as lacking in confidence – something which later is revealed to be a ruse – she is generally accepted by the rest of the troupe. And no such ending featuring a double, or her becoming a monstrous spirit – as depicted in the film – is featured. In fact, Suzuki's story falls more into the 'ghosts of love' category, regardless of the fact that there appears to be some spite in Sadako, both alive and in spirit form, and ends on a somewhat upbeat, yet tragic note, in direct contrast to the film's punch-to-the-gut conclusion.

Beyond Japanese *kaidan* tradition. *Ringu 0*'s biggest contextual reference seems to come from a Western influence, given the film has a distinct flavor of Stephen King's *Carrie*. King's famous 1974 novel tells the story of Carrie White, a teenage girl with newly forming psychic powers, who is heavily bullied by her peers. In a similar style, early on in *Ringu 0* characters become suspicious of Sadako because of her strange aura. When unexplained deaths befall some of the troupe, it is Sadako who becomes the main suspect, and it is the violence, provoked by fear and suspicion of the girl, that leads to her becoming a monster.

In many ways, the original *Carrie* is a Gothic novel, because of its puritan themes, which do not carry over to *Ringu 0*. However, the film does form its own association to Gothic through the interesting use of the double: Sadako's twin and evil alter-ego. Doubles are not solely exclusive to Western horror – take Kim Jee-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*, 2003), for example, which was based on a Joseon Dynasty Korean folktale *Janghwa Hongryeon jeon* – but they are integral to Gothic, much more than they are to Japanese *kaidan*. As far back as James Hogg's 1824 novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, doubles have been popping up in Gothic in order to explore the theme of duality; these can be literal doubles like the aforementioned text, or a dualism within a singular person, like, most famously, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). There is something distinctly Freudian about this line of thinking, playing off the 'good/bad' dichotomy and the notion of sin, which doesn't really exist in Japanese folk tales in the same way, because morality is presented as far more complex there. In fact, *Ringu 0* plays with the double in a similar way that Gothic does. The twin Sadako, this shadow self who has splintered off from the 'real' Sadako, is the concrete manifestation of negative thoughts and actions, as well as past trauma, which is then contrasted with the 'main' Sadako, who is innocent and sweet, representing a polar opposite. As a result, the unexpected appearance of twins provides the narrative with a strong theme of dualism that isn't present in the previous films, or Suzuki's core text – although the Sadako in *Lemon Heart* does appear to present two sides, good or bad, depending on who she is dealing with. For the film, Sadako, as two halves of an incomplete whole, is a literal Jekyll and Hyde character, and can be claimed by Gothic as a result.

In conclusion, if we take *Ringu 0* as Sadako's absolute origin story, one has to ask, how much of a monster is she really? Gothic elements aside, and thinking in terms of a purely *kaidan* tradition, despite the fact that by the end of the film she ends up a killer, the story gives a clear-cut reason why this must be the case. As with many *kaidan* tales, there is a certain cruel inevitability that things will never be able to end well for the girl, even when she finds love. This is the film's biggest strength, when you consider the Sadako in *Lemon Heart* doesn't have to endure the same trials and tribulations as her filmic counterpart. The film, by comparison, gives us a Sadako we can really relate to. Remembering that the grudge spirit was once human is an integral part of Japanese folklore, and therefore the *kaidan* tales borne from it. *Ringu 0* honors this, reminding us that Sadako is no exception to the rule.

Kat Ellinger is the Editor-in-Chief at Diabolique Magazine, and the co-host of their Daughters of Darkness and Hell's Belles podcasts. She has also written for BFI, Senses of Cinema, Fangoria and Scream Magazine, and is the author of All the Colours of Sergio Martino.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION: *RINGU*

Ringu has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with stereo and 5.1 audio.

The original 35mm camera negative element was scanned in 4K resolution at Imagica, Tokyo. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The stereo and 5.1 mixes were remastered from the original audio files at Deluxe Audio Services.

All materials for this restoration were made available by Kadokawa Corporation.

The grading was supervised and approved by Director of Photography Jun'ichirō Hayashi.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

R3Store Studios: Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Rich Watson, Nathan Leaman-Hill, Emily Kemp

Deluxe Audio Services: Jordan Perry

Kadokawa Corporation: Etsuko Furutsuki

Imagica: Mito Ryohei

Special thanks to Jun'ichirō Hayashi for his participation.

ABOUT THE TRANFERS: *SPIRAL, RINGU 2 AND RINGU 0*

Spiral, Ringu 2 and Ringu 0 are presented in their original 1.85:1 aspect ratio with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound. The High Definition masters were provided by Kadokawa Corporation.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and booklet produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering **David Mackenzie / Fidelity in Motion**
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Art and Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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