





CONTENTS

Cast and Crew

5

Coils of Trauma: Symbolism of a Snake Girl

by Raffael Coronelli

7

About the Transfer

15

THE SNAKE GIRL AND THE SILVER HAired WITCH

蛇娘と白髪魔 / *Hebi musume to hakuhatsuma*



CAST

Yachie Matsui Sayuri Nanjo
Mayumi Takahashi Tamami Nanjo
Yuko Hamada Yuko Nanjo
Sachiko Meguro Shige Kito
Sei Hiraizumi Tatsuya Hayashi
Yoshirō Kitahara Goro Nanjo
Kuniko Miyake Sister Yamakawa

CREW

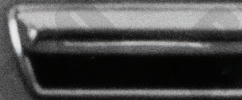
Directed by **Noriaki Yuasa**
Screenplay by **Kimiyuki Hasegawa**
Based on the manga *Hebi shōjo* by **Kazuo Umezu**
Cinematography by **Akira Uehara**
Music by **Shunsuke Kikuchi**
Art Director **Tomohisa Yano**
Lighting Director **Heihachi Kuboe**

This edition of *The Snake Girl and The Silver-Haired Witch*
is dedicated to the memory of

Shunsuke Kikuchi
(1931–2021)



京 王



COILS OF TRAUMA: SYMBOLISM OF A SNAKE GIRL

by Raffael Coronelli

An old house where terror lurks in the shadows and jumps out at night. Childhood traumas manifesting as ghastly apparitions. *The Snake Girl and the Silver-Haired Witch* (1968) is a gothic horror film if ever there was one, but one with deep and unique cultural roots. Behind its imagery is a tradition of Japanese folktales that plays directly into its complex themes and characterizations.

The late '60s were a big time for Daiei Studios in Japan. The "*kaiju* boom" heralded the box office high point of the *Gamera* series, and both their Kyoto and Tokyo studios produced a rapid-fire line of *tokusatsu* (special effects) films.

Following the successful release of *Gamera vs. Viras* (1968), and before he was scheduled to get to work on the next installment in Daiei's flagship giant turtle franchise, director Noriaki Yuasa had a release slot to fill with a totally different kind of film. As he later admitted, Yuasa had been tiring of the *Gamera* series by the time he directed its fourth installment. The large-scale special effects sequences were strenuous to shoot, as were the tight production schedules. Regardless of his personal feelings toward the series he launched, the films continued to make lots of money, and Daiei wanted more. Before going in for more *Gamera*, Yuasa needed something of a palate cleanser — another type of genre film on which he could regroup his ideas and creative energy.

The Snake Girl and the Silver-Haired Witch got the green light to fill Daiei's need for a second double-feature genre flick to bill with Yoshiyuki Kuroda's blockbuster period action-horror sequel *Yokai Monsters: Spook Warfare* (*Yokai Daisenso*, 1968). *Spook Warfare* was in production at their Kyoto studio, leaving the Tokyo branch to handle production of Yuasa's film, utilizing much of the crew he'd worked with on the *Gamera* films. Among them was legendary composer Shunsuke Kikuchi, who set the film to an eerie and unsettling theremin-heavy score. For the film's concept, they turned to the work of seminal horror manga artist and writer Kazuo Umezu.

Unlike the robust *Yokai* and *Gamera* productions, *Snake Girl* was a comparatively small-scale affair — but that was by design. Yuasa took the opportunity to craft a film out of shadow and claustrophobia, with surreal sequences to realize imagery from horror manga of the period and occult traditions of the past on screen in a live-action drama.

Folklore was always a major point of inspiration for Yuasa's genre films, and his approach to storytelling in general. When explaining his kaiju films in interviews, he often drew comparisons to traditional Japanese tales that portray animals with supernatural qualities, capable of metamorphosis and human-level intelligence. This point to which he continuously returned, that his monsters always contain a divine element that stems from the folklore of Japan, was how he differentiated his own films from those being produced in the West at that time. Tales of animals embarking on quests and encountering real and complex emotional turmoil informed how he would characterize his nonhuman creatures, which he viewed as direct extensions of classical Japanese storytelling.

With folklore so firmly planted at the forefront of Yuasa's mind and tastes as a filmmaker, it's no surprise that *The Snake Girl and the Silver-Haired Witch* contains numerous elements involving yokai, witchcraft, and the occult from Japan's past.

Some of the indirect lineage can be attributed to the other main creative force behind the film, *manga-ka* Kazuo Umezu. The witch character in particular is taken from Umezu's manga *Benigumo* (literally "Red Spider," 1965–1966). The manga's art style and scenes of a young girl being terrorized by a silver-haired witch formed much of the direction of the film's thriller approach. Umezu himself was drawing from a long line of Japanese ghost stories when he created his seminal manga, especially in the use of animals in conjunction with the witch's terrorizing attacks on young people.

Snake Girl opens with a shock as its first scene depicts a woman being killed by snakes, setting a dark tone for the proceedings and immediately establishing the animal as a major motif. More on that in a bit, as killing is one of the more tame acts snakes are implied to commit by the film's imagery and its cultural ties.

Young protagonist Sayuri (Yachie Matsui) moves from a Catholic orphanage to her family's home after they've spent years estranged from one another. Almost immediately, her aloof herpetologist father (*Gamera* series veteran Yoshirō Kitaharo) leaves to study a new poisonous snake in Africa — leaving Sayuri in an old, dark house with her amnesiac mother (an elegant Yuko Hamada), their housekeeper (Sachiko Meguro), and Sayuri's delinquent sister Tamami (Mayumi Takahashi in an intense performance), the latter of whom may not be what she seems. Several strange occurrences take place at the house's Buddhist shrine — an interesting juxtaposition with the Catholic imagery in the film's opening orphanage scenes.

In this confusing and traumatic environment amongst issues with her troubled family, Sayuri encounters apparitions and animals that manifest in her presence, including spiders (reminiscent of Umezu's manga) and continuing the film's recurring motif, snakes. Repeatedly, Sayuri finds herself tangled in snakes as they drop out of the ceiling over her bed, launch themselves at her, and materialize around her at the behest of a malevolent, terrorizing presence and her own psyche as she struggles to free herself from their coils — both literally and metaphorically.

Amongst all of this are the titular characters, between whom Sayuri is caught. Both bring to mind traditional concepts — the witch in a more straightforward way, as she represents a type of malevolent force common in many cultures' storytelling. The "snake girl," however, is something more specific.

The use of snakes and the design of the snake girl are not just an aesthetic choice, or something conjured by Umezu or Yuasa out of thin air for the film, but a deliberate tie to a long-standing connection between snakes and the Japanese occult. The concept of witches' familiars is a western concept that nonetheless has a strong equivalent in Japanese tradition. In Japan, there are two animals in particular that are especially witch-related.



The most common witch's animal in Japan is the fox, a creature said to possess supernatural ability of its own in countless yokai stories of foxes transforming into humans or humanoid beings. The other — slightly less common, with stories mainly emerging from the southern Shikoku island — is the snake.

Foxes and snakes are often *tsukimono*, or possessing beings. They take up residence in a human host and possess them, either out of malice, or by command of some other malevolence. While not explicitly stated, it's overwhelmingly clear that this is the origin of the titular "snake girl" in the film, though she's ultimately a metaphoric dream figure and not something to be taken literally in the story. The split mouth, the snake-like features, and her strange and inhuman behavior all suggest that the girl is a human possessed by a *hebi-tsuki*, specifically a snake *tsukimono*.

Hebi-tsuki are more spirit than normal snake. While they appear exactly like the mundane animal, they are actually monstrous, mystical beings — a type of *yokai*. Some versions of the hebi-tsuki are described more like worms than reptiles, which might offer a clue to the story's origin. Tapeworms or other parasites may have formed the basis for an occult idea that a serpentine being could enter a human host and cause horrific physical damage from the inside.

In the scenes where Sayuri finds herself attacked by swarming snakes, the animals' exact motivation remains obtuse. However, the connection between the witch's animals and their weird tendencies in occult tales is too prominent to dismiss the notion that they had motives of their own. Moreover, the snake girl is quite obviously a hebi-tsuki herself. It's possible that, as in folktales of attacks by such supernatural creatures, these attacking snakes are hebi-tsuki attempting to possess Sayuri and turn her into a second snake girl — entrapping her in the strange and miserable existence of her sister, into whose presence she's suddenly been thrown.

This would certainly make the implications of the snake attack scenes far more skin-crawling and insidious. Yuasa is on record as a firm believer in animal characters having concrete and complex motivations, like in fables. If he intended the scenes with any such motivation in mind, it would likely have drawn from stories with which he and the Japanese public were familiar.

Such stories of possession by hebi-tsuki involve the creature physically entering the body of the victim like a parasitic worm and living there, taking over and controlling their will and corporeal form — sometimes to amass power as a possessed human, or sometimes to simply eat things with their newly acquired human mouth.

Behind these motivations might even be a human being who unleashed them as a means of attacking and taking control of an enemy. These sorcerers may not have resembled the Kazuo Umezu silver-haired witch exactly, but even that design brings to mind traditional *ukiyo-e* depictions of demon women terrorizing unsuspecting mortals.

The resulting possession would often be dealt with through a Buddhist exorcism ceremony, a way of casting out the power of the occult and the physically absorbed animal within. Interestingly, the snake girl's first glimpse is provided through a Buddhist shrine. In this film, however, the snake girl is an apparition in Sayuri's psyche and not an actual monster, bypassing the need for such a literal solution. However, Yuasa was an outspoken litterateur of these types of tales, so the allusions in the mind of the audience created by association are likely part of the film's intended horror.

What makes this connection more than likely is that it entirely ties in as a metaphor for Sayuri's psychological struggle. Her family live a depressing existence, one that she repeatedly tries to make the best of and accept. After they'd discarded her for years to live elsewhere, even by accident, she's suddenly pulled back into their strange, messy lives. The newly established ties between Sayuri and her formerly estranged sister are like hebi-tsuki coiling around her to turn her into something less like the person she was or wants to be, represented by the doll she carries with her on her arrival, and more like her tragic sister, represented by a frightening creature of legend.

Shot in atmospheric black and white, *Snake Girl* has plenty of bite when it comes to actual horror. Death scenes contain stabbing and blood, and there is fairly startling

imagery throughout. The special effects by the Daiei Tokyo staff under Yuasa's seasoned SFX direction are executed with style. There's one moment in particular where Yuasa can't seem to help himself from going full monster movie, and fans of his other films will recognize familiar sound effects. Mostly, though, it's a totally different and surprising direction for the filmmaker — a tight, elegant, and disturbing look into a little girl's damaged psyche and the family that caused it.

For Yuasa, the change of pace while directing *Snake Girl* was exactly the creative breath of fresh air he needed. He and his Tokyo Daiei crew immediately came roaring back to Gamera with arguably the most outlandish and original installment in the entire series, *Gamera vs. Guiron* (1969), in which Yuko Hamada again plays a memorably domineering mother.

A dark, gothic drama feels at odds with much of Daiei's late 60s *tokusatsu* output, but *Snake Girl* operates on levels that will surprise its audience. For fans of the director, it delivers a side of his oeuvre otherwise unseen. For fans of Japanese horror, it draws from deep in the culture and delivers multifaceted metaphors and characters. When watching, try to keep some of that knowledge of snake yokai and witch animals in mind, and see what you make of how such fantastic sights relate to the horror of real-life childhood trauma.

Raffael Coronelli is the author of How to Have an Adventure in Northern Japan, Daikaiju Yuki, and other books.



Poster for the original theatrical double bill of *The Snake Girl and the Silver-Haired Witch* with *Yokai Monsters: Spook Warfare* (1968).

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Snake Girl and the Silver-Haired Witch is presented in its original 2.35:1 aspect ratio with its original mono soundtrack. The High Definition master was produced by Imagica Lab, Tokyo in 2021 and supplied to Arrow Films by Kadokawa Pictures. Additional optimization was completed at R3store Studios, London.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Flower**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**

QC **Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Authoring **Leroy Moore, The Engine House Media Services**

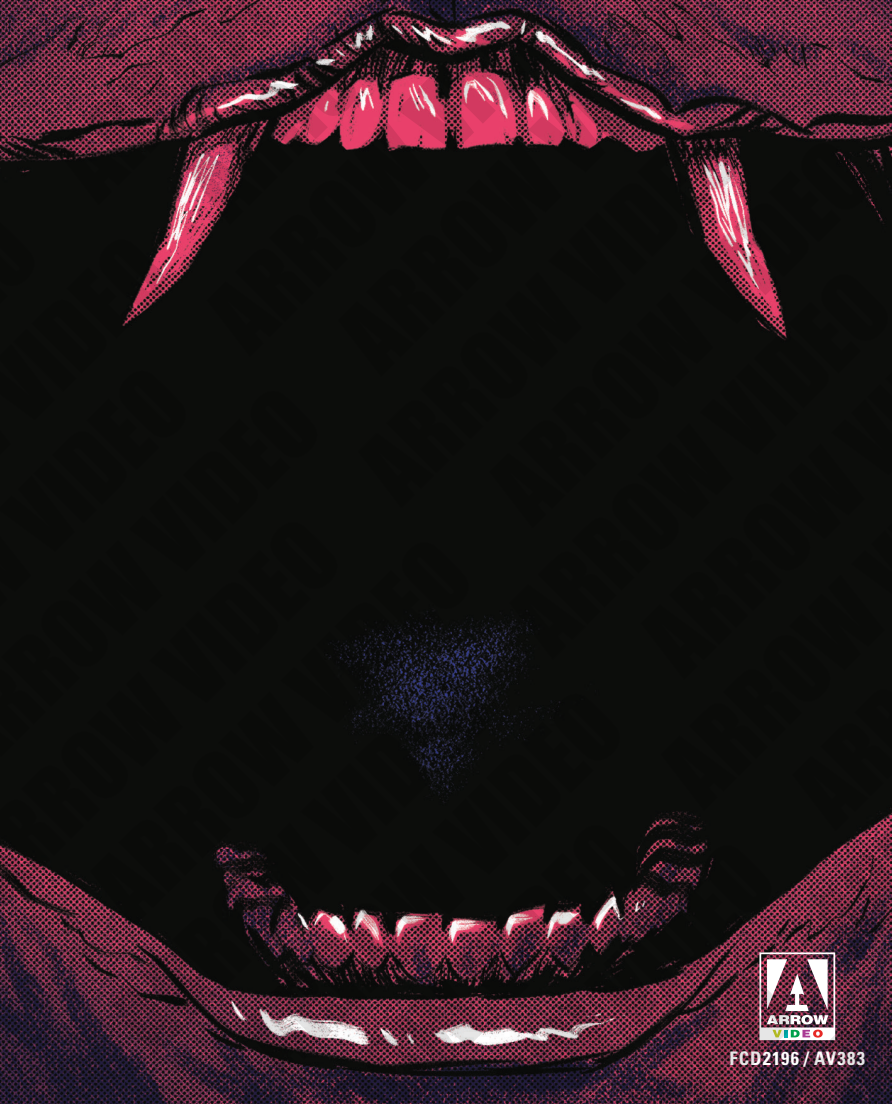
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artwork **Mike-Lee Graham**

Design **Scott Saslow**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Sarah Appleton, Raffael Coronelli, Zack Davisson,
David Kalat, Chiyo Mori, Shoko Yoneda



FCD2196 / AV383