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Science Fiction

Don't look now

Steven Poole tastes postmodern Japanese terror with Koji Suzuki's Ring, the novel behind a cult film

Saturday June 19, 2004
[The Guardian](#)

Ring

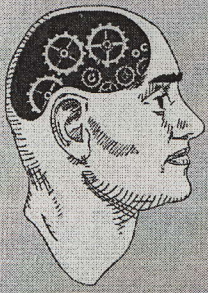
by Koji Suzuki, translated by Robert B Rohmer and Glynne Walley
284pp, HarperCollins, £10

It begins in minutely described urban banality, as we tour a modern housing development in Yokohama, Japan. Then a single gruesome simile: "A maze of pipes and conduits crawled along the factory walls like blood vessels on muscle tissue." From here on, Ring plays off two sets of imagery: the contemporary, hi-tech world of cities and audiovisual gadgetry, and the more visceral cluster of flesh, soil and darkness. **On a larger scale, the novel evokes a postmodern Japan that is unable quite to shake off the ghosts of ancient religion. Here be demons.**



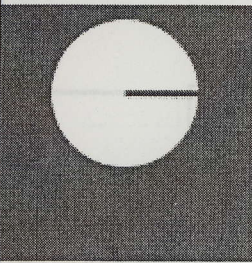
[Buy Ring at Amazon.co.uk](#)

Those who have seen and so cannot forget Hideo Nakata's **seminal 1998 Japanese horror film**, Ring (remade for a parochial anglophone audience as The Ring in 2002), will know the broad outlines of the story, since it was based on Suzuki's novel, which is only now translated into English. Four teenagers die in inexplicable circumstances. It turns out they all watched a certain videotape. Whoever watches the tape will die in exactly one week. The tape originally contained instructions to avoid this fate, but they have been recorded over with a TV chat-show. Investigating the teenagers' deaths, a journalist watches the videotape too, and must now solve the puzzle before time runs out.



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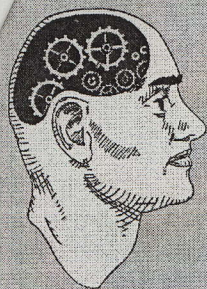
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In the novel, the journalist, Asakawa, is a whisky-loving, Tokyo-based family man who suspects that there is more to the world than modern science accounts for. He enlists the help of his friend Ryuji, a seemingly amoral professor and self-avowed rapist, as they travel through urban and rural Japan to try to discover who made the video and what she wants. While he is away from home, Asakawa's wife and child also watch the video, so that his entire family is doomed if he does not succeed.

Suzuki builds tension brilliantly early on: the details he accumulates on the page are banal in themselves, but the narrative voice lurches among them like a stalker-camera, or a malevolent spirit. This is especially well done in the opening scene, which, true to horror tradition, depicts the demise of a young woman; and at a moment when a simple pane of glass is considered as an animate object. Elsewhere time is made to stop while the narrator concentrates lovingly on motorcycle oil pooling like blood on tarmac.

The scene when Asakawa sees the tape, along with the reader, for the first time, invites comparisons with Nakata's film, in which grainy fragments of inexplicably dreadful images from the tape, such as a woman brushing her hair, combined with unspeakable sound effects, are distributed throughout. When we read a long, shot-by-shot account of the fatal video, the effect is quite different. Its initial warning, "YOU WILL BE EATEN BY THE LOST", is followed by lengthily described scenes of a volcano, a Japanese name, an old woman, hundreds of faces contorted by hatred, and more. Then Asakawa receives the fateful phone call that sets his future time of death. The sound from the receiver is evoked gruesomely: "Something was swirling around in a dark, cramped place."

But inevitably the book's presentation of the video feels more like an intriguing puzzle than a sensuous demonstration of evil, and the last two-thirds of the novel degenerates somewhat, with wooden conversations about the paranormal, minor characters proffering helpful confessions just at the right moment, and the sense of leisurely dread conjured by the opening seemingly abandoned. This is not helped by an extremely annoying translation into American slang: Japanese characters saying "Darn it!" creates a rather unhelpful cognitive dissonance.

In his film, Nakata took the concept and situation from Suzuki's novel and fashioned a fearsome sensory assault. In the end, for this story about the murderous impact of a visual artefact, the visual medium has proven superior. Suzuki's hero remarks in surprise on one scene in the video, in which a name appears on an old-fashioned

television set: "Not a play within a play, but a TV within a TV." Such giddy recursions are more potent shown than told, and there is nothing in Suzuki's superior potboiler to match Nakata's most horrible invention, in which the enemy breaks down the "fourth wall" of television itself.

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