Chicago Tribune
Koji Suzki 2005 Mar. 23

MOVIES

'Ring' fever spreads new wave of ho

By Dan Dinello
Special to the Tribune

A demonic black-haired ghost-girl crawled, spiderlike, out of a television and into our heads, helping make "The Ring" one of the most disturbing horror movies of recent years. "The Ring's" terror felt new. Yet that 2002 film, and its recently released sequel, "Ring Two," arrive at the end of a Japanese "Ring" phenomenon that launched with the 1991 publication of the original novel by Koji Suzuki.

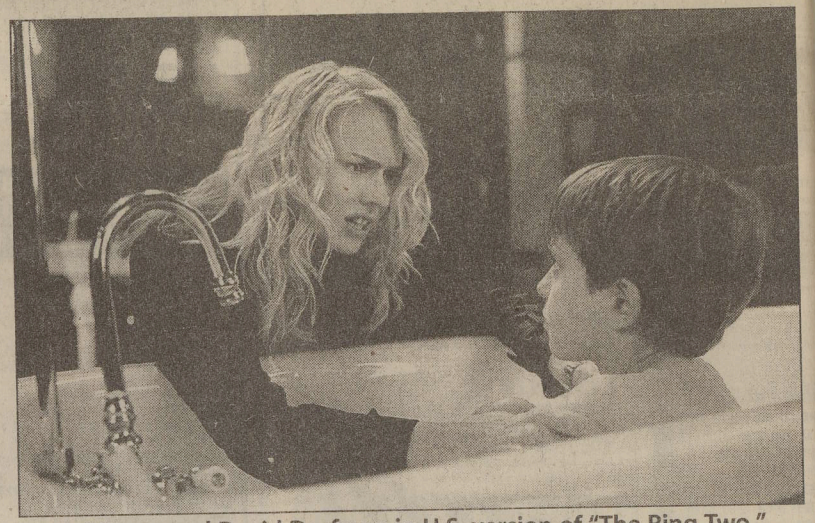
The Japanese Stephen King, he has sold more than 10 million copies of his books. In "Ring," Suzuki imagined the tormented, vengeful ghost of a raped and murdered girl, Sadako (named Samara in the American movie adaptation), who psychically creates a surreal videotape that kills anyone who sees it. Evoking occult beliefs, ancient spiritualism and contemporary anxieties, the story resonated wildly with the Japanese public, who embraced Sadako as an all-pervasive boogey-woman.

Movies and merchandise

"Ring"-mania spread like a media infection with a 12-episode TV mini-series, a radio drama, two Suzuki sequels — "Spiral" and "Loop" — eight manga comic books, several attractions at the mega-arcade Joypolis, an art exhibit, a video game, toys, pens, mugs, T-shirts, "well-water" tea and even an onion-Ring burger. The 1998 film adaptation, "Ringu," by director Hideo Nakata, became the highest-grossing horror film in Japanese history, broke attendance records all over Asia and spawned four film sequels, a Korean remake, the American remake and the new DreamWorks film "Ring Two," which is directed by Nakata.

The roots of the "Ring" phenomenon twist back through the history of Japanese culture and traditions. Despite being rooted in contemporary media technology, the "Ring" re-scans an ancient archetype — the vengeful female spirit or demon ("hannya") that has haunted Japanese culture for thousands of years.

"In Japanese folklore, Kabuki theater and Noh drama, female ghosts are motivated by anger and resentment," says Susan J. Napier of the Asian Studies Department at the University of Texas. "There's lots of ghost-women who have been raped and murdered and who return to wreak horrible vengeance." Like these wronged women, Sadako/Samara elicits our sympathy and our fear because her murderous motive springs from human brutality.



Naomi Watts and David Dorfman in U.S. version of "The Ring Two."

While this social dimension suggests how an intrinsically Japanese figure captured the world's imagination, the surprisingly un-horrific catalyst for the "Ring" craze looks at his creation logically, biologically and philosophically.

"I'm not really interested in the occult," says author Suzuki, who has also published child-rearing books. Looking at the "Ring's" global popularity, Suzuki suggests that his horror books are frighteningly compelling because they evoke humanity's precarious nature. "Humans march along between order and chance, the ridge along the abyss of chaos," he says.

Our vulnerability derives less from the spirit world and more from our own biology. "Sadako is a metaphor for viruses," he says. The ring is a pattern of infection rippling outward. The pestilential videotape will kill unless the infected human-carrier replicates it and spreads the disease, symbolizing "a plague which could destroy all mankind, the unleashing of some apocalyptic evil."

Beyond gore

After several decades of mostly brain-bashing horror movies, American audiences seem ready for something new. Gore Verbinski's version of "The Ring" opened the floodgates for other U.S. adaptations of Asian horror films, most of which feature enraged ghosts of various gen-

CLASSICAL REVIEW

rror to U.S.

ders and ages.

Last summer "The Grudge," adapted by Japanese director Takashi Shimizu from his own original, spooked American audiences with a white-faced ghost-boy. Upcoming releases include Disney's "Dark Water," a remake of a Nakata film. Based on a story by "Ring" author Suzuki, the movie finds a mother and daughter trapped in a creepy house, haunted by spirits who manifest themselves as dripping pools of filth. DreamWorks will remake "A Tale of Two Sisters," a South Korean film about two teens who return from a mental institution to find their family home possessed by evil, black-haired spirits.

Sam Raimi's Ghost House Productions will make a version of Hong Kong's "The Eye." Originally created by the Pang brothers, the film features a blind girl who receives cornea transplants only to discover that she sees ghosts and becomes clairvoyant. Along with these movies, Suzuki's "Ring," "Spiral" and short story collection "Black Water" are available in English translation with "Loop" to follow in May.

While these new, ghost-laden Asian thrillers connect to a Western tradition of ghost movies, such as "The Haunting," "The Shining" and "Poltergeist," they tend to be more enigmatic, twisted and disturbing.

"Japanese horror is usually darker," says Napier of the University of Texas. "Americans want happy endings; we want our mysteries solved. The Japanese are more tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity." In Japanese horror, the demonic spirit prevails, still mad and seeking revenge. The human realm remains infected and insecure. The horror can never end, especially with so many vindictive, malicious ghosts poised to take over U.S. movie screens.

ctc-arts@tribune.com