

EXCESSIVE CANDOUR

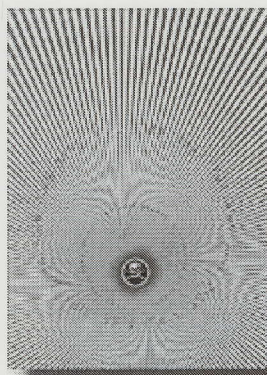
Engine of Disquiet

PREVIOUS COLUMNS

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 Hammerfall

By John Clute

It is like dropping a pebble into a pond and watching the rings widen. Koji Suzuki's SF/horror novel *Ringu* (1991), published with great success in Japan, has generated rings of *Ringu*-derived product. Suzuki himself has written sequels and prequels (none yet available in English). In Japan there has been a TV drama (very bad), two TV series (rather better), a radio version and comic books (quality unattested) and the film *Ringu* (1998), made for almost nothing, hugely successful in Japan and—for a while in bootleg form, though later as distributed by Dreamworks—equally successful subtitled into English. Late last year Gore Verbinski directed an English-language remake, *The Ring*; it was a ring cycled too far, fatally watered down (though it rains a lot in Seattle, where this version is set), which may help explain why the storyline, so adulterated in its descent from the original source, has become pretty confusing. But today we have the original novel at last, *Ring*, very competently translated by Robert B. Rohmer and Glynne Walley, a tale gives off a very clear (we will now stop making ring jokes) ring.



The first thing to note, given the hi-tech *feel* of the tale's dependency on what have become low-tech technologies, like VHS and floppy disks, is that Rohmer and Walley have made absolutely no attempt to modernize Suzuki's original text, which is set specifically in 1990. *Ring* takes us resolutely back, therefore, to Japan the Miracle State, Japan before the Fall. Property values are rising everywhere. Super-fast trains traverse great distances without disaster. The protagonists of the book—Kazayuki Asakawa (I follow Western practice and give the surname second), who is an industrious reporter for a prosperous paper, and Ryuji Takayama, who is a philosophy professor longing to thrust himself through the wall of the world into some kind of ultimate experience—have no anxieties about the fate of Japan. To say this is to say something pretty significant about a text generated from within a culture whose most famous products include Godzilla, the novels of the great Kobo Abe (urban fantasies read as though they were set in quicksand), and Sakyo Komatsu's *Japan Sinks* (trans 1978), whose title itself is an extreme expression of deep cultural anxiety of

Ring
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The Pickup Artist
 Ship of Fools
 Return to the Whorl
 Look to Windward
 In the Stone House
 Declare
 Thirteen Phantasms
 The Telling
 In Green's Jungles
 Probability Moon
 Ash
 Perdido Street
 Station
 Galveston
 Revelation Space
 Perpetuity Blues and
 Other Stories
 Science Fiction of
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 Illustrated History
 The Book of
 Confluence
 There and Back
 Again
 On Blue's Waters
 All Tomorrow's
 Parties
 Half Life
 Ender's Shadow
 The Rift
 When We Were Real
 Darwin's Radio
 The Dictionary of
 Science Fiction Places
 A Deepness in the
 Sky
 The Dracons of
 Springplace
 The Good New Stuff
 The Twinkling of an
 Eye
 The Good Old Stuff
 The Golden Globe
 The Dreams Our
 Stuff Is Made Of
 Black Glass
 Six Moon Dance
 Darwinia
 Weird Women,
 Wired Women
 Girl in Landscape
 The Smithsonian
 Institution
 Moonfall
 The Sparrow;
 Children of God

this riven folk. But the perils Asakawa and Takayama face are centripetal; they do not shake the island.

So we are in a land of prosperous overachievement, where horrors—the pleasures of the text—can reverberate to their own drummer. Asakawa's young niece has just died mysteriously, with an expression of terrible anguish on her face, apparently of a heart attack. Sensitized by this, he hears alarm bells in the tale his taxi driver tells him: of waiting out a red light beside a young motorcyclist, who suddenly keels over, dead of a heart attack, at exactly the same time his niece died. Slowly, very slowly (Ring works as a slow crescendo; by novel's end, things are happening very fast indeed, as though the text had been tracing a slow reverb back upstream, to a faster and faster beat, until it reaches at last the original tone that set the future rings to), very very slowly, Asakawa discovers that two more teenagers have died of heart attacks, that they knew one another, that all four had surreptitiously rented a cottage in a seaside resort (to have sex in, he assumes) just a week before their simultaneous exits.

A tale of the tape

Asakawa goes to the resort, rents the cabin, finds an unmarked VHS tape they had apparently watched; and watches it. It is partly abstract, partly a sequence of images: a volcano, an old woman predicting the birth of a boy, a venomous mob, a raging man with a wound. Words then appear on the screen, to the effect that, unless a certain action is performed, anyone who views the video will die in seven days. But Asakawa cannot discover these vital instructions, as the remainder of the sequence has been taped over. This could all have been a joke; but Asakawa jumps immediately to the conclusion that what the video says is somehow *true* (this abrupt, almost decorous lurch into obedient belief in a command of this sort might, a little vulgarly perhaps, be thought of as purely Japanese—an alienness to Western modalities that the translators convey without flinching).

We now meet Ryuji, who is always addressed by his given name, and who insists on viewing the tape himself. (In the U.S. remake of 2002, the female protagonist has her ex-boyfriend view the sequence, which is a bit as though she'd found out she had AIDS and immediately slept with the guy; the original text, and the Japanese film, avoid this surreal obscenity.) To Western eyes, Ryuji sounds a bit like Yukio Mishima, the Japanese novelist who disemboweled himself in public, compressing, as it were, Rimbaud's long long death into an existentially charged, sublime instant. Whatever the reason, we feel oddly comfortable with his plunge into viewing the fatal tape, almost as though to do so were, in this strange universe of 1990 Japan, the done thing.

Events continue to accelerate. With the aid of colleagues, the two begin to work out that something paranormal is affecting them. On analysis, the tape proves not in fact to contain a recording in any usual sense—what is imprinted here turns out to be a pattern of intense visual memories, memories of the sort that people are reputed to experience at the moment of death. The terrifying flickers of blackness in the sequence, which evoke a sense of abyssal nothingness in Asakawa, are caused by the blinking of the eyelids of the person whose inner vision has imprinted the tape (this terrifying flicker sounds uncannily like the demonic abyss that flickers in between each film frame, 24 times a second, in Theodore Roszak's *Flicker*—but there must have been some fibrillation in the zeitgeist, as both novels were both published, more or less simultaneously, in 1991). The volcano, and the old woman, are traced to Oshima, a real island in the Pacific, directly south of the real peninsula where the resort is sited. Parallel chains of investigation lead to Sadako Yamamura, the illegitimate child of a dead mother who went to the mainland to become an actress but who disappeared 30 years earlier. Further search connects her to university experiments in the paranormal. It becomes clear that she may somehow have been capable of laying a *geas* or *wanweird* on the VHS, which would then operate as a curse. Even further research places her in the

- Cosm
- To Say Nothing of the Dog
- The Calcutta Chromosome
- Expendable
- The Rise of Endymion
- Jack Faust, A Geography of Unknown Lands
- Destiny's Road
- Eternity Road
- Lives of the Monster Dogs
- God's Fire

tuberculosis sanatorium which, years later, was turned into a resort. ...

Time is running out, all the same. Asakawa finally locates Sadako's grave (unsurprisingly, it is in a well directly under the cabin where the VHS had been imprinted with her dying memories of vengeance and famishment), and the novel seems to come to a not unexpected climax: by disinterring Sadako's skull and returning it to her family on Oshima, Asakawa survives beyond the seven days. The revenant Sadako has been liberated from bondage and water and the dark; she has been appeased; she can rest. Sort of thing.

Ring without end, amen

But this is only a seeming climax. One day later (seven days after he viewed the VHS), Ryuji dies in agony, of an apparent heart attack. The curse has *not* been lifted. We now realize that we do not know how Asakawa has survived, nor do we know what instruction was wiped from the original tape; and we now remember that, so far, we have not begun to understand the meaning of the title. And what is the the significance of the last case of smallpox in Japan, which the author has brought up a couple of times so far? And there is a further problem for the plot to solve: Asakawa's wife and child (who is transmogrified in the 2002 remake into a demonic nuisance) have inadvertently seen the VHS: how to save them?

I don't normally pay much attention to Spoiler's Code in reviews, as it has always seemed a contradiction in terms to write a response to a work of art without saying what it does; but in the case of *Ring*, it seems to me that much of the pleasure of the text lies in its successful retardation of genuine revelation, a revelation which changes the meaning of, but does not turn into mere sound and fury, everything that happens up to this point. In the last page or so of *Ring*, Asakawa figures it all out. To save his wife and child, he must get to them in time. Fortunately it is Sunday, he will have no difficulty driving back to where they are staying. But saving his family will necessarily entail putting others—putting eventually the entire world—at risk. What should he do? As in real life, there is no real debate here. The novel ends in a foreordained slingshot: Asakawa will save his wife and child. What the novel does not tell us, as the last page closes, is the cost.

So the last page hurls us out. It has been a ride. Suzuki depends on nothing—as far as the translation can depose, he is a writer of reportorial speed and directness, but little rhetorical range—on the crescendo of story he is riding. Each event in *Ring* is slower and quieter than its successor. Everything is subordinate to Next. Suzuki himself, who does not advertise his craft, seems more like a jockey than a writer. But that is only seeming. Ring is as written as a sonnet. It is an engine of disquiet.

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*John Clute is a writer, editor, critic and scholar of science fiction. His first novel for 25 years, Appleseed, was a **New York Times** Notable Book for 2002. He is the author of **Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia** and co-editor of both **The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction** and **The Encyclopedia of Fantasy**, all Hugo Award winners. His criticism and reviews have appeared in **The New York Times**. **The Washington Post**, **Omni**, **F&SF** and elsewhere. Much of this material has been collected in **Strokes: Reviews and Essays 1966-1986**, **Look at the Evidence: Reviews and Essays**, and the forthcoming **Scores: Reviews 1993-2003**, which will include the first 76 "Excessive Candour" columns and other pieces. Also forthcoming is **An Historical Dictionary of Horror Literature**.*