



J-HORROR WEEKENDER

Dark Water

According to Alfred Hitchcock's oft-quoted 'bomb-under-the-table' theory, the key to screen thrills is the *anticipation*, rather than the *realisation*, of an approaching terror. It is a lesson well proven by the Japanese chiller *Dark Water*, a splendidly derivative frightener whose air of creeping anxiety and out-of-the-corner-of-your-eye unease almost strangles the viewer into breathless rigidity. Time and again we are offered visual fragments (was that a figure at the half-opened door? the face of a child in a pool of water?) drenched in the uncanny allure of sights unseen yet hazily recognised. That such a film should also deliver not one, but two (and possibly even three) moments of skin-crawling revelation testifies to its generic roadworthiness; as a horror shocker, both suggestive and demonstrative, *Dark Water* is one of the most satisfyingly scary pictures of the year.

Returning to the novels of Kôji Suzuki, whose writings provided the basis of *Ringu* (and its sequel *Ringu 2*), director Hideo Nakata draws again from the wellsprings of modern urban anxiety and timeless human terror. Fans of *Ringu* will recognise recurrent leitmotifs, from the specific figure of the faceless child lost in water (Mitsuko, the mysterious missing child in this story, bears an uncanny resemblance to the ghostly Sadako from *Ringu*) and the use of blurry televisual information (CCTV footage mirroring *Ringu*'s cursed videotape) to the more general spectres of parental grief and abandonment, and the unstoppable resurfacing of long-sunken guilt. *Dark Water* serves as a thematic companion piece to *Ringu* – even more so than some of that film's ostensible sequels – revisiting the psychodramas which lurked therein. Stylistically, too, the re-teaming of composer Kenji Kawai and cinematographer Junichirô Hayashi (ably aided by lighting director Meicho Tomiyama) thaws us back into the murky depths of Nakata's breakthrough feature, with Hayashi's extraordinary eye for the everyday uncanny once again well complemented by Kawai's atonal screechings and rumblings; the sound of a quiet, ordered urban lifestyle gradually falling apart.

Familiar too are the nods to classic western shockers, with the ghost of Nic Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973) stalking the edges of the waterlogged drama, and casual asides toward such films as Robert Wise's *Audrey Rose* (1977), John Irvin's *Ghost Story* (1981), Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999). The relationship between newly single mother Yoshimi and her increasingly haunted daughter Ikuko, who may or may not be the victim of something more eerie than parental divorce, also mirrors that between Chris and Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist* (1973). None of which is intended to suggest that *Dark Water* is simply a work of imitation or 'homage'; on the contrary, by creating such a generically literate movie, the filmmakers can toy with the audience's expectations, employing these readily identifiable signifiers to chilling effect.

Framed in chilly blue and green hues, with flashbacks drenched in melancholic ochre, *Dark Water* inhabits a cine-literate environment in which everything seems ominous, from the angular shape of Ikuko's kindergarten to the garish colours of Mitsuko's coat and bag which seem designed to tear cracks in Yoshimi's sense of fragile sanity. While the revelation that she was once driven half-mad by proof-reading graphically sadistic novels may be a

knowing reference to Suzuki's literary reputation, it also sheds light on her fractured character, casting her as one who becomes drowned by stories, unable to establish boundaries between fantasy and reality.

It is to Nakata's credit that having marshalled such genuinely unsettling material, he closes *Dark Water* with a denouement and coda heavy with melancholic loss and triumphant sadness – exactly the qualities which Hollywood will doubtless obliterate should this suffer the same remake treatment as *Ringu*. Remembering that, as Shirley Jackson said, fear and guilt are sisters, Nakata offers a sacrificial mother-and-daughter resolution worthy of the most down-to-earth, heartfelt melodrama. We are left with images of surreal horror bound together by a tangible sense of loss deep-rooted in domestic, familial reality. Now that's scary.

Mark Kermode, *Sight and Sound*, July 2003

Dark Water fits most comfortably into the *kaidan-eiga* (ghost-story film) tradition, much of which remains little seen outside Japan. Nakata cites *Ghost Story of Yotsuya* (an oft filmed adaptation of a kabuki play) as indicative of the fundamental divide between east/west ghostly traditions. Other (perhaps atypical) examples of the genre which have gained recognition in the west include Satsuo Yamamoto's *Tales of Peonies and Lanterns* (1968); Masaki Kobayashi's Cannes prize-winning anthology *Kwaidan* (1964), whose chilling 'Black Hair' sequence reverberates throughout modern Asian horror; and *Kuroneko* (1968) from director Kaneto Shindo, whose *Onibaba* (1964) was once described by *The Exorcist* director William Friedkin as 'the scariest film I ever saw.'

To this list western audiences may add Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 Venice Silver lion-winner *Ugetsu Monogatari*. Although not perceived as part of the *kaidan-eiga* canon in Japan, Mizoguchi's classic had a profound impact on Nakata, both for its iconic lakebound set-pieces and for the neorealist flavour of its 'supernatural' scenes (a sense of heightened reality rather than fantastical escape). Based on stories which are essentially Japanese adaptations of Chinese originals, *Ugetsu Monogatari* presents its ghosts in solidly human form, leaving both audience and protagonists largely unaware of the otherworldly nature of its central spectres (such as Machika Kyo's alluring Lady Wakasa) for much of the drama. 'Unlike ghost stories in the west,' observed American critic Roger Ebert, 'Mizoguchi's film does not try to startle or shock; the discovery of the second ghost comes for us as a moment of quiet revelation, and we understand the gentle, forgiving spirit that inspired it.'

As Nakata observed in an interview with the Japanese arts and culture magazine *Kateigaho*: 'The difference between Japanese horror and western horror can be traced back to the difference in religious beliefs. When making horror films, the methods of describing the spirit world and the expression of horror are totally different between Japan and the west. In a culture where the influence of monotheism such as Christianity is strong, the antimony, or confrontation between the devil and God becomes the fundamental conflict.' While Suzuki points to writers such as Junichiro Tanizaki, Naoya Shiga and Soseki Natsume as evidence that 'Japanese literature is full of ghosts', film fans need look no further than the runaway domestic success of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (a childhood fantasy in which a young girl finds employment in a bath-house for spirits) for proof of the ease with which audiences of all ages in the east accept such concepts.

‘Walking along a body of water, you sense ghosts being born,’ Suzuki also told *Kateigaho*, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. In Britain, however, Nakata recently felt the need to explain that ‘Japanese ghosts are supposed to appear wherever the water exists’ and to clarify the ‘strong connection between water and the supernatural’ that underwrites his most celebrated works.

Mark Kermode, *Sight & Sound*, August 2005

DARK WATER (HONOGURAI MIZU NO SOKO KARA)

Director: Hideo Nakata
Production Company: Oz
Presented by: Dark Water Film Partners
Producer: Taka Ichise
Line Producers: Satoshi Fukushima, Minoru Yokote
1st Assistant Director: Masanori Adachi
Screenplay: Yoshihiro Nakamura, Ken-ichi Suzuki
Based on the novel by: Kôji Suzuki
Director of Photography: Junichirô Hayashi
Lighting Director: Meicho Tomiyama
Visual Effects: Mitsuaki Hashimoto
Special Effects: Shuichi Kishiura
Editor: Nobuyuki Takahashi
Art Director: Katsumi Nakazawa
Prop Master: Ryoji Matsumoto
Music: Kenji Kawai
Theme Song by: Shikao Suga
Production Sound: Masayuki Iwakura
Sound Mixer: Kiyoshi Kakizawa
Sound Effects: Kenji Shibasaki

Cast

Hitomi Kuroki (*Yoshimi Matsubara*)
Rio Kanno (*Ikuko aged 6*)
Mirei Oguchi (*Mitsuko Kawai*)
Asami Mizukawa (*Ikuko Hamada aged 16*)

Japan 2002©
101 mins

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Ring (Ringu)
Fri 29 Oct 18:10
Dark Water (Honogurai mizu no soko kara)
Fri 29 Oct 20:30
Cure (Kyua)
Sat 30 Oct 18:00
Pulse (Kairo)
Sat 30 Oct 20:40
Audition (Ôdishon)
Sun 31 Oct 15:20
Ichii the Killer (Koroshiya 1)
Sun 31 Oct 18:00

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