

USA, 2002. PG-13. 115 min

Cast: Naomi Watts, Martin Henderson, David Dorfman, Brian Cox; Writers: Kōji Suzuki, Ehren Kruger; Music: James Michael Dooley, Henning Lohner, Hans Zimmer; Cinematographer: Bojan Bazelli; Producer: Benita Allen; Director: Gore Verbinski

and one could not market a horror film in which there wasn't a fairly hefty body count of young nubile innocents.

If *Blair Witch's* minimal mise en scene and emphasis upon the unknown has been a strong influence upon contemporary American horror directors, so have the strong aesthetic approaches seen in recent Japanese horror films such as the hugely-popular *Ringu* trilogy, *St. John's Wort*, or *Kairo/Pulse*. The Japanese aesthetic, perhaps more than any other trends seen in horror (there have been some dark, disturbing, erotic films out of France, and some grisly historical ones

was *Seven Days*).

Gore Verbinski's remake of the Japanese thriller is adapted from author Koji Suzuki's novel *Ringu*, which was also wildly successful in Japan and Asia. Although director Verbinski, whose previous films were far less darkly-themed (*Mouse Hunt* and *The Mexican*), proves himself here to be a master of suspenseful pacing, it is the work of cinematographer Bojan Bazelli which establishes the moody, dreamy look that is the film's most memorable element. The story was originally set in Boston (watch for some local names which don't seem to match up near the beginning), but eventually ended up set in Seattle, and Bazelli creates a rainy, palpably-depressing atmosphere in which to set this story of ghosts, murder and obsession. Oh, and the dangers of watching too much TV.



out of Scandinavia) have influenced the Americans because of the emphasis upon media and media culture inherent in their design and in many cases the story lines themselves. In *St. John's Wort*, three students design a video game that leads them to discover a bizarre, ghastly family secret. But even amidst the scenes of human brutality, the computer/video medium itself is portrayed as somehow part of the supernatural occurrences. In *Ringu/Ring*, directed by Hideo Akata, the evil culprits are most assuredly human, but their deeds become known and the mystery is unraveled because of a mysterious videotape, which causes anyone who views it to die mysteriously within seven days (one of the film's original working titles

The film's cast is first-rate. Naomi Watts (*Mulholland Drive*) plays Rachel, the reporter and single mother whose niece falls victim to the videotape's strange power. Her young son is played by David Dorfman, a remarkably self-possessed child actor whose intensity is often chilling. And Brian Cox, the versatile Scottish actor familiar to American audiences from his recent work in *Adaptation*, and earlier roles in *Manhunter*, *Braveheart*, *Rob Roy* and last year's indie hit *L.I.E.*, plays a man whose horrific family secrets are at the root of the videotape's deadly images.

Actress Naomi Watts and director Verbinski were interviewed by Cindy White of *Science Fiction Weekly* just before *The Ring* opened in October 2002. Below, their thoughts:

In recent years, American horror films have shown a marked shift away from predictable, spectacular effects-laden efforts and towards aesthetically-striking "art" pieces, with subtler storylines and thematic elements that go beyond simple morality or supernatural myths of monsters. Who do we have to thank for this? I submit that the radical "less is more" approach to horror brought to us from those young visionaries in Orlando has had everything to do with a desire to return to horror's atmospheric, psychological roots. *The Blair Witch Project*, crudely-made and over-hyped though it was, was a masterpiece of frightening (as in "to frighten," the verb). By offering key action sequences in near or total darkness, by refusing to show any scenes of overt gore or violence (but suggest that a great deal of this had happened or was about to), and by never once showing the face (or indeed even the shadow) of the evil entity stalking the hapless young filmmakers, we were given a refreshing take on what horror ought to be: a framework within which we might enter the dusty recesses of our psyche, that place where evil lives, where our most private and primal fears are made real. After some wonderful experimentation and seminal works in the 1970s, the 1980s made the horror film into a Rosco stage blood parody of itself: the teen slasher genre became king,

On adapting a successful Japanese popular and cult hit for an American audience: Verbinski: "I think when you remake a movie you try not to mess it up. I think the original movie worked really well in certain places and there's part of it that's different. We're not dealing with the ESP aspect to the original movie or the volcano. Choices were made in this case to emphasize the more viral aspects of the tape. I think it's very important for me to try not to take away from what worked well in the original movie. ... There's something wonderful about an outside perspective on the horror genre, which has a real history in American cinema. And I think there was a wonderful minimalism to the original movie that I felt was very important to keep."

Watts: "Yes, it's a very bold move to do a remake of a movie, but even though it was such a huge phenomenon in Japan it was still fairly obscure to the rest of the world. And I know that in certain demographics or, you know, cult worlds, it was huge, too, no matter where you are in the world. But not too many people knew about it, so it wasn't like we were doing a classic that was internationally phenomenal that everybody would be seeing again. So I tried not to pay too much attention to that and just take it for what it was and enjoy."

On creating an original work of horror cinema that does not ignore the conventions of the genre:

Verbinski: "We didn't want to play to the sort of noir aspects of the genre. The language of horror is so steeped in cliches because it's just been reinvented so

many times it's hard to set a shot and not feel like it's a shot that's in someone else's movie when you're making a horror film. So you kind of have to celebrate that but at the same time try to reinvent it where you can. [Cinematographer Bojan Bazelli] and I discussed the removal of shadows to try to keep the characters feeling like they're floating a little bit, in space. I find films like *The Tenant*, where there's a kind of nauseousness you get in the process of the movie, and a lot of that comes from the composition. In this case, we really emphasized lighting and the oppressive nature of



the softer light, overcast skies and rain. It's not a movie that evolves into the light, it's a movie that ends where it begins."

On seeing the original version of *Ringu* after being cast in the remake:

Watts: "I read the script and I really liked it. I got excited about it, and then I managed to get hold of the copy of the Japanese version. It was particularly difficult to find as I was shooting a film in the south of Wales. The video store people looked at me blankly.

And when I got hold of it, I was in my hotel room alone and watching it on a very small TV monitor, and I remember being pretty

freaked out. I just saw it the once, and that was enough to get me excited about doing it. But then, after that, I didn't want to look at it too much, because when you're doing a remake, I think it can be dangerous, because seeing how the other actor played the role could corrupt your own ideas or take you in a direction that's not exactly where you would have planned to go."

On why audiences love horror:

Verbinski: "I think that horror movies work best when they deal with some kind of contemporary issue. The thing I responded to with this movie was [the] actual moral ambiguity of the film, which is this kind of transferable nature of hatred. That you can hurt me and then I can find it justifiable to hurt somebody else, that I can transfer that. And that seems to be a very contemporary issue. And the idea that you can play a tape and die and be like, "I didn't do anything, why is it me?" And there's a kind of powerless nature to that that I think is contemporary terror. And I think that that is something that's universal."

- compiled by Peg Aloï