

OFF:SCREEN

The "Ring" Master: Interview with Hideo Nakata

Hideo Nakata on his Japanese horror sensation

by *Donato Totaro*  *Volume 4, Issue 3 / July 2000*  12 minutes (3000 words)



Offscreen: How did you get your start in film, and are you a horror fan?

Hideo Nakata: It started in university when I moved from the countryside to Tokyo and during my studies watched something like 300 films a year. I went to work for Nikkatsu studios after passing my exams, and worked there for 7 years as an assistant director. Meanwhile, during my practice, I was not exactly specializing or longing for horror films. During my high school days I can remember watching *The Exorcist*, and other horror films that really impressed me, but I would not say it was my choice to exclusively work in horror.

Offscreen: Your first feature is *Ghost Actress*, which I have not seen. Can you talk a bit about your move into features and whether that film is at all, stylistically or in tone, similar to the *Ring* films?

Hideo Nakata: Yes, some people tell me that *Ghost Actress* is very similar to my later films. However, Takahashi, who co-wrote the scenario, said that *Ghost Actress* was not frightening at all, but certainly you have the main heroine, Shujinko, who in *Ghost Actress* shows her whole face, but even so the image was maybe not very powerful. We have the opposite in the *Ring* film, where we have this very evil character who shows only one eye and her hair, and I think that is the most powerful image regarding these devilish characters. So it is not a question of comparing them, but I could call it the revenge of this female character, who is persecuted again in *Ring 2*.

Offscreen: Is *Ghost Actress* available on video outside of Japan?

Hideo Nakata: No.

Offscreen: Was it successful domestically?

Hideo Nakata: Well actually, the initial reception for *Ghost Actress* was not very good because we were on the late show for six weeks, and we counted only 800 people in 6 weeks who came to see the film. But, you know, with the huge success of *Ring* we have recycled *Ghost Actress* and what I can say is that now, as part of the same commercial system, *Ghost Actress* has been selling well.

Offscreen: Was *Ring* considered a low budget film by Japan's standards?

Hideo Nakata: I can't consider it either low or high budget because it was about 1.5 million US dollars, which is a pretty standard production cost for a film like that.

Offscreen: How fast was the sequel put together?

Hideo Nakata: Pre-production, including writing the script was about 3-4 months, postproduction about 4 months, and shooting itself about 5 weeks.

Offscreen: What was the shooting schedule for *Ring*?

Hideo Nakata: 5 weeks

Offscreen: I've heard that the Americans are interested in buying the rights and making their own sequel or remake to *Ring*. Is there any truth to that?

Hideo Nakata: I have heard that they want to buy the original rights and make an American version, yes.

Offscreen: Has the film been sold outside Japan, either for video or theatrical?

Hideo Nakata: Theatrically, it has been sold to Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Offscreen: Has the novel been translated to English?

Hideo Nakata: I'm not sure? Into Korean yes, and Chinese.

Offscreen: How did you become involved with the project?

Hideo Nakata: Well, after I made a name with *Ghost Actress* I was approached by producers. And actually the writer of *Ring* himself, Mr. Suzuki Koji, actually liked the way I worked in my previous films and asked me to direct the film version of *Ring*.



Hideo Nakata introduces *Ring*, with translator Milton Tanaka

Offscreen: I know the novel was a huge success, but was it a big success before the film or did your film help the sell the novel?

Hideo Nakata: Yes and no because when the film was released of course it helped the sales of the volume which was called *Ring*; but there are two other volumes in this series, which are called *Loop* and *Spiral*. And inside this trilogy *Ring* had sold something like 500,000 copies, but after the film was released the publishing company Radokawa Shozen put on a huge marketing effort and the total has reached 1.5 million copies, just of *Ring*. So they have helped each other.

Offscreen: Are there any major changes between the novel and the film, maybe in terms of the style, the philosophy, or is it faithful to the novel?

Hideo Nakata: There are some changes because the original *Ring* novel is a horror-mystery novel. And one of the keys in solving the mystery was this machine called the psych-meter, which is attached to the person and reads their memories. The main character was changed from a man to a woman. The fact is that the video rumor about dying within one week of watching the video was already a kind of rumor, an urban legend in certain school groups, like among high school students. So maybe the momentum was right to make a film using a rumor that had already existed, with some minor changes in the story itself. There is an actual coincidence where the rumors got started in these little bars where people go drink and have snacks. In Japan most kids have cellular mobile phones. During the release of *Ring* I went to five or six theatres and saw kids calling each other on their cell phones right after the screening, telling them "boy this is really scary you should go watch it." I was really pleased to see all this self-marketing going on between the kids!

Offscreen: Was there any resistance from your producers to your very subtle approach to horror?

Hideo Nakata: There was no resistance from the producers but I did feel some doubt on their part when they asked why there wasn't a sudden death, or why I didn't show any deaths, since in the original book they describe the process of dying. Another thing they were doubtful of being worthwhile, was the question of having a death exactly one week after watching the video. But I persevered in the strategy of a story that doesn't present any direct deaths. And the producer stayed on and supported the story.

Offscreen: Do you see your film as going back to an older tradition of Japanese supernatural stories. Because when I saw *Ring* it made me think about films such as *Kwaidan* or *Ugetsu*, the way you use nature

for example, and the ghost. Was this a conscious decision?

Hideo Nakata: Yes. There might be a relation between them. You mention *Kwaidan* and *Ugetsu*, but also in Kabuki theatre, and in *Yotsuya Kaidan* (*The Ghost of Yotsuya*), a classic of Japanese horror. I might say that I have studied all these, and the ancient histories and traditions of Japan. But in my film what I really intended to do is present the fearful side of nature itself. For instance, I shot some scenes in Oshima where there was a very bad or unnatural feeling in the air. Or even in Washitsu [a Japanese-style room], where some rooms are very dark and have an eerie aspect in themselves. So maybe this is all part of the supernatural tradition of Japan, which is part of nature, though not horror per se.

Offscreen: You mention a classic of Japanese horror. Is that a film or novel?

Hideo Nakata: A story, which I think is based on a true story about graveyards. Yes, the *Yotsuya Kaidan* story is a classic story that has been told for 40 years, a classic Japanese story in the sense that because summer in Japan is so hot and humid, you tell those stories or show these films, because they give you a cold feeling, a chill. It's a classic that has been shown already for forty years. The best film version, I think, is *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959) by director Nakagawa Nobuo, who mastered this. There are about five or six versions of the story, but this I think is the best. These are tales that are always centered on *Yotsuya Kaidan*, which actually exists. It is a region in center Tokyo, where they might have actually experienced some weird events. It is a story centered in the Edo period in Japan about a very poor peasant who wants to be a samurai. He suspects his wife of having an affair with a blind masseur, so he kills his wife and the masseur. He gives poison to his wife, which causes her face to become completely disfigured, as if acid was thrown on it. The story is about this couple, the wife and masseur, coming back to life haunt the husband.



Valérie, Christine, Donato, Hideo Nakata, Milton

Offscreen: I found the flashback footage of the psychic with Shizuko and Sadako shot in a very interesting way, the mix of documentary elements and touches of surrealism. Was this conscious, and what format did you shoot that in?

Hideo Nakata: Originally it was shot on 35mm film but we did discuss filming it on 8mm or home video. The scene was shot on 35mm, then we went to the lab, and it got passed through a computer to get the grainy image quality. But the technician at the lab didn't want to give up his trade secret, so I'm not exactly sure what was done to the image to get that texture! Though I know that the 35mm was also transferred to video format at some point.

Offscreen: How about the cursed video, which has even more grain, was that shot in the same way?

Hideo Nakata: It was shot using the same technique. But you mention the term surrealism, which is interesting because in shooting the cursed video scene we didn't want to give to the viewer any reference points, so there is no reference whatsoever to where the scene is taking place or where it was shot or where the light and dark is coming from. In that sense we wanted to integrate in the image the notion that we don't really understand from what point of view we are watching this scene, or from which point of view the light and the dark comes from. We really wanted to give that scene a dreamlike atmosphere where you are not able to tell what is what.

Offscreen: I liked what you did with the photographs, the way the

faces are smeared. Is that something that was in the novel, or did you come up with the idea? I mention this because in the 19th century, when photography was invented, there were groups of people called the spiritualists who thought that a photograph could represent the spirit of a deceased person, and that deceased people appeared as shadows in photos. Does that relate to your film? Or were you even aware of this?

Hideo Nakata: Mister Takahashi, who wrote the script with me, suggested strongly that we have the idea of the photos, which is actually based on a real life person named Mifune Chizuko, a paranormal. As a paranormal this woman, Mifune, was able to project written words on paper and make words materialize on paper, these are things that paranormals can usually do. There is another real story that is related to this. There was this Tokyo University professor who was expelled because of research he was doing into the paranormal. Mifune Chizuko was the actual object of his study. And obviously a Tokyo University professor who was interested in that kind of research was not taken seriously. This kind of shinrei shashin which is the appearance of ghost and spirits in photos apparently really happened in Japan. You often have people telling you that they have these photos. It is very popular but I think it is half-true, that there are also invented and bogus stories; but research has been done in that field. All this is related to the photographs and the image distortion we use in the film, because the writer did do research on that before writing the script to incorporate it into the film.

Offscreen: When did this happen with the professor?

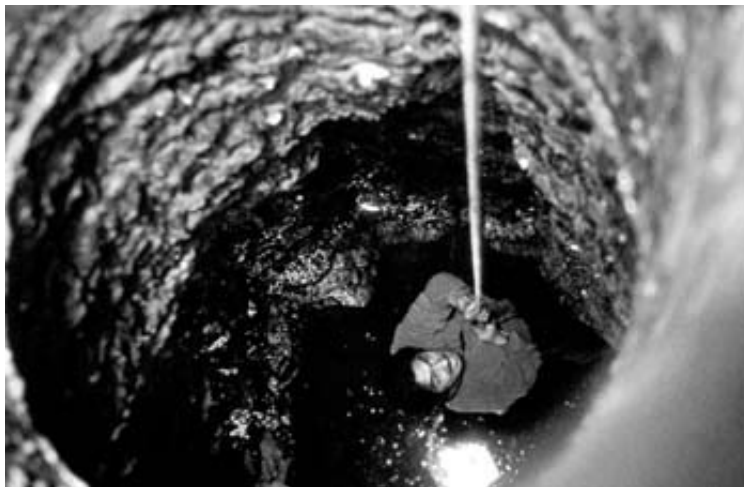
Hideo Nakata: I think around the beginning of the 20th century.

Offscreen: Also, for those scenes and in the film in general the music and sound is very important, especially during the cursed video, where the sound is very technological but also has a supernatural flavor to it. Did you work closely with the composer for the music?

Hideo Nakata: It is the same composer of the film *Ghost in the Shell*, Kenji Kawai, who composed both *Ring* and *Ring 2*. We've been working together for the whole series. I had a very close collaboration with the sound technician for sound effects; he was a very talented person. Just for the sound effects alone we had 50 tracks and for the sound of the telephone, they mixed four different qualities of phone sounds because they did not want them to sound like Hollywood phones! So it was

a whole process of discussing everyday, even having disputes about the quality, the way to produce the sound effects. There are 50 tracks for Kenji Kawai's background sounds and 50 tracks for the sound effects. It was a huge task and because he wanted to have very high quality he supervised the sound directly himself. Your ear can not separate the melody from the sound effects because they are all so well integrated in the overall soundtrack.

Offscreen: The film has been very, very successful. I seem to think that maybe one of the reasons for this is because it has this mythic quality to it. There's this sense that there is something important here and you don't really say what it is, you leave it vague, which is nice. Along these lines, traditionally in western culture the well, water, or the subterranean is a metaphor for the mind. Can we say that the well in the *Ring* series is a metaphor for the unconscious? Because I noticed in *Ring 2*, the well is much deeper. Is this because, whatever this fear or anxiety is, it is getting deeper into the consciousness of the people? *Ring 2* is getting more popular, more ingrained, and therefore the well is deeper?



The 'well' as the Unconscious

Hideo Nakata: There's actually a story with a well, called *Bancho Sarayasaiki*, which relates to this story in the sense that maybe the well is haunted by evil spirits. I myself when I lived in the countryside in Japan saw a well, about 5 meters deep, which is maybe not that deep, but for me as child, it seemed like a bottomless hell. Because I thought once I got inside it I would never get out of it. The relationship between the well and the TV monitor [in *Ring 2*] is that the monitor itself is the tube or connection to hell. In this sense there must also be another connection between the TV monitor and the unconscious to the well or the evil spirits. So yes it is very

interesting how we can relate the well to some kind of passage to the underworld.

Offscreen: Also something that strikes me as a particular Asian quality, and unlike a lot of western horror films, is that it feels like a spiritual horror film, with the idea of transcendence and this connection between the living and the dead. [People die but come back in one way or another.] But you never mention soul, it is more this idea of an energy, a body energy, which again relates to Asian medicine. Is that perhaps something that you also feel makes it different from Western horror films?

Hideo Nakata: Well I'm not a specialist in Japanese traditions like Kabuki theatre, or Noh theatre, but very often in these traditions, particularly in Noh theatre, the hero or the main character is a dead person who comes back to the land of the living to tell stories about the friends they had, lovers they had, all the earthly pleasures they had. So if you see it from this point of view, it is not that far away from the perspective of the living. I think I've been influenced by this traditional aspect of Japan, but I can also see many influences from Robert Wise's *The Haunting*, or the Henry James novella, *Turn of the Screw*, which was made into a film by a British director [ed. Jack Clayton], so I can say that I've been influenced by many directors outside of Japan also, and my scriptwriter advised me strongly that I see these films. So it is a kind of realistic ghost story where you sense that there is not only black and white, or life and death, but also something in between that I've been incorporating into my works. And I'd say that these influences come from Japanese as well as foreign directors.

Offscreen: Any other horror film directors or directors that have influenced your cinema?

Hideo Nakata: I was influenced by the Amityville series of horror films.

Offscreen: Do you know the director of *Ring 3 (Ring 0: The Birthday)*?

Hideo Nakata: Yes, someone who has a good feel for the horror genre, Tsuruta Norio. The screenwriter, Mr. Takahashi admires his works. Mr. Takahashi doesn't recognize me as a good horror director.

Offscreen: He's wrong!

Hideo Nakata: I was offered to direct it, but I declined. I didn't want to continue making horror films so I've stopped temporarily. But probably next year I will go back to horror.

Offscreen: You've just finished directing two films, a romance and a suspense. What are the titles?

Hideo Nakata: One is *The Glass Brain*, and the suspense film is called *Chaos* (showing at Fantasia this year).

Offscreen: Well, thank you so much and good luck for your future projects.

(This interview was conducted during the Montreal Fantasia 1999 Film Festival, in preparation for an in-depth piece on Hideo Nakata and the Ring series for *Fangoria* magazine (issue #193). Many thanks go to Milton Tanaka for his wonderful work of interpreting.)

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Donato Totaro has been the editor of the online film journal *Offscreen* since its inception in 1997. Totaro received his PhD in Film & Television from the University of Warwick (UK), is a part-time professor in Film Studies at Concordia University (Montreal, Canada) and a longstanding member of AQCC (Association québécoise des critiques de cinéma).

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