



Dark Water (US 2005)

In the early 2000s Hollywood moved to enthusiastically re-make several genre pictures from East Asia. This cycle of production was stimulated by the huge international success of *The Ring* (US 2002), a remake of the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (1998). The American version starring Naomi Watts made nearly \$250 million worldwide, including more in Japan than the original. Nakata Hideo had directed the original film, adapted from a novel by Suzuki Kôji and in 2002 he made *Dark Water*, this time based on a short story from a collection also written by Suzuki. The collection had the title *From the Depths of Dark Waters* and comprised seven stories each featuring water imagery.

With the international reputation of 'J-horror' now secure, the Disney company Touchstone decided to remake *Dark Water* and chose the Brazilian filmmaker Walter Salles to make their version. Salles had just had his biggest success so far with *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) a major international co-production starring Gael García Bernal as Che Guevara. Touchstone's producers decided that it was important to 'Westernise' the Japanese story and gave that instruction to the scriptwriter Rafael Yglesias, an American novelist. The cultural difference that concerned them is the different attitude towards ghosts in Japan (and possibly also the the different attitudes towards divorce and single mothers).

The story is relatively simple. It concerns a mother and her small daughter who must find a new place to live after a contested divorce. Dahlia (Jennifer Connelly) finds an apartment in a run down block on Roosevelt Island in the East River. The island is part of Manhattan and it has a highly-rated school close to the housing block. But Dahlia and her daughter Ceci will also discover that the block is haunted. Salles and Yglesias share an appreciation of Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (US 1969), also set in a New York apartment block, and there is certainly something that connects the two stories.

Walter Salles was an unusual choice as director for a ghost story in New York. The Brazilian director, for his first film in English (which he speaks fluently having attended film school in California), chose to focus first on finding a cast of top class actors who could create a believable drama. Supporting Jennifer Connelly, an actor capable of conveying a great deal non-verbally and through her eyes, are a trio of British actors. Dougray Scott is the husband, Tim Roth is Dahlia's lawyer and Pete Postlethwaite is the building's superintendent. The Hollywood 'character star' John C. Reilly is the agent of the company that owns the block. To round it off, Salles auditioned hundreds of children to find Ariel Gade who plays Ceci.

Water is the source of fear in the apartment block, and outside where it rains much of the time, but the action depends on the performances, camerawork and production design more than the special effects. Salles is well served by his Brazilian cinematographer Affonso Beato, a veteran of American and European cinema and by the similarly experienced Angelo Badalamenti as the music composer. His credits range from *The Wicker Man* to *Twin Peaks*.

Unlike many of the other films developing from the J-horror cycle, *Dark Water* is not a film targeting the youth audience. Instead it's an adult drama about a woman under pressure, attempting to keep her child safe in the midst of a custody battle with her husband. Dahlia can't afford to appear to be losing control but small children in this context can be both innocent and terrifying. Perhaps the last word should go to Roger Ebert, the critic who got it right more often than not: "I cared about the Jennifer Connelly character; she is not a horror heroine, but an actress playing a mother faced with horror. There is a difference, and because of that difference, *Dark Water* works".

Roy Stafford 10/11/22

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

SCREEN
ARGYLL

BFI
FAN
BY FILM AUDIENCE NETWORK

THE
NATIONAL
LOTTERY