P U L S E

回路
Kairo

Original release date: 3 February 2001
119 minutes

Written and Directed by **Kiyoshi Kurosawa**
Produced by **Shun Shimizu, Seiji Okuda, Ken Inoue, Atsuyuki Shimoda**
Director of Photography **Junichiro Hayashi**
Lighting by **Meicho Tomiyama**
Audio Recording by **Makio Ika**
Production Design by **Tomoyuki Maruo**
Digital Art Director **Yoshihisa Kato**
Visual Effects Supervisor **Shuji Asano**
Music by **Takefumi Haketa**
Theme Song by **Cocco**
Edited by **Junichi Kikuchi**
Assistant Director **Tatsuya Yoshimura**

Ryosuke Kawashima: **Haruhiko Kato**
Michi Kudo: **Kumiko Aso**
Harue Karasawa: **Koyuki**
Junko Sasano: **Kurume Arisaka**
Toshio Yabe: **Masatoshi Matsuo**
Yoshizaki: **Shinji Takeda**
Michi's mother: **Jun Fubuki**
Boss: **Shun Sugata**
Construction employee: **Show Aikawa**
Ship captain: **Koji Yakusho**

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THE SMUDGE

by Chuck Stephens

The Japanese title of *Pulse* – Kiyoshi Kurosawa's 2001 masterpiece of late-postmodern dread and long-since-antiquated millennial future shock – is *Kairo*, a term meaning "circuit," in the senses of both an electronic connection, and a potential connection between human beings. A "pulse" suggests a throbbing; something as sanguinary and mortal as a heartbeat, even something impulsive. Circuits turn on and off. In *Pulse*, one circuit turns on – a ghostly Web 1.0 connection to the spirit realm that allows the dead to flood the land of the living (over a dial-up modem, no less) – as another turns off: the connections between human beings. The end of the world, or something very much like it, quickly follows. Is the medium the message? As elaborately apocalyptic as it is ultimately buoyed by hope, *Pulse* is very much a film concerned, both narratively and in the parental sense, with the connections promised and disconnections portended by the dawning age of the internet. Would simply "logging in" to the then-not-so-super two-lane information highway lead to the destruction of the minds and souls of our children, and of future generations? Never mind "social networks," where your mom and her friends now share selfies and pics of their grandkids; those didn't exist yet. No one quite knew *what* was lurking online. Kids began to migrate there "because everyone's doing it," but what would they find? A new world of integration and connectivity? Or a dead zone where already-pallid *otaku* congregate to share their apathies and introversions and eventual spiritual and corporeal disintegrations with one another in a never-ending chatroom from Hell? Will we be able to turn off the internet? Could the internet turn on us?

Dread and ghosts are the very essences of Kurosawa's work during the period that climaxes with *Pulse*, as the director embarked on a *fin de siècle* filmmaking cycle that can be seen to begin with his 1997 international breakthrough, *Cure* (*Kyua*), an unnervingly atmospheric thriller and generically-cracked cop caper whose narrative seemed to splinter off and continue in various directions throughout the filmmaker's next several works. Born in 1955, Kurosawa spent decades studying cinema and experimenting in Super 8 before making his first feature, *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* (*Do-re-mi-fa-musume no chi wa sawagu*), in 1985; he spent another decade working mostly in direct-to-video features and TV films before shifting into a new gear with *Cure*, an *X Files*-era paranormal mystery about fissured family life and faltering heroes that helped send Koji Yakusho to stardom. The actor and director continued working together for several years, refining themes and characterizations in often in the most extreme and arcane of genre

situations. *Charisma* (*Karisuma*, 1999), for example, begins as a *policier* but soon turns into a psychedelic battle of wills between pathological eco-freaks, batshit crazy botanists, and murderous plant bandits in a poisoned forest, where one tree may have the power to end the world. (Kurosawa, a hardcore fan of midcentury Hollywood cinema, said he tended to think of *Charisma* in terms of the films of Robert Aldrich.)

An unnerving study of sound design and emotional silence between would-be parents, *Seance* (*Korei*, 2000) reworks Bryan Forbes' *Seance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964) by way of Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973). *License to Live* (*Ningen gokaku*, 1998) is a haunted family melodrama where Yakusho again fails to save the world, and children appear and disappear; *Barren Illusion* (*Oinaru genei*, 1999) is a project Kurosawa made with his film students, who embody and disembody themselves onscreen as fading specters of the millennium about to come, and from which stars are absent altogether. (It occasionally brings Roger Corman's *The Last Woman on Earth* [1960] to mind.) Yakusho returns in the brief wraparound episodes of *Pulse*, captaining an enormous ship on a last-ditch voyage to "Latin America"; he might as well have wandered directly in from the climax of *Charisma*, Tokyo in flames behind him, as hapless a "heroic survivor" as the befuddled Mike Hammer at the end of Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1956), stumbling away from an A-bomb and into the sea. (Toshiro Mifune had similar flight-fancies in Akira (no connection) Kurosawa's *I Live in Fear* [*Ikimono no kiroku*] in 1955.)

Made on a significantly larger budget than most of Kurosawa's films to that point, *Pulse* was calculated to dovetail with the then-still-quite-popular *Ring* (*Ringu*, 1998) films and their assorted satellite endeavors (*Dark Water* [*Honogurai mizu no soko kara,* 2002], *The Grudge* [*Ju-on,* 2002]). It begins with a glitch: a woozy, perhaps-melting image of a young computer geek's desultory flat, a wall of cheap shelving arrayed with an assemblage of gear. Our view is partially occluded by a sheet of plastic that hangs from the ceiling, listlessly floating like the shroud of a junkyard ghost. Boxes and tubes are stacked in several corners; the light is leaden, thick and murky. Imagine watching the film on VHS: what are we seeing in the dankest depths of those pixels? Soon the twenty-somethings who work at Sunny Plant Sales, a botanical research company improbably situated on the top of a skyscraper with a commanding view of Shibuya, will wonder too. Their coworker Taguchi (Kenji Mizuhashi) hangs himself in that largely illegible apartment and then, like the shadows that already crowd his corners, he dissolves into an inky black smudge on the wall. Shocked but not shattered, Michi (played by Kumiko Aso, previously indelible as the whale-riding sprite in Shohei Imamura's *Dr. Akagi* [*Kanzo-sensei*, 1998]) saw it all happen; she might even be the film's eventual hero, if *Pulse* had heroes. When Yabe (Masatoshi Matsuo) receives an ominous cell phone call for help from what seems to be his recently-deceased colleague, he too visits the apartment, and is led from there – by the most intentionally tenuous of

connections – to something called "the Forbidden Room." What happens in that restricted chamber is best witnessed without preamble, but suffice to say that there are several such forbidden rooms throughout *Pulse*, and that the portals to each of them are surrounded by blood-red duct tape – a warning against entry which no one seems able to abide. And within each of these chambers: elaborately-designed symphonies of shadows worthy of Fritz Lang or Jacques Tourneur, and horrors that leach into the half-light from those darknesses while DSL signals crackle and composer Takefumi Haketa's electro-Bernard Herrmann strings scrape and scream. Horrors that loiter and loom and refuse to disappear.

Elsewhere, Kawashima – a hapless young economics major with a carefully-curated collection of vintage t shirts and vibrant teen-idol hair played by Haruhiko Kato – attempts to log in to the internet for the first time, and immediately encounters the film's signature invitation: "Welcome to the internet. Would you like to meet a ghost?" What he finds within a click or so are still more of the movie's chambers of horror: images of other internet users alone in their own darkened rooms, staring at their computer monitors or slowly drifting offscreen, about to disappear forever. A figure with a black bag over its head is seen seated in front of a wall scrawled with iterations of the word "Help." The bag is removed and we encounter a face all-the-more horrifying for being virtually indistinguishable from the shadows. Are these *yurei* ("spirits"), or kids just like Kawashima? Both? He terminates the connection in horror, but the connection logs itself back in while he sleeps, and only drops when he unplugs his desktop entirely. At school and in search of tech support, the unnerved Kawashima wanders into the orbit of Harue, a computer science major with fashion model features played by real-life fashion model Koyuki. When Harue uses advanced technological jargon like "print screen key," Kawashima is immediately smitten, overlooking the beautiful programmer's darker admonition that "people don't really connect, you know. We all live totally separately." Another of the film's intentionally tenuous connections, this unlikely pair do strike up a temporary friendship, but their fatally derailed romance is merely a pretext for Kurosawa to pursue parallel lines of thought: on a monitor in Harue's computer lab runs a rudimentary program which studies randomly moving dots on a screen which, while drawn to one another, "die" if they get too close. (It looks like a screen saver from the dawn of Atari.) It's a "miniature model of our world," Harue distantly explains. "I wouldn't suggest staring at it too long…"

These and other characters take turns modeling the behavior of those dots, sometimes circling closer toward one another, sometimes forever drifting away. As some sort of End Time seems imminent, we learn – from another bright young computer scientist, Yoshizaki (Shinji Takeda from *Taboo* [*Gohatto*, 1999]) – one possible explanation for the black shadow creeping across the face of humanity. It seems that the afterlife has storage issues, just as a shortage of space in Hell resulted in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and the deceased have at

last discovered a way to upload themselves back among the living – through the already menacingly-monikered "world wide web." "The circuit is now open," Yoshizaki impishly grins. Young people everywhere have gone missing. Those black smudges have become an inky epidemic. (The "nuclear shadows" from the blast at Hiroshima never fade.) The dead are back and we are gone. Japan is in ruins, even as *Pulse* – one of the most strikingly-photographed modern horror films made anywhere in the world – grows more and more beautiful from scene to scene. The shadow-lush compositions in the film's wraith-infested final destinations speak for themselves, but the collaborative efforts of Kurosawa and his cinematographer Junichiro Hayashi (*Ring*, *Dark Water*, *Charisma*) often stand out even more in scenes unintended to disturb or shock. Next time through, pay careful attention to the elaborate long take and carefully calibrated mobile framing that occurs about forty-six minutes into the film: Kawashima and Harue are having a conversation as they move about a lab cluttered with walls of monitors and mountains of discarded workstations piled with cables and pieces of furniture, and are soon joined by Yoshizaki. They *are* the dots in that computer simulation, moving closer, moving away, and Kurosawa choreographs the camerawork to move just as unpredictably, just as perilously, never exactly close to the actors and often at a cautious remove. A sudden pan becomes a gliding tracking shot that sidles up behind a pile of garbage, peering cautiously over the junk, then backs off further still, searching for cover as another character enters the frame. It's a stunning yet subtle moment, an encapsulation in purely cinematic terms of the tentative, frightened, dwindling human dynamics at play everywhere throughout the film.

Kurosawa has long had a passion for piling up empty boxes – literally so: you'd be hard pressed to find a Kurosawa film in which characters *don't* rummage through stacks of cardboard containers, or haphazardly collide with trash-mountains of empty poster-tubes and other mailing enclosures. It proves a key auteurist touch, this endlessly creative repurposing of the detritus of our already-ruined world (empty boxes, dilapidated factories) for his own captivatingly clutter-rich *mise en scene*, whether Kurosawa's figuratively ransacking elements of Hollywood potboilers or physically rummaging through the rubbish at the edges of his sets and locations, in search of some Rosetta stone in the ruins. "I know it's not possible in reality," the filmmaker once explained, "but in my dreams I like to meditate on the possibilities of reducing everything to zero, and of starting the world anew. In a number of my films, you see cities destroyed, and perhaps even hints that the end of civilization is near. Many people construe those images and ideas as negative and despairing, but I actually see them as just the opposite—as starting again with nothing, and as the beginning of hope."

Pulse is precisely an intimation of those antinomies: technological advancements that inculcate a planet-wide return to zero, the end of everything fused to the promise of a fresh start, despairing and hopeful. It's a bleak, lonely film filled with pulsing dots which, in attempting to connect, rapidly fade and die; a film mortified by the possibilities of new circuits which, once opened, cannot be closed. Listen for the term "kankei nai" – "no connection" – as you watch the film: Harue tellingly uses it at one point to describe the disconnection she feels from her own parents. Children adrift, pulses without people, circuits without connection, a world unplugged. Kurosawa's classic vision of the end of 20th century humanity and the dawn of the 21st century dead remains as haunting today as it was back then, a movie imbued with nostalgia for the future, even as it races into the past.

Chuck Stephens is a columnist for Cinema Scope *magazine, and has written on Japanese cinema for publications worldwide. He lives and teaches in Los Angeles.*

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Pulse is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 2.0 stereo sound.
The High Definition master was made available for this release by Kadokawa Pictures.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by: **Marc Walkow**
Executive Producers: **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer: **James White**
Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**
QC and Proofing: **Nora Mehenni, Marc Walkow**
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering: **David Mackenzie**
Subtitling: **IBF Digital**
Artist: **Tommy Pocket**
Design: **Obviously Creative**

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