

## ***Ju-On: Origins*. Written by Hiroshi Takahashi and Takashige Ichise, and directed by Sho Miyake. Netflix, 2020.**

Created and released at the height of J-Horror, *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002), written and directed by Shimizu Takashi (note: all Japanese names given Japanese-style, surname first), offered a variant on the onryō film – an onryō being a vengeful yūrei (ghost), usually female, who takes the form of a dead girl with long black hair and a dirty white robe or dress, often but not always wet. Many books have been written in Japanese and English about the late-twentieth, early twenty-first century explosion of onryō films, citing the social, artistic, and cultural forces that created this films and their subsequent influence on global cinema, not to mention the ensuing Hollywood boom in J-Horror remakes. As with other horror films, Shimizu’s movie did not merely spawn sequels but instead is now a franchise unto itself, and even a universe like *The Conjuring*: reboots, echoes, remakes, tangential films, interactions with other franchises followed the original and created an entire world affected by the original cursed house.

At heart, the *Ju-On* series has a high concept, simple idea: a house is so cursed, so haunted, that even if someone leaves the house, or only visits it for a few minutes, the evil in the house follows and kills that person, usually horrifically. The original film was episodic in nature, detailing the curse that murders any and all who enter the house. The newest series on Netflix maintains this basic set-up but offers a different approach. The series repurposes the visuals in a new way and does not merely ‘reboot’ the series, but reimagines the relationship between series and original film in a manner that allows the story to begin again without the trappings established by the “*Ju-On* universe.”

At the series’ beginning, the narrator intones, “*Ju-On* was inspired by a true story” over visuals of first responders removing dead bodies from the cursed house, presented in a documentary style which will continue to echo through the series. This announcement does two paradoxical things simultaneously: it announces its connection to the original film and the universe it spanned while concurrently denying an actual presence in that world. “*Ju-On* was fiction inspired by the real story we will tell here.” This announcement thus also allows the creators to both supersede the original while claiming the new narrative is the correct one and any differences is because the original is fiction. Artistically, it is a clever gambit that allows the series to be *Ju-On* and not *Ju-On*, keeping what works with no promise of consistency with the series.

Indeed, perhaps in the biggest change, gone is Kayako, the series’ emblematic uncanny female ghost, replaced by “The Woman in White.” The curse remains, as does the protagonist seeking to understand why the house is cursed and people die, but the longer duration of the narrative allowed by a series as opposed to a 90-minute film allows for much greater exploration of the characters, how the house has affected their lives in a daily sense, and how the larger curse of the house unfolds over a decade.

The six half-hour episodes focus on an actress and a paranormal investigator who have personal reasons to investigate the cursed house (she because it killed her fiancé; he because he lived there as a child and his entire family except him died in the house), and upon an unusual couple whose futures were set when they visited the house as school students and experienced a traumatic encounter. These paired stories interweave with each other throughout the series. Three important elements recur over and over in the series, which seem to frame the narrative. Repeatedly throughout the episodes, televisions broadcast a stories of violence: two school children killing their friend, a young woman murdered, a serial killer strikes again. It seems that the horrors of everyday life are both a part of and supersede the violence of the house. One need not enter a cursed house to find murder, violence, cruelty, the series seems to say: just turn on the television. The opening shot of the show, done television style, seems to enforce this idea, that the cursed house is just one of

dozens of atrocities each week in the greater Tokyo area. Conversely, it also suggests there is much more to the story in each of these cases than in what the television news reveals.

This idea is reinforced when Odajima visits the serial killer M in prison. “Occult fans can’t really come up with ideas,” the killer tells the paranormal writer, “Actual criminals like me need to help out.” It is true – M knows where the cursed house is because he was the only one who saw the news reports of deaths in the house and linked them together. One must think like a killer to see the supernatural pattern (which may not be so supernatural).

The second new element is the shift from Kayako to the Woman in White. While Kayako has been an uncanny avenger who is responsible for death, madness, and injury, the Woman in White is more a of a presence, a harbinger instead of an onryō. She shows Haruka where the house is. She is present when bad things happen, but it not the cause of them. Indeed, most of the atrocities in the series are not from the supernatural but from human evil: Yudai killing Kiyomi’s mom and beating his own son into a coma, Kiyomi pushing Yudai to kill and then drowning him in her tub herself, the girls and Yudai tricking Kiyomi to the house in the first place to rape her, Nobuhiko and Chie planning to murder their spouses with the end result of all four individuals dead, and the list goes on. While an argument can be made for the supernatural influence of the house over all of them, the series shifts away from onryō-driven curses and focuses on human evil and its cost. Linked with the recurring images of television news reporting horrible crimes, the series places a higher focus on human capacity for causing harm.

The third and final element is the “long game” of both the protagonists and the house. Whereas the original film unfolds over a few days, the series takes place over half a century, with the majority of the events occurring across a decade near the end. The characters who have been affected by the house all continue to live their lives and do their jobs, but come together repeatedly as the house continues to exert influence. With each new atrocity they come back together to seek more answers. Yudai and Kiyomi live under fake names, and manage to stay together despite his sexual assault of her at the beginning of the relationship over the six years it takes for the entire arc of their relationship to play out. Most horror films play out the events of one crazy weekend; in contrast, *Ju-On* the series is concerned with ongoing horrors, with perhaps even literalized metaphors. Kiyomi literally lives with the reality of her rape every day. Haruka, despite her fame, is deeply troubled by the loss of her fiancé, which literally haunts her. Odajima continues to attempt to discover why his entire family died. In each case, the survivor lives with the aftermath of horrible tragedy, it continues to shape and guide their lives. Not everyday, but often enough that it dominates their existence. The horror of *Ju-On: Origins* is the horror of the survivor; the origin of the horror is literally the beginning of something that will occupy a place in the lives of all it touches.

Japan and North America share an ambiguous relationship with their own hauntings and cultural sense of the supernatural. The United States had a television program entitled *Celebrity Ghost Stories*, on which Hiruka would have been perfectly at home, and certainly we revisit our famous hauntings, especially ones in which violence has played a part (see: The Amityville Horror; the Lizzie Borden House, The Winchester Mystery house). Inevitably a trope in both cultures is the idea of the ghost hunter who finds “new” information about previously known hauntings that reinvest them with a sense of the uncanny, and bring them back into the public eye. The *Ju-On* universe is powered by this sense of recurring urban legend/folklore.

The original *Ju-On* demonstrates both the failure of the family unit in post-industrial Japan, as well as the failure of conventional wisdom to solve problems. As with many of the J-horror films of the late nineties and early oughts, solving the mystery of the ghost’s origins and identity does not stop the haunting. If anything, it intensifies it and allows it to continue further afield. *Ju-On* shows an irrational world in which no solutions are possible. *Ju-On: Origins* reminds the audience that the world remains irrational and dangerous. At the heart of that modern irrationality is the idea of blaming a curse for decades of family tragedies. Still, that explanation makes about as much sense as those offered by adherents of Q-Anon or other conspiracy theories that have blossomed in the last few years. Curses make as much sense as any other irrational belief.

The horror of *Ju-On: Origins* is thus also that the curse does not end. Even burying the recording at the end of the series does not save Haruka from the ghost of the kidnapper. Nothing we can do ends the curse. At best we can survive, haunted by what has happened. The only solution is to avoid the house altogether, which is not a very satisfactory message, yet one that seems entirely apt for 2020.

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