

Review of *Suicide Forest Village*. Written by Daisuke Hosaka and Takashi Shimizu, directed by Takashi Shimizu. Toei Company, Ltd., 2021.

Suicide Forest Village (Japanese: *Jukai Mura*) is a Japanese horror film directed by Takashi Shimizu. It is the second film in Shimizu's *Villages of Dread* series, following *Howling Village* (Japanese: *Inunaki Mura*) (2020). The film creatively develops urban legends to construct a complex horror fantasy narrative centered on the themes of suicide, loss, and self-sacrifice, drawing audiences to reflect on the nature of human life and relationships.

The narrative world of the film integrates two urban legends. The first concerns a village in Aokigahara, also known as *Jukai* ("Sea of Trees"), a densely forested area at the northwestern base of Mount Fuji. The forest of Aokigahara is known in Japan as dangerous for getting lost and has a reputation as a site for suicide and supernatural occurrences. According to an urban legend, a village, *Jukai Mura* (which provides the Japanese title of the film), exists in this forest, not marked on any map and isolated from the rest of society. The second urban legend used in the film is that of a *kotoribako*, (lit. "child-taking box"). The *kotoribako* legend concerns a box in which a small part or parts from a human body or bodies have been placed (such as a finger). The box is infused with a curse that particularly affects children and women capable of bearing children, although in the film the curse proves to be further reaching. The box originated in a village (identified as *Jukai Mura* in the film) to be used against those by whom the village had been mistreated and marginalized, and it functions as a physical localization of the resentment of the village's people.

The film's story follows two sisters, Mei (Mayu Yamaguchi) and Hibiki (Anna Yamada) with their newlywed friends Teru (Fuju Kamio) and Miyu (Haruka Kudo) and Mei's boyfriend Shinjiro (Yuki Kura). After finding a *kotoribako* in the storage space of Teru and Miyu's new home, the continuing series of tragedies from the entanglement of the sisters, their friends, and family in the box's curse lead Mei and Hibiki to learn of the origin of the *kotoribako* and of the dependence of the souls of *Jukai Mura* on it, and to finally resolve their understanding of the death of their own mother, Kotone (Yumi Adachi), who died in the forest when they were young children.

While the *kotoribako* and its curse from the village serve as the prominent threats in the film's story, the anxieties the film most draws from its audience are the fear of loss and anxiety concerning helplessness in the face of death. As acknowledged in the opening lines of the film, we never know what will happen to people, nor when. Death, including through suicide, cannot be anticipated.

Loss in the film is not limited to suicide. Grief from loss through miscarriage (a form of grief often more difficult to express openly), accident, and unspecified cause also appear in the film. Nevertheless, the film's treatment of loss through suicide is the most developed. The portrayal of distasteful jesting at suicide, encountered by someone who grieves loss through suicide, confronts treating suicide lightly (even confronting the audience to self-reflexively consider whether it is watching this film simply to be entertained by a story in which suicide features prominently). The effects of suicide on loved ones are portrayed in their variety. Even after many years have past since Kotone's death, Mei remains embittered toward her while

Hibiki longs for her and wants to understand more about her death, even at the risk of her own life. Their grandmother (Hideko Hara) weeps over having not understood Kotone, blaming herself over her own failure to help Kotone as her daughter. The film resists simplistic relegation of suicide to a regrettable symptom of mental illness, considering instead how in some cases suicide could be an act of love and of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, while also showing that perceived suicide may not in fact always be suicide. The ability to handle suicide and loss to this extent in the film itself draws attention to the importance and value of human life, and thereby focuses attention on the uniqueness of humanity.

While not developed to the same extent as the themes of loss and suicide, a social-critical presentation of clinical psychology also appears in the film. The presentation of Hibiki's diagnosis as schizophrenic and the treatment of her and her friends by the psychiatrist (Muga Tsukaji) provides an implicit critique of psychological diagnosis and psychotherapy as an inadequate, coldly theoretical, and perhaps even abusive, means by which people are classified as weak. The film leaves ambiguous whether Hibiki truly is schizophrenic or if she receives a misdiagnosis due to her spiritual sensitivity, and thereby also leaves ambiguous how much of what the audience has seen is her genuine perception of spirits or schizophrenic hallucination. That she has a genuine spiritual sensitivity and perceives spirits is clear, but how much, if any, of her perception is illusory is left open. The revelation that those considered mentally unsuitable in the past were among those who were cast into the forest and became part of the village raises the question of how much psychiatric and clinical psychological institutions in present-day society may differ from such abusive societal isolation and exclusion in the past.

Suicide Forest Village is a complex film rewarding multiple viewings with subtle details, leaving some unexplained in such a way that audiences can continue to analyze, discuss, and debate, leading to multiple interpretations. A longer discussion of the film could consider epistemological themes concerning truth, reality, and perception; the blurring of the borderline between plant and human; the combination of elements of traditional *kaidan* (lit., "strange tales"; a form of Japanese folklore traditionally transmitted orally and adapted in traditional drama [*noh* and *kabuki*]) and Western dark fantasy; and stylistic innovation within the context of Japanese horror. The remainder of this review, however, may offer some comments on viewing the film in consideration of religion (Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity).

Half-way through the film, the forest is explained as *kami no mori*, meaning, "forest of gods," "gods' forest." Such an association of nature, particularly a forest, and the sacred flows naturally from a traditional Japanese conceptual framework, in which various *kami* of Shinto are associated with the natural world. At the same time, in the film the people of the village are those who had been taken to the forest as offerings to the god or gods of the forest (*kami*, "god," may be either singular or plural), confronting use of religion to mistreat others and to justify prejudice and abuse.

The one religion that appears explicitly in the film is Buddhism. Shinjiro's father is a Buddhist priest. The bleached-haired Shinjiro, however, finds himself to be the object of a playful rebuke from Mei that he is not acting appropriately for a "temple son." The somewhat flashy manner (along with obvious wealth) of his father may seem more reminiscent of a religious television personality than someone whose devotion has stressed indifference to desire.

Nevertheless, the powerful resistance of the *kotoribako* to his exorcism attempt functions in the film's narrative not to present him as an unsuitable priest, but rather to reinforce the film's emphasis on helplessness against death. Additionally, as in several of Shimizu's films, including those of the *Ju-on* series, *Reincarnation* (Japanese: *Rinne*) (2005), and *Howling Village*, temporal non-linearity and locational transcendence in the film also draw from a Buddhist context.

Finally, although Hosaka and Shimizu may have made not conscious references to Christianity, two scenes of the film may easily evoke cognitive associations with Christian imagery or theology for viewers familiar with them. In the first of these scenes, Mei returns to consciousness in the forest and is surrounded by the souls of the people of the village. She is now strapped down on a tree by branches with her arms outstretched for her finger to be cut off with pruning shears, which will result in her absorption into the forest as one of the people of the village. The events that ensure in this scene are those of sacrificing oneself for the sake of another, which, when combined with Mei's cruciform position on a tree, evoke substitutionary self-sacrifice to save another.

The second of these scenes is the film's climactic death. As forest goblins pursue in a scene visually reminiscent of Dante-inspired portrayals of hell (particularly artwork based on the Wood of the Suicides in Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XIII), one character stands between another person and this foresty hell to take her own life, giving herself in place of the other person to save that person from the curse. The image of her standing with the tree growing around her with its boughs outstretched directly perpendicular to the trunk, shown from a low angle that focuses on her face, makes her appear suspended on a tree in a manner further evoking images of Jesus's crucifixion in art and film. This resemblance is strengthened by the twistedness of the branches by her lower body, similar to crossed legs on a crucifix, the twigs around her head, and the bright light that shines from behind her.¹

Suicide Forest Village is disturbing, as would be expected for a horror film. Its disturbance comes from gore and the grotesque, portrayal of physical pain, as well as from the subject matter of suicide itself. Its portrayal of grief makes the film painful to watch. The film leaves its audience, however, not only with how terrible the loss of human life is, but also with the beauty of love that extends even to giving one's life for another. As observed at the beginning of the film, we do not know what will happen to any person or when, but the film reminds those who still live to remember with gratefulness what others have done for them and to continue to live, in spite of tragedy, in that light.

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¹ The correspondence to Christian imagery may be unintentional. Shimizu stated in a YouTube interview for Kon Amimura's *Cinema Labo* on January 21, 2021 that he had in mind a "horror version" of the end of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Topcraft, 1984): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnx91BGMJVM> (accessed 18 March 2021).