

***Kisaragi Station*. Written by Takeshi Miyamoto, directed by Jiro Nagae. Aeon Entertainment Co., Ltd., 2022.**

*Kisaragi Station* (Japanese: *Kisaragi Eki*) is a Japanese horror film written by Takeshi Miyamoto and directed by Jiro Nagae. Although differing in many respects from classic “J-horror” in the Konaka Theory tradition, *Kisaragi Station* continues the common use of urban legends in Japanese horror films, exemplified recently in Takashi Shimizu’s village series (*Howling Village* [2020], *Suicide Forest Village* [2021], *Ox-Head Village* [2022]). Through its unique combination of audience-perspective first-person storytelling and other elements from gaming, juxtaposition of the mundane and the otherworldly, and deliberate ambiguity, it leads audiences from their fascination about other worlds, through fear of such worlds and the unknown in them, to the final realization that the deception, betrayal, and selfishness within ourselves provide plenty of reasons for fear even in the world in which we now live.

*Kisaragi Station*, like Nagae’s earlier *2Channel no Noroi Gekijouban* (2011) and *Shin Samejima Jiken* (2020), is based on an urban legend originating from Japanese internet bulletin board 2channel (popularly known as “2chan”). In a thread extending in the night from January 8 to January 9, 2004, a woman under the handle “Hasami” wrote that she was returning home from work by train as usual but that the train had not stopped for about 20 minutes. Aside from her, only 5 other people were on the train, all asleep. After other 2chan users interacted with her initial posts, she posted that the train stopped at “Kisaragi Station,” where she got off the train but found no one, much less a taxi that she could use to go home. Readers of the thread, seeking to help her, soon found that internet searches for “Kisaragi Station” provided no results. Continuing to post, Hasami walked along the train tracks, began to hear taiko drums in the distance, encountered a one-legged elderly man who warned her not to walk on the tracks and then disappeared, and came to a tunnel with a sign “Isanuki Tunnel.” Going through the tunnel, she could see someone standing ahead. The person offered to give her a ride to the nearest station, but after getting in the car, the person stopped speaking. Hasami’s last post was that her phone battery was about to run out. An urban legend concerning a late-night train becoming a portal to another world and stopping at “Kisaragi Station” resulted from these posts, and it has been used in various media, the best-known outside of Japan of which may be the video game *The Ghost Train* (Japanese: *Yūrei Ressha*; Chilla’s Art, 2020).

In Nagae’s film, university student Haruna Tsutsumi (Yuri Tsunematsu) visits Sumiko Hayama (Eriko Satō), who posted as “Hasami,” to interview her as part of her research for her graduation thesis for a degree in folklore studies. Hayama narrates to Tsutsumi her experience in the other world, shown to the audience in first-person in the manner of an FPS video game, including how she returned to the normal world and her

failure to save high school student Asuka Miyazaki (Miyu Honda), another passenger on the train. Tsutsumi, through analyzing old messages on Hayama's phone, deciphers how to enter the other world and goes to Kisaragi Station herself. The actions and events in the other world repeat in exactly the manner as Hayama encountered them, allowing Tsutsumi to manipulate differing outcomes through her knowledge of what will happen.

The appeal and attraction of the film *Kisaragi Station*, as well as the urban legend on which it is based, may be considered human curiosity and imagination about other worlds, and it raises the question of the reasons for such fascination. This attraction of other worlds is often manifested in entertainment, such as through the genres of science fiction and fantasy, including the recently popular *isekai* ("other world") genre of manga and anime. Fascination with other worlds and speculation about them are not, however, exclusive to entertainment. They are also manifested in mythology, folklore, and the manner in which religion imagines worlds other than the one of current experience, including, for example, in Christian tradition, speculating about heaven and hell beyond scriptural description. Although *Kisaragi Station* does not develop the relationship of other worlds to religion, echoes of such a relation emerge through the location of the portal of light at a Shinto shrine. The term for disappearance into another world is, after all, *kamikakushi* ("hiding by the gods") and such disappearance has sometimes been associated with particular shrines, such as Shirazumori Shrine in Ichikawa.

The dangers of the other world in *Kisaragi Station* suggest that other worlds, as fascinating as they may be, may also be reason for fear. On the one hand, many of the dangers of the world beyond Kisaragi Station do not surprise audiences who know they are watching a horror film, aside from the mild surprise of occasional jump scares. Nevertheless, the audience knows of only Hayama's return to the normal world and therefore feels anxiety for her companions as they are gradually eliminated by the unexpected variety of dangers by which the other world seems to wish to either destroy them or prevent them from escaping back to the normal world. This anxiety is lessened when Tsutsumi makes her own run through the otherworld. She displays an appearance of control over the strange world through her ability to navigate her companions through it, sometimes comically, without losing them to as many of the dangers that Hayama had. Hayama's distressed exclamations when she is finally unable to manipulate outcomes as she anticipated, however, are a reminder that worlds, whether the one in which we now live or other worlds, are more powerful than the humans who inhabit them. The unexplained giant eye that appears in the sky at this point in the film also suggests the terrifying supernatural (divine?) personhood lying behind the world that has trapped those unfortunate enough to enter it and seeing the evil they commit. While some viewers of the film may feel frustrated by the absence of explanation for the world beyond Kisaragi Station and the dangers that inhabit it, this very absence highlights that neither the present

world nor others may be as we would want to imagine, and they cannot be tamed by our desires and attempts to manipulate them.

Tsutsumi's failed plan for escape is, however, not simply a matter of powerfulness in an unfamiliar world. Both her plan and its failure direct the audience to dangers greater and more sinister than a vein-like thing that haunts train tracks, a weird old man that ignites and explodes on contact, or zombified traveling companions: human deceit, selfishness, and betrayal. Characters in the story have deceived and betrayed each other. Regret, selflessness, compassion, and trust were merely pretend, devices for gaining one's own desire before throwing one's relationship with another person in the trash and leaving the person to die in another world. Those whom humans have pretended to care for may in the end have been mere tools disposed once they have served the roles secretly devised for them. The audience of the film, who has sympathized with these characters (even more so because of the film's FPS viewpoint), has likewise been deceived and betrayed by them, and the film, with its last laugh at the audience, mocks the audience for being so trusting all along. The characters' own ability to predict deception, their use of the deception of others to their own advantage, and even the cosmic watching eye that looks down on Tsutsumi's failure remind that, as much as we may wish to deny human selfish predilection for deceit, it is neither unseen nor to be unexpected. It is too much of who humans are. Audiences who watch through the post-credit scene are left with the sinking dread of what will happen after the film's end when two deceived people encounter each other and attempt to betray each other through self-interest.

These themes of human deceit and betrayal in *Kisaragi Station* are highlighted further if the film is viewed alongside Shimizu's village series as a parody. *Kisaragi Station* shares many elements with the films in the village series, including use of urban legends, a young intelligent female protagonist, a non-urban setting, a timeslip, cyclicism, and a post-credit scene showing that not all has ended. Even some of the visual effects could be considered cheap parodic imitations of those used in the village series. In each film in the village series, however, a character, understanding the inescapable fate by which someone must die, performs a climactic act of self-sacrifice for the salvation of another. *Kisaragi Station* climaxes instead with an act of selfish betrayal that reveals the layers of deceit that extend all the way to the film's beginning. One could imagine Nagae saying to Shimizu that humans are often not the loving, self-sacrificing beings that Shimizu has portrayed them to be.

*Kisaragi Station* entertains by appealing to the fascination of other worlds, yet it reminds that neither this world nor the worlds beyond the grave can be imagined as a video game to be played and manipulated by our own desires; they must be taken much more seriously. While many of the mysteries of this world and other worlds, as well as the supernatural are left unexplained, the proclivity to selfishness, deception, and betrayal in

ourselves are clear reasons for fear even in our experience of the world in which we now live. We are monsters enough ourselves even if we have not encountered anything monstrous while trying to escape to another world.

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