

***Howling Village*. Written by Daisuke Hosaka and Takashi Shimizu, and directed by Takashi Shimizu. Toei Company, Ltd., 2020.**

Howling Village (Japanese: *Inunaki-mura*) is a Japanese horror film by Takashi Shimizu, beautifully filmed on-site in Fukuoka Prefecture. It is the first film of Shimizu's *Villages of Dread* series, to be followed in February 2021 by *Suicide Forrest Village* (Japanese: *Jukai-mura*). Shimizu is best known for the *Ju-On* franchise, which began with his first feature-length film, the direct-to-video *Ju-On: The Curse* (Japanese: *Ju-On*) (2000) and became internationally well-known through the success of the third film of the franchise, the theatrically released *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Japanese: *Ju-On*) (2002). While family plays a thematic role through domestic violence and abuse in the *Ju-On* franchise as well as in Shimizu's *Innocent Curse* (Japanese: *Kodomo Tsukai*) (2017) and, to an extent, *Reincarnation* (Japanese: *Rinne*) (2005), the family-centered story of *Howling Village* expands urban legends concerning a village in Inunaki (literally meaning "Dog Barking") into a complex narrative concerning bloodlines and borderlines. It thereby draws audiences to face their own identity and the nature of their humanity.

The film's story follows young clinical psychologist Kanade Morita (Ayaka Miyoshi), who lives with her parents, older brother Yuma (Ryota Bando) and elementary-school age brother Kota (Hinata Kaizu). After Yuma and his girlfriend Akina (Rinka Otani) venture through the old, blocked-off Inunaki Tunnel into Inunaki Village, Akina's behavior becomes strange and she soon dies. While Yuma, along with Kota, goes missing after returning to the tunnel, Kanade is troubled by her experiences of seeing what seem to be ghosts. At the heart of this is her maternal family history, which seems related to what has happened to her brothers and Akina, to prejudice from others in the town against her family, and to difficulties in her parents' marital relationship.

As the film progresses, Kanade learns about both her maternal and paternal ancestries. Her maternal grandmother, who had the same experience of seeing spirits, had been abandoned as an infant, likely from Inunaki Village, which was destroyed through flooding due to the construction of the Inunaki Dam. The people of the village had long been ostracized and objects of prejudice, but a group from outside entered and seemed to desire to help them. Secretly working for an electric company, however, they came deceptively to have the dam constructed in disregard for the village and the lives of its people. They treated the people of the village with brutality, and to further increase hostility against the village, locked up its young women and spread rumors that these women engaged in bestiality with dogs. One of the prominent members of this group was a paternal ancestor of Kanade.

Throughout this narrative, the determined nature of bloodlines, along with their resultant construction of identity and relationships, play a prominent thematic role. *Howling Village* is not a narrative of acting on ambition, determining self, or fulfilling dreams, but rather one that revolves around the determined and unchangeable nature of self, family, and community. Bloodlines are neither chosen nor necessarily known, and at times, they appear to be in conflict. At the beginning of the film, even though some of her experiences result from her ancestry, Kanade knows neither her bloodlines on her mother's side nor on her father's side. The knowledge that unfolds as the film progresses allows no opportunity to choose between them or alter them.

Kanade's maternal ancestry places her and her family in a position of prejudice and, to an extent, the bestial or monstrous in the view of others, but not because of anything that she has done or over which she has control. Kanade hears insults of her family's blood. She finds her family's house marked with graffiti calling her family murderers with dirty blood. Kanade's father admits to her that his at times harsh patriarchal disposition comes from his own fear of her and her mother. And, finally, Kanade and her mother's own dog-like characteristics and behavior reveal that the effects of her maternal bloodline extend not only to how Kanade is viewed subjectively by others, but to her own unchangeable nature.

At the same time, Kanade's paternal ancestry is that of the deceiver, the persecutor, the ostracizer, the slanderer, the one who has murdered a community for financial gain. As shown by the continued prejudice and mistreatment of her family within the community outside of the village, these are not merely matters of the past, but continue as an underlying disposition of her town toward her in the present. Kanade's conflicting maternal and paternal ancestry are not bloodlines to be escaped, but are her own predetermined identity and the predetermined identity of her family whom she loves.

Howling Village's blurring of several conventional borderlines in its narrative world contribute to the complexity of its treatment of human nature: urban legend and reality, natural and supernatural, living and dead, present and past, and insider and outsider. Most significantly, however, the film focuses its audience on the blurring of the border of human and animal and thereby forces its audience to face both the existence of that border and the horror unique to being on the human side of it. The animality of humans in a naturalistic evolutionary understanding of human development often provokes little reaction in a classroom or an account of natural history, but *Howling Village* will not allow such disinterested neutrality.

Many of the most disturbing moments of the film are those in which humans behave like dogs or show the characteristics of dogs, causing the audience to face its presupposition that humans are different from beasts. Shimizu has previously blurred the borderline between human and animal through Toshio's meows in the *Ju-On* series and through the animalistic behavior of F and the dero in his Lovecraftian *Marebito* (2004). The effectiveness of these scenes in *Howling Village*, however, is heightened by how they feature characters toward whom the audience has first been drawn to feel affection and sympathy. The POV for much of the opening eight-minutes draws the audience to view Akina from Yuma's perspective as he films his bright and playfully cheerful girlfriend while they venture into Inunaki Village. As an audience, we therefore feel all the more sorry and embarrassed for Akina when she later urinates on herself while walking along the road. We would have no similar reaction toward a dog that urinates on the street when taken on a walk. Similarly, when Kanade's mother eats off the floor directly with her mouth, the portrayal of her doing so is disturbing because of her very humanity. Even Maya is presented as an ordinary woman who is Kenji's lover until her transformation as the film's climax. The chilling final moment of the film is the sight of Kanade herself, whom the audience has followed throughout the film's narrative, as she holds her hand up to her mouth like a dog's paw. The audience's sense of the dignity of humanity is what makes each of these moments in the film disturbing.

Yet, as much as dog-like behavior in humans is disturbing, a more disturbing characteristic of human nature appears at the point where the film's thematic use of bloodlines and borderlines cross. Which is superior, or which is more monstrous? The people of the village, who do indeed have bestial characteristics but are victims of prejudice, hostility, slander, and, in the end, murder through the construction of a dam for company profit by a group who betrays them; or that group and its community outside the village? If the question is one of which is more bestial, the answer is the people of the village, who indeed have characteristics of dogs. Yet, paradoxically, they are also more like beasts than those outside of their community in that the group from the power company and their community are more wicked than dogs could ever be. They differ from dogs by the atrocity of their actions, showing a distinguishing characteristic of humanity: wickedness.

Howling Village is not explicitly "religious" in the presentation of its story (although its temporal non-linearity may take hints from the Buddhist cyclicism from which Shimizu draws in the *Ju-On* films and, more explicitly, in *Reincarnation*). Nevertheless, the questions with which it faces its audience concerning determinedness, identity, and the dignity and wickedness of humanity are the material of philosophy, ethics, and, indeed, of religion. As an audience, we are drawn to consider again who we are as humans, our discomfort of being made to feel we are like animals, and whether we have more reason to fear the inhuman or to fear ourselves. We cannot change our humanity and its characteristics, nor the particularity of ourselves, our families, and our communities as part of that humanity. Within that particularity we recognize humanity's dignity and love for our family, exemplified by Kanade risking her life to save her brothers and by Yuma's

sacrifice of himself for her. Yet, even if we view ourselves as different from beasts by that dignity and love, the internal conflict of our humanity is the presence of a human characteristic worse than bestiality. While we may recoil at the thought of being more like dogs than we wish to admit, *Howling Village* invites us to consider if, even more horrifyingly, we may be less like dogs than we wish to acknowledge as we distinguish ourselves from them by the wickedness we commit against each other.

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