

## EYEBLAZE # 5

# HAUSU



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**Part 5 of our regular column in which we give short personal introductions to those unique gems of cinema that stand alone and are unlike anything else. Each week we focus on a film that has inspired and influenced our own work as filmmakers or has expanded our understanding of what cinema is and could be.**

### **The film:**

In 1977 when the Japanese Toho Studios asked Nobuhiko Obayashi if he could make a Japanese equivalent of *Jaws* he replied "I have the energy for 10 or 12 *Jaws*". He certainly had the energy but the film he made appears to have little in common with its American starting point. Obayashi threw a few ideas around, killer bears, killer ants, all ideas that would have found themselves lost amongst the other similar films that were made in the wake of Spielberg's killer shark. He finally found what he was looking for one evening when he was getting his 13 year-old daughter ready for bed. He asked her what she found scary and she said, while brushing her hair in front of the mirror, "if my reflection leaped out and ate me". He continued to discuss the film with his daughter, who contributed a large number of ideas for scenes that we see in the film.

The story follows schoolgirl Angel and her friends (Fantasy, Kung Fu, Prof, Sweetie, Mac and Melody) on a summer trip together to her auntie's house in the country. Unknown to the girls the auntie has been dead for many years and her ghost possesses the house while she waits for her long lost fiancé who never returned from World War II. Her spirit is kept alive by consuming the flesh of young girls. The set up is very simple but the execution is unlike anything else we have ever seen and reveals a concern with deeper issues.

The film at first appears chaotic and bewildering, scenes move quickly and shift tone several times within each scene, the plot and character are stripped down and the story seems secondary to a narrative that follows ideas rather than a Hollywood style plot, each moment is pushed to excessive melodramatic effect resulting in a bombardment of images and sounds, the style is that of adverts and children's TV, a pop style of bright colours, repetition and catchy music. *Hausu* uses every conceivable technique and effect, superimposed images, freeze frames, stop motion animation, slow motion, miniatures, puppetry, jump cuts, fades and wipes, blue screen and painted back-



drops. Not a scene goes by without some kind of visual effect. It is a film of theatrics and camera tricks, there is no pretence of realism here.

The film starts and we hear a creepy music-box type tune played on piano. On screen we see Angel dressed in traditional Japanese dress surrounded by candles and being photographed by Fantasy. The scene is shot through a green filter in a 4:3 frame, Angel walks across the room and the frame freezes, becomes 16:9 and resumes normal colour, the music-box melody becomes a bouncy pop tune as they talk excitedly about their summer holidays. A bell rings and they rush to class, the image freeze frames and is superimposed with the next moment. Angel asks Fantasy why she was looking at her in a strange way, she replies "Because you looked like a witch in a horror movie". A friendly female teacher approaches them and they congratulate her on her engagement and giggle that she must be in love, she flatly replies "It's an arranged marriage". The girls skip off down the hall happily and we cut to a close up of the teacher as she says wistfully to herself "Summer holidays...how wonderful" then the image irises into black.

This opening scene introduces the key themes of the film, the divide between past and present, the old world of traditional ceremonies and arranged marriages is in contrast with the young westernised girls who think of romance, use English names for each other and live in a world of consumerism and pop music. The change from the 4:3 image of early cinema to the wider image of the 70's highlights this theme also, which permeates throughout every part of the film, each narrative element, image, sound and effect are an expression and exploration of it.

As the girls journey from the town into the countryside we see a hand-drawn picture of a train traveling through the city in a children's book, which then becomes an animated view of the countryside from the train window. Angel tells her friends about how her aunt's lover was lost at war and never returned, as she tells her story we see the light of a projector flicking and black and white footage within a hand-drawn frame of sprocket holes that plays like an old silent movie, over we hear the girls comment on the scenes as if we were sitting with them in the screening room. Once they leave the train they walk through a field and woods with painted backdrops of mountains and clouds. The film's theme song plays repetitively as we see each of the characters introduced to us as in a children's adventure TV show, each of their faces and names appearing in a hazy superimposed circle over footage of the woods with their names written down one side of the screen. This may all sound quite over the top but you haven't heard anything yet, it's when they get to the house that things really get going.



The house is alive from the start, responding to the aunt's enthusiasm for having fresh young girls to consume, and it helps her to do it. One girl is decapitated and her head flies around the yard laughing before biting another girl on the backside, futons attack another of the girls in an incredible scene which is shot from underneath through a glass floor and in another scene a piano bites off a girl's fingers before swallowing her whole! The piano chews her down, her limbs sticking out and bouncing around mid-air, while a skeleton dances and chatters his teeth! But still this is nothing compared to a scene towards the end, when Angel has been possessed by the aunt, Kung-Fu fights and is killed by a lampshade, a painting of a cat spews a torrent of blood and the floor breaks up revealing a sea of blood in which Prof falls and disintegrates, in a mix of strobing lights, video effects, hand-drawn backdrops and a cacophony of noise. We could go on but wouldn't come close to giving a description of *Hausu* that would do it justice, all we can say is go watch it!

**Who made it:**

Obayashi started his film work as an experimental filmmaker working in 8mm and 16mm in Tokyo in the 1960's, showing his films in galleries and underground venues alongside other young experimental filmmakers. His films had an innovative, fast-paced and playful style and a melodramatic tone that appealed to advertising companies, he became very successful making commercials in America and Europe.

In the late 70's, the Japanese film industry wasn't doing too well. The studio system in Japan was going through a transformation similar to what was happening in Hollywood in the late 60's and early 70's, the studios were losing audiences and were wanting to capitalise on the youth market, taking chances on young directors making their first films. Obayashi, who was in his late 20's at the time, was seen as the perfect filmmaker to make a youth film, being a director working on commercials who had a deeper sensibility developed in his experimental work. Traces of both of these can be seen in *Hausu*, which was originally taken on as a commercial project but quickly, due to the creative freedom he was given, became a personal project.

**Why it's important to us:**

We love *Hausu* for its excessiveness, it holds nothing back, it is a full-on celebration of the theatricality and artifice of cinema. But what makes this seemingly over-the-top style work is that it is held together with strong themes that are



explored and expressed throughout. It is a perfect example of a film in which form and style marry with its content, for us this is what makes a good film. At first glance *Hausu* appears to be rather silly and just good fun, but with a closer inspection it is clear that it's a work made by an artist very much in tune with the world around him and with a masterful understanding and skill for making movies. *Hausu* is exploring the form of western mainstream cinema, it defies and challenges clichés, it questions storytelling conventions and succeeds in making a work of art that also happens to be a great piece of entertainment.

**How to see it:**

There are two DVD's available, one released by Masters of Cinema (region 2) and one by Criterion (region 1). The Criterion release is also available on Blu Ray. All can be found on Amazon.

**Further viewing/reading:**

*Hausu* is the only one of Obayashi's feature films that is available in the UK. Considering the great number of films that Obayashi has made, it's frustrating that more aren't available outside of Japan. Some of his experimental short films can be seen here: <http://www.ubu.com/film/obayashi.html>

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