In the briefest special feature on Criterion’s stunning DVD and Blu-ray of 1977’s HOUSE, filmmaker Ti West (of the incredible HOUSE OF THE DEVIL) says, “As a filmgoer, how could you ignore a movie that’s unlike any movie you’ve ever seen before? How is that not the most exciting thing?” And he’s absolutely right. HOUSE is something truly special, a film that’s unique and mind blowing—and one whose qualities have not been tarnished by time.

The first feature by commercial and experimental director Nobuhiko Obayashi, HOUSE was famously inspired by ideas from his daughter, Chigumi—a preteen at the time. The very loose narrative concerns seven young schoolgirls, all with silly names describing their personalities (Gorgeous, Fantasy, Melody, Kung Fu, Mac, Sweetie and Prof) who decide to spend the summer with Gorgeous’ aunt (conveniently named Auntie). Her looming home, however, is haunted and an entity unto itself, prompting some of the most absurd, chaotic and visually arresting scenes you may ever witness.

Truly, HOUSE defies description. I could write on about the sheer anarchy of a floating decapitated head biting a character’s rear end; or the cast of girls openly commenting about the handsomeness of a character in a flashback, as if they’re watching it play out with the audience; or a piano literally eating Melody; or Sweetie being attacked and drowned by a mountain of pillows and futons. But no more description can replicate the experience of viewing the camera tricks, the futon raft and the lasers shooting from Blanche the cat’s eyes.

Criterion’s HOUSE discs aren’t stocked with an incredible amount of supplements, but those included offer plenty of in-depth appreciation for the diamond this film is. “Constructing a HOUSE” is 45 minutes’ worth of interviews with both Nobuhiko and Chigumi Obayashi and screenwriter Chiho Katsura, chronicling every stage of the film from inception to development, its production and media hype. This featurette manages to convey just how different the film was both in spirit and behind the scenes, circumventing traditional release patterns and studio rules. Also included is EMOTION, a lengthy experimental short Obayashi directed in 1966—a mellower, but more abstract and telling prelude to his work in HOUSE. The final bonus is the

aforementioned chat with West, in which he not only gushes about Obayashi’s film (and rightfully so), but notes the interesting dynamic between the filmmaker’s TV-advertising background and how that shaped HOUSE’s odd flavor, vs. the many commercial and music-video directors hired in Hollywood today—often because of their lack of a distinctive style.

As expected (this is a Criterion release, after all), HOUSE’s widescreen transfer and sound are nothing short of gorgeous, and it’s a blessing that the picture can be presented in such a light. I would happily argue that this is one of the best (and most extreme) cases of using the visual medium to its full potential. From the animation, to the matte backgrounds, to the playful uses of iris, soft focus and outstanding production design, it’s an exciting piece of work whose energy is unlikely to ever be replicated. If you dare even consider yourself a fan or student of cinema, or are remotely interested in being affected by a movie, you must get your hands on HOUSE.

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DISC PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀

{jcomments on}