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Ways of Thinking, ADDA4022

How Junji Ito's Manga Was Influenced By Western Media

Junji Ito is a horror manga artist from Nakatsugawa, Gifu, Japan, whose work has had an undeniable impact upon the world of horror and Japanese comics, which are known as manga according to (Merriam-webster.com, 2018), since his debut in 1987 with the first chapter of *Tomie*. His work has influenced several different projects such as the 2023 video game *World of Horror* which wears its influences proudly on its sleeve “Experience the quiet terror of this 1-bit love letter to Junji Ito and H.P. Lovecraft” (Panstasz, 2023). The influence of manga as a whole has long been talked about as a major inspiration for comics in the west, especially in reference to Ito. But what’s relatively unknown is how western properties and history have inspired the artist over the course of his career.

In Joshua Meyer’s 2022 article *The Western Influences Behind Junji Ito’s Manga Work*, the journalist briefly touches upon a few of the artist’s previous influences. Building on the discovery of these influences via this initial article, this essay will explore two of Ito’s most well-known manga and their influences as well as the inspiration for a selection of his lesser-known works.

Ito’s most well-known work is the long form manga *Uzumaki*, originally published in 1998 and later receiving an English release by Viz Media through 2001 - 2002. The manga takes the symbol of the spiral and injects horror into its very shape in unique ways every chapter. Though the word ‘uzumaki (渦巻)’ can have a few different variations when being translated, such as whirlpool, eddy, vortex and swirl (WordHippo, 2024), the specific characters used for the Japanese spelling of the book’s title “うずまき” is directly translated as ‘spiral’.



Fig 1. Ito, J. (2002). Spiral obsession. *Uzumaki*.

The symbol of the spiral can be used in many ways but from a semiotics standpoint, the first and most prominent use throughout the book is in reference to how people can get swept up into a concept or way of thinking, after being drawn in and plunged into a single idea and how it becomes more difficult to escape the further into it you go. This can be seen in a very literal and physical way during the first and second chapters. The first follows the father of the protagonist's boyfriend as he becomes obsessed with spirals, to the point of contorting his own body to take on the same shape as his obsession, resulting in his death. The second follows the wife of the father as she deals with an extreme phobia of spirals brought on by her husband's death and causes her to mutilate her own body, in order to rid herself of any spirals.

In the 2019 video from Crunchyroll *Junji Ito Tours A Real Haunted House (The Winchester Mystery House)*, Ito states that the original concept for the setting of *Uzumaki*'s climax stemmed from row houses, called 'nagaya' in Japanese. In the 2024 book *Uncanny: The Origin of Fear*, translated by J. Allen, he compares the scale of this conceived "endless row house" to the Great Wall of China. Though the row houses idea was taken from his childhood, he mentions that the Winchester Mystery House, in San Jose, California, may have influenced the complex design of the building (Crunchyroll, 2019).

A more direct and intentional inspiration is from Steven Spielberg's 1975 film *Jaws*. In the 2024 book, Ito credits as being the "motif" for his story *Gyo*. Later into the book the artist once again mentions the film as a "model example" (Ito, 2024, P) of effective horror. Explaining how the buildup to the viewer's first full glimpse of the shark is made that much more effective by the expectations the characters set for the audience, via the fisherman's intense tale of his past with other man-eating sharks. Before the creature is even shown, the anxiety surrounding it has already built up an imposing picture within the viewer's mind.

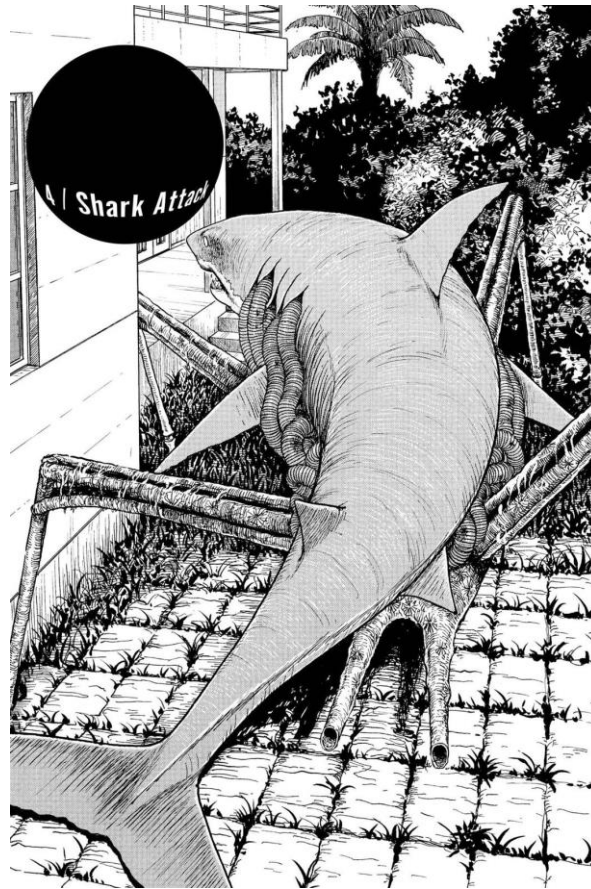


Fig 2. Ito, J. (2003). *Shark Attack*. *Gyo*.

The general theme and overall horror originates from the very core of *Jaws* and its effect on the audience, but for the visuals, Ito took inspiration from Swiss artist H.R. Giger (Ito, 2024, P.171). Popularised after his designs for the *Alien* franchise, his artwork combined the human shape or idea with mechanical aspects, often being referred to as “biomechanical” (Archive.org, 2008). Ito describes the work of Geiger as “extremely alluring, boasting a somehow indescribable terror and eroticism” (Ito, 2024, P.171). This inspiration is very noticeable when looking at the mechanical designs throughout the story of *Gyo*, especially when the machines start to attach to humans instead of just fish. From looking at the artwork on the opening page of Chapter 4: *Shark Attack*, this biomechanical style is perfectly mixed with that of *Jaws*. The page prominently features a great white shark attached to some sort of machine with legs. But due to said machine having been underwater for so long, it has taken on a rusted and worn appearance. When paired with what appear to be barnacles and seaweed attached all over, it presents an eerily organic appearance. Especially if we also take into account the shape at the very base of the machine, which could be compared to the appearance of a human heart.

Stepping away from these long-form manga and once again delving into the autobiographical book *Uncanny: The Origins of Fear* from 2024, we can also learn about some of the influences behind many of his one-shot stories. Though these works tend to be lesser known by a wider audience, they show off

Ito's ability to build fear in a short amount of time. Many of the ideas for these stories were related to western media and even history. The latter of which can be seen in his one-shot *Honored Ancestors*. The design behind the multi fore-headed family patriarch was influenced by the appearance of Canadian totem poles. These poles, according to (Huang, 2011), were monuments created by the “First Nations of the Pacific Northwest to represent and commemorate ancestry, histories, people, or events”.

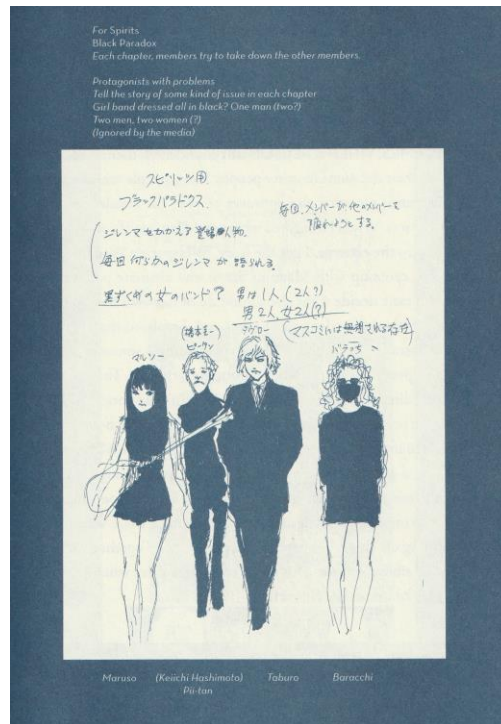


Fig 3. Ito, J. (2024). *Black Paradox*. *Uncanny: The Origins of fear*.

Another western historical influence can be seen in the initial concepts for the story *Black Paradox*. Where it is mentioned in *Uncanny*, 2024 that the story idea stemmed from a documentary discussing space development and the space race between the US and the USSR. Later on this same page, he also discusses the first idea for the protagonists being that of an unknown rock band. Though this concept did not come to fruition in the exact way as initially planned the roots of this idea can still be seen as the fashion for the characters final designs, particularly the “collarless suit and the black jacket” (Ito, 2024, P.227) comes from popular English rock band The Beatles.

Ito also attributes the creation of protagonist Soichi, from the series of the same name, to the influence of *Lost in Space*, an American science fiction show from 1965. The show features the character of Dr. Smith who causes trouble for the family characters throughout the series. Ito admits a personal liking to this character and expressed a ‘secret desire’ to feature a similarly trouble making character within his own work (Ito, 2024, P.212).

This essay has covered two of Junji Ito's most acclaimed long-form works as well as a selection of his lesser-known, shorter releases. By investigating the development process behind these stories, it has been discovered that many pieces of western media have had a strong influence on the artist's work over

the years. This can especially be seen with *Gyo*. Which, for its visuals, based the styling of its machines on the biomechanical artworks of H.R Geiger and the general theme and escalation of the story on Spielberg's 1987 film *Jaws*. Not only was it an inspiration for this story in particular but the artist considers it a model example of horror and attributes his phobia of sharks to having watched the movie at a young age.

Though a number of his works have been examined here, it makes a small dent upon the catalogue of Ito's work, which has been ever expanding over the past 30 years, and has only scratched the surface behind the countless influences and inspirations of horror artist Junji Ito.

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Fig 1. Ito, J. (2002). *Spiral obsession*. Available at: Ito (2002), *Uzumaki*, USA, Viz Media, PP 40 - 41.

Fig 2. Ito, J. (2003). *Shark Attack*. Available at: Ito (2003), *Gyo*, USA, Viz Media, P.73.

Fig 3. Ito, J. (2024). Black Paradox. Available at: Ito (2024), Uncanny: The Origins of fear, USA, Viz Media, P. 227.

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