



JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Yearning (Midareru)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

Hideko Takamine was Mikio Naruse's great muse – as Setsuko Hara was Ozu's and Kinuyo Tanaka was Mizoguchi's – her peerlessly expressive face capable of registering the rawest of emotions. She gives an intensely moving performance in this melodrama about the repressed love between a widow (Takamine) and her brother-in-law (Kayama), one whose currents of emotion swell to a devastating, unforgettable climax.

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The freeze-frame on the face of 14-year-old Jean-Pierre L  aud at the end of Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* may be the most famous final-shot close-up in cinema history, but for shocking registering of personal loss and lingering emotional resonance, my own vote would go to the unforgettable image of the great Japanese actress Hideko Takamine that closes Mikio Naruse's 1964 film *Yearning*. Like Truffaut's close-up of L  aud's Antoine Doinel, or shots of Falconetti in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, it's an image that seems to capture the soul of her character Reiko in a frozen moment, conveying an inexhaustible amount about her experiences, feelings and fears.

The ending of *Yearning* is unforgettable also because it stands as a summation of Naruse's abiding concern with the struggles faced by women. As the American critic Keith Uhlich notes in his insightful review of *Yearning* for *Slant Magazine*, it's an image that reverberates back across Naruse's entire oeuvre – not least because Reiko is played by Takamine. As L  aud was to Truffaut – or perhaps more aptly, as Setsuko Hara was to Ozu – Takamine, who started out as a child star and went on to become one of Japan's best-loved actresses, was indelibly associated with Naruse.

The first film of the director's she appeared in, at the age of 15, was *Hideko the Bus Conductress* (*Hideko no shasho-san*, 1941). Their golden period, however, ran from the early 1950s to the mid-60s, with a run of masterful films including *Lightning* (*Inazuma*, 1952), *Floating Clouds* (*Ukigomo*, 1955), *Flowing* (*Nagareru*, 1956) and *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (*Onna ga kaidan o agaru toki*, 1960). *Yearning* was their penultimate collaboration, so Reiko is also something of a summation of all the characters the actress played for him.

Reiko is a war widow who has devoted the better years of her life to managing the small grocery store owned by her late husband's family. The store, like Reiko, is caught in the past; a new supermarket has opened on the same street, and is slowly pushing them out of business. Alongside her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, Reiko also shares the house with her brooding brother-in-law Koji, who's prone to fights and passing flings – and who one day declares his love for her.

Shocked, Reiko is initially resistant, but Takamine's expressive face gradually registers flickers of excitement and pleasure at being desired again. Mindful of her dead husband, however, she sees no future in a relationship with Koji, and when the mother-in-law suggests that she leave the store, she decides

it's time to go. It's at this point, with 20 minutes remaining, that this previously rather staid film hurtles towards its tragic finale with a soaring emotional intensity worthy of Douglas Sirk. On the train, Reiko sees that Koji has travelled with her, and simply by registering their exchange of glances – intercut with shots of the train speeding away from Tokyo, and the concerns that have held them back – Naruse suggests that a life together could be possible for them.

They disembark and head to an inn for the night, and Reiko tells Koji how happy it has made her to hear him declare his feelings. But later she tells him once again that she cannot be with him; Koji leaves, wearing a paper ring she has tied around his finger. Next morning Reiko is packing, ready to leave the inn, when she hears a commotion outside. A body is being carried along the towpath beside the river, and in a close-up we see from the paper ring on his finger that it is Koji.

Naruse's films are usually remarkable for the way he captures conversations in adult and believable ways – he may be the best director of talking aside from Eric Rohmer. But here it's the unspoken that's most articulate, emotions coursing across Reiko's face as she runs, desperate to catch up with Koji's body.

At last she stops, gives up the chase and watches as he's carried away. Her breathing becomes less frantic and the shocked expression on her face gives way to despair, then anger, then a numbed resignation to the fact that she is again alone, and can partly blame herself.

No less a figure than Edward Yang, writing on Naruse for a retrospective at the San Sebastian Film Festival in 1998, described the moment as one of the most memorable and moving in all cinema – and he should know.

James Bell, *Sight & Sound*, October 2012

YEARNING (MIDARERU)

Director: Mikio Naruse
Production Company: Toho Co. Ltd.
Producers: Sanezumi Fujimoto, Mikio Naruse
Assistant Director: Seijun Kawanishi
Screenplay: Zenzô Matsuyama
Story: Mikio Naruse
Director of Photography: Jun Yasumoto
Art Director: Satoshi Chûko
Music: Ichirô Saitô

Cast

Hideko Takamine (*Reiko Morita*)
Yûzô Kayama (*Kôji Morita*)
Mitsuko Kusabue (*Hisako Morizono*)
Yumi Shirakawa (*Takako Morita*)
Mie Hama (*Ruriko*)
Aiko Mimasu (*Shizu Morita*)
Yû Fujiki (*Mr Nomizo*)
Kazuo Kitamura (*Mr Morizono*)
Hisao Soga
Kan Yanagiya
Chieko Nakakita
Kumeko Urabe

Japan 1964
98 mins

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