



JAPAN 2021: ANOTHER GAZE

Naomi Kawase: Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth + Birth/Mother

The youngest Cannes Camera d'Or winner at 28 with her debut feature *Suzaku* (1997), Naomi Kawase maintains the highest international profile among the new wave of Japanese female directors who arrived in her wake. She began her career with a series of experimental documentaries – and these two later works from her body of lyrical, first-person Super8 films both cite and reconfigure her earlier, more tender attempts at confronting the pain around her unconventional upbringing. In *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth* (2001) Kawase forces herself to confront her reaction to the death of the father she barely knew, while in *Birth/Mother* (2006), as the filmmaker prepares to give birth, she asks difficult questions of the ailing great-aunt who raised her.

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Naomi Kawase

Japanese cinema is typically viewed as a masculine domain. Until the 1980s, the studio system's structure presented a formidable barrier for women hoping to enter the industry in a creative capacity. Barring Japan's first woman director, Tazuko Sakane, who made a single feature in 1936, the long-lost *Hatsu sugata*, the few who chalked up a directing credit generally hailed from an acting background.

Only in the past decade have Japanese women filmmakers made real headway. Their swelling ranks and the acclaim, both domestic and international, for such names as Miwa Nishikawa (*Dear Doctor*, 2009; *Dreams for Sale*, 2012), Yuki Tanada (*Moon & Cherry*, 2004; *The Cowards Who Looked to the Sky*, 2012), Naoko Ogigami (*Kamome Diner*, 2006) and Satoko Yokohama (*Bare Essence of Life*, 2009) suggest an industry keen to redress past imbalances.

The trailblazer for this new wave, although also an artist with a distinctively individual voice and agenda, has been Naomi Kawase. While recent female directors have downplayed gender's bearing on their work, Kawase has kept it at the forefront, with the naturalistic celebrations of the universality of womanhood of her dramatic features balanced by deeply personal documentary works in which she has regularly turned the camera on herself and her family.

Though she remains overlooked in English-language territories, Kawase has been a fixture at Cannes since her 1997 Caméra d'Or win, aged 27, for her feature debut *Suzaku* (1997), a portrait of family life in a remote village community beset by mass depopulation due to the decline of its traditional cedar-logging industry. Ten years later, she received the Grand Prix for *The Mourning Forest* (2007), about the developing bond between a retirement

home careworker and one of her wards. This was followed by the Carrosse d'Or lifetime achievement award in 2009, the same year that another of her films, *Nanayo* (2008), in which a young woman embarks on a voyage of self-discovery while vacationing in Thailand, cropped up in the Cannes market. Her *Still the Water* (2014), a coming-of-age romance set on a subtropical Japanese island, played in Competition, as did *Hanezu* in 2011, a contemporary adaptation of a Masako Bandô novel shot on 16mm.

Kawase's recurring presence at Cannes indicates her stature within a certain transnational festival subculture. Since 1999, there have been retrospectives in Italy, Switzerland and France; European co-productions within her oeuvre include *The Mourning Forest* and *Still the Water*, and stretch back to *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth* (2001), a documentary self-portrait chronicling her grieving process after the death of her father.

Yet in Japan, Kawase remains marginal, both critically and commercially. Still based in the ancient capital of Nara, where she was born, far from the filmmaking hub of Tokyo, her resolutely independent stance has rendered her very much an outsider in the industry. The mountainous Nara prefecture is an enduring presence in much of her work, and *Suzaku* represented a real breath of fresh air when it first appeared.

Kawase's earliest filmmaking hints at how remarkable her arrival as an internationally-feted auteur seemed to local audiences, and at what still distinguishes her work: low-key depictions of everyday family life and rural traditions with a distinctive feminine subjectivity, steeped in Buddhist themes of cycles of regeneration and rebirth.

Born in 1969, Kawase began making 8mm films at the Osaka School of Visual Arts (then the School of Photography), graduating in 1989. Rather than cinephilia, it was her discovery of the camera as a tool for articulating thoughts and feelings and connecting with the world that informed her earliest work, as their titles – *The Concretisation of These Things Flying around Me* (1988) and *I Focus on That Which Interests Me* (1988) – amply spell out. On the other hand, works like *Papa's Ice Cream* (1988) and *My Solo Family* (1989) point towards the more autobiographical dimension of her oeuvre, evoking a difficult childhood in which she was abandoned by her parents and raised by a great aunt.

This hapless upbringing informs *Embracing* (1992), an emotional journey back into the mists of Kawase's childhood that ends with her making phone contact with her estranged father, and *Katatsumori* (1994), a touching portrait of the elderly relative who took her in. The two films sit between personal diary and experimental cinema, almost painfully candid, stylistically guileless, surprisingly elegant. Vivid invocations of the everyday as filtered through their maker's subjective experiences, they unfurl like assembled fragments of home movies, hypnotic collages of mundane suburban landscapes, trees and other organic forms, simple household objects and interiors: inanimate objects brought to life by the animating force of the camera, inscribed in natural light in the raw grainy texture of 8mm stock and counterpointed by a sparing use of non-diegetic sound. (*Katatsumori* was later blown up to 16mm for theatrical exhibition.)

'I see myself as some sort of axis connecting these images and sounds,' Kawase has said. She captures the timeless spirit of place through the

relationship between landscapes and the communities that live and work within them. *The Weald* (1997), for instance, which saw her returning to the area where *Suzaku* was filmed to document the ageing community still making their livings as loggers, makes evocative use of the textures of 8mm, 16mm and video. With her early 8mm works, Kawase found herself a major player in the amateur *jishu eiga* (‘self-produced film’) scene that emerged during the 1980s.

After *Embracing* won a FIPRESCI Prize Special Mention and *Katatsumori* won the New Asian Currents Award of Excellence at Yamagata in 1995, she collaborated with another rising star of independent Japanese art cinema, Hirokazu Koreeda, making a series of 8mm filmed correspondences that were exhibited as *This World* (1996). The prizes also led to her meeting Takenori Sentô, her future husband and producer of the 35mm work with which her international career would be launched, *Suzaku*.

The pressure Kawase faced to be seen not only as an ambassador for Japan but also for Japanese women was compounded by her engagement and marriage to Sentô in 1997. Work and marriage proved incompatible for a maverick producer based in Tokyo and the promising filmmaker whose heart belonged in Nara, and was keen not to be seen as just another protégée.

The break-up that led to their divorce in March 2000 occurred during the production of a pivotal work in Kawase’s filmography, fuelling much of its content. Beautifully shot in the villages and farmlands of Nara over a year and, like *Suzaku*, improvised by a mostly nonprofessional cast, *Hotaru* (2000), meaning ‘firefly’, depicts the intense, turbulent relationship of two emotionally scarred people.

Kawase’s willingness to place herself or an obvious stand-in at the centre of her films, and the nakedness with which she has used her art to work through her own obsessions, go against the grain with local audiences. Some argue the pictures Kawase presents to the world are mannered and self-consciously exotic – more Japonesque than Japanese. But they can be beautiful and represent a soft-spoken alternative voice in a national industry that has too often traded on bombast and eccentricity. And, crucially, it is this international profile that has laid the groundwork for many young independent filmmakers, especially female ones, to follow.

Jasper Sharp, *Sight & Sound*, August 2014

SKY, WIND, FIRE, WATER, EARTH (KYA KA RA BA A)

Directed by: Naomi Kawase
Presented by: Visual Arts College, Arte France
Production: Sent Inc., KUMIE
Producer: Luciano Rigolini
Cinematography: Masami Inomoto
Sound Recordist: Nobuyuki Kikuchi

With

Uno Kawase
Naomi Kawase

Japan 2001
50 mins

BIRTH/MOTHER (TARACHIME)

Directed by: Naomi Kawase
Production: KUMIE, Sent Inc.
Co-produced by: Arte France

With

Uno Kawase
Mitsuki
Naomi Kawase

Japan 2006
40 mins

JAPAN 2021: ANOTHER GAZE

0.5mm (0.5 miri)

Sat 4 Dec 18:30; Mon 27 Dec 16:30

Dear Pyongyang

Sat 11 Dec 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by director Yang Yong-hi); Thu 23 Dec 18:10

Restoration Premiere: The Far Road (Toi ippon no michi) + intro

Tue 14 Dec 20:40 (+ intro); Tue 28 Dec 15:00

Experimenta presents: A selection of video and film works by experimental filmmaker Mako Idemitsu

Wed 15 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Another Gaze’s Daniella Shreir); Wed 29 Dec 20:40

JAPAN 2021
100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

After Life (Wandafuru raifu)

Wed 1 Dec 18:10; Fri 10 Dec 20:40; Mon 13 Dec 20:40; Wed 29 Dec 14:20

In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)

Wed 1 Dec 20:50; Sat 11 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 18:20

Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no sôretsu)

Thu 2 Dec 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, Kyoto University); Tue 14 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 15:50

The Shifting Spaces of Modern Japanese Cinema

Thu 2 Dec 20:40

Woman of the Dunes (Suna no Onna)

Fri 3 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Espen Bale, BFI National Archive); Sat 18 Dec 17:30

Tokyo Drifter (Tôkyô nagaremono)

Fri 3 Dec 20:50; Thu 23 Dec 18:30

Black Rain (Kuroi ame)

Sat 4 Dec 17:50; Tue 28 Dec 18:15

Straits of Hunger (aka A Fugitive from the Past) (Kiga kaikyô)

Sun 5 Dec 16:30; Sat 18 Dec 14:30

Woman of the Lake (Onna no mizûmi)

Mon 6 Dec 18:00; Wed 15 Dec 20:50

Silence Has No Wings (Tobenai chinmoku)

Mon 6 Dec 20:55; Wed 15 Dec 18:00

The Long Darkness (Shinobugawa)

Wed 8 Dec 20:40; Sun 19 Dec 12:40

Pale Flower (Kawaita hana)

Thu 9 Dec 18:00; Sun 19 Dec 18:20

Death By Hanging (Kôshikei)

Fri 10 Dec 17:50; Fri 17 Dec 18:00

Muddy River (Doro no kawa)

Sun 12 Dec 11:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Thu 23 Dec 20:40

The Demon (Kichiku)

Sun 12 Dec 14:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Sun 19 Dec 16:00

The Man Who Stole the Sun (Taiyô wo nusunda otoko)

Sun 12 Dec 18:00; Thu 16 Dec 20:10

Tampopo

Mon 13 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King’s College London); Fri 17 Dec 20:45; Tue 28 Dec 15:10

Philosophical Screens: Tampopo

Mon 13 Dec 20:15 Blue Room

The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On (Yuki Yukite, Shingun)

Sat 18 Dec 11:40; Mon 27 Dec 18:20

Moving (Ohikkoshi)

Sat 18 Dec 20:35; Wed 29 Dec 20:30

Fire Festival (Himatsuri)

Mon 20 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 13:20

Suzaku (Moe No Suzaku)

Tue 21 Dec 17:45; Thu 30 Dec 21:00

Shall We Dance? (Shall we dansu?)

Tue 21 Dec 20:30; Thu 30 Dec 17:40

Love Letter

Wed 22 Dec 20:50; Tue 28 Dec 12:10

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