



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Black Rain (Kuroi Ame)

Masuji Ibuse's novel, published in 1966, is doubtless the most sophisticated of the many attempts by Japanese artists to come to terms with the experience and effects of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. Shigematsu's *Journal of the Bombing* gives the book its core, providing one man's street-level view of cataclysm and social catastrophe; but the Shigematsu of the novel's present adds to, corrects and revises his old diary as he copies it out, allowing Ibuse to mix imagined eyewitness reportage with information and opinion that would not have been available to most Japanese in 1945. The story of the fruitless quest for a marriage partner for Yasuko and of the girl's own decline frames the novel, but provides only a small percentage of its substance.

Imamura's adaptation of the novel reverses this balance, limiting its view of nuclear holocaust to the prologue and one extended flashback and focusing instead on Yasuko's plight. The shift in emphasis is understandable: Imamura has always been interested in struggles for survival, and he clearly found Yasuko's story more engaging than the challenge of visualising nuclear holocaust. (Inevitably, his own attempts to show the unthinkable are no more adequate than those of his many predecessors, from Kaneto Shindo to the animator Renzo Kinoshita; the single image of black, oily raindrops falling on passengers in the ferry in the opening scene is more ghastly and minatory than all the charred corpses and mutilated survivors contrived by the special effects crew for later scenes.) The difference between Yasuko's struggle for survival and those of Imamura's earlier, amoral heroines, of course, is that Yasuko is doomed to lose. Critics in Japan who have hailed *Black Rain* as a return to his detached, Buñuelian style – after the anarchic 'aberrations' of *Eijanaika*, *The Ballad of Narayama* and *Zegen* – seem to have missed this crucial difference, which pushes the film towards an elegiac sentimentality quite alien to the tough-minded cynicism that used to characterise almost everything that Imamura made.

Given his decision to centre the film on Yasuko, Imamura has had no choice but to supplement the narrative of Ibuse's novel with copious details of his own. He has added the character of the battle-crazed soldier Yuichi, whose mental sufferings match Yasuko's physical pain, and thereby introduced a kind of 'love interest' that would never have occurred to Ibuse. Also added are a handful of peripheral characters like the 'cabaret artiste' Fumiko, a floozie who returns to her home in the village, and the young yakuza who tries to drag her back to Kobe; aside from being quintessential Imamura 'types', they are presumably there to suggest the post-war urban decadence that Yasuko is shielded from. Most portentously, Imamura has amplified the novel's references to the fish in the village lake by introducing what can only be described as the Lawrentian symbol of the giant carp leaping from the water in the closing scenes: an image of the rampant life force confronting the virginal Yasuko's decline.

All these additions are obviously designed to beef up the 'drama' of Yasuko's position, and to give Imamura a range of visual motifs to work with. Ironically, all of them tend to work against the film's actual strengths. The best things in the film are precisely those elements in which Imamura's interest coincides

directly with Ibuse's: the depiction of life in a small village in South-West Japan in the early 1950s, and more particularly the recreation of behaviour patterns and social mores that are now all but lost. This means everything from the many vignettes of quotidian life – gardening, heating the water for the nightly bath, fishing – to the elaboration of neighbourly relationships.

Imamura once again proves himself the last director of his generation capable of drawing convincing period performances from present-day actors; Kazuo Kitamura's supremely measured Shigematsu has the edge over Yoshiko Tanaka's rather one-note Yasuko, but both inhabit their roles in a way that makes most period acting in contemporary Japanese cinema and television look shallow and false. When the script is content to leave larger questions and problems off-screen, the film succeeds magnificently in sketching the village as a living – and, tragically, dying – community. In its low-key, naturalistic way, it has much the same vividness and immediacy as Imamura's earthier and more vulgar picture of the village in *The Ballad of Narayama*.

There is nothing inherently wrong with Imamura's injections of drama into the almost plotless narrative. Indeed, some of them are superbly integrated into the film's sense of domestic routines cracking under impossible strains. But the expressionist paraphernalia of Yuichi's misshapen carvings and the giant carp seem hopelessly out of key with the dominant emphasis on day-to-day norms, just as the abrupt insertion of a radio broadcast reporting the U.S.'s threatened use of atomic bombs in Korea seems a clumsy excuse for Shigematsu to rage that humans never learn from their mistakes. Such lapses into overstatement may spring from Imamura's feeling (since winning the Cannes Golden Palm for *Narayama*) that he needs to meet the perceived expectations of an international audience rather than a purely domestic one. But if there is one thing that characterises most Japanese cinema, literature, theatre and painting on the theme of the Bomb – with the notable exception of Ibuse's novel – it is precisely this kind of rhetorical excess.

When Imamura conjures a string of imagery out of next to nothing, he achieves results as disquieting and resonant as anything he has ever done. The broken clockface that bobs up as flotsam at the start, for instance, giving the ferry passengers their first hint of the enormity of the disaster that has befallen their city, relates to the two later scenes in which Yasuko uses a time check on the radio to reset the household clock. The conjunction of the two images expresses something that it would take pages to put into words, something about time stopping and marching on, about the pathos of reliance on domestic routines, about the death of a certain idea of 'Japan', about despair. By contrast, the hyped-up drama of Yuichi's compulsive re-enactments of battlefield traumas seems unworthy of the director of *Intentions of Murder*, *The Insect Woman* and *The Ballad of Narayama*.

Perhaps the underlying problem is that Imamura wants to have it both ways, trading on the cultural respectability of the novel while straining after the visceral shocks that came so easily in his earlier films. Something of the same ambivalence informs the decision to shoot in monochrome, which is both nostalgic and, in the context of present-day Japanese cinema, artily pretentious. Whether these doubts are well-founded or not, *Black Rain* is certainly the first Imamura film since 1958 that raises serious questions about the future course of the director's career.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1990

BLACK RAIN (KUROI AME)

Director: Shohei Imamura
Production Companies: Imamura Productions, Hayashibara Group, Tohokushinsha Film Corporation, Toei
Executive Producer: Shohei Imamura
Producer: Hisa Iino
Production Supervisor: Yasushi Matsuda
Production Manager: Kunihide Hirasu
Assistant Directors: Kitaka Tsukino, Takashi Miike, Nobuaki Ito
Screenplay: Shohei Imamura, Toshiro Ishido
Based on the novel by: Masuji Ibuse
Director of Photography: Takashi Kawamata
Assistant Photographers: Masashi Chikamori, Mazakazu Oka, Junichi Watanabe
Lighting: Yasuo Iwaki
Editor: Hajime Okayasu
Art Director: Hisao Inagaki
Set Decorator: Akira Kanda
Yuichi's Stone Carvings: Yoichi Shimizu
Make-up: Shigeko Igawa
Special Make-up: Isao Haruyama
Title Calligraphy: Hirohide Watanabe
Music/Music Conductor: Toru Takemitsu
Music Performed by: Tokyo Concerts
Sound Recording: Senichi Benitani
Sound Effects: Masatoshi Saito
Dialect Adviser: Shigeko Ohara

Cast

Yoshiko Tanaka (Yasuko)
Kazuo Kitamura (Shigematsu Shizuma)
Etsuko Ichihara (Shigeko Shizuma)
Shoichi Ozawa (Shokichi)
Norihei Miki (Kotaro)
Keisuke Ishida (Yuichi)
Hisako Hara (Kin)
Masa Yamada (Tatsu)

Tamaki Sawa (middle-aged woman in Ikemoto-ya)
Shoji Kobayashi (Katayama)
Kazuko Shirakawa (old woman with white flag)
Kenjiro Ishimaru (Aono)
Mayumi Tateishi (Fumiko of Ikemoto-ya)
Taiji Tonoyama (old priest)
Fujio Tsuneta (40-year old man with burns)
Toshie Kusunoki (Kane)
Reiko Nanao (Rui)
Satoshi Iinuma (Takamaru)
Toshihiko Miki (Factory Foreman Fujita)
Yohachi Fuji (cab driver)
Sabu Kawahara (Kanemaru)
Mitsunori Fukamizu (Nojima)
Noboru Mitani (post office clerk)
Shuji Otaki (Dr Fujita)
Isayoshi Yamazaki (young Yakuza)
Mari Kamei (nurse)
Tatsuya Irie (young man)
Kazue Minami (first village woman)
Takaomi Miura (boy)
Hiromi Yasui (second village woman)
Toru Iwasaki (Nojima's stepfather)
Nobuko Tani (Nojima's stepmother)
Shinichi Hibino (Dr Ando)
Tessui Tada (Buddhist monk)
Toshiko Yokota (woman throwing roof tiles)
Yoshiro Hori (wood seller)
Hitomi Ishihara, Junko Hori (women of the Nojima family)
Tetsuhiko Miyoshi (Takeo Takamaru)
Kazuko Kawakami (Takamaru's second wife)
Junko Takahashi (middle-aged woman at station)

Japan 1988©
123 mins

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