



The Eternal Breasts Chibusa yo eien nare
Director: Kinuyo Tanaka
Production Company: Nikkatsu
Producer: Hideo Koi
Screenplay: Sumie Tanaka
Director of Photography: Kumenobu Fujioka
Lighting: Ko Fujibayashi
Production Designer: Kimihiko Nakamura
Music: Takanobu Saito
Sound Recording: Masakazu Kamiya
Cast:
Yumeji Tsukioka (*Fumiko Nakajo*)
Ryoji Hayama (*Akira Otsuki*)
Junkichi Orimoto (*Shigeru Anzai*)
Hiroko Kawasaki (*Tatsuko*)
Shirô Osaki (*Yoshio*)
Toru Abe (*Yamagami*)
Masayuki Mori (*Mori*)
Japan 1955
110 mins
Digital 4K

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Too Much: Melodrama on Film

The Eternal Breasts

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Kinuyo Tanaka is best known as the magnetic lead actress in numerous films by Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Mikio Naruse and others, where she tended to be cast as women suffering the constraints imposed by a suffocating patriarchy. Less well known is the fact that she directed six of her own films, at least one of which, *The Eternal Breasts*, is pretty special. Based on a real-life story, the film follows Fumiko, a mother of two dissatisfied with her lot, who discovers an outlet through poetry and divorces her unfaithful husband. Diagnosed with breast cancer, she undergoes a mastectomy that seems to give her a new confidence and lease of life, at least for a while. There's an unsparing frankness and directness to the film, especially around female sexual desire, which feels exhilarating. Towards the end, as death encroaches, Tanaka unleashes some bleak, fiercely potent images that will haunt you for weeks after seeing the film.

Kieron Corless, *Sight and Sound*, October 2015

Kinuyo Tanaka is rightly renowned as one of the greatest actors in the history of Japanese cinema. However, her prestige as an actor has overshadowed her parallel career as a film director, and most of the films she directed are hard to track down.

Tanaka was the second female director in Japan, after the wartime filmmaker Tazuko Sakane, but she was the first to develop a significant career in mainstream cinema. Working within the studio system, Tanaka directed six features between 1953 and 1962, and was the only female director active during the golden age of Japanese cinema in the 1950s.

Japanese actresses of the period typically retired young, when they got married, but Tanaka – who entered the film world in the 1920s in her teens – never married or had children. She often said that she chose instead to marry cinema. In 1953, the year she made her debut as a director with *Love Letter*, Tanaka was 43 years old and facing the quandary of what to do in the face of competition from so many middle-aged Japanese actresses, with ever fewer opportunities to play interesting parts. Her move to the director's chair should be seen in that context, but it was also inspired and made possible by the transformations that had occurred in Japanese society after World War II. Changes such as women being granted the right to vote, and the provision in the post-war constitution for legal equality of the sexes particularly affected the social position of women in Japan. 'After the war, the advancement of women became evident in every aspect of [Japanese] society, including the entrance of women in parliament,' Tanaka said in 1975. 'I too felt like trying to do something new by working as a female director.'

Tanaka's star status and her contacts in the industry played in her favour, allowing her to direct films with different studios and to collaborate with a wide range of stars, and technical and artistic staff. Her ties with the great directors of the period also proved important (even if her great collaborator Kenji Mizoguchi was vocally resistant to her move to directing): Mikio Naruse employed her as his assistant for two months during the shooting of his *Older Brother, Younger Sister* (1953), and Keisuke Kinoshita and Yasujiro Ozu,

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

The Life of Oharu Saikaku ichidai onna

Sun 9 Nov 18:10; Thu 20 Nov 17:50

Now, Voyager

Mon 10 Nov 18:00 (+ intro); Mon 24 Nov 20:40

Stella Dallas

Wed 12 Nov 18:00 (+ intro)

7th Heaven

Wed 12 Nov 20:35

A Cottage on Dartmoor

Fri 14 Nov 18:20; Sat 22 Nov 12:30

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: The Arch

Dong fu ren + pre-recorded intro

Fri 14 Nov 20:50

Melo-dramarama

Sat 15 Nov 11:00-17:00

Far From Heaven

Sat 15 Nov 18:00; Thu 20 Nov 20:50

The Cranes Are Flying Letyat zhuravli

Sat 15 Nov 20:45

Written on the Wind

Sun 16 Nov 11:00 BFI IMAX

Brief Encounter

Sun 16 Nov 14:45 (+ 80th Anniversary discussion)

The Eternal Breasts Chibusa yo eien nare

Fri 21 Nov 20:45

Stella

Sat 22 Nov 15:00

Madame X

Sun 23 Nov 12:20 (+ intro); Sat 29 Nov 20:40

The Wicked Lady + panel discussion on

Gainsborough melodramas

Sun 23 Nov 14:50

Madonna of the Seven Moons

Sun 23 Nov 18:20

Splendor in the Grass

Mon 24 Nov 18:00

Mamma Roma

Fri 28 Nov 18:15 (+ intro)

Olivia

Fri 28 Nov 20:45

Spring in a Small Town Xiǎochéng zhī chūn

Sat 29 Nov 12:40

Volter

Sat 29 Nov 18:10

Leave Her to Heaven

Sun 30 Nov 15:10

respectively, wrote the scripts of her first two films, *Love Letter* and *The Moon Has Risen* (1955).

The six films Tanaka directed, while moving broadly within the conventions of the romantic melodrama with which she was mostly associated as an actress, disrupted the dominant representations of women in Japanese cinema of the time. In two of her films, Tanaka looks at the ubiquitous figure of the prostitute. In *Love Letter*, the national (male) trauma of the war defeat is represented through the story of a returning Japanese soldier who discovers that his beloved girlfriend had a relationship with an American official after the war, and dismisses her as a 'panpan' (streetwalker prostitute). In her fifth film, *Girl of Dark* (1961), Tanaka explored the issue from another angle, depicting the struggle of a former prostitute to change her life after the enforcement of the Anti-Prostitution Law of 1956. Her most celebrated film, *The Eternal Breasts* (1955), portrayed the tragic fight of a female poet against breast cancer – not in terms of victimhood, but as the emergence of an audacious female subject able to express and reclaim her sexual desires and subjectivity.

The central place of female characters and women's issues in Tanaka's filmography was in part a reflection of the wider Japanese cinema of the time, but it also reveals a deliberate approach on her part. Tanaka was acutely conscious that she was a rare anomaly as a female director, and deliberately constructed spaces to allow for other female authorship and subjectivity. She worked with female scriptwriters such as Sumie Tanaka on *The Eternal Breasts* and *Girl of Dark*, and Wada Natto in *The Wandering Princess* (1960) – all films adapted from biographical accounts or novels by female authors, and focused on the multifaceted experiences of female protagonists, who in turn were played by charismatic stars such as Yumeji Tsukioka or Machiko Kyo. Her last film, and the only jidaigeki (period drama) of her career, *Love Under the Crucifix* (1962), was produced by Ninjin Kurabu, a film company founded by three actresses – Yoshiko Kuga, Keiko Kishi and Ineko Arima (who also starred in the film). The idea behind the project also came through a woman, executive producer Hisako Nagashima. It's high time that Tanaka's achievements as a director were more widely appreciated – and seen – alongside her unassailable position as one of Japanese cinema's greatest actors.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández, *Sight and Sound*, November 2017

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