



JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Love Letter (Koibumi)

Love Letter is the first film of legendary actor turned director Kinuyo Tanaka. The man writes love letters to make a living. One of the women who asks him to do so is someone he's been searching for. He pursues her, almost like James Stewart pursues Kim Novak in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Here they are chess pieces. Their sadness is the sadness of post-war Japan. The geometry of Tanaka's staging is masterful.

Camera positions and eyelines capture the mood, poetry, expectation and uncertainty of the story. Tanaka had worked with the greatest Japanese directors, but her style was less reserved than Ozu, less heroic than Kurosawa. She was closer to Michael Curtiz, perhaps, in her depictions of love and heartache, her brilliant scene breakdowns and her total control.

Mark Cousins, *Sight & Sound*, May 2020

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, 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 Natto Wada 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 & Sound*, November 2017

LOVE LETTER (KOIBUMI)

Director: Kinuyo Tanaka
Production Company: Shintoho
Producer: Ichiro Nagashima
Screenplay: Keisuke Kinoshita
Based on the novel by: Fumio Niwa
Photography: Hiroshi Suzuki
Editor: Toshio Gotô
Art Director: Seigo Shindô
Music: Ichirô Saitô
Sound: Yûji Dôgen

Cast

Masayuki Mori (*Reikichi Mayumi*)
Yoshiko Kuga (*Michiko Kubota*)
Jûkichi Uno (*Naoto Yamaji*)
Jûzô Dôsan (*Hiroshi*)
Chieko Seki (*office lady*)
Shizue Natsukawa (*Reikichi’s mother*)

Japan 1953
97 mins

Print courtesy National Film Archive of Japan

The screening on Sun 21 Nov will be introduced by Irene González-López, co-editor of ‘Tanaka Kinuyo: Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity’

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