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# Annals of the Poor

Voice

By J. Hoberman *Sept. 11, 1984*

AMERICAN PICTURES (Part I). Written, directed, and photographed by Jacob Holdt. Produced and distributed by the American Pictures Foundation. At the Film Forum, through September 18.

**THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA.** Directed and written by Shohei Imamura, from the novels by Shichiro Fukazawa. Produced by Jiro Tomoda and Goro Kusakabe (Toei Company). Released by Kino International and Janus Films. At the 57th Street Playhouse, opening September 7.

FULL MOON IN PARIS. Written and directed by Eric Rohmer. Produced by Margaret Menegoz. Released by Orion Classics. At the Lincoln Plaza, opening September 7.

Winner of the Palme d'Or at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival and a highlight of last spring's New Directors series, Shohei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* offers a less dislocated, more perversely "natural" view of mind-boggling poverty than does *American Pictures*. Made with Imamura's customary black humor and brutal pageantry, the film depicts a year in the life of a primitive, famine-stricken Japanese village which also happens to be the last year in the life of a 69-year-old matriarch named Orin (Sumiko Sakamoto). The exact time is unclear—the press material locates the action in the early 19th century—but the morality is Stone Age. The village's Hobbesian quality of life is immediately established when the spring thaw casually reveals a baby's bluish corpse in the rice paddy. ("Makes for good fertilizer," someone—perhaps the father—dismissively remarks, in a crack worthy of Colin Turnbull's *Ik*.)

The rules for membership in this society are wholly dictated by the shortage of food: not only is infanticide common, but village elders go voluntarily to the top of Narayama mountain upon reaching their 70th birthday. Indeed, the local penal

code is so tough it makes the Koranic laws of Saudi Arabia look like they were written by John Lindsay: when one dead-beat is discovered stealing potatoes, he and his entire family (including a pregnant daughter) are buried alive. Subsistence living tends to cramp everyone's style. Each morsel of food is carefully measured out and marriage is an option only for eldest sons. On the slopes of Narayama, sexuality is a severely mixed blessing—an interesting situation considering the Reichian undercurrents of Imamura's previous films.

etic image which is entirely earned.

With rude insistence, *The Ballad of Narayama* suggests the relativity of human values. At times Imamura goes even further: the film is punctuated not only with bawdy scenes of enthusiastic sexual couplings, but with the sort of nature inserts that might seem Disneylike were they not so garishly predicated on the cycle of life feeding on life. Devoid of Christian piety, Imamura's pantheism is meant to be shockingly Darwinian. *The Ballad of Narayama* broadly hints that—living far from sublimated civilization in accordance with implacable natural laws—its human protagonists are not just one with nature, but are nature itself. (Keisuke Kinoshita's earlier version of the same story was characterized by its kabuki stylization; Imamura's movie aspires to documentary naturalism, and, filmed in a remote mountain village, it occasioned as arduous a shoot as any opus of Werner Herzog.)

*The Ballad of Narayama* is not as grim as it sounds—Imamura's ribald comedy is a constant throughout the film—but virtue in this world amounts to a kind of noble acceptance that transcends mere stoicism: Orin uses her last year of life to obtain a new wife for her widowed son Tatsuhei (Ken Ogata, the star of Imamura's *Vengeance Is Mine*) and pass onto the woman her accumulated knowledge. Then, having knocked out her front teeth in a preliminary gesture of renunciation (this sequence becomes all the more astonishing when you understand that the actress Sakimoto did, in fact, sacrifice four teeth for the sake of verisimilitude), she prepares to go to her death with a preternatural calm.

Like Imamura's *Eijanaika*, *The Ballad of Narayama* climaxes a lurid, tangled narrative with an extended sequence of sustained brilliance, as the devoted son trundles Orin up the mountain to meet her fate. (The old woman's awesome serenity in the face of death is typically played off against the unseemly display created by another septegenarian who, although trussed up, makes so tremendous a fuss that his son inadvertently tumbles him off a cliff.) The final half-hour of this 128-minute film is a remarkable spiritual ascension, past carrion birds and skeletons to the place of death. And, although there is much in Imamura's mocking naturalism that seems excessive or forced, the final few shots of snow falling first in the boneyard and then on the entire village construct a po-