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Sex, Death, and Comics

By Amy Taubin

A rich and eclectic array of films produced during the past 10 years by some two dozen young Japanese filmmakers who, as the series's curator Tony Rayns writes, "stayed close to their roots as super-8 directors," unspools at Japan Society and Anthology Film Archives through May 10. Sexual identity, mad love, rock 'n' roll, heroism, and various utopias are envisioned in styles that range

from lyrical to comic book. The program is a scheduling nightmare. Most films screen once and once only and about half of them are must-sees.

Made in 1980 by the then 24-year-old Hitoshi Yazaki, *Afternoon Breezes* is an extraordinarily detailed, anguished depiction of the unrequited love of a young nursery school teacher for her much more sophisticated, marriage-hungry roommate. Were it not directed and written by a

man, *Afternoon Breezes* would have a place of honor on the feminist film circuit. In fact, few filmmakers of either sex have made this profound a connection between romantic symbiosis and the desire for the mother. In his depiction of female sexuality, Yazaki is right up there with Chantal Akerman and Marguerite Duras.

Totally obsessed with Mitsu, Natsuko is desperately jealous and afraid of losing her to Hideo, her perfume-salesman boyfriend. Sussing out that Hideo is a compulsive womanizer, Natsuko tries introducing him to her girlfriends. Eventually she goes to bed with him herself—on the condition that he stop seeing Mitsu—and winds up pregnant. Hideo casually spills the beans to Mitsu ("she's not really a lesbian; she was a virgin"), who returns his perfume samples and then tells Natsuko

that, pregnant though she is, she must find another place to live. Unable to detach herself, and all but oblivious to her swelling body, Natsuko shadows Mitsu—watching her systematic and inevitably successful search for a new boyfriend. The worst is yet to come.

Amazingly assured for a first-time feature filmmaker, Yazaki evokes Natsuko's subjectivity through vertiginous camera placement and an idiosyncratic sound mix in which the dialogue is all but blotted out by ambient noise. Detaching his camera from Natsuko's point of view only to fixate on her image, the filmmaker suggests that he is as obsessed with his heroine as she is with her object of desire. The camera holds tight on Natsuko as she longs for Mitsu, who's got her practical, rather than passionate, eye on some man or another. What mat-

ters far more than the specifics of homosexuality or heterosexuality is that desire is always triangulated and oedipal.

First glimpsed lolling on the floor playing with a bubble pipe, the sweet-faced Aya Setsuko combines obstinacy, passivity, hunger, and a stunning absence of self-consciousness in her performance of Natsuko. Breaking her floating, giddy gait to compulsively trace the outlines of every manhole cover she passes, frozen in doorways simultaneously drinking in and disavowing the sight of her beloved in the arms of another, sliding suddenly to the floor in a way that suggests the fine line between feelings of abandon and abandonment, she seems infinitely regressed and truly starved for love. The emotions may not be p.c. but they sure are recognizable.

More pop- and male-oriented

than *Afternoon Breezes*, Go Riju's *Zazie* and Naoto Yamakawa's *The New Morning of Billy the Kid* involve the confusions and trials of heroes, whether reluctant or gung ho. The lead singer of Junk, the legendary first "waterfront" band, Zazie, the eponymous protagonist, now lives in isolation in a loftlike shack by the river. Disturbed by the adoration of his fans, fellow band members, and girlfriends, and by his own narcissistic pleasure in their attention, he refuses to perform and spends most of his time wandering around with a video camera. Although given to smug pronouncements such as, "There's just a hairline between wanting to make someone smile and wanting to make them suffer. I prefer the smiles but it's all so complicated," Zazie is sympathetic and charmingly stylish. Likewise the film as

a whole.

In *The New Morning of Billy the Kid*, Billy, ever the bumbling adolescent, takes a shortcut out of Monument Valley and finds himself in the Schlächtenhaus (Slaughterhouse), a world's-end saloon that has been besieged by warring motorcycle gangs. Billy is seduced by the devious Charlotte Rampling, who is really the lover of gang leader Hurry Callaghan. As the girl-group Zelda performs, the gangs attack, wiping out workers, performers, and patrons alike. The joint is wrecked but Billy lives to return to the West and rethink his strategy.

Its exuberance and comic-book pyrotechnics aside, *Billy the Kid* seems a mite redundant compared to Yamakawa's earlier short films *Attack on a Bakery* and *A Girl, She is 100%* (showing with a half-dozen of the director's shorts and



Girl pines girl in Hitoshi Yazaki's *Afternoon Breezes*.

music videos). Probably the most tersely romantic film ever made, *A Girl* depicts the elliptically gaga fantasies of a teen who has encountered the perfect woman and can't stop obsessing about what should have been and what might still happen. In the deadpan *Attack on a Bakery*, two out-of-work young men are deflected from a

robbery by a communist bakery owner who offers them free bread—on the condition that they listen to his favorite Wagner aria.

Among the other interesting items are Nagasaki Shunichi's *The Enchantment*, another tale of lesbian obsession, slicker than *Afternoon Breezes* and with a slightly exploitative edge. Word of mouth

suggests, however, that Shunichi's earlier *Heart, Beating in the Dark* (unavailable for press screening), which involves "sex switching" and "the reinvention of film noir," is more interesting. Rayns deems it "Nagasaki's masterpiece . . . a key film for modern independent cinema . . ." Also keep in mind *Magino Village: A Tale*, a four-hour combination of documentary and reenactment by the director of the incomparably minimalist late-'60s protest film about student opposition to the building of the Narita airport, and Go Takamine's *Paradise View*, an earlier and more stoned, though less accomplished, take on Okinawan alienation than his *Untama Giru*, which was one of the hits of last year's New Directors series—and remains without distribution. Take that as a lesson: see these now, or maybe never.