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彼岸花 (Equinox Flower): Warr's Constraint

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This video is a study of age and gender on screen, a reflection of our relationship to film history, and a meditation on various forms of editing.

Creator's Statement

From 1927 to 1962, Ozu Yasujirō directed over 50 films. 彼岸花 (*Higanbana*, *Equinox Flower*, 1958) was his first in color. Thereafter, he made five more films, all color. Ozu's transition was not due to an interest in technological novelty; Kinoshita Keisuke had already directed Japan's first full-color film カルメン故郷に帰る (*Karumen kokyō ni kaeru*, *Carmen Comes Home*) seven years earlier in 1951 and the audience appeal of color film was understandably high, as it still is. Quite the contrary, Ozu was notoriously reluctant to make the shift from black and white, and he was a vocal devotee of the aesthetics of monochrome. Rather, it was studio pressure that resulted in such a dramatic change for Ozu so late in his career (Philips 424). He chose to work with AGFA film stock, which has the particular characteristic of accentuating reds. Like many others, I have fallen under the spell of Ozu's enigmatic color staging, logging a red kettle, sweater, or fire hydrant from shot to shot, as if the decoding will unlock some of the filmmaker's cinematic secrets.

One such riddle, to me anyway, is the title of his first color film. While the translation of *Higanbana* to "Equinox Flower" bears faithful fidelity to Ozu's penchant for seasonal film titles in the latter half of his career, the plant itself is more commonly known in English as the "red spider lily" or, even, the "corpse flower." A symbol of fall in Japan—the season of change, the season of death—*higanbana* are often planted at graves. Known for its stunning crimson blooms, one could be forgiven for hunting for the flower in Ozu's AGFA-saturated shots, but you won't find it anywhere in his meticulously staged *mise-en-scène*. We must hunt, instead, as always, and with great patience, for the presence of its absence.

Let's start with the narrative. Like many Ozu films, *Higanbana* is a story about inevitable change brought about by equally inevitable endings marked by disruptive

beginnings. Like many Ozu films, it ends with a wedding. While we could say that our equinox flower marks the end of the parent/child relationship with the advent of marriage and a generational shift, I think a more interesting, fleeting moment at the beginning of the film affords us one of Ozu's secret gestures to decode. It is a seemingly throwaway conversation by two train station employees enjoying a moment's respite during the hot workday. Seated on a bench, the men recount the young women they've seen while on shift. They banter and share their rankings. Although we never see these fellows again, this idea that women exist as body objects to be looked at, whose appraisable worth rests in their fleeting attractiveness, becomes an overarching motif. While some have said that in *Equinox Flower*, Ozu shifted a focus from the plight of the elderly to a compassion for the youth, I read a profound sympathetic support for women in the film. Rising from objectification at the outset, the women in *Higanbana* assert their desires and pursue their own choices in society, turning a deaf ear to the men in their families and putting something of an end to their quite explicitly scripted bad patriarchal behavior.

Already our graveside flower is doing double duty.

The focus on women in *Higanbana*, especially commentary on the patriarchal valuation of their perceived transitory beauty, is particularly salient given the presence of superstar and film director Tanaka Kinuyo, who plays the protagonist's middle-aged wife. While Ozu is the most celebrated director of Japanese cinema, Tanaka is the most celebrated actress. She appeared in more than 250 films and worked with all of the top directors across studios. She was a powerful and evocative symbol of Japanese "ideal femininity" (Satō 4). In 1949, she was chosen as a postwar cultural ambassador and spent three months in the United States, hobnobbing with Hollywood celebrities and connecting with Japanese Americans both on the mainland and, more significantly, in Hawai'i. But by the time she appeared in *Equinox Flower*, which appears at the midpoint of my video, she had already reached a stage in her acting career where the only roles she could secure were of aged mothers and elderly grandmothers; sometimes even heavy makeup was applied to make her look far older than she actually was. For Kinoshita Keisuke's film 楢山節考 (*Narayama bushikō*, *The Ballad of Narayama*, 1958), at age 49 Tanaka played a 70-year-old woman whose son takes her to a mountaintop to abandon her to starvation in accord with the village's tradition of disposing of the "useless" and resource-draining elderly. By then, she had already turned to directing films herself, an exceptional accomplishment in an exclusively male-dominated studio system, as an act of self-preservation in the industry and even as a rebellion (Saito 131), foreseeing the gendered limitations of age on screen (Tanaka 372).

Earlier, at 41, film reviewers attacked her physical appearance in 婚約指輪 (*Konyaku yubiwa*, *Engagement Ring*, 1950), calling her "*roshu*"—old and ugly (Yoshimoto 409). At 40, she had been criticized by the press and the public alike upon her return from the US for "showy" attire and flirtatious behavior; they called her an *ameshon actress*—a phony know-it-all who was only in America just long enough "to piss" (Yoshimoto 408)—an insult she probably would not have incurred had she been ten years younger. She no longer was cast as the protagonist or the love interest, even though she was a remarkable physical actor and was undeniably beautiful. While we could poetically place Ozu's *Equinox Flower* at the deathbed of the acting career of his long-term friend and often-star, I stubbornly, on her behalf, want instead to say that Tanaka Kinuyo is timeless.

And yet, when I began my online search for clips for this video, I became acutely re-aware that Tanaka Kinuyo is not, in fact, timeless. Her image—when we see it, where we see it, what we see in it, how we understand what we are seeing—is, of course, all informed by the contexts of time. It is, moreover, shaped by what a given point in time affords in terms of access: the clips in my video are contingent on IP address, the languages I can search in, and the platforms I can access—this I make visible in the video essay. Likewise, in this very moment in time of writing as I reflect on my own making of the image of Tanaka Kinuyo, both videographically and in a Word document, I know that my relationship to the idea of Tanaka Kinuyo is no different. Thirteen years ago, when I began my search for Tanaka as a graduate student in the archives of Tokyo libraries, I did so because I shared the same conception scholars in English and Japanese had at the time: that she was Japan's first female commercial film director (e.g. Anderson and Richie, Bare Buehrer, Bowyer, Foster, Kawakita, Kuhn and Radstone, Totman). This was our shared understanding and how we viewed her. As I eventually learned in the archives, thanks to the curiosity of a helpful librarian at the Tokyo Metropolitan Library, it turns out she's actually the second female director. Now, in 2024, this correction is widely known and lives on Wikipedia, but even so, what is known or thought about Tanaka on the English Wikipedia site is drastically different from what has been crowd-generated on the Japanese Wikipedia site, as you see in the credits sequence.

Over a decade has passed since I searched for Tanaka in the print archives. Since then, her status as director and beloved film star has been widely popularized in international communities. When I searched for Tanaka more recently in digital archives to make this video, I discovered that a great deal of her films can be found online. However, I also discovered that many of them only exist in versions that have been modified by AI-generated colorization. The results are equally mesmerizing and ghastly. In

encountering this trend online, I was compelled to wonder about this drive to, once again, embrace a new technology at the expense of the aesthetics of monochrome, to, as HDcovert.com advertises, "transform historical footage into vibrant, timeless masterpieces with just a few clicks" (2024).

When I tried out this process myself with 33 screen recordings in the making of this video, I felt a kind of kinship with Ozu.

We have both planted an equinox flower at the gravesite of black and white cinema.

Technical note: I made this video while participating in an online, informal workshop on parametric video exercises designed and organized by Ariel Avissar over the summer of 2024. The video follows *most* of the instructions Avissar created for the third exercise of the series he entitled "Warr's Constraint," which is modeled and named after Nick Warr's "Honolulu Mon Amour." The central parameters I followed are: 1) two sequences arranged in split-screen composition, the second of which is a duplicate of the first running in reverse chronological order; 2) the second sequence must be flipped, either horizontally or vertically; and 3) the audio track must come from a different source that is nevertheless conceptually related to the visual track.

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Biography

Colleen Laird is Assistant Professor of Japanese Cinema at the University of British Columbia. She has published in *[in]Transition*, *Tecmerin*, *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Frames Cinema Journal*, and *Jump Cut*. Her works were listed in the Sight and Sound poll of "Best Video Essays" in 2022 and 2023. She was the PI of the SSHRC Grant for the 2023 "Embodying the Video Essay" workshop, is the lead researcher of the SSHRC-funded "Japanese Women Directors Project," and is a co-founder of the Ways of Doing videographic collective.

Review by Irene González-López, Birkbeck, University of London

In this stimulating video, Colleen Laird uses the image of Tanaka Kinuyo to raise important questions about cinema's relation to gender, ageing, technology and pleasure.

Tanaka Kinuyo is arguably the most legendary actress of Japanese cinema and worked virtually with all the top directors between the 1920s and the 1970s. As shown in Laird's video, she was an extremely versatile actress, but her performances often exude resilience. In the last decade, Tanaka has also received much-deserved attention for her trailblazing work as director, where she tackled taboo issues such as sex work and breast cancer. Directing six films in ten years, she became the first woman in Japan to build a substantial filmography in commercial cinema. One can, therefore, explore

the history of Japanese cinema and its gender politics through Tanaka's life and career, and so there could hardly be a better case study for Laird's experiment.

The video begins by juxtaposing a quote from Tanaka in which she acknowledges the short-lived careers of actresses with one from HDconvert that invites us to colorise black and white clips to produce "vibrant, timeless masterpieces." Placing these quotes in conversation with myriads of images of Tanaka's films in a split-screen composition with reverse chronological order, Laird's video seems to highlight three ideas. First, the unescapable and yet, in the case of women and especially stars, unforgivable passage of time, which is reinforced in Lana Del Rey's accompanying song "Young and Beautiful." Yet, many late films by Tanaka prove that a mature woman is much more than an "aching soul." Second, the everlasting beauty of classical cinema's stars and their often-hyperbolic performances, an aesthetic also utilised in the music video of "Young and Beautiful," by the way. And third, ever-powerful technologies never seem to completely satisfy our desire to collect memories. We want to see more and to own more. Even though part of the nostalgic allure of Tanaka's cinema lies in the texture of black and white film, we happily consume terribly pixelised or even colorised copies of her films—although I must confess, now I would love to see a colour version of Mizoguchi's *Women of the Night* (1948). Laird intentionally exposes the online sources and tools that enable this extractionist relationship with (non-Western) classical cinema. What happens if we extrapolate these ideas to our perception, experience, and engagement with women's bodies and with ageing bodies beyond the screen?

In the final section of the video, against Lil Mama singing "Whatchu know 'bout me?," Laird reflects on the ways in which we "know" and remember Tanaka. Silences and gaps that aimed to preserve her image of traditional and sacrificial woman and that worked to idolise the male directors known as "masters of Japanese cinema" have only in recent years started to be addressed. Here again, accessible technology and knowledge play a vital role. Laird's eclectic use of pop references, moreover, prevents any orientalist nostalgia towards high-art cinema and acknowledges the pleasure of playfulness.

As Ozu's first colour film, *Higanbana* (1958) proved his successful adaptation to technological trends. Both Ozu and Tanaka sought to remain relevant in a cinema industry in flux, amidst broader changes shaking Japanese society and its gender politics. Laird's "Higanbana" interrogates our relationship with women's bodies on screen while exploring the role of new and old technologies in shaping our cinematic pleasures and even our broader conceptions of pleasure and beauty.

Review by Alastair Phillips, University of Warwick

All cinema invites us to return to its moment of registration: the capturing of a time that has passed, a time that is both frozen and subject to perpetual renewal and reinvestigation. Collen Laird provides a compelling and mesmeric meditation on these themes via the long history of the Japanese film actress (and director) Tanaka Kinuyo's astonishing and affecting multiple star image. The gestation of the project hinges on two axes contained within: firstly, an observation about the "the absence of a presence" in Ozu Yasujiro's celebrated first colour feature, *Higanbana/Equinox Flower* (1958)—that is the seasonal flower which provides the film's title—and, secondly, a formal stipulation that the internal structure of the videographic essay must offer the pairing of space and time in both a forward and a reverse sense. These elements combined provide the aesthetic and conceptual underpinning of a multi-dimensional rumination on the picturing of the female face and body on screen in ways that align inventively with the complex flow of cinematic temporality and its picturing of the inevitable passage of life's seasons.

Laird does not just sense the actress that has once been, however. Via the essay's twin/reverse screen critical approach, she also allows us to witness both the progression of Tanaka's age and the regression of her becoming young once again at the same time. The most innovative aspect of this lies in its reading of Ozu's colour in relation to critical method. Always far more than just a mere technician, operating with cinema's unique formal parameters, Ozu invites the viewer of *Equinox Flower* to pair the optics of the autumnal equinox with a way of looking that investigates the assumptions of male privilege in relation to the life choices offered to women. Laird re-opens this prospect to locate a new way, enabled by videographic editing and thought, of understanding the politics of the equinox and femininity via the technology of colourisation. In a manner both fascinating and disturbing, Tanaka Kinuyo's body, one historically subject to all manner of patriarchal oppression in narrative terms, has now also become subjugated by the pixels of digital transformation. In her plundering of the online archive, Laird shows how we may see Tanaka anew through a different chromatic prism as well as through a different ordering of space and time. The moment when the two speeds and rhythms of the two frames in the piece collide in original colour and Tanaka momentarily seems to gaze out at us (from both the fictional world of Ozu's film and the videographic essay of Laird's imagination) is, to me, truly arresting. The conjunction of the pulsing beat of the musical soundtrack and the knowledge, at least on a second viewing, that this moment will pass and the ageing/de-ageing process will soon commence in a refashioned way is as profoundly moving as Ozu's original film remains to this day.