

#5
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REVIEW OF BOOKS

TOWARDS THE CREATION OF A WORLD

About the book “Naomi Kawase. El cine en el umbral”

Reviewed by

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The last edition of the Las Palmas International Film Festival offered a comprehensive look back at the works of Naomi Kawase, without a doubt one of the most suggestive filmmakers of contemporary oriental cinema. Her films touch to a great extent on the discourses of current filmic theory: the hybridisation of the documentary and fiction, the fecund dialogue between cinematographic and digital supports, the changes in the system of distribution and the call for an invisible cinema or the self-referential use of the device, to cite but a few of the possible trajectories of the cinema of nowadays. The collective book coordinated by José Manuel López accompanies (and enriches) the season proposed by the Festival and goes over the trajectory of this Japanese filmmaker under the premise of these new trends of contemporary cinema, avoiding falling in the common place, projecting interesting intersections and vanishing points.

In the prologue, the editor evokes a passage of the canonical film by Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*, which mentions the notebook in which Sei Shonogon is writing a list of “things that make the heart beat”. This enumeration of emotions serves as a starting point for the structuring of the collective book on Kawase, divided into different “books” of notes and logs. The reflections as to the life and works of Kawase (which are so dissociable in her cinema) follow each other and interweave in a critical fabric that combines analytical rigour with spectatorial emotion. What follows aims to give a tour of the main concepts that result (in multiple layers) from each of the articles that comprise the book devoted to the director of “The mourning forest”.

One of the constant features of Kawase’s cinema, especially in her anecdotic autobiographical jewels filmed on an 8 millimetre camera, is the desire to make visible,

recognisable, the device, the traces, the writing. José Manuel López indicates (1), paraphrasing Godard, a two-way, reciprocal relationship between the visor and the lens: “against the dominant tradition of creator-directors working from the visor to the lens, modern cinema [...] chose the other path”. And this other path is, probably, the one chosen by the director of *Nara*, the capturing of the world and its filtering through the lens or, as Marker points out with regard to Japanese sensitivity, “extracting from contemplating the simplest things a sort of melancholic consolation”. (2) Gonzalo de Lucas also insists on the patent use of the medium, with regard to the ambiguity between cinema and video that is present throughout this director’s filmography and proposes a fundamental distinction between the spectral quality of the video in comparison with the cloudiness, with the accentuation of the lights and shadows provided by the photochemical medium.

Kawase makes the traces clear, and the camera, that “camera with statute of actor” of which Manuel Yáñez Murillo (3) speaks, becomes an element of interaction with the world. From this participative use of the camera, a series of cinematographic figures arises that are common to the cinema of the director of *Suzaku*, such as the reiterated gesture of introducing the artist’s hand into the shot. Kawase feels the need to touch the loved, to come into contact with the surrounding reality (4). For Carlos Losilla, this tactile condition is, without a doubt, one of the most interesting qualities of Kawase’s cinema, as it proves her subscription to a certain materialist minimalism: “there is nothing that comes from transcendental meditation, rather everything comes from the touch” (5). Through the gesture of coming close to the object, Kawase relates with what surrounds her and as a result of that desire such devices arise as the insistent (and why not irritating) use of the close-up through which she “encodes a desire to focus the other usually uncomfortable and on occasions imposed” (6).

The hand that comes into view, the close-up as a sign of curiosity, the need to touch (“And when I get that close, I want to touch it”, as Kawase herself puts it in her interview with Aaron Gerow, included the end of the book), but also filming her own shadow or her reflection in the mirror: attempts to apprehend, as Adrian Martin (7) suggests, a volatile reality. By means of the enumeration of objects, places and loved ones (again, the lists evoked by Marker) the director proposes a narcissistic game in which the enigma to be solved, as Martin defends so well, is the question “who am I?”. “For me, the issue isn’t social, or depopulation. I myself am the issue”, declared Kawase in the same interview cited above. Her belongings (as we have seen) but also her profound shortcomings (as we shall see), become an interrogative nucleus of her discourse. About *En sus brazos*, José Manuel López writes: “a domestic *road movie* in which the geography covered is herself and the route is her diffuse affiliation with her past” (8).

When Naomi Kawase revisits her past, she finds voids, gaps cut by ephemeral memories, unequivocally marked by disappearance. “The hole of absence becomes present”, as Carlos Losilla (9) remarks. In this way, trauma lines the tale, like a fabric which is hard to untangle and the narration begins to involve what Yáñez Murillo has come to call “eclipsed character” (10), disappeared at some stage of fiction (or a long time ago, in the self-portraits of the artist) and which introduces a rotund fracture in the course of the narrative. The works of this Japanese director, under this perspective, become, reiterative questioning (to herself and the rest) as to loss and primitive split (11), around the “lack of being” (12).

Kawase's work hinges around an amalgam of sentiments, dread, and its passage kicks up the dust that tarnishes memories. This existential search often gives rise to the most contradictory emotions and she insists on verifying "the effects (trembling, crying, hesitations, astonishment) that filming causes her" (13). Filming is painful at the same time as cathartic. The reconstruction of one's own memory is, without a doubt, a way of approaching intimacy. The reiterated persecution of the intimate is usually shown, as Gonzalo de Lucas (14) points out, through a change of scale through which filming is done with childlike innocence, in such a way that the small details take on great importance and "banal life, in its most circumstantial and immediate aspects, is perceived as something precious". Naomi Kawase's films exude her doubts and feelings, in a "crossroads of affection" (15) that implicate the spectator, the surprised recipient of the emotions of another. Astonishment at what surrounds her, turbulent experience that is conveyed to the movement of the frame; stupor, trembling. (16)

In his article, Fran Benavente (17) evokes a passage by Saint Augustine, in which experience is defined according to three separate times: the present of things past (which is corresponded by the memory), the present of things present (perception) and the present of things future (the wait). These three stages (fabrics) of time, with their multiple intersections, are present throughout the work of the director of *Shara* creating fleeting, evanescent structures. For his part, Aaron Gerow (18) speaks of the opposition or clash in Kawase's cinema between a circular time, that of nature (that of astonishment, I add), and a linear time, that of the worldly. Hence irresolvable tension arises between repetition and rupture. "I have two desires", Kawase confesses to Gerow, "one is to stop that circularity, that perpetual movement at an instant, and the other is to have it all temporarily connected. I am hoping I can keep working in these two senses of time". Her obsession with the rays of light through the trees, with the joyful rushing of the wind, with cries in the form of rain, relate Kawase's cinema with that of Malick, Serra and Weerasethakul, great representatives of the so-called "cinemeteorology" (19).

The works of Naomi Kawase, in the words of Yáñez Murillo, "are a new cinematographic experience, a variant of *being*. Less of a journey, rather a place to inhabit" (20). Through a constantly changing style, this Japanese film director opens up a gap through which she invites us in, in exchange for inevitable emotional upheaval, to her deepest intimacy. Kawase invites us, with the risk of being startled, to attend her own particular creation of the world (21).

notes

- 1 LÓPEZ, José Manuel: *El cine en el umbral*, in LÓPEZ, José Manuel (ed.): *Naomi Kawase. El cine en el umbral*, T&B Editores, Madrid, 2008, p. 26-28 (from here on, the citation of this publication is omitted since all articles mentioned come from the same book).

([back](#))

- 2 Ibid, p. 24

([back](#))

- 3 YÁNEZ MURILLO, Manuel: *Dialécticas de un cine habitable: hibridaciones del documental y la ficción en el cine de Naomi Kawase*, p. 105

[\(back\)](#)

- 4 Miranda tells us of a “camera-skin” that “elaborates a poem of the empirical on the unrepeatable sameness of touch”, in MIRANDA, Luis: *La cámara-piel: tocar la imagen (y el rostro) de la anciana en “Caracol”*, p. 73

[\(back\)](#)

- 5 LOSILLA, Carlos: *Ausencia de sí*, p. 61. Ivan Pintor also highlights the ontological, tactile nature, of the “I was here”, in PINTOR, Ivan: *El fulgor en el rostro: el desfile del festival de Basara en “Shara”*, p. 83

[\(back\)](#)

- 6 Ibid, p. 82

[\(back\)](#)

- 7 MARTIN, Adrian: *Cierto rincón oscuro del cine moderno*, p. 47

[\(back\)](#)

- 8 LOPÉZ, José Manuel: *Encrucijada de afectos: la llamada al padre de “En sus brazos”*, p. 68

[\(back\)](#)

- 9 LOSILLA, Carlos. Op. cit., p. 61

[\(back\)](#)

- 10 YÁNEZ MURILLO, Manuel. Op. Cit., p. 106

[\(back\)](#)

- 11 Fran Benavente recalls the emotional passage of *Birth/Mother* in which Kawase, her son just born, asks for the camera to film herself when the umbilical cord is being cut, as wanting to see through the viewfinder the moment of the separation of the two bodies. In BENAVENTE, Fran: *El tejido del tiempo: dar a luz en "Nacimiento/Madre"*, p. 86

[\(back\)](#)

- 12 MARTIN, Adrian. Op. Cit., p. 47. In the interview held with José Manuel López, Kawase makes the following statement: "If you cannot remove the feeling of loss and solitude from your heart, it might remain empty for ever. But I believe it's better to take the blow and learn to live with it. [...] I think it's possible to channel the knowledge of loss through creation", p. 138

[\(back\)](#)

- 13 DE LUCAS, Gonzalo: *El cine tiembla*, p. 31

[\(back\)](#)

- 14 Ibid, p. 32-33

[\(back\)](#)

- 15 LOPÉZ, José Manuel: *Encrucijada de afectos: la llamada al padre de "En sus brazos"*

[\(back\)](#)

- 16 Under the title of "Estupor y temblores" Belgian writer born in Japan, Amélie Nothomb, published one of her autobiographical works, a stranger to the style (and tone) of Kawase's work, but with which she shares a marked egocentrism and the observation of her universe with childish curiosity.

[\(back\)](#)

- 17 BENAVENTE, Fran. Op. Cit., p. 87

[\(back\)](#)

- 18 GEROW, Aaron: *Repetición y ruptura en las películas de Naomi Kawase*, p. 91-92

[\(back\)](#)

- 19 Term coined by Serge Daney, in reference to the cinema of the Straub, appearing in LÓPEZ, José Manuel: *El cine en el umbral*, p. 24

[\(back\)](#)

- 20 YÁNEZ MURILLO, Manuel. Op. Cit., p. 110

[\(back\)](#)

- 21 At the start of her interview with Aaron Gerow, Kawase says about the concept of hybridisation that in her cinema: “people ask me whether I make documentary or fiction, but I tend to think of my work in a different way, in terms of creating a world”.

[\(back\)](#)