

Dina Iordanova, 'Moe no suzaku,'
100 Best Asian Films Directed by Women,
Busan IFF, South Korea. 2021.

MOE NO SUZAKU, Japan, 1997, Naomi Kawase

Dina Iordanova

The mountain is majestic. The sounds and colours of the forest change in mood with the wind. Yet those who live here are going away. The few who stay are immersed in long silences.

SUZAKU is a film about *furusato* (native place/ native land), about losing it, about expiring in time. Its minimalist plot talks about the irreversible slow entropy that engulfs communities and families.

Filming in Nishiyoshino, Kawase has stayed true to her native region of Nara Prefecture. She favours the representation of nature and feelings over plot and relationships. It is all interstitial: linkages between people and places overpowered by inevitable uprooting of togetherness. The neighbours are leaving one after another, the extended family still holds on but they know it is not for long. The slopes of the majestic silent forest are slowly bleeding to death.

The father wanders away one day, camera in hand, to never return; we never know how and why he died, was it a suicide or an accident related to the abandoned tunnel that he revisits. The young couple, whose lives feel suspended for the lack of opportunities, are in relationship of platonic attraction, riding a bike through the forest after school or idling around the house. Unfinished sentences, passing glances, and feelings of loss and transition are present in each frame. Marked by the relentless passage of time, Suzaku is reminiscent, in

its nostalgic and contemplative mood, to Hou Hsiao-hsien's A TIME TO LIVE AND A TIME TO DIE (1985).

Having first made a series of personal documentaries — on flickering 8mm — that tackle a difficult family story and confronting trauma, all Kawase's feature films are marked by this documentary quality: in SUZAKU this is expressed in her choice to using local amateur actors and to punctuating the narrative with portraits of ordinary people from the area, shown in close ups and looking to the camera, with no commentary. She is not only telling the story of a disintegrating family, she is documenting the passage of time and traditional life's slow disappearance.

But this story goes far beyond Japan. SUZAKU is a universal film talking about the gradual abandonment of the land and the depopulation of remote areas. It may be set in Nara, but it shows things that are equally true about so many other parts of the world. My native country, Bulgaria, for example -- the mountain home on a river where I was longing to return one day, is standing still and empty. Houses and trees still stand but everybody who lived there have either passed or moved away. The mountains of Italy where I will live next are marked by similar depopulation and solitude.

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