

Dina Iordanova, 'Women and Documentary: Naomi Kawase',

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Women and Documentary- Naomi Kawase Online

3 April 2020

From [Dina Iordanova](#):

Recently I taught a class on Japanese documentary, for which I resourced many links for publicly available resources of rare Japanese documentary films.

Besides presenting the work of 'usual suspects' such as Shinsuke Ogawa or Kazuo Hara, I was determined to include the work of at least one female documentary filmmaker in view to somehow balance out the line of brave male directors that was formidable yet lacking in any diversity.

My choice fell on Nara-native [Naomi Kawase](#) (b. in Nara, Japan, in 1969), who still resides in the area where she was raised by her adoptive parents. She has come to amateur 8mm filmmaking in the early 1990s but by now she has made a number of features as well — such as the acclaimed [Suzaku](#) (1997), [The Mourning Forest](#) (2007), [Radiance](#) (2017) and *True Mothers* (2020, Japan's Official submission to the Oscars).

Kawase is still better known in France, as a darling of the Cannes festival that has acknowledged and awarded her work from the onset. But I understand she is also highly respected in Japan, for speaking up for independent women, divorcees specifically.

All Kawase's feature films are marked by documentary quality and elements (especially in her preference to portray ordinary people from the area, shown in close ups and looking to the camera, with no commentary), and we are lucky to that **YouTube** offers links some of her work – and what I see as key documentaries.

The first one is the very personal and utterly moving 8 mm film [Embracing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgfP2LnUxu8) (1992 , English subtitles; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgfP2LnUxu8>) which tells about her difficult family story and about overcoming trauma.



Its sequel, the flickering 8mm [Katasumori](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBnrIPfPCc) (1994, English Subtitles; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBnrIPfPCc>) is a moving portrayal of the ‘grandmother’

who raised Kawase after she was abandoned by her parents at an early age. This is where the topic of motherhood – that will dominate a lot of her work from now on – becomes prevalent.



[Ten, Mitake/Sea Heaven](#) (1995, English Subtitles;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1gSy89eDGI>) is a 10-min long humanist documentary,

which features the same grandmother going on around her daily chores. In 2006 Kawase

revisited this grandmother one more time, now in advanced dementia, for [Tarachime/ Birth](#)

[Mother](#) (2006, English, French, and Spanish Subtitles;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WttTrCXEEGY>).



In the mid 1990s, after making these films, Kawase was, for a while, involved in a video correspondence with Hirokazu Koreeda, who was, like her, a member of the new generation of young Japanese independent directors. The enchanting result of this exchange is [This World \(Winter\)](https://letterboxd.com/film/this-world-winter/) (1996). [Not streaming; <https://letterboxd.com/film/this-world-winter/>]

YouTube also provides access to two further resources related to two of Kawase's public discussions on the importance of film.

[The Value of Movies](#), a TEDTalk in Tokyo 2019 is a very personal and profoundly moving talk on how film helps overcome trauma (Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhOtrGDDRRo>).

There is also Kawase's great discussion of documentary filmmaking filmed during a stage interview at **IDFA** in 2018, as part of the sidebar dedicated to her work. The interview is edited with excerpts of her work and thus gives a good overview of the director's oeuvre. It is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-YVazrF79M>

These days, Kawase is running a film festival in her city of Nara, the next edition of which is scheduled for October 2020. She is also the filmmaker appointed by the Japanese government, in the footsteps of Kon Ichikawa's [Tokyo Olympics 1964](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHt0eAdCCns>) to make a documentary about Tokyo 2020. Let's see what will come out of these projects.

