

The Inferno of First Love

(Hatsukoi jigoku-hen)

Staff

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| Production | Hani Production, Art Theatre Guild of Japan |
| Producer | Fujii Tomoyuki |
| Director | Hani Susumu |
| Screenplay | Terayama Shûji, Hani Susumu |
| Photography | Okumura Yûji |
| Editing | Hani Susumu |
| Sound | Kubota Yukio |
| Lighting | Kamada Tsutomu |
| Music | Takemitsu Tôru, Yashiro Akio |
| Art director | Kaneko Kuniyoshi |

Cast

Ishii Kuniko, Takahashi Akio, Mitsui Kôji, Fukuda Kazuko, Miyato Misako, Yuasa Minoru, Nukamura Kimiko, Shina Tora, Kimura Ichirô

Release date: May 25, 1968

108 min.; B&W; 1:1.33; 35mm

Hani Susumu started his filmmaking career at the major publishing house Iwanami. The publisher created its own film unit for producing documentaries in order to exploit the burgeoning market for PR and education films. Curiously enough, the leader of the unit was remarkably open to experimentation, and many of the young filmmakers jumped on the opportunity to tamper with the conventions of the documentary. These included the likes of Higashi Yôichi, Kuroki Kazuo, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, Ogawa Shinsuke, Suzuki Tatsuo, Okumura Yûji (cameraman for this film), Tamura Masaki, Haneda Sumiko and Hani Susumu. All of them and most of the other innovative directors and cinematographers at the company, including Hani, left Iwanami for independent documentary and feature production. It is probably no exaggeration to say that their impact on 1960s Japanese cinema has yet to be adequately accounted for.

It was probably Hani that made the first large splash, starting with his two vérité-like films on children interacting in classrooms and continuing with feature films like *Furyô shônen* (Bad Boys, 1960), *A Full Life* (*Mitasareta seikatsu*, 1962), and *Kanojo to kare* (She and He, 1963). One of the most striking aspects of these films are their documentary qualities. Indeed, if there is one strong contribution of the Iwanami crowd it is this. Starting with *Bad Boys*, Hani used non-professional actors, and loose, flexible shooting scripts to powerful ends. The two leads in *The Inferno of First Love* (also known under the title *Nanami*) are both amateurs, selected through a call published in a youth magazine. Hani chose them from 600 entries, most of whom (according to Hani) were more interested in the film's frank exploration of sexuality and not the possibility of fame.

Frank it certainly is. The film teases audiences with an early sex scene, but immediately stresses the seriousness of his project when it becomes evident that Shun is hopelessly impotent. He provides an

aural hook that swings us into the source of young Shun's frustration: the sound of tapping from his foster father's metal shop. This hurls us into a complicated series of flashbacks where we discover that Shun was abandoned by his parents, and this trauma was followed by his adoption by callous foster parents. It seems likely the new father has taken on this responsibility only to procure Shun's free labor, and later Hani reveals sexual advances as well. These traumas emotionally cripple Shun, and he eventually finds his first solace in a human relationship when he meets Momi. The problem is that Momi is only five or six years old, and Shun brings both paternalism and sexuality into their relationship. Interestingly enough, Hani collaborated on the script with Terayama Shûji, who would, several years later, make *Tomato kechappu kôtei* (Emperor Tomato Ketchup, 1970) which envisions a revolution of children who attack, bind, and rape adults.

However, while Terayama would approach this treatment of child sexuality in a thoroughly surreal manner, Hani's treatment is far more complex. He does include a number of remarkable experimental sequences—with Takemitsu Tôru music borrowed from his previous films—but he remains ever grounded in the codes of documentary. Much of the camerawork is hand-held, an evocative of the verite documentaries that were breaking new ground at the time. At the same time, Hani frequently switches to fascinating montages of still photographs. And these strongly documentary sequences are embedded in experimental touches, such as extreme canted angles, overexposure, and other camera effects. For example, when Shun is caught in a compromising situation with Momi and chased down the street, Hani cuts between extreme close-ups of the furious men that catch him and a long shot from above with the objective feeling of a surveillance camera. Scenes of hypnosis and strip joints for photographers provide Hani other opportunities to move from his documentary aesthetic into the kind of crazy filmmaking that was possible in 1968.

This heterogeneity of styles never detracts from the psych-sexual exploration of the characters, despite its complexity. The film is a mesh of flashbacks, fantasies, dreams, memories, documentary exploring the sexual universe – S&M, voyeurism and exhibitionism, pedophilia and incest, puppy love and child abuse – but Hani never lets us lose our way. He prepares us for this elaborate narrative with its rather shocking core story of pedophilia and incest by making his characters remarkably believable and nurturing our empathic identification with his pitiful family situation. What makes the sequences with Momi all the more powerful is that Hani treats them in a curiously straightforward, non-judgmental manner. This is not to say that he condones Shun's behavior, but that Hani's interests lie elsewhere. In 1968, Hani said, "We are now living between two worlds of morality – the old traditional one, which is crumbling, and the new one, which is burgeoning. Living between both, we are confronted by both. In consequence, we live in frustration, afraid now to leap into the depths of ourselves, content to see our outer image merely, as tough in a mirror. In this film, I wanted to look straightly, even fearlessly, into his depth, into that part of a human being which is most personally his."

Mark Nornes