

Silence Has No Wings

(Tobenai chinmoku)

Staff

Production Nihon Eiga Shinsha
Producer Ogasawara Motoo, Horiba Nobuyo, Miwa Kôichi
Director Kuroki Kazuo
Screenplay Matsukawa Yasuo, Iwasa Hisaya, Kuroki Kazuo
Photography Suzuki Tatsuo
Editing Kuroki Kazuo
Sound Katô Ichirô
Lighting Asano Yoshio
Music Matsumura Teizô
Art direction Yamashita Hiroshi

Cast

Kaga Mariko, Hiranaka Minoru, Ozawa Shôichi, Toura Rökkô, Sazanka Kyû, Kimura Toshie, Nagato Hiroyuki, Ninagawa Yukio, Satsuki Misa, Masutomi, Nobutaka, Kasai Kazuhiko, Naruse Masahiko, Komatsu Hôsei, Watanabe Fumio, Iwasaki Toyoko, Mizushima Hiroshi, Tanaka Kunie, Senda Koreya

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

A boy on the northern island of Hokkaido, Japan catches a butterfly from Nagasaki, at the southern end of the archipelago. His teachers think he bought the insect in a department store and lecture him on his fraud. Meanwhile, a larva of that same butterfly embarks on an often comic and always improbable journey from South to North. On that journey the larva appears (on the screen and, it seems, in the person of model/actress Kaga Mariko) juxtaposed with a series of failed love affairs, traumatic war memories, disrupted smuggling operations, and corrupt political plots. The film ends where it begins, in Hokkaido with another butterfly caught in the boy's net.

Few films are less well-served by plot summary than *Silence Has No Wings*. The film mixes multiple genres, starting like an experimental documentary but then turning into a comic road movie, a newsreel, and even a kind of international spy mystery, but not for long. Storytelling takes a back seat to allegory and an improvisational, natural light camerawork that had never been seen before in Japan. The style of the film, and the history of its production and (eventual) exhibition, tell the story of a cinema in crisis, and point to the role of ATG, founded as a chain of repertory cinemas (*meigaza*) to showcase European art cinema, as the most important venue for the new Japanese cinema of the 1960s.

In 1964 Teshigahara Hiroshi had used his father's money to produce *Woman of the Dunes*, which was shown in Tôhô cinemas and proved to be a critical and (for Tôhô) a financial success. Nippon Eiga Shinsha, a subsidiary of Tôhô created out of the main wartime producer of propaganda documentaries, hoped for a similar result when it agreed to produce Matsukawa Yasuo's script for this film. Matsukawa approached documentary filmmaker Kuroki Kazuo to direct. As Kuroki tells it, he was a "trouble maker" who had quit the Iwanami documentary film company because he didn't want to make PR for

Japanese capitalists and was now at a loose end after clashing with the management of Tokyo Films, a communist-affiliated producer that specialized in progressive science films. Kuroki had been commissioned to direct a human interest story about a marathon runner preparing for the Tokyo Olympics. Instead, he produced an impressionist documentary of the runner running, with a collage of his voice mixed with footfalls and breathing on the soundtrack. The studio demanded something more orthodox but Kuroki insisted on his authorial rights. That pattern would repeat with *Silence Has No Wings*: originally intended as a commercial release in the Tōhō cinemas, it would be shelved for a year before opening in the ATG cinemas.

That the film is after something unusual is clear from the opening credits: the camera wanders across blow-ups of butterflies and Kaga Mariko's iconic face, followed by an almost wordless six minute sequence of a boy catching butterflies in which the camera fluidly takes up the point of view both of the boy ... and of the butterfly. The next sequences set the allegory in motion: reality is determined as hard facts, and any experience that does not conform is rejected as a hoax. The task of the film is to put those complacent assumptions into question: as critic Matsumoto Toshio observed, just because something does not exist does not mean it *could* not come into existence. Matsumoto likened the film's structure to "dumplings on a skewer." The skewer is the larva (which is also somehow incarnated by Kaga Mariko), symbolizing the struggle to be born of something that does not yet exist, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. The dumplings are the stages of the larva's journey, which both mark a significant location in the history of modern Japan and are marked by some kind of failure, interruption, or disappointment. Hagi, for example, is one source of the "incomplete revolution" of 1868 that restored the emperor system but also led to total war. In Hiroshima, a young man in despair over the failure to overturn the America-Japan Security Treaty tries and fails to reconnect with an old girlfriend who is a *hibakusha*, a survivor of the Atomic Bomb... further episodes indict the perversions of middle-aged men acting out repressed war crimes, the emptiness of a carnal life without authentic *engagement* with the world, and the impasses of a corrupt Tokyo that seems to be already under Martial Law. So what is the answer to the film's allegorical riddle? What is struggling to be born?

In any case, *Silence Has No Wings* is also an experience of cinema, one that goes beyond the boundaries that usually guide our expectations. Rather than one or two "goal directed protagonists" that guide us through the narrative, characters appear and disappear while one actress plays multiple roles that are somehow incarnations of the larva on a journey toward its (dead) future self. The sound design of the film is also quite extraordinary, a collage of patently fictional characters with documentary voice-overs gathered in the real locations in which the drama is set. That tension seems constitutive: the film veers between the abstractions of the script, sometimes encoded in baldly generic scenarios, and the earthy materialism of close-up images of skin and sweat, fruit and larvae, and head-on shots of speeding trains. Apart from the opening sequence the camera seldom articulates character subjectivity, maintaining a roving hand-held distance that sets up a complex relation to the object of the image, one that became familiar in the engaged documentaries of the 1960s. Those films were made by members of the Blue Group (*ao no kai*) of young filmmakers, Kuroki's colleagues at the Iwanami documentary studio, who also worked on this film. Holding the camera while hanging from helicopters and swinging from trees, cinematographer Suzuki Tatsuo *mobilized* the controlled reframing of studio cinema, creating a loosened form of continuity that is now a touchstone of modern art cinema but that was revolutionary at the time. Suzuki was also a Blue Group alumnus but after this film he went on to work for many of the leading lights of the Japanese New Wave: Yoshida Kijū, Shinoda Masahiro, Matsumoto Toshio, Terayama Shūji, and others.

All this was a bit much for the Tōhō executives who had agreed to exhibit the film. Kuroki admitted later that he had intended to make "totally political film" but that the "poetry" he'd used to disguise his

message had ended up taking over. Tôhô put the film on the shelf, where it might have stayed but for the growing importance of ATG as a venue for “alternative” films. Important critics and filmmakers saw the film at private screenings and the journal *Eiga hyôron* held a round-table on it in June 1965, while Satô Tadao wrote a long essay comparing it to Hitchcock’s *The Birds* in September of the same year. Satô was on the advisory board of ATG, itself part-owned by Tôhô, and so a release was finally approved for February, 1966. Although the reception was somewhat mixed, Matsumoto Toshio spoke for many in the cultural avant-garde when he said that the pleasure of Kuroki’s film lay precisely in the dialectic between the excessive abstraction of the film’s conception and the breathtaking virtuosity of its images. *Eiga Hyôron* voted the film 3rd best of 1966, though the film’s unavailability after its ATG run caused it to fade in the memory of Japanese cinephiles. This Japan Society screening is a wonderful opportunity to give the film the attention it deserves.

Michael Raine