

## Fango Flashback: "EMPIRE OF PASSION" (1978)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman  
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You'd think an empire is typically built up, and subsequently torn down.

In Nagisa Oshima's 1978 noirish nightmare, however, the titular empire—based in fleeting moments of illicit passion—preternaturally extends below into an interpersonal hell, ripping its two main characters to shreds in the process. It's an unsettling picture, the least of which is the ghost's fault.

Set in a gorgeous, haunting and atmospheric feudal Japan, *EMPIRE OF PASSION* sees beautiful mother of two, Seki (Kazuko Yoshiyuki) step out on her husband with the half-her-age Toyoji (Tatsuya Fuji). Aimless upon his return to the village (after a stint in the military), Toyoji spends much of the film as a manipulative aggressor, forcing Seki into an affair and impulsively convincing her they must murder her husband Gisaburo (Takahiro Tamura). Three years later—as told in fable style by an elderly narrator—as the village starts to question his disappearance, Seki and Toyoji are set upon by guilt and a ghost.

Gisaburo is the best kind of cinematic specter; one that's material, interacting physically with those he visits. Interestingly enough, though his presence is an eerie one, it's also (mostly) calming, with *EMPIRE OF PASSION*'s scariest moments stemming from its violent eroticism. Seki and Toyoji have a lot of sex, and it's always from a place of pain. The two of them clash in stilted, wince-inducing moments of intimacy that never stop feeling wrong, and made worse by the sense that Toyoji doesn't even love his bedfellow. That notion, of course, changes when he saves Seki and her son from their burning house. By that point, however, both realize exactly the kind of path they're on.



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That path is long, as Oshima's film is leisurely paced, but totally immersive. Seki and Toyoji's journey is an agonizing one, and while Oshima, and cinematographer Yoshio Miyajima's (KWAIDAN, HARAKIRI) visuals are never less than stunning, it's hardly a pleasure being wrapped up in this ordeal (there's always the oddly comical Inspector Hotta, though). Eventually, the two are led to the old well where they've previously disposed of Gisaburo's body. It's the film's most incredible, scariest sequence (well, this and when the deceased Gisaburo gives Seki a ride home), and the interior of the well heightens the film's grim fairy tale feel. It's a wondrous, but dark, dark place where both Seki and Toyoji are completely and physically drenched in the muck they've created. EMPIRE OF PASSION ends as most tales of this kind do, in complete ruin. Seki is appropriately punished for her Oedipal tryst, and the film concludes with viewer wholly upset.

I hadn't previously seen EMPIRE OF PASSION, but thirty-four years following its release, it remains eerie, poetic and towering on first view. I watched it on Turner Classic Movies, but it's currently available, in what I only imagine to be an excellent package, from [Criterion Collection](#)