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Tomohiro Kubo directs TOMIE VS. TOMIE, available on-line via Japan Flix and one of several films loosely based on Junji Ito’s *manga* TOMIE. This film is validation of the power of women and is a perfect Japanese example of the perils of loving girls, even when they’re babies. The film opens with the most universally recognized torture device, a cruel hypodermic needle poised to puncture and loaded with viscous red fluid. The unlucky recipient of the wicked poke remains unrevealed for now, but an infant is howling and folded skin is everywhere across the screen.

Watch the little girl swish her stick playfully around the bushes as we follow her ominously from behind. Oh, look, a gray dove is on the ground, its wing somehow twisted; watch it fitfully try to lift off. Conveniently, a heavy rock, bigger than the girl’s hand, but not too heavy to lift, lies nearby. Another girl appears; she looks like a twin; they regard each other soberly. They are both Tomie, as we soon discover. In this film, the only difference between females is the presence of a beauty mark and whether they have bangs. These attributes will help the viewer keep the characters straight.

Our hero, Kazuki Umehara, tells his therapist he feels well enough to end their sessions. She cautions him—it’s only been six months since his girlfriend, Naoko, was murdered in front of him. The flashbacks and nightmares could come back unexpectedly, but he insists he’s healed. Leaving the office, he encounters a mysterious man in a hat who shakes his confidence in this self-diagnosis.

Kazuki lights the many candles in his personal Naoko shrine, illuminating her white summer dress, her jewelry, her pastel portrait. She looks somewhat familiar in her bangs. He apologizes for his small offering, but will do better: He starts a new job tomorrow. Even in the morning light, the workplace presents another classic horror trope; it’s a mannequin factory. Dismembered parts, unfathomable painted eyes, reproachful poses and, of course, plastic wrapped torsos are well photographed and are successfully creepy. Nothing creates dread like a warehouse full of naked mannequins.

Mr. Fujita introduces Kazuki to his co-worker, Kishida. He’s a pleasant fellow, albeit a bit distracted. In a room above the factory floor, behind diaphanous drapery, a gorgeous bangless Tomie orders Fujita around like he’s garbage. He simply must find the “other girl.” Until then, she requests the delivery of Kazuki to cure her boredom. She comes on a bit strong, however, and frightens off the damaged boy, who sees a shocking resemblance to the dead Naoko, except for the pronounced mole under her left eyelid. Impossible. A ghost in a Japanese horror tale?

He becomes one of five men helplessly enslaved by the beautiful, demanding, Tomies. Beautiful, that is, except for the nasty areas where their faces are decaying. These men love them so much, in fact, that even their murder and immolation cannot cure the fatal attraction. Only one Tomie can save them, the first, the true, the pure-blooded Tomie, recipient of the hideous initial needle jab.

TOMIE VS. TOMIE is lovely. Suspenseful scenes are demarcated by soft grayscale, enhanced by subtle pastel background accents, referring well to the style of the manga. Long shots of somber faces, skewed camera angles and unhurried pans over mannequin bodies create a haunting, meditative atmosphere. Fire is a key element in the story, and falling matches, candlewicks and fireballs are nicely haloed and slowed to allow articulation of flame.

The music is simple and artistic, a traditional stringed instrument plays in most scenes, haunting and insistent, reminiscent of the effect we got from Mike Oldfield’s “Tubular Bells” theme from THE EXORCIST. Other sound FX are classic fear inducers, wind, white noise, single chords winding up the suspense, but the string music is the authority here, sophisticated and very effective.

Most gore happens off-screen, but it’s present, nonetheless. Like a single bloody panel among landscape panels, incongruously graphic scenes suddenly break the tranquility. In one, Kishida

uses a sledgehammer and butcher knife to decapitate a bang-sporting Tomie, releasing her head from the grotesquely disfigured body of another. As they watch the corpse burn, the noggin of the irresistible siren admonishes Kishida for his inadequacy. Could Kazuki be the one strong enough to find the pure Tomie? But what’s in it for him?

Despite a translation that cuts the dialog by two-thirds, the story is classic enough to be twisted one more time, and the pictures tell it well. TOMIE VS. TOMIE’s overall visual quality makes it well worth viewing. And the final climax has some pseudo cannibalism, and a shocking, nasty piece of special effects that quite transcends language and is not to be missed.

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