



This issue of *The Japan Society Review* marks the opening of an exciting new year of Japan-related books, films and events. In 2022 this publication will reach a landmark 100 issues, an inspiring moment in our ongoing mission to celebrate the vibrancy and variety of Japanese culture, history, politics and much more. As we advance toward that milestone, this issue also brings together an interesting selection of reviews focusing on Japanese art, gardens, literature and cinema.

The first review discusses the catalogue of an exhibition on Japanese Buddhist art hosted by the Newark Museum in 2019-2020. *Beyond Zen: Japanese Buddhism Revealed* offers a fascinating visual history of this rich artistic tradition from the Edo period to the present day.

Following this art review, we feature an overview of the publication *Of Arcs and Circles: Insights from Japan on Gardens, Nature, and Art* written by landscape architect and artist Marc Peter Keane. In this collection of personal essays, Keane explores topics such as modern Japan's

approach to architecture, the history of torii gates and the traditional methods of making charcoal.

This issue also includes reviews of two fiction books recently published in English, *The Woman in the Purple Skirt* by Imamura Natsuko and *Fish Swimming In Dappled Sunlight* by Onda Riku. The first one offers an original take on working-women, social alienation, and sexual violence in contemporary Japan. The latter is a psychological thriller/murder mystery novel, in the style of Onda's previously translated work *The Aosawa Murders*.

The last review of this issue is dedicated to the film *37 Seconds* written and directed by Hikari and currently available to watch in Netflix UK. A sensitive exploration of the reality of being disabled, the film presents a coming-of-age story focusing on Yuma, a woman with cerebral palsy and her quest to become more independent.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Cameron Bassindale, Katie Croft, Laurence Green, Jenni Schofield and Timon Screech

Cover image from *37 Seconds*

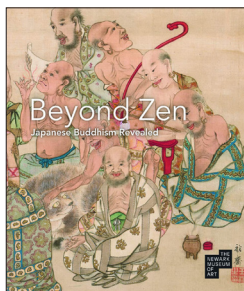
Beyond Zen: Japanese Buddhism Revealed

edited by Katherine Anne Paul

D Giles Limited and the Newark Museum of Art (2021)

ISBN-13: 978-1911282556

Review by Timon Screech



The Newark Museum's collection of Japanese art is insufficiently recognised, and certainly those of us living outside the USA are not well aware of it. Newark naturally suffers from proximity to New York City, with its wealth of artistic options. Nevertheless, the Museum has put itself on the map with a series of important exhibitions, notably begun under the long-standing curator of Asian Collections, Valrae Reynolds, who served for almost four decades (1970-2007). Under her the permanent gallery of Japanese art was created, in 1989. Reynolds' successor, Dr Katherine Anne Paul, now titled Curator of the Arts of Asia, has admirably carried on the tradition, and organised the exhibition *Beyond Zen: Japanese Buddhism Revealed* (18 September 2019 - 5 January 2020). The show was a wonderful introduction to the topic of Buddhist art in Japan, being both viewer-friendly for first-time visitors, and profound. It is greatly to be hoped that people managed to see it, despite the Covid situation. For those who could not make the trip, or others like myself who live abroad and could not go anyway, we have a lavish hardback catalogue, jointly published in the USA and UK, with full colour plates, introductory essays and helpful entries.

The Newark Museum (now the Newark Museum of Art) has given priority to Japanese art ever since its foundation in 1908. It grew out of an exhibition of George T. Rockwell's Japanese items, which had been shown at the Newark Library the year before. 3000 pieces from Rockwell entered the new Museum. As expected from things put together at that time, it contains a wealth of prints, ceramics and *inro* (hanging pill box). The Museum's founder, John Cotton Dana, also director of the library, donated more pieces, and since then, Japanese art of one sort or another had been added to the collection almost every year, without exception.

This exhibition reveals how rich the Rockwell collection was in Buddhist art too, with some half the items coming from him.

The catalogue opens with a striking pair of paintings, one a Shaka (Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha), probably from the 15th century, and the

other an Amida (Amitābha, Buddha of the Western Paradise) [Figs 4 & 5]. They are not only fine works, but demonstrate the longevity of Buddhist iconicity. The former piece shows a golden Buddha enthroned on a lotus flower, with the 'sixteen good gods' (*juroku zenshin*), protectors of the dharma clustered to either side; below is the great continental monk, Xuanzang (602-666), seen introducing a Mongolian divinity that he had met on a pilgrimage to India, to Buddhism truth, on which the divinity embraced the dharma and vowed to project it. It is a key story in the East Asia tradition, incorporating India, the new Buddhist lands of modern-day People's Republic, and the pre-existing gods of region. Specialists in Japanese art will know the magnificent statue of this divinity, Jinsha Taisho in Japanese, carved by Kaikei, c. 1200. The icon is a focal Buddha with attendants, and a hagiography of a mid-7th century monk, as encoded in late-7th century text, transmitted to Japan, and prosed in a metaphysical statement, painted some 800 years after the purported events – and now, to continue, shown to us some 600 years on again, somewhat darkened by the passage of time, but still with the same inclusive message.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Paired with this is the Amida. It depicts not an old myth, but an old mythic *statue*. In Buddhism (as in Catholic Christianity indeed) it is not just the gods and Buddhas who serve as examples, or offer succour, but particular *images* of them. The one depicted in this

probably-mid 19th century painting, is not just Amida, but the celebrated Amida icon at the Zenko-ji. It is said to be the first image ever seen in Japan, having been donated to the Japanese court in 552, by a Korean who hoped to convert the islands to the dharma, which, after some vicissitudes, is what happened. Initially the dharma was not accepted, and the icon was hurled into a ditch, from where it was retrieved and taken to a remote place for safekeeping by an adherent who gave his name to the temple built to house it, Zenko-ji. The icon is so holy that it has never, ever, been seen, or rather, not since a mediaeval warrior forced the doors open to view it – twice in fact; he noticed that the icon had moved in the interim, thus confirming it was actually alive. This is one of two living icons in Japan. The painting does not show the Zenko-ji Amida itself, the appearance of which no one knows, but a subordinate icon that stands in front, asserted to look the same. This subordinate also grew too holy to be freely seeing, so it was (and is) mostly sequestered from view. Hence the need for such paintings among devotees. Art historians in Japan and Korea, would like to see the King's gift piece, but the truth of the matter is that the shrine is probably empty.

The next two items [Figs 6 & 7] take us in the other direction. Both are two sculpted images of Shaka, dating to the Edo Period (1603-1868). They are not a pair, though they are similar, about 35cm tall, about the right size for personal icons, which were widespread, for use in domestic spaces. Inevitably, most of Rockwell's purchases were of Edo art, though his exhibition includes some impressive earlier piece too. Several icons are exhibited in their original shrine, with the doors open, which allows us to conceptualise how they were used. Sometimes the shrines have inscriptions, which assists in dating.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Edo is to the fore, but important to the exhibition is a set of four probably from after 1890. They show manifestations of Kannon, that is, the Amida's attendant, who will convey us to the Western Paradise. The Meiji regime (1868-1912) launched a cultural revolution against Buddhism, which is now so many icons left Japan. The Rockwell collection is not alone in having pieces stolen from temples, or salvaged from them, when the government burned the precincts down, in the name of modernisation. In these four works, however, we see Buddhism fighting back, and even, as the style suggests, modernising itself.

The exhibition is titled *Beyond Zen*, and it is certainly worth recalling that although tourists and school children flock to Kyoto's Zen temples, Zen had never the predominant school in Japan. It did have powerful sponsors, notably in the Ashikaga Shogunate, but numerically it was small. The Tokugawa shoguns, moreover, were not Zen, but Pure Land adherents. Modern taste has unbalanced history, and it is right and proper for this exhibition to take us 'beyond' Zen. The school is not banned, and lovers of the spontaneous link line will find work to their taste included. There are two excellent work by Unkoku Togan, a lineal successor to the great Zen master Sesshu. Unfortunately, in the catalogue they are hung the wrong way around (Fig 63 should come before Fig. 62). As a diptych, they likely were originally displayed with a Buddha image in the centre.

The exhibition has over 100 exhibits, and is too impossible here to mention them all, but one final item deserves attention. This is perhaps Newark's special treasure, for although far from a masterpiece in terms of execution, it is almost unique. The recognises is special enough to have its own catalogue chapter, by Kaminishi Ikumi. It is another Meiji work, once a long handscroll, now mounted as hour hanging scrolls. It adheres to the established genre of pictorial hagiographies of eminent monks, that would be narrative at pilgrimage temples. He is named Tokuhon, an Amidist (Pure Land) monk, who died in 1818. His biography was composed by a younger follower, Fukuda Gyokai, in 1867, so the paintings must date to after that. Tokuhon travelled but came to rest at the Daizu-in in Edo, founded (or in legend refounded) to be the mortuary temple for Tokugawa Ieyasu's mother, O-dai-no-kata, who died in 1602. Gyokai serve here and would have met Tokuhon late in life. Tokuhon ended his days, also in Edo, at the Ikko-in, and since that temple is recorded as possessing a handscroll of his life, but no longer had it, the Newark

Museum presumes their piece is the one. Three similar illustrated biographies of Tokuhon are still in Japan.

Last of all, with such fine offerings and such a comprehensive exposure of Japanese Buddhist art, it seems churlish to ask for more. Nevertheless, must be said that this show is a rather modern interpretation of Buddhism. Where, I want to ask, is Shinto? It was only during the Meiji persecutions that the kami (Shinto

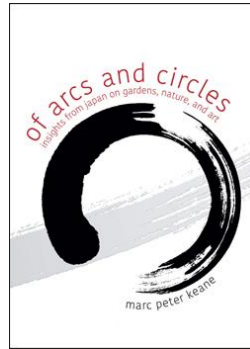
gods) were wrenched out of where they belonged, as is, in Buddhist temples, where they served as protectors of the dharma and as their avatars. Any pre-Meiji person would have been startled to encounter an exhibition of Japanese Buddhist art that left the kami out. They are part of the story. Still, that can be told on another occasion. §

Of Arcs and Circles: Insights from Japan on Gardens, Nature, and Art

by Marc Peter Keane

Stone Bridge Presss (2022)
ISBN-13: 978-16117207239

Review by Katie Croft



The title of this lovely book is somewhat misleading. Although I assume that it is literally true (i.e. that Keane was in Japan when he wrote it), it gives a prospective reader the impression that they are about to encounter some specifically Japanese socio-cultural-historical non-fiction: perhaps it will include a critique of different periods of Japanese art, or the history of the Japanese conception of nature? In fact, this is a collection of personal musings on Keane's own life, his interactions with nature and culture and his observations on the wider world.

Keane is a successful landscape architect, artist and author who has been living and working in Japan for decades. He has written eight previous books, including an introduction to Japanese gardens, an explanation of the tea garden and a translation of the *Sakuteiki* with Jiro Takei. Those who have read 2002's *The Art of Setting Stones* will be familiar with the style of Keane's gently humorous prose and optimistic observations.

The essays in this collection range from the specific and tangible to the metaphysical, often in the same paragraph. A description of a momentary sight of a heron flying above the surface of a river leads to a discussion about symmetry in the natural world; seeing a house in the process of demolition leads to a critique of modern Japan's approach to architecture alongside theories of transience, value and care. Keane's conceptual wanderings are grounded in the real world so the reader is never left adrift; questions of existence are balanced by asides on topics such as the history of *torii* gates or the traditional methods of

making charcoal. The quality of his writing makes it thoroughly enjoyable to follow Keane's flow of thought from a woman on a subway platform to the best place to pitch a tent and onwards to the evolution of hunter-gatherer society, but I am left wondering what it must be like inside his mind, and if he ever just sees a thing as a thing.

Keane's writings on culture and nature have the thoughtfulness which is surely only available to an outsider who can examine their surroundings with fresh eyes, unencumbered by habituation. Of course, this is an extremely knowledgeable outsider, and as such, his writing weaves deep understanding of Japan with his personal experiences to give a universal perspective which would appeal whether one has an interest in Japan or not. I particularly enjoyed the essay "there is no such thing as art," which argues passionately for the need to return to craftsmanship, communication, beauty and emotional experience as the primary values of art.

Amongst the discerning and delightful of Keane's writings, however, there are a few moments where he falls into the tempting rabbit hole of pseudo-philosophy. The scientist in me raised her eyebrows at a passage arguing for the supremacy of one state of matter over another: 'suspended in a dream of melting into the river... it occurred to me why there is such a strong connection between water and life... Solids are too fixed... Gases are too dispersed to be the foundation of life... Liquids on the other hand, offer the kind of density required for the development of an organism but also have the fluid nature that supports the various chemical and physical interactions from which life is born'. Forgive me for being literal but life on earth does fundamentally rely on all forms of matter; postulating otherwise detracts from the pleasure of his precise insights. Luckily, there are only a few moments that stretch credulity, which did not undermine my overall enjoyment of the book.

Although each essay is ostensibly on a separate subject, they are united by Keane's desire to help us to

see and value the connection between humanity and nature. With every phrase, Keane invites us to look at the world around us, and to look better at it. While admiring the beauty of a willow tree, he interrogates the failure of names to signify the complete reality of existence. In a discussion on Japanese poetry, he implores us to be aware of the deeper experiences available to us: 'the world holds these hidden messages by the bagful. It's just a question of knowing how to look. Or, rather, to be willing to look. To be open to their revelations.' Keane's light-hearted accounts of the pleasure he gains from the world around him leads the reader gently towards a desire to look deeper, whilst avoiding

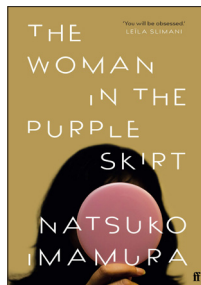
condescension or evangelism. The threads running through the book come together in the final essay, where he elucidates his understanding of the Buddhist concept of emptiness: that 'all existence is dependent on a web of interconnections'. Whilst admitting the near impossibility of it, Keane hopes that humans will one day learn 'to truly see the world as it exists with infinitely layered connections'. His optimistic message feels like the right one for our times: if we learned to understand the relationships that stretch from our single self to all other beings, the world would be a kinder place. §

The Woman in the Purple Skirt

by Imamura Natsuko
translated by Lucy North

Faber & Faber (2021)
ISBN-13: 978-0571364671

Review by Cameron Bassindale



Winner of the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, one of Japan's highest literary honor, Imamura Natsuko is the latest in a growing list of contemporary female authors to be introduced to the British literary scene. She is certainly in good company. The likes of Kawakami Hiromi, Banana Yoshimoto and Murata Sayaka are now readily available in chain bookstores up and down the UK. What's more, this wave of Japanese female voices being translated into English seem to touch on similar experiences: social alienation, workplace pressures and the threat of sexual violence. In *The Woman in the Purple Skirt*, Imamura adds her own take on these themes through a narrative with a gripping conceit and satisfying ending.

At its core, *The Woman in the Purple Skirt* is a story about a woman who stalks her neighbour, in the hopes of striking up a friendship with her. As the story progresses however, the reader's attention naturally shifts from the eponymous character to the narrator, who calls herself 'the woman in the yellow cardigan'. What starts off innocently enough does take on a rather more sinister tone as the novel builds up to its conclusion. The narrator's descriptions of waiting for the 'woman in the purple skirt' in dark alleys or by a bus stop go quickly from eliciting sympathy for a woman trying to make a friend in the digital age to a sense of deep foreboding. However, Imamura stops well short of making this novel a grizzly psycho-thriller, as perhaps a lesser author may have been tempted to do. To my

mind this is what makes the ending so satisfying; I found myself imagining any number of ways the novel may finish only to be pleasantly surprised Imamura steered well clear of tropes and cliché.

The descriptions of workplaces, and women's role within them in modern Japan, is another area which Imamura manages to provide novel views. *The Woman in the Purple Skirt* at times has shades of Murata Sayaka's excellent *Convenience Store Woman*, a novel whose protagonist is obsessed with the din of her 24/7 convenience store chain. For Imamura, the narrator's obsession is with a female colleague. For both novels, the result is the same; a narrative which dissects the intersection between femininity and the modern workplace. In fact, 'the woman in the purple skirt' does not begin working at the hotel with the 'woman in the yellow cardigan' until she finally reads a subtly placed newspaper advert meant for her to see. Before she joins the hotel workforce, the narrative voice is rather harsh on her moving from job to job, unable to pin down a career. The distance between the two characters, and the narrator's irritation at 'the woman in the purple skirt's' work ethic helps build the atmosphere of modern work in Japan, which is often gruelling and worse for those who don't conform.

Once she begins work at the hotel, the dangers of non-conformity become more prescient. Imamura has some stellar lines of dialogue laced throughout the scenes at the hotel, between the supervisors and the regular staff members. For example, at one point the narrator overhears a supervisor ask the new recruit 'Hino-chan. Is there a reason you don't use the hotel shampoo?'. For me this is a masterful line of dialogue, which represents the pressure to conform within the workplace, compounded by the pressures modern Japanese women face with regards to their body. As

the novel goes on, the narrator begins to hear rumours about 'Hino' being given favourable treatment because of an alleged affair. From then on, the staff totally turn against her, taking every opportunity to criticise her work and character. Imamura weaves into the narrative here a subtle class commentary. At the start of her employment she was encouraged, off the books, to help herself to food and drink when she was carrying out her duties. As her colleagues begin to take a dislike to her, they out her for doing just that. In so doing, Imamura perhaps is trying to paint a picture of a lack of solidarity between working-class Japanese.

So too does Imamura frame in an interesting way another problem that women face: sexual violence. Hino's experience on a bus, in which a stranger gropes her from behind, is all too common in modern Japan. What makes Imamura's description unique is the way in which it is framed, from the viewpoint

of a female stalker. The narrator sees the situation as an opportunity to touch her, as the fracas on the bus occurs, she reaches her hand out through the crowd to 'tweak her nose'. This moment is the tipping point in the novel, where it transitions from strange to outright bizarre. Given the pacing of the novel, which is lively and doesn't rest in one place too long, this makes for a quick build-up toward a truly well-thought-out ending.

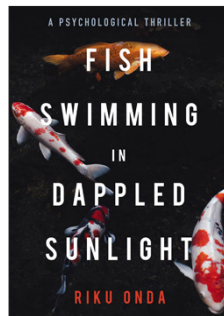
With her finger clearly on the pulse of Japanese literary modernity, Imamura Natsuko's *The Woman in the Purple Skirt* manages to touch on issues surrounding working-class women in Japan while managing to maintain a unique writing voice within an even more unique story. The result is a thoroughly readable book, well deserving of its place in the contemporary Japanese canon. §

Fish Swimming In Dappled Sunlight

by Onda Riku
translated by Alison Watts

Bitter Lemon Press (2022)
ISBN-13: 978-1913394592

Review by Laurence Green



A couple meet up one final time, one last night together in which to dissect the past. Their relationship has broken down. Their apartment is now emptied and void of their possessions. All that is left is to get to the bottom of where it all went wrong; a horrific incident in which during a dreamy holiday trekking in the mountains, their guide suddenly dies. The couple each believe the other murdered the guide - but why, and how? What they desire more than anything is a confession.

Perhaps even more so than in *The Aosawa Murders* - Onda Riku's previous novel to be translated into English - there is a clinical sparseness to the prose here that keeps the reader in a constant sense of unsettled anxiety. Through a constant drip-feeding of information, with paragraphs often circling around a subject for pages by way of tangents and diversions, we teeter on a precipice of what we think we know, and what we don't know. Resolution is hard to come by in Onda's uniquely creepy psychological worlds, the characters almost child-like at times in the wilful skirting of the usual hard-and-fast truths of adult rationality.

Thus we are pulled, always at the mercy of Onda's puppeteer-like hands, through a plot that slowly - ever so slowly - reveals itself. We might think of comparisons such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* - masterworks at never showing more than is absolutely necessary at any given time of the worlds that surround their protagonists. The intensity of this claustrophobia was one of the key allures of *The Aosawa Murders*, and it is done to perfection again here - with Alison Watts' translation capturing with deft poise the understanding that it is often the most simplest of utterances that can convey the deepest unease.

Bit by bit, we get to know the couple at the heart of this story. Though we know their names, (or do we...?) the first person narrative that flits between their respective points of view sees them melding together into a kind of symbiotic, hydra-like existence. We can never be entirely sure what each is concealing from the other, and yet we know they share a deep bond. Who holds the dominant position, and who is struggling toward the truth? In the constant back-and-forth of their dialogue, we begin to see a sense of how they are ultimately two sides of the same coin.

Do we ever like them as protagonists? That's a more difficult question to answer - but through the time we spend in their company, they nevertheless become the only anchor we are afforded in a plot that is constantly adrift and at angles with itself. The core narrative is hard work for the reader, to be certain, and is given to us asynchronously - are we in the present,

or the past? The framing device of the couple sitting in their soon to be vacated apartment, working their way through wine and shochu as they discuss their memories of the trauma that haunts them both, has a kind of weird comfort to it. It is in their recollections that we truly lose ourselves, a space divorced of any solid ground, composed of illusory fragments that loom out of the mists of forgetfulness.

It's not until about two-thirds of the way through the book that we really begin to get a handle on what is actually at play here, and the various interlocking elements begin to make sense. We finally start to understand not only the true depths of the bond between the couple, but also the dark secret that connects both them and the dead guide. The answers, it seems, lie not in some kind of final confession, but in their childhoods - a mental space that can only be reclaimed through a reconciliation of the difference between 'fact' and 'truth'.

It is very difficult to talk about the massive revelations that the book's latter half delivers without giving anything away, but suffice to say, when they finally come, it is like a volley of punches to the gut,

tearing away any remaining semblance of safety the reader has, and dangling them over an abyss of vertigo-inducing nausea. Onda toys with primal fears; insects, being buried, children in peril - and they terrify all the more because of the repetitive, cyclical manner in which they are employed. Like something from a nightmare by way of a David Lynch movie, the eeriness gets into us like a bad itch.

Although the novel could ostensibly be touted as 'crime' fiction, as with *The Aosawa Murders*, the tone is often far closer to psychological horror. Fans of the likes of Ogawa Yoko will find plenty to enjoy here, and the book's biggest draw can be summed up in its relentless probing and unpicking of the deepest recesses of morality. What drives us to act the way we do? Who are we really? And can we ever - even with those closest to us - know the inner thoughts of another? Time and again, Onda forces us to confront the ugly truths behind these questions. In doing so, she comes very close to conveying in the textual format what it might mean to be 'human', with all the messy, fallible connotations associated with it. §

37 Seconds

written and directed by Hikari
(2019)

Cast: Kayama Me, Kanno Misuzu,
Daitoh Shunsuke, Watanabe
Makiko, Kumashino Yoshihiko

Available on Netflix

Review by Jenni Schofield



37 Seconds is a 2019 film directed and written by Hikari which explores the coming-of-age story of Yuma, a woman with cerebral palsy, and her quest to become more independent from her overbearing mother. The film examines her search for "freedom", in her own words, through love, loss, and internalised ableism.

Takada Yuma, the protagonist, is unfulfilled and unhappy with her life. Her childhood best friend Sayaka takes credit for her artwork and shares less than half of the earnings, forcing Yuma to remain a secret ghost-writer while Sayaka claims the fame and fortune. As a result, Yuma decides to look for work elsewhere, and submits samples of her work to a publisher which specialises in erotic manga. The contact she meets with at the publisher tells her that her work is exceptional, but that the sex scenes she has written are

not believable. The publisher tells Yuma that if she has sex, she should contact her again, as experience is all she lacks in writing credible sex scenes. Yuma decides to hire a sex worker, but the sex worker leaves after she has an episode of incontinence. As she attempts to leave the hotel, the elevator is broken, and while trying to get help, Yuma meets Kuma, a fellow wheelchair user, sex worker Mai, and carer Toshi. The rest of the film follows the sexual and spiritual awakening of Yuma, as she opens herself up to new experiences, drinking in drag bars, going to nightclubs, buying sex toys, and getting makeovers with Mai.

The way Yuma is treated by her new friends is a stark contrast to the way she is treated at home by her mother. Yuma's mother is extremely overprotective of her, and actively infantilises her at every opportunity, from stripping her naked to bathe together, to walking her to the bus stop and waving at the bus as it pulls away. Once Yuma attempts to escape the binds of her mother, she is punished by being physically locked in the house, echoing the all-too-frequent abuse that disabled people face from their families.[1] Her newfound friends, however, treat her as an independent adult, capable of making her own decisions, choosing her own clothes, and working hard to achieve her dreams. They believe in her abilities and

are even willing to support her growth with their own money.

Nudity is a useful framing device for the evolution Yuma undergoes in the film, encapsulating her journey into adulthood. At first, she is an infant, innocent in her nudity, forced to bathe with her mother and lean against her for support, much like how one bathes with a very young baby. As the story progresses, Yuma explores her own sexuality and desires by watching herself in a mirror while masturbating, still fully clothed, shy, and not entirely comfortable in her own skin. During her experience with the sex worker, he slowly peels back her clothes, framing her sexual form for her. Throughout the film, the audience watch as Yuma becomes more at home in her own skin, coming to terms with her body as a woman, and as a disabled person. Yuma wears the clothes she wants to wear, does her own makeup how she likes, and has gained bodily autonomy, without being dressed physically, or framed cinematically, by others.

Ordinarily, cinema featuring sexuality and disability in tandem play off the very real struggles of disabled folks as comedy, with the fact that a person with a disability is trying to have sex being the entire punchline and source of humour. *37 Seconds* takes a vastly different approach, choosing to instead take the audience on Yuma's journey with her, sharing in her emotions and experiencing the world through her eyes, through her embarrassment and her eventual joy. The grounded and authentic feel of the film are created in part due to the casting choices that the director made. Kayama Mei, who plays Yuma, is also a wheelchair user herself, as well as sharing a diagnosis of cerebral palsy with the character. The world of cinema internationally often casts non-disabled actors as disabled characters, robbing disabled actors of the chance to tell their own stories, in most cases reinforcing harmful stereotypes in the process. By casting real wheelchair users in *37 Seconds*, Hikari allows disabled folks to discuss the real issues that affect them, describing and portraying their own experiences as though re-enacting them for the audience on screen.

The man Yuma meets in the hotel, Kuma, is also played by a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy, Kumashino Yoshihiko. Kumashino is the CEO of an organisation called NPO Noir, which campaigns for the sexual rights of disabled people by increasing awareness of the fact that the sexuality of disabled people is so often overlooked by medical professionals, carers, and those in the sex industry, not to mention their friends and family.[2] In part, this is due to the

portrayal of disabled people as involuntarily celibate, sterile, and incapable of having or enjoying sex, as well as an inaccurate depiction of disabled people as childlike, or infantile. Kumashino's organisation show that all of this is far from the case, and that there is a greater need for the sexual needs and desires of people with disabilities to be understood and acknowledged. *37 Seconds* feels like an extension of that idea, telling the story of one lady and her struggle to be seen as an adult capable of both sexual desires, and of being desired.

In one heart-breaking scene, we see Yuma attempt online dating, where she is wholly unsuccessful. During one promising date, Yuma asks the man if he could see himself dating "someone like her", and after he reassures her that he could, in fact, be attracted to her, he then does not show up for their second date at a cinema and does not answer her calls. By the end of the film, Yuma has acknowledged that she is "worthy" of being loved, and that she will eventually find someone who likes her as she is. Her relationships with Toshi and Mai are examples of that fact, proving to Yuma that people can see past her disability to the real her, whilst acknowledging and supporting her through any difficulties her disability causes along the way.

37 Seconds is a heartfelt exploration of the reality of being disabled; a reality which is seldom explored outside of comedy. Most, if not all, disabled people have had to tackle their own self-image and self-worth, while navigating the world of dating and sex. The difficulty that Yuma has reconciling all of this by herself displays a clear need for better education surrounding both sex and disability and demonstrates the necessity of visible disabled people in popular media, to provide a hopeful and positive role model for younger disabled folks. With films like *37 Seconds* starting the conversation, we can only hope that the future will see more inclusion and support for disabled people.

Notes

[1] To read more about the abuse disabled people face, see Karen Roy (2021), *Domestic Abuse and People with Disabilities*, Numotion, blog post: <https://www.numotion.com/blog/february-2021/domestic-abuse-and-people-with-disabilities> (accessed 31/03/2022).

[2] For more information on NPO Noir, check out their Twitter page @nponoir: <https://twitter.com/nponoir> (accessed 31/03/2022). §