



Shape of Red

Red

2020/123min/Colour/English Subtitles
Distributor: Pony Canyon

Director: MISHIMA Yukiko

Cast: Kaho, TSUMABUKI Satoshi

Online screening information:

Fri 19 Feb	48 hour rental window from	6.00pm
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“Even with a family, you’ve got an empty space inside.” Once spoken, these razor-sharp words uncover the epicentre of the emotional earthquake that Toko (Kaho) is experiencing. At the core of Mishima Yukiko’s latest film, *Shape of Red (Red)*, is the story of a seemingly happy family enjoying the bliss of domesticity: an immaculate house, a lovely daughter, a thriving career for the breadwinner. However, something is amiss. In such a portrayal of a traditional Japanese family, a woman’s individuality can hardly find its place. Often confined to the kitchen, where her presence and skills are subtly questioned and undermined by her ever-present mother-in-law, Toko leads an innocuous life made of deferential smiles and little pleasures, if any at all. Everything around her is decided by others – what to wear, when to have kids – so when the offer of Toko’s carefully prepared hamburger steak is dismissed by her husband on the account of having had dinner already, the refusal reads as yet another reminder of the needless nature of her efforts. On the other hand, one thing is required of her: a meek and well-mannered composure, which perfectly fits into the standards of a Japanese wife.

Adapted from Shimamoto Rio’s novel *Red*, Mishima’s *Shape of Red* also works as a modern reinterpretation of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, although not much has changed since the 19th century. In a male-dominated world, Toko’s aspirations had to be sacrificed and thoroughly replaced by her uxorial duties. Once a promising junior architect, the young woman marries into a wealthy family and is hence expected to give up on her career. Soon after comes a child, an event that turns Toko’s coveted coming back to work into a hopeless possibility. For a film about a woman that regains control over her desires as much as her professional life by landing a job in an architecture firm, the design of the film’s spaces is minutious. In particular, Toko’s luxuriously understated house is built to remind the viewers of a cage, which looks indeed too comfortable to escape but is a cage nonetheless. Each shot captures the woman inside windowless corners and when, at last, we’re able to peek at the outside through the front door or the kitchen’s window, the brick wall delimiting the garden implies an ulterior layer of fortifications. In *Shape of Red*, the house is not only the space most commonly associated with a woman’s invisible labour. It’s also a symbol of self-affirmation and empowerment when in the form of the miniature house that Toko and Kurata (Tsumabuki Satoshi) – Toko’s mentor and lover – assemble together following the woman’s sketches.

In *Shape of Red*, Toko seeks love – both physical and spiritual – above anything else. Her marriage is not sexless, however her role within the couple is limited to giving pleasure to her husband. As a consequence, Toko’s needs are simply erased; forgotten, even. Unsurprisingly then, the woman’s libido awakens when she meets Kurata again after ten years apart and is shown genuine affection and attention. Their relationship is ill-fated though. Not only their liaison is morally questionable, but the man is dying of cancer. Reminiscing of those heroines of early films whose transgressive romance was destined to doom, *Shape of Red* doesn’t want to punish

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its protagonist. Rather, it reinforces the subversion of gender roles through illness and death. As a counterpart to the film's core sequence – Toko and Kurata's long car ride back to Tokyo during a snowstorm at night – which is cross-cutted throughout the film and gives it its nonlinear structure, there stands the final ride towards the red blazing sky of a breathtaking dawn. It's Toko who drives the car now while Kurata languidly sleeps upon her shoulder. Her gaze transfixing the road ahead, she's willingly shaping her own future.

Ren Scateni, writer, curator, and programmer