



VISIONS DU RÉEL 2016

Ama-San: Diving into the abyss of femininity

by [GIORGIA DEL DON](#)

20/04/2016 - Portuguese director Cláudia Varejão's film had its world premiere in the international feature films competition at Visions du réel



Ama-San, the latest film by young Portuguese director **Cláudia Varejão**, in competition at Visions du réel, uncovers and introduces us to the world of the mysterious *ama* of Japan, a world seemingly suspended between dreams and reality, past and future. A film that crystallises an ancestral tradition that risks dying out as it is watered down by the flow of overwhelming and dangerously seductive modernisation.

(The article continues below - Commercial information)

The *ama* (literally 'women of the sea'), as they are commonly known in Japan, are underwater fisherwomen who free dive without breathing apparatus in line with a thousand-year-old tradition made up of mysterious rituals. Although they're famous for pearl diving, the *ama* mainly dive into the abyss in search of seafood (in particular, highly sought-after abalones). What makes this ancient practice all the more fascinating and mysterious is the average age of the fishermen: 67. The magic in the encounter between bodies that are still young and others weighed down with age, which, once in the cold waters of the sea move in unison as if they were dancing, transforms their work into pure poetry, a distant litany with bewitching undertones. Unfortunately, like many traditions, that of the Japanese *ama* risks being crushed by mercantile logic seeking to exploit the sensuous side of the practice (traditionally, the *ama* dive wearing just a light linen suit) and increase profits with the use of modern wetsuits and oxygen tanks.

Through her film, which follows three generations of fisherwomen, Cláudia Varejão crystallises a tradition shuddering with fragility, desperately clinging on to a past that created it and an uncertain future that it looks towards with surprising fragility. The sequences in which the director films the diving ritual of the *ama*, made up of meticulous rituals and mysterious objects (the white linen that covers their heads literally smells of the sea) seem to come from a faraway and dreamlike past. At the same time, life on solid ground is coloured with modern shades of the everyday. Nonetheless, there is one common thread that seems to magically tie these two times and places: a certain idea of happiness in which the present feeds off the past without disowning it, with extraordinary and rejuvenating faith.

Ama-San brings us a sort of portrayal of the profound nature of 'femininity'. The *ama*, brave and extraordinarily strong women, compress a world often associated with the domain of men by turning a common conception in not only the East but the West too on its head. In the depths of the sea, these mysterious creatures cease to be women and simply be themselves. Cláudia Varejão's camera succeeds in this sense in acting as a bridge not only between tradition and modernity, but between male and female, yin and yang, profoundness and outward appearances, in search of a necessary and liberating balance.

An enigmatic yet extraordinarily serene film that speaks a lot of truth.

Ama-San is a co-production between Portugal (Terratrema, which will also handle international sales) and Switzerland (Mira Film).

(Translated from Italian)

See also

[Ama-San \[CH, PT, JP\] \(2016\): film profile, film review](#)

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