

March 10, 2020 (XL:10) Masaki Kobayashi: **KWAIDAN** (1965, 183m)  
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Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.*



**Directed by** Masaki Kobayashi  
**Writing Credits** Yôko Mizuki (screenplay), Lafcadio Hearn (novel) (as Yakumo Koizumi)  
**Produced by** Takeshi Aikawa, Shigeru Wakatsuki  
**Music by** Tôru Takemitsu  
**Cinematography by** Yoshio Miyajima  
**Film Editing by** Hisashi Sagara

The film won the Jury Special Prize and was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 1965 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1966 Academy Awards.

#### CAST

##### “The Black Hair”

Michiyo Aratama...First wife  
Misako Watanabe...Second Wife  
Rentarō Mikuni...Husband

##### “The Woman of the Snow”

Tatsuya Nakadai...Minokichi  
Jun Hamamura...Minokichi's friend  
\*Keiko Kishi...the Yuki-Onna

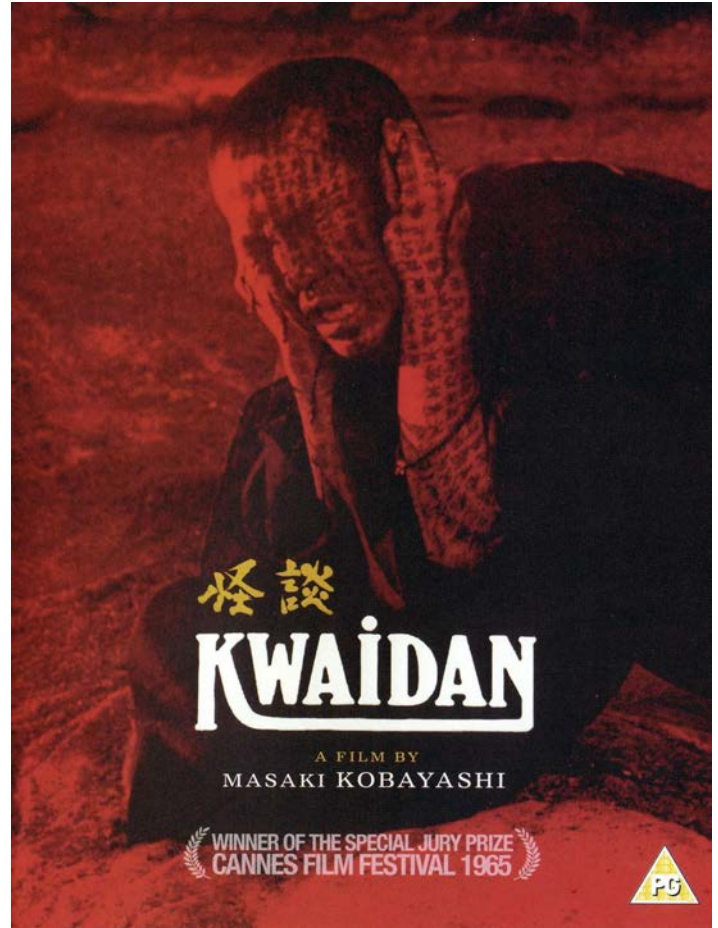
##### “Hoichi”

Katsuo Nakamura...Hoichi  
Takashi Shimura...Head priest

##### “In a Cup of Tea”

Kanemon Nakamura...Warrior

**MASAKI KOBAYASHI** (b. February 14, 1916 in Hokkaido, Japan—d. October 4, 1996 (age 80) in Tokyo, Japan) was a Japanese film director (22 credits) and screenwriter (9 credits), best known for writing and directing the epic trilogy *The Human Condition* (1959–1961), as well as the samurai films *Harakiri* (1962), for which he won the Jury Special Prize and was nominated



for the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and *Samurai Rebellion* (1967), and *Kwaidan* (1964), for which he, once again, both won the Jury Special Prize and was nominated for the Palme d'Or. He was also nominated for the Palm d'Or for *Nihon no seishun* (1968). He also directed: *Youth of the Son* (1952), *Sincerity* (1953), *Three Loves\** (1954), *Somewhere Under the Broad Sky* (1954), *Beautiful Days* (1955), *Fountainhead* (1956), *The Thick-Walled Room* (1956), *I Will Buy You* (1956), *Black River* (1957), *The Inheritance* (1962), *Inn of Evil* (1971), *The Fossil* (1974), *Moeru aki* (1979), *Tokyo Trial\** (Documentary) (1983), and *Shokutaku no nai ie\** (1985). He also wrote the screenplays for *A Broken Drum* (1949) and *The Yotsuda Phantom* (1949).

##### \*Also wrote

**YÔKO MIZUKI** (b. August 26, 1910, Tokyo, Japan—d. April 8, 2003 (aged 92), Ichikawa, Chiba, Japan) was a Japanese screenwriter. After graduating from Bunka Gakuin, a vocational school, she began writing screenplays to support her family after her father died. Mizuki was active in the 1950s era of the Japanese studio system and is notable for her work with directors Tadashi Imai and Mikio Naruse. Her work had received several Best Screenplay Awards from Kinema Junpo, Japan's oldest film magazine,

and has been described in the book *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide* as "One of the most important and accomplished Japanese female screenwriters of all time."

These are some of the 37 films she wrote for: *Onna no issho* (1949), *Till We Meet Again* (1950), *Sekirei no kyoku* (1951), *People of Akata* (1952), *Mother* (1952), *Oka wa hanazakari* (1952), *Himeyuri no Tō* (1953), *Husband and Wife* (1953), *Aijō ni tsuite* (1953), *Older Brother, Younger Sister* (1953), *An Inlet of Muddy Water* (1953), *Sound of the Mountain*

(1954), *Floating Clouds* (1955), *Koko ni izumi ari* (1955), *Shūu* (1956), *Yakan chūgaku* (1956), *Untamed Woman* (1957), *Morishige no Boku wa biyōshi* (1957), *Jun'ai*

*monogatari* (1957), *Angry Island* (1958), *Kami no taisho* (1958), *Hadaka no taishō* (1958), *Kiku to Isamu* (1959), *Brother* (1960), *The Age of Marriage* (1961), *Arega minato no hi da* (1961), *Mozu* (1961), *Nippon no obaachan* (1962), *A Night to Remember* (1962), *Sweet Sweat* (1964), *Kwaidan* (1964), *Freezing Point* (1966), *Devils-in-Law* (1968), *The Possessed* (1976), *Older Brother, Younger Sister* (1976), *Himeyuri no Tō* (1982), and *Himeyuri no Tō* (1995).

**LAFADIO HEARN** (b. 27 June 1850, Lefkada, United States of the Ionian Islands (present-day Greece)—d. 26 September 1904 (aged 54), Tokyo, Empire of Japan), known also by the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, was a writer, known best for his books about Japan, especially his collections of Japanese legends and ghost stories, such as *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. In the United States, Hearn is also known for his writings about the city of New Orleans based on his ten-year stay in that city.

**YOSHIO MIYAJIMA** (b. February 3, 1910 in Nagono, Japan—d. February 21, 1998) was a Japanese cinematographer (45 credits). He worked frequently with Masaki Kobayashi. These are some of the films he worked on: *Utanō yononaka* (1936), *Jinsei keiba* (1938), *War and Peace* (1947), *Violence* (1952), *Before Dawn* (1953), *The Beauty and the Dragon* (1955), *Wedding Day* (1956), *Joyu* (1956), *Behold Thy Son* (1957), *Glow of the Firefly* (1958), *Naked Sun* (1958), *The Human Condition I: No Greater Love* (1959), *The Human Condition II: Road to Eternity* (1959), *The Human Condition III: A Soldier's Prayer* (1961), *Love Under the Crucifix* (1962), *Harakiri* (1962),

*Kwaidan* (1964), *Live Your Own Way* (1967), *Empire of Passion* (1978), *Akō-jō danzetsu* (1978), and *Shikake-nin Baian* (1981).

**MICHIYO ARATAMA** (b. January 15, 1930, Nara, Japan—d. March 17, 2001 (aged 71), Tokyo, Japan) was a Japanese actress who appeared in leading and supporting roles in such films as Hiroshi Inagaki's *Chushingura: Hana no Maki, Yuki no Maki* (1962), Kihachi Okamoto's

*Samurai Assassin* (1965) and *Sword of Doom* (1966), and Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1965), *Hymn to a Tired Man* (1968), and *The Human Condition* trilogy (1959-1961).

**RENTARŌ MIKUNI** (b. January

20, 1923, Gunma, Japan—d. April 14, 2013) appeared in over 150 films since making his screen debut in 1951. Besides his appearance in tonight's Kobayashi's film, he was in the director's harrowing *Harakiri* (1962). Throughout his career, he was involved with films recognized by the elite Cannes Film Festival. In 1971, he was in Masahiro Shinoda's fantasy drama *Himiko*, which was entered into the 1974 Cannes Feature Film Competition. In 1986, he was in Yoshishige Yoshida's drama *A Promise*, which was screened in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes. Mikuni's own filmmaking effort, the 1987 *Shinran: Path to Purity* was awarded the Jury Prize at Cannes.

**TATSUYA NAKADAI** (b. December 13, 1932, Tokyo, Japan) is a Japanese film actor famous for the wide variety of characters he has portrayed and many collaborations with famous Japanese film directors. He has been featured in 11 Kobayashi films, including *The Human Condition* trilogy (1959-1961), wherein he starred as the lead character Kaji, plus *Harakiri* (1962), *Samurai Rebellion* (1967) and *Kwaidan* (1965), tonight's film. Nakadai starred or co-starring in many films directed by Akira Kurosawa: *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Sanjuro* (1962), *High and Low* (1963), *Kagemusha* (1980), and *Ran* (1985). He was also cast in significant films directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara (*The Face of Another*, 1966), Mikio Naruse (*When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, 1960), Kihachi Okamoto (*Kill!*, 1968, and *The Sword of Doom*, 1966), Hideo Gosha (*Goyokin*, 1969), Shirō Toyoda (*Portrait of Hell*, 1969) and Kon Ichikawa (*Enjō*, 1958, and *Odd Obsession*, 1960).



**KEIKO KISHI** (August 11, 1932 in Yokohama, Japan) is a Japanese actress, writer, and UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador who made her acting debut in 1951. David Lean had proposed her for the main role in *The Wind Cannot Read*, about a Japanese language instructor in India circa-1943 who falls in love with a British officer, but the project fell through. Several films she acted in were recognized by Cannes, including Shirō Toyoda's *Snow Country* (1957), which was entered into the 1958 Cannes Film Festival, and Kon Ichikawa's *Her Brother* (1960), which won a prize for Special Distinction at Cannes in 1961. Besides acting in tonight's film, she also appeared in Kobayashi's *The Fossil* (1975).

**TAKASHI SHIMURA** (b. March 12, 1905, Ikuno, Hyōgo, Japan—d. February 11, 1982 (aged 76),

Tokyo, Japan) was a Japanese actor who appeared in over 200 films between 1934 and 1981. Along with Toshirō Mifune, Shimura is the actor most closely associated with Kurosawa: he appeared in 21 of Kurosawa's 30 films. In fact, Kurosawa's cinematic collaboration with Shimura, from Sanshiro Sugata in 1943 to *Kagemusha* in 1980, started earlier and lasted longer than his work with Mifune (1948–65). Shimura's performances for Kurosawa included the doctor in *Drunken Angel* (1948), the veteran detective in *Stray Dog* (1949), the flawed lawyer in *Scandal* (1950), the woodcutter in *Rashomon* (1950), the mortally ill bureaucrat in *Ikiru* (1952), and the lead samurai Kambei in *Seven Samurai* (1954). Kurosawa wrote the part in *Kagemusha* specifically for Shimura, but the scenes were cut from the Western release, so many in the West did not know that he had been in the film. The DVD release of the film by The Criterion Collection restored Shimura's footage. Shimura appeared in a number of Tōhō kaiju (giant monster) and tokusatsu (special effects) films, many of which were directed by Kurosawa's good friend and colleague Ishirō Honda. Shimura's roles included Professor Kyohei Yamane in the original *Godzilla* (1954), a character he briefly reprised in *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955). He acted in *Osaka Elegy*, a 1936 film Kenji Mizoguchi considered his first serious effort as a director, also his first commercial and critical success in Japan. He appeared in *Snow Trail*, a 1947 black-and-white film directed by Senkichi Taniguchi with Akira Kurosawa's screenplay. He also appeared in Yasuzo Masumura's *Afraid to Die*, a 1960 film notable for featuring the nationalist author, Yukio Mishima.



### **Gwendolyn Audrey Foster: “Kwaidan (Senses of Cinema 2016)**

Along with Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) and Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō*, 1957), Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964) – aka *Kaidan*, or 'ghost stories' – is one of the peaks of the Japanese cinema during its golden era, and one of the most superbly atmospheric supernatural films ever produced in any country. It's also a

terrific example of how a portmanteau film can work successfully, harking back to Ealing Studios' multi-director *Dead of Night* (1945), and gesturing towards the multi-story films of Amicus in the 1960s.

Kobayashi's filmography as a director isn't extensive, with only 21 feature films to his credit throughout his entire career, yet each of his projects has an individual stamp that makes them deeply personal. His earlier films are both gritty and introspective, and seem nothing at all like *Kwaidan*: one of Kobayashi's most compelling early films is the brutal baseball noir drama *I Will Buy You* (*Anata kaimasu*, 1956), in which a young player rises to the top of Japanese professional baseball, revealed to be little more than a racket.

Kobayashi's other major works include the epic trilogy *The Human Condition* (1959- 1961), which clocks in at an astonishing 9 hours and 47 minutes in its entirety, and *Harakiri* (*Seppuku*, 1962), a suitably violent and nihilistic samurai film. Most of Kobayashi's work is in black and white, but in *Kwaidan* he evokes a world of heavily stylized colour, and creates one of the most sensual and strangely evocative supernatural films ever made. It remains one-of-a-kind not only for Kobayashi, but also for what has been loosely called 'the horror film': *Kwaidan* doesn't deal in shock imagery, but rather in an ever-mounting sense of psychological dread.

Based on Lafcadio Hearn's anthology of Japanese tales of the supernatural, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904), the film is structured in four parts. "The Black Hair" follows a warrior who leaves his first wife for a second marriage to gain greater status, only to find the promise of a "better life" is an empty one indeed. "The Woman of the Snow" is a tale of supernatural vengeance in which a woodcutter falls in love with a Yuki-onna, or "snow woman" – a spirit who wanders the woods

– with unexpected results. “Hoichi the Earless” deals with a blind musician who discovers that he has been unwittingly singing for a family of ghosts, resulting in dire consequences. The last section (which the spectator is invited to complete in their own mind) is “In a Cup of Tea,” the philosophically deepest and most challenging of the tales, in which a writer is continually disturbed by the unexpected sight of a face in – as the title suggests – his cup of tea.

Winner of the Special Jury Prize at the 1965 Cannes Film Festival, and honored with an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film the same year, *Kwaidan* is one of the most sumptuously mounted horror films ever made, shot in moody, otherworldly colour that would be evoked again in Dario Argento’s *Suspria* (1977), in true TohoScope ratio 2.35:1 by the gifted cinematographer Yoshio Miyajima, with stunning art direction by Shigemasa Toda.

Working from Yôko Mizuki’s screenplay, director Kobayashi unfolds these tales in a leisurely, assured fashion. The final film practically envelops the viewer in the world of the unknown. The correct running time of the film is 183 minutes, but in some of its first screenings, *Kwaidan* was cut to 161 minutes, and even to 125 minutes, by cutting some of the stories down, or eliminating one of the segments entirely. Only the complete version really conveys the mystery and sense of dread so essential to the success of the film.

Those expecting a more brutal or violent horror film will be disappointed as *Kwaidan* is a film of nuance and restraint, despite the excesses of sound design and wildly stylized visuals. Kobayashi’s mise en scene is deliberate and proceeds with the assurance of dream-like logic, or the lack thereof; the world of *Kwaidan* is one in which the supernatural atmosphere is very real, often intertwined with scenes that conjure everyday life, a fact that several of the film’s protagonists ignore at their peril.

*Kwaidan* is a psychological horror film for those who are seeking an utterly immersive experience, in which the viewer is gradually seduced by the deeply saturated colour, the expressiveness of the seemingly vast hand built studio sets, and the sheer time factor. This is a film that takes the viewer out of the real world into another realm altogether. In its visual and thematic structure, *Kwaidan* is

ultimately an expressionist fairy tale for adults, in which all is artifice, and yet at the same time mesmerizingly real.

As Geoffrey O’Brien noted, Kobayashi “had trained as a painter before beginning his career as a



filmmaker,” and the meticulous attention to visual detail throughout the film, not only in the sets, but in the costumes, the lighting, and the colour effects, which are simultaneously subtle, and yet layered in textures

that seem to continue without end, reflects this early apprenticeship. As O’Brien writes,

The elaborateness of Kwaidan’s artifice is not concealed. On the contrary, right from the first liquid swirls of primary-colored ink that wash across the screen, we are invited to savor the sensory delights of every hue, every movement, every unfolding pattern. On repeated viewings, the spectator becomes aware of further layers of mirroring and repetition and counterpoint, of seasonal shifts and contrasting colors, of insistent images, whether of an opening gate or an abandoned pair of sandals, recurring in different contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Complementing these dazzling, almost hallucinatory visuals is Toru Takemitsu’s bold and modern soundtrack, which deftly avoids the clichés of conventional film music, especially in the case of a horror film, in which the score usually underscores the images with conventionally melodramatic music. Takemitsu’s score – one of the many he composed for most of the major directors working in Japan during the era – uses expressionist sounds, and bizarre instrumentation interspersed with sections of uneasy quiet and deliberately disarms the spectator, while simultaneously weaving a spell that draws the viewer further into Kobayashi’s colourful and highly stylized realm.

*Kwaidan* is a film unlike any other, not only in its visual structure, but also in its insistence on the viewer’s patience – which is rewarded – in each of the four stories by a suitably macabre conclusion. Nothing is straightforward in *Kwaidan*; it’s a world where anything is possible, where spirits interact with the living on an everyday basis, and those who trifle with the spirits of the departed pay dearly for their hubris.

Above all, *Kwaidan* is a stunning visual experience, best seen in a theater for full impact, as

Kobayashi's TohoScope images unfold on the screen as if in a dream – a dream in which the dead are alive, the living may be dead, and illusion and reality merge into a world which is at once alluring and yet menacing. *Kwaidan* is one of the treasures of supernatural cinema, existing in a world all its own, which beckons to us, even as we sit in the theater, transfixed by the images we see on the screen.



**Goffrey O'Brien: "Kwaidan: No Way Out" (Criterion Essays)**

For a film so widely and indelibly remembered, Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* has confounded a surprising number of critics over the years. Ever since its release in 1965, there have been those who have found it too long, too artificial, too self-consciously exotic, not socially minded enough for the director of *The Human Condition* (1959–61) and *Harakiri* (1962), not scary or gory enough to qualify as a horror film. To be sure, this four-part adaptation of four renowned ghost stories by Lafcadio Hearn—not quite comparable to any other film, regardless of genre or country of origin, and unique in Kobayashi's oeuvre—defies easy categorization. That is perhaps why it has remained for countless viewers such a singular experience, clinging to memory like an unshakable dream, a glimpse into some alternate zone where light falls differently on faces, time moves by a different measure, and terror blends disturbingly with beauty.

In its day, it was the most expensive Japanese film to date, shot almost entirely on hand-painted sets built in an airplane hangar, the only space big enough to accommodate them. The meticulousness of the production is evident in every frame: there is not a leaf or a piece of fabric or a dust trace on a worn floorboard that is not visibly the result of intensive consideration and labor. The whole film feels made by hand, a quality not ordinarily associated with a production epic both in length (restored for this release to its full 183-minute running time) and in the spatial dimensions of the TohoScope screen. The elaborateness of *Kwaidan*'s artifice is not concealed. On the contrary, right from the first liquid swirls of primary-colored ink that wash across the screen, we are invited to savor the sensory delights of every hue, every movement, every unfolding pattern. On repeated viewings, the spectator becomes aware of further layers of mirroring and repetition and counterpoint, of seasonal shifts and

contrasting colors, of insistent images, whether of an opening gate or an abandoned pair of sandals, recurring in different contexts.

Such openly acknowledged artificiality has deep roots in Japanese art, and most prominently in Japanese theatrical traditions. It was the eighteenth-century Bunraku playwright Monzaemon Chikamatsu, in discussing the aesthetics of the puppet theater, who described art as "something that lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal." *Kwaidan* was following closely on such notable cinematic experiments as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), with its grafting of Noh performance style to the period action film, Keisuke Kinoshita's *The Ballad of Narayama* (1958), with its painted landscapes, and Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge* (1963), with its jarringly garish color effects. Kobayashi had trained as a painter before beginning his career as a filmmaker, and in the progression from earlier, more naturalistic work like *Black River* (1957) through the monumental compositions of *The Human Condition* and the more extreme stylization of his first period film, *Harakiri*, he seems to have moved quite deliberately toward the almost hermetically controlled visual and aural world of *Kwaidan*.

The aural dimension was entrusted to the great composer Toru Takemitsu, whose hundred or so film scores include—aside from his other collaborations with Kobayashi—ones for major works by Kurosawa, Nagisa Oshima, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Masahiro Shinoda, Ichikawa, and Shohei Imamura. Takemitsu's contribution to *Kwaidan* can hardly be overestimated. He once stated that "timing is the most crucial element in film music: where to place the music, where to end it, how long or how short it should be," and from the opening moments of *Kwaidan*'s first episode—as the camera moves through and then soars above the dilapidated gate of a ruined dwelling, proceeding to glide through the house's uninhabited interiors in a series of voluptuous forward movements, as if it were calmly swallowing great gulps of empty space—our perception is already being shaped by the creaks and cracks and muffled slams and whooshes of wind on Takemitsu's soundtrack. *Kwaidan*'s atmosphere is fully established before a single character has appeared on-screen. His musique concrète, compounded of jangling plucks and tweets and a hundred other not-quite-identifiable sounds, is defined as much by its silences as by its never predictable accents. Of the making of the soundtrack, Takemitsu remarked: "I wanted to create an atmosphere of terror. But if the music is constantly saying, 'Watch out! Be scared!' then all the tension is lost. It's like sneaking up behind someone to scare them. First, you have to be silent. Even a single sound can be film music . . . We used real wood for effects. I'd ask for a *cra-a-a-cks* sound, and they'd split a plank of wood, or rip it apart, or rend it

with a knife. Using all these wood sounds, I assembled the track.” What we get is the sound of a constant, tormented undermining of the world Kobayashi’s characters think they inhabit.

That world is an exotic one. It could hardly be otherwise given the nature of the source material. The life and work of Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) are something of a case study in exoticism, with Hearn the quintessential man without a country: born to a Greek mother and an Irish father, set adrift at an early age among unsympathetic relatives, absorbing the aesthetic directives of French romanticism while enduring the dreary rigors of a Catholic boarding school in Normandy, shipped off to the United States, where he remade himself as a chronicler of black culture in the

American South and in the Caribbean—and finally reinventing himself once more in Japan, marrying a woman from a samurai family (while concealing the traces of an



earlier biracial marriage in America), converting to Buddhism, and establishing himself as a world-famous interpreter of Japanese culture and folklore, while remaining only modestly capable of reading Japanese.

By a circuitous process, his literary versions of Japanese folktales, some of which had not previously been written down, and to which he added his own European literary flourishes, became part of Japanese literature under his adopted name, Yakumo Koizumi. Hearn’s books—of which Kobayashi’s film draws on *Shadowings* (1900), *Kotto* (1902), and *Kwaidan* (1904)—were calculated to appeal to a Western appetite for the mysteries of “ghostly Japan”; but they were also, it might be supposed, to some degree exotic to a Japanese readership then in the midst of the modernizing Meiji period. That era too, in light of all the cataclysms that followed, had by 1965 acquired its own patina of nostalgic myth. Myth within myth, then, exoticism within exoticism: for *Kwaidan*, the whole of the past is itself something of a supernatural phenomenon, an unreality to which we yet remain inescapably tied, a ghost story from which no one can entirely awake.

The first three stories Kobayashi chose to include all involve broken vows, broken not through conscious malevolence but through what seem like unavoidable circumstances: in “The Black Hair,” a promise made to a wife; in “The Woman of the Snow,” to a spirit; and in the

film’s dazzling centerpiece, “Hoichi the Earless,” to a whole phantom army. The brief final episode, “In a Cup of Tea,” ends the film on a note of bizarre comedy. These are not tales that point to any obvious moral other than the danger of venturing, deliberately or by accident, beyond the invisible barriers that mark the limits of the human world. What lies beyond those barriers is the domain of supernatural terror, but it is also the domain of art. In *Kwaidan*, beauty is not decoration but a direct link to unknown and perilous realms.

Hearn’s four original stories run to a total of thirty-seven pages in their first, large-type printings. These skeletal anecdotes expand under Kobayashi’s treatment into dense and multileveled experiences, in which great

stretches of time are compressed. In “The Black Hair,” an impoverished samurai leaves his wife, remarries into a more socially elevated family, and moves to a distant province in the service of

a feudal lord. The years of his absence are marked by discontent in his new marriage and deepening regret for the woman he abandoned. In his imagination, he returns again and again to their former home, the camera repeating the same probing movement, as if nudging in frustration against temporal limits, pushing forward and then forced to pull back. When he does finally get back to where he started out, we are once again enmeshed in the movement with which the episode began, moving toward the light in the far room where the first wife sits at her loom. Here time slows down, every second of the longed-for reunion seeming stretched out, until the inevitable revelation that turns it all to horror and decay.

The straight-out horror ending of “The Black Hair” gives way in “The Woman of the Snow” to a fairy-tale atmosphere whose entirely fabricated loveliness, all painted moon and artificial snow, in no way impedes a deepening mood of menacing uncanniness. A young woodcutter’s encounter with a snow spirit culminates in her threatening him with doom should he ever speak of their meeting. Once again years go by, a whole rural lifetime of courtship and parenthood and contented domestic life passing before us, until he is put to the test. At *Kwaidan*’s Cannes premiere, this episode was omitted, depriving the film of a crucial emotional register: the suggestion of a forbidden love uniting the natural and supernatural worlds. The woodcutter’s failure to adhere to

his vow is a mark of his human weakness, and the departure of the loved being—radiant in blue light for a suspended moment before she vanishes forever—is as heartbreaking as it is chilling. The emotionally warmest chapter is suffused with images of snow.

These two seem but preludes to the film's most overpowering segment. In "Hoichi the Earless"—the famous story of a blind biwa-playing monk unwittingly summoned to perform for the dead—the collapsing of time takes on extravagant proportions. An opening shot shows us the waters where the decisive battle of Dan-no-ura was fought between the Heike and Genji clans in the late twelfth century, as recounted in the epic *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*). That shot, dissonant because it gives us an abrupt glimpse of a real world outside the film studio (as if we might have forgotten), fades in to a scroll painting of the battle, in which the Heike were destroyed along with the infant emperor and his mother. Smoke swirls in front of the painted images, which are now intercut with enacted scenes of the battle, filmed in such lurid light as to seem more animation than live action, especially since the actors move with the ritual slowness of Bunraku puppets in full military regalia. Here the classical recitation and biwa playing adds a new dimension to the soundtrack. The chanting of the traditional chronicle becomes the central pulse for the duration of the chapter.

An episode that begins on such a visually gaudy note only becomes stormier and more menacing as it goes on. The young musician Hoichi sits playing his biwa in the courtyard of the monastery when the voice of a dead warrior calls out to him. This summoning of the blind mortal by the invisible dead signals the point of entry into a forbidden place. The music is the link between them, and it sustains a sense of continuity even while the images crosscut wildly between worlds—the painted battle, the filmed battle, the unreal pavilion in which the ghosts sit listening to the recitation, the cemetery in which the action is actually taking place—as the mist swirls, the rain pours in torrents, the ghosts suffer their dying once again, and hellish flames burn on all sides. It is all quite exhilarating and at the same time insidiously disturbing. The terrors evoked are of the oldest kind; the fear is that the horrors and unassuageable sorrows of those ancient massacres might once more come fully to life. Here Kobayashi goes far beyond the quaint antiquarian tone of Hearn's story; the ordeal of the blind musician has laid bare an age-old cauldron of sorrows. The realm of the supernatural becomes an extension of those inescapable hierarchies and historic injustices that Kobayashi had charted in his earlier films, and to which he would return. (One of his last works, 1983's *Tokyo Trial*, was a lengthy documentary on the Tokyo war crimes trials.)

*Kwaidan* remains distinct among Kobayashi's films in its exploration of parallel realities. No one who has contemplated his nightmarish distillation of wartime experience in *The Human Condition* or the grueling rigor with which he exposed feudal codes in *Harakiri* and *Samurai Rebellion* (1967) would think of him as an artist inclined toward escapist fantasy. And indeed the three main stories of *Kwaidan* offer no escape. The gorgeousness of their painted skies and otherworldly color schemes, the transparent unreality of everything we see, all the bravura touches of stylization, only emphasize that one may travel to the farthest reaches of the imagination only to find at last a great and terrifying void. (*Kwaidan*'s fusion of transcendent beauty and icy cosmic emptiness—its creation of spaces both vast and hermetic—sometimes calls to mind *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *The Shining*. One can well imagine Stanley Kubrick paying close attention to what Kobayashi achieved here.)

The whimsically unsettling "In a Cup of Tea," *Kwaidan*'s deliberately unfinished coda, sets up a paradoxical game involving a disembodied yet apparently life-threatening reflection in the tea that a samurai is about to drink. Finally, the storyteller disappears into his own story, becoming himself another reflection, as if the only way to escape from this counterworld is by way of a tale that omits any final explanation by simply flinging itself down like an empty cup.

**Lafcadio Hearn: "The Reconciliation," (from *Shadowings*, 1900)**

There was a young samurai of Kyoto who had been reduced to poverty by the ruin of his lord, and found himself obliged to leave his home, and to take service with the Governor of a distant province.

Before quitting the capital, this samurai divorced his wife, a good and beautiful woman, under the belief that he could better obtain promotion by another alliance. He then married the daughter of a family of some distinction, and took her with him to the district whither he had been called. But it was in the time of the thoughtlessness of youth, and the sharp experience of want, that the samurai could not understand the worth of the affection so lightly cast away.

His second marriage did not prove a happy one; the character of his new wife was hard and selfish; and he soon found every cause to think with regret of Kyoto days.

Then he discovered that he still loved his first wife, loved her more than he could ever love the second; and he began to feel how unjust and how thankless he had been. Gradually his repentance deepened into a remorse that left him no peace of mind. Memories of the woman he had wronged (her gentle speech, her smiles, her dainty, pretty ways, her faultless patience) continually haunted him.

Sometimes in dreams he saw her at her loom, weaving as when she toiled night and day to help him during the years of their distress: more often he saw her kneeling alone in the desolate little room where he had left her, veiling her tears with her poor worn sleeve. Even in the hours of official duty, his thoughts would wander back to her: then he would ask himself how she was living, what she was doing...

Something in his heart assured him that she could not accept another husband, and that she never would refuse to pardon him. And he secretly resolved to seek her out as soon as he could return to Kyoto, then to beg her forgiveness, to take her back, to do everything that a man could do to make atonement.

But the years went by.

At last the Governor's official term expired, and the samurai was free. "Now I will go back to my dear one," he vowed to himself. "Ah, what a cruelty, what a folly to have divorced her!" He sent his second wife to her own people (she had given him no children); and hurrying to Kyoto, he went at once to seek his former companion, not allowing himself even the time to change his traveling-garb.

When he reached the street where she used to live, it was late in the night -- the night of the tenth day of the ninth month -- and the city was silent as a cemetery. But a bright moon made everything visible; house without difficulty. It had a deserted look: tall weeds were growing on the roof.

He knocked at the sliding-doors, and no one answered. Then, finding that the doors had not been fastened from within, he pushed them open, and entered. The front room was matless and empty: a chilly wind was blowing through crevices in the planking; and the moon shone through a ragged break in the wall of the alcove. Other rooms presented a like forlorn condition. The house, to all seeming, was unoccupied.

Nevertheless, the samurai determined to visit one other apartment at the farther end of the dwelling; a very small room that had been his wife's favorite resting-place. Approaching the sliding-screen that closed it, he was startled to perceive a glow within. He pushed the screen aside, and uttered a cry of joy; for he saw her there, sewing by the light of a paper-lamp!

Her eyes at the same instant met his own; and with a happy smile she greeted him, asking only: "When did you come back to Kyoto? How did you find your way here to me, through all those black rooms?"

The years had not changed her. Still she seemed as fair and young as in his fondest memory of her... But sweeter than any memory there came to him the music of her voice, with its trembling of pleased wonder. Then joyfully he took his place beside her, and told her all: how deeply he repented his selfishness, how wretched he had

been without her, how constantly he had regretted her, how long he had hoped and planned to make amends; caressing her the while, and asking her forgiveness over and over again.

She answered him, with loving gentleness, according to his heart's desire, entreating him to cease all self-reproach. It was wrong, she said, that he should have allowed himself to suffer on her account: she had always felt that she was not worthy to be his wife. She knew that he had separated from her, notwithstanding, only because of poverty; and while he lived with her, he had always been kind; and she had never ceased to pray for his happiness. But even if there had been a reason for speaking of amends, this honorable visit would be ample amends: what greater happiness than thus to see him nly for a moment?

"Only for a moment?" he replied, with a glad laugh... "say, rather, for the time of seven existences! My loved one, unless you forbid, I am coming back to live with you always, always, always! Nothing shall ever separate us again. Now I have means and friends: we need not fear poverty. To-morrow my goods will be brought here, and my servants will come to wait upon you, and we shall make this house beautiful... To-night," he added, apologetically, "I came thus late, without even changing my dress, only because of the longing I had to see you, and to tell you this."

She seemed greatly pleased by these words; and in her turn she told him about all that had happened in Kyoto since the time of his departure... excepting her own sorrows, of which she sweetly refused to speak.

They chatted far into the night... Then she conducted him to a warmer room, facing south, a room that had been their bridal chamber in former time. "Have you



*Lafcadio Hearn*



no one in the house to help you?" he asked, as she began to prepare the couch for him. "No," she answered, laughing cheerfully: "I could not afford a servant, so I have been living all alone." "You will have plenty of servants tomorrow," he said, "good servants, and everything else that you need!" They lay down to rest, not to sleep: they had too much to tell each other...; and they talked of the past and the present and the future, until the dawn was gray. Then, involuntarily, the samurai closed his eyes, and slept.

When he awoke, the daylight was streaming through the chinks of the sliding-shutters; and he found himself, to his utter amazement, lying upon the naked boards of a mouldering floor... Had he only dreamed a dream? No: she was there: she slept... He bent above her, and looked, and shrieked! for the sleeper had no face! Before him, wrapped in its grave-sheet only, lay the corpse of a woman, a corpse so wasted that little remained save the bones, and the long black tangled hair...

Slowly, as he stood shuddering and sickening in the sun, the icy horror yielded to despair so intolerable, a pain so atrocious, that he clutched at the mocking shadow of a doubt. Feigning ignorance of the neighborhood, he ventured to ask his way to the house in which his wife had lived. "There is no one in that house," said the person questioned. "It used to belong to the wife of a samurai who left the city several years ago. He divorced her in order to marry another woman before he went away; and she fretted a great deal, and so became sick. She had no relatives in Kyoto, and nobody to care for her, and she died in the autumn of the same year; on the tenth day of the ninth month..."



### **Andrea Grunert: "Kobayashi, Masaki" (*Senses of Cinema*, 2016)**

Masaki Kobayashi's career coincides with the so-called Golden Age of Japanese cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the fact that some of his films such as the war trilogy *Ningen no jōken* (*The Human Condition*, 1959-1961) and *Seppuku* (*Harakiri*, 1962) had won international critical acclaim,<sup>1</sup> the centenary of his birth in February 2016 passed almost unnoticed in the Western media.<sup>2</sup> Kobayashi

has been largely forgotten by the average Japanese filmgoer, and outside Japan interest in his work is much lower than it is for the films of his contemporaries, such as Akira Kurosawa.

Kobayashi's politically and ethically uncompromising and economically risk-taking attitude put him in conflict with the studios he worked with, Shōchiku and Toho: this might explain the fact that he made only 22 films. Moreover, his critical view of militarism in Japanese history and the entanglement of politics and the economy in Japanese society are topics that are not attractive to young Japanese people. However, they are still burning issues in Japan and in the modern world, more meaningful than ever before. *The Human Condition* is not only a landmark film putting a harsh light on Japanese imperialism during World War II, it is a remarkable and universal statement against war. *Harakiri*, *Kwaidan* (1964), *Jōi-uchi: Hairyō-tsuma shimatsu* (*Samurai Rebellion*, 1967) or *Inochi bō no furō* (*Inn of Evil*, 1971) – all bearing the director's unique signature – reveal the complex interplay between content and form, morality and aesthetics. They show in a most original way how traditional forms can be used as a tool for political criticism and ethical reflection.

Kobayashi was one of the finest depictees of Japanese society in the 1950s and 1960s, and explored the war and post-war situation by addressing controversial topics such as corruption, economic exploitation and the denial of war atrocities. *The Human Condition* was such a great international success in the 1960s that a remake was produced for television in 1963 directed by Takeshi Abe. It is not the film's harsh and uncompromising realism which makes it outstanding, but its approach to Japan's imperialist policy. As film critic Setogawa Sōta pointed out, it "was the first Japanese film that frankly depicted 'Japanese devils' in China in great detail."<sup>3</sup> Kobayashi dared to criticise openly Japanese militarism and to show the brutality of the Japanese occupation policy in China. His humanist message is close to Kurosawa's, but his political attitude and his interest in aspects that concern Japanese society are more clearly expressed than in the work of most of his contemporaries. Not unlike Kurosawa, he was a risk-taking filmmaker who was interested in challenging formal aspects and rejected compromise, an attitude which made his position more and more insecure in the 1970s when Japanese film industry experienced a period of drought. His last film – *Shokutaku no nai ie* (*Family Without a Dinner Table* aka *The Empty Table*) – was released in 1985, twelve years before his death. However, his anti-violence stance and his personal style with its combination of aesthetics, historical research and emotions are as vibrant as ever.

Born on the northern island of Hokkaido, Kobayashi spent his youth in his hometown Otaru near the

mountains. His penchant for views from a height was developed during these years, when he enjoyed skiing on his home island. Breathtaking views of the mountains filmed on Hokkaido appear in *The Human Condition*, and other films also contain impressive shots of mountain landscapes. Not unlike Kurosawa, Kobayashi uses meteorological conditions such as wind, snow, storms and heavy rain to add movement to his frames. His insistence on natural elements creates a broader context for his protagonists, connecting them even more clearly to a culture in which the contemplation of nature is central and in which there is an omnipresent awareness that the fragility of human existence depends so much on natural conditions.

Kobayashi returned to Hokkaido to shoot his war trilogy. He left the island to study ancient oriental arts and philosophy at the prestigious Waseda University in Tokyo in the 1930s. After graduation in 1941, he entered Shōchiku Studios but was drafted into the army shortly after and sent to Harbin, Manchuria. Being a pacifist, he refused promotion to higher ranks several times.

This is a significant manifestation of his independent spirit and non-conformism. Kobayashi spent the final months of the war interred in a POW camp in Okinawa, at that time under American control.

Upon his release from the camp in 1946, he became an assistant to Keisuke Kinoshita, one of the leading directors of the period – together with Yazuro Ozu, Mikio Naruse and Kenji Mizoguchi – and at that time under contract at Shōchiku. His first films are inspired by the studio's style, which was renowned for its *shomin-geki*: contemporary stories and domestic dramas. The sentimental style of these productions is resonant in Kobayashi's early films, Kinoshita clearly being a major influence.<sup>4</sup> Kobayashi's mentor Kinoshita was the scriptwriter of his first film, the 45-minute-long *Musuko no seishun* (*My Sons' Youth*, 1952), and of his first feature film *Magokoro* (*Sincere Hearts*, 1953). Both are social melodramas close to the style of the studio and deal with young people's desires and fears within a coming-of-age context.

In 1953, Kobayashi directed a far more personal film on a topic that was unusual for Shōchiku. *Kabe atsuki heya* (*The Thick-Walled Room*) is an early example of his lifelong preoccupation with the war and his deep interest in

politics and society. This landmark film is one of the first Japanese films to deal with the war heritage, raising questions of responsibility for atrocities committed by the Japanese. The screenplay, by the novelist Kobo Abe, is based on the secret notes written down by former members of the army who were sentenced for war crimes. The protagonists are low-ranking soldiers, categorized as B and C war criminals. The film targets not only the brutal punishment suffered by these men at the hands of the Americans, but also the fact that many of them were

framed by their superiors who escaped punishment. Without trying to whitewash his protagonists, Kobayashi suggests how badly they were treated by a system which denied all responsibility. The prison is not simply the stage on which the intimate drama of Japan's post-war society is played out: the *huis clos* of the prison is turned into a metaphorical space and a dramatic character in its own right. The bleakness of the expressionist black-and-white photography, unusual camera positions, cross-fades, the subtle blending of everyday situations and dream sequences revealing

the tormented spirits of the inmates are aspects that repeatedly shine through the realism at the film's core. *The Thick-Walled Room* was far too controversial in 1953 – just one year after the end of American occupation – so was not released until 1957. By that time, it had lost much of its political impact.

Since there was no chance that Kobayashi's second feature film would be released straightaway, he returned to the psychological drama more typical of Shōchiku. *Mitsu no ai* (*Three Loves*, 1954) and *Kono hiroi sora no dokoka ni* (*Somewhere Under the Broad Sky* aka *Somewhere beneath the VastHeavens*, 1954) are like many other Japanese films of the 1950s in that they deal with poverty and disillusionment: the disfigurement of one of the protagonists in *Somewhere Under the Broad Sky* is a visual reminder of the war and the permanent mark it left on post-war society. Another film, *Uruwashiki saigetsu* (*Beautiful Days* aka *Days of Splendour*, 1955) affirms small-town values and recalls Kinoshita's great success with his film of domestic life, *Nijū-shi no hitomi* (*24 Eyes*, 1954). In these films, the family is the microcosm in which the economic struggle of the (young) protagonists and their disregard for society are depicted....



*The Human Condition* is the first film Kobayashi made outside Shōchiku, and his critical depiction of the Japanese during the war was not appreciated by the conservative studio. As a producer, he took enormous risks with this monumental work: the shooting lasted 2½ years and the whole production took four years. The screenplay is based on a popular novel by Junpei Gomikawa deriving from personal experience but inspired in equal measure by Kobayashi's own war experience as a pacifist in the Imperial Army. Kaji, his protagonist, could be considered the director's alter ego as he is a pacifist serving in the Kwantung Army. Kobayashi raises



questions which are uncomfortable still today: what did World War II turn the Japanese into? Who was responsible for the atrocities committed in their name? As Patrick Galbraith puts it: "From controversial visits to Yasukuni Shrine to glaring omissions in high-school textbooks, conservative Japanese continue to fan the flames of their stained relationship with China by dismissing and denying many wartime atrocities, but the truth was laid bare 50 years ago in Kobayashi's films."<sup>6</sup> Kobayashi breaks with taboos by showing comfort women and depicting the inhumane treatment of Chinese civilians in Japanese labour camps. One of the most brutal moments is the discovery of the near-starving prisoners in the cattle wagons: hundreds of men, their faces and bodies marked by hunger and exhaustion, run away into the bare Manchurian landscape, desperately trying to find food and water. Another crucial moment is the arbitrary execution of six of the prisoners by the Japanese military police. This long sequence reveals the desire of the prisoners to resist and Kaji's own contradictory feelings, oscillating between fear and determination. He stops the execution after the third man has been beheaded but is drafted into the army because of this insubordination. In the third part, he is imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp, where he continues his struggle, this time against the corrupt system established by the other Japanese officers.

The trilogy is not only a confrontation with historical guilt but also the portrait of a society that continuously suppresses the individual. Focusing on resistance to authority, it is a major humanist document. "Human condition" is not entirely accurate as a translation of the Japanese title *Ningen no jōken*, which means the special condition under which a person is human. This particular meaning is revealed at the moment of the execution when Wang (Eijirō Tōno), one of the Chinese

slave labourers, tries to convince Kaji to put an end to the cruel punishment of innocent men. He wonders if Kaji, still hesitating, is either a murderer who pretends being a humanist or a human being who fully deserves this name. As in most of his films and especially in his two period films *Harakiri* and *Samurai Rebellion* Kobayashi is

preoccupied with the uneasy relationship between the individual and society, between personal desire and social obligations. Having a strong sense of justice and dignity, Kaji (Tatsuya Nakadai) is aware of his inner contradictions and limitations. He arrives

at the labour camp determined to show that better life conditions lead to better work, but he discovers how much he himself is part of an unjust system. His rebellion is paralleled by a never-ending struggle for integrity that shows where there are no heroes. In the end, he is forced to face evil, and he kills the sadistic Kiriwara (Nobuo Kaneko). Without becoming a figure for heroic identification, Kaji represents a symbol of hope in a world of opportunism and corruption. He prevents the Soviet tribunal and the Japanese officers from maltreating the lower-ranking prisoners.

Kobayashi defends bourgeois ideals in his representation of Kaji's love for Michiko (Michiyo Aratama): his protagonist's last words before dying in the cold are addressed to his wife. However, the individual is always seen in a broader social context that includes fundamental questions concerning an individual's place in society. The human figure framed through a telescope lens and thus turned into a miniature suggests the individual's place in the world. Kaji and Michiko, Kaji and the soldiers, or Shizuko in *Black River* appear in the emptiness of a wide landscape. In *The Human Condition*, Kaji has to face snow, wind, heat, dust, hunger and torture. At the end, his body is an unrecognizable shape under the snow....

Realism dominates *The Human Condition* and Kobayashi's films of the 1950s, realism enhanced and overcome by subtle camera movements and sophisticated lighting devices. *Harakiri*, *Kwaidan* and *Samurai Rebellion*, all set in the past, reveal Kobayashi's growing interest in Japanese art forms and concepts. He first discovered this dramatic potential while working on *Harakiri*. "I was keenly attracted to the stylized beauty of our traditional forms," he stated. "At the same time, since I felt I had come to the end of pursuing realism in film, this new mode of expression delighted

me.”<sup>8</sup> *Harakiri* is an intimate character study filmed in a 2.40:1 aspect ratio (*The Human Condition* had been filmed in 2.35:1), and an impressive representation of oppressive hierarchical structures....

In *Harakiri*, *Kwaidan* and *Samurai Rebellion*, there are long travelling shots in the barely furnished rooms revealing the harmony inherent in symmetrical compositions. Kobayashi's favourite angle – from above – transforms the courtyard of the Iyi residence into the stage of a Noh play, another traditional art form Kobayashi takes inspiration from. The focus on symmetry and asymmetry is reminiscent of the formal use of grouping in Noh drama.

The dialogue, written in the archaic style of public storytelling, is another device that Kobayashi uses to oppose realist conventions. The poetic imagery is heightened by sound and music: Torū Takemitsu's score includes songs from Japanese folklore and atonal Biwa sounds.<sup>i</sup>



Expressionist lighting contributes to a sense of fragmentation, creating gloomy corners which immediately question the apparent visual equilibrium. Motome's (Akira Ishihama) extremely painful death is presented in a series of fast cuts which are in stark contrast with the slow ceremonial pace of other shots. The oblique position of the camera destroys the concept of linearity presented in the architecture. It creates a disturbing moment in which the pain and the fear the young man experiences becomes even more palpable. The ideal of harmony is revealed as a means to mask the truth – underneath the apparent cleanliness, filth and violence are only too obvious. The frantic sounds of the Biwa accompanying Motome's agonising death create strong discordances which, together with the visual strategies, challenge the idea of beauty in death and emphasise the cruelty of the ritual of self-disembowelment....

Social concerns are less overtly present in his first colour film *Kwaidan*, inspired by four traditional ghost stories retold by the Irish-Greek-American journalist Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904). Kobayashi captures the beauty of old Japan while at the same time extending the limits set by non-realist film-making. According to Japanese artistic concepts, illusion is not hidden. The sumptuous settings, created entirely on a sound stage, allow a great degree of stylisation, including a tribute to surrealism. Painted backgrounds, the startling use of sound and music by Takemitsu and Kabuki together with Noh-

influenced staging also contribute to this outstanding exploration of form. In the second story “The Woman of the Snow” especially, the painted décor is reminiscent of a theatre setting. Takemitsu's innovative score contributes to a constant atmosphere of terror in which ordinary phenomena such as the cracking of wood are transformed into scary, alien sounds. *Kwaidan* states strong ethical positions but at the same time contains portrayals of society as well as references to recent history, mainly through atomic bomb imagery.<sup>10</sup> Kobayashi invested all his savings in the film, but despite much critical acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival, it was not a commercial success.<sup>11</sup>

*Samurai Rebellion* is another film in which Kobayashi makes use of *jidai-geki* elements as a tool for social criticism. The setting is a provincial court in 1727, a hundred years after *Harakiri*. It stars Toshirō Mifune, whose company produced the film

together with Toho. Most of the shooting took place in Mifune's brand new sound stage in Setagaya.<sup>12</sup>

As in *Harakiri*, there are some frantic battle scenes combining realism with stylish choreography. The duel between Isaburo (Mifune) and Tawaki (Nakadai) is a precisely measured but extremely intense exchange of blows. Aesthetics and space become signifiers in their own right. Kobayashi used the precepts of Japanese architecture to create a metaphorical space reflecting social norms weighing down on the characters and also the transgression of these social norms. The sobriety and symmetry of interiors symbolises oppressive sterility and dullness. The social constraints are a burden which has turned Isaburo into a prematurely aged man. However, the linearity of the architecture and tradition disappears when the protagonist – preparing his house for the battle – crosses bamboo rods at the openings, providing a counterbalance to the symmetrical concept. Isaburo has regained strength and confidence. The change undergone by the protagonist is subtly reflected by his mask and costume and by the actor's sense of presence and outstanding performance.

The conflict between *giri* (feudal authority) and *ninjo* (human feeling) has been part of the samurai film since the silent era.<sup>13</sup> Kobayashi makes use of this contrast in the development of his central character, Isaburo, from an obedient but lucid servant (the very meaning of the term “samurai”) to an independent fighter for justice. Donald Richie called the film “a relentless attack on the feudal traditions inherent in Japanese society”<sup>14</sup>, and topics such as social hierarchy and history are approached in a

complex manner within the framework of a domestic drama in which Isaburo is not the only one to rebel. The Japanese title could be roughly translated as “An Order of the Emperor (or a high-ranking person): The Sad End of the Bestowed Wife”. Lady Ichi (Yōko Tsukasa), the main female figure, refuses to accept the traditional woman’s role as object and becomes even more worthy of admiration than the men. Her resistance is a radical gesture against the rules imposed by the ruling elite and within a male-dominated world. The choice of title indicates that the film is not a conventional *chambara* and underlines Toho’s wish to target a wider audience. The importance given to the domestic was also a strategy to distance the film from the rival studio Shōchiku, which had produced the successful *Harakiri*....

Kobayashi’s worldview is ultimately pessimistic: the dissident, even if morally the victor, cannot change the world. Yet we can observe him and his fight for justice.

#### **BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS SPRING 2020, SERIES 40**

Mar 24 John Schlesinger *Midnight Cowboy* 1969

Mar 31 Alan Pakula *Klute* 1971

Apr 7 Robert Altman *McCabe and Mrs Miller* 1971

Apr 14 Martin Scorsese *King of Comedy* 1983

Apr 21 Wim Wenders *Land of Plenty* 2004

Apr 28 Wes Anderson *Isle of Dogs* 2018

May 5 Pedro Almodóvar *Pain and Glory* 2019

#### CONTACTS:

email Diane Christian: [engdc@buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@buffalo.edu)...email Bruce Jackson [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)...

for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>...

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There is a glimpse of hope in *Samurai Rebellion* when the wet nurse, having witnessed Isaburo’s last desperate fight, saves the little girl. This woman might spread the story of love and rebellion, and Ichi and Isaburo may perhaps not be forgotten. Kobayashi’s *chambara*-inspired films are not concerned with the question of honour and the idea of how to die a beautiful death but with the essential question of how to live as a human being.

If only for the key moment in which the filmmaker shows a man who leaves well-trodden paths and becomes a human being in his own right, it is worth coming back again and again to Kobayashi’s work. When Isaburo leaves the stone-paved path in the courtyard of his house, thereby endorsing his full support of his daughter-in-law, his *zori* leave footprints in the carefully-raked sand. At this moment, he transgresses the visible as well as the invisible boundaries which keep him prisoner of the rigid code that Kobayashi never tired of questioning.

