Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi  
Written by Saikaku Ihara (novel Koshuku Ichidai Onna)  
Cinematography by Yoshimi Hirano and Yoshimi Kono

Kinuyo Tanaka ... Oharu  
Tsukie Matsuura ... Tomo, Oharu's Mother  
Ichirô Sugai ... Shinzaemon, Oharu's Father  
Toshiro Mifune ... Katsunosuke  
Toshirô Mifune ... Katsunosuke  
Tsukie Matsuura ... Tomo, Oharu's Mother  
Kinuyo Tanaka ... Oharu


Kura ma tengu ibun: Zoku kakubei-jishi, and 1926 Kaijin ōkami: Zempen.


Kenji Mizoguchi (May 16, 1898-August 24, 1956), Japanese director, was born in the middle-class district of Hongo, in Tokyo, near the Yushima shrine. His father, Zentaro, was a roofing carpenter, and his mother, Masa, the daughter of an unsuccessful trader in Chinese herbal remedies. When Mizoguchi was seven, they had to move to a poorer downtown district of Asakusa because of the failure of a business venture in which his father tried to sell raincoats to the army during the war with Russia. In that same year his younger brother, Yoshiro, was born, while his sister, Suzu, then fourteen, was given up for adoption to help the family finances, and soon afterwards sold by her foster parents to a geisha house. She was eventually to find a wealthy patron who married her in 1925.

These early experiences were to have a powerful influence on Misoguchi’s films, like much else in his turbulent personal life. At the time of the move to Asakusa he suffered his first attack of the rheumatoid arthritis that was to recur throughout his life, and which left him with an odd gait and a tendency to raise his right shoulder when angry. In June 1907 he entered Ishama elementary school and there met Matsutaro Kawaguchi, who became a successful novelist and Misoguchi’s collaborator on many of his best-known films.

When Misoguchi was eleven, after a total of six years schooling, his father was forced by a lack of money to send him to live with relatives in the northern city of Morioka, where he was apprenticed to an uncle who worked as a hospital pharmacist. He returned home in 1912, but his father, whom he hated, refused to send him to school again. The resulting sense of inferiority about his lack of formal education stayed with him all his life.

In 1913 Mizoguchi’s sister found him a job with a designer of patterns for kimonos. Two years later, when their mother died, Suzu installed their father in an old people’s home, and took her two brothers to live with her. Watching an artist who lived across the street, Mizoguchi began to be interested in painting, and studied Western-style oil and watercolor painting at the Aiobashi Institute. At the same time he was absorbing the city life of Tokyo and going to Japanese variety theatre and Western-style shows in Asakusa. He read Zola, Maupassant and Tolstoy, but preferred Japanese novelists: Kafu Negai for his naturalism, Soseki Natsume for a philosophical view, Koyo Ozaki, for his panoramic and allegorical narratives, and Kyoko Izumi for the aestheticism of his sentimental Meiji melodramas.

Mizoguchi went to Kobe in 1918 to take up a job as a designer of advertisements for a newspaper there. He enjoyed the city’s progressive atmosphere and the company of new drinking companions, dabbled in theatrical ventures, and wrote poems which the newspaper printed; but homesickness drove him back to Tokyo. He moved in with a friend who worked at Nikkatsu’s Mukojima film studios and through him came to know Osamu Wakayama, one of the progressive directors. At this time Nikkatsu was modernizing its methods of production in response to competition from other studios. Mizoguchi was fascinated. He offered himself in 1922 as an actor, but found himself doing various jobs such as transcribing scripts. “I remember my first day in the studio perfectly,” he said years later. “I was a flunky, that’s all, but at the end of that day, I thought—this is good work for me.”

Mizoguchi worked for Eiio Tanaka, organizing sets for his Kyoya Collar Shop (1922) so effectively that Tanaka recommended him as a director. This was the year of the famous
walkout of directors and actors protesting at the studio’s new policy of casting actresses in women’s roles instead of female impersonators—the traditional oyama. Because of the strike, a directorial vacancy appeared almost at once. Mizoguchi’s first film, *Ai ni yomigaeru hi* (*The Resurrection of Love*) was released on February 3, 1923, heavily cut by the censors because of its resolutely naturalistic treatment of a “proletarian ideology.” Its realistic style was influenced by the innovative critic and director Norimasa Kaeriyama. Mizoguchi used a great many intertitles—his first attempt to dispense with the traditional benshi, the narrator who sat on a special platform and explained what was happening on the silent screen behind him.

Ten more films followed in the same year, the average shooting time being about a week for each. *Foggy Harbor*, based on O’Neill’s *Anna Christie*, had a formally framed story beginning one evening and ending the following dawn, and was as richly melancholy in atmosphere as the title suggests. It continued the innovative tendency toward making the benshi redundant, but this time by using the camera to tell the story so clearly that few titles were required. *Blood and Soul* showed the expressionist influence of *Caligari*, which had appeared in Japan in 1921. The variety of Mizoguchi’s early output is further demonstrated on the one hand by 813, based on an Arsène Lupin detective story by Maurice Leblanc, and on the other by *The Song of the Mountain Pass* by Lady Gregory, a founder of the Irish Literary Theatre. The great Tokyo earthquake on September 1, 1923 caused the evacuation of Suzu and their father to the studio for safety; Mizoguchi himself was filming the disaster for American newsreels and for use in the feature film *In the Ruins*, which opened to great success the following month.

Mizoguchi was now moved to Nikkatsu’s Kyoto studios, where he continued to make many films according to front office requirements. He found the atmosphere of the ancient city, with its traditions and its distinctive Kansai dialect, so much to his taste that he made it his permanent home. Beginning with *Turkeys in a Row* in 1924, most of Mizoguchi’s films until the advent of sound were scripted by Shuichi Hatamoto, over whom he exercised a domineering control of the kind his more famous collaborator Yoshikata Toda suffered in later years. Hatamoto was not even allowed to return home after work, but was enlisted as Mizoguchi’s unwilling drinking partner. Mizoguchi was living with Yuriko Ichijo, a call girl who moved into the flat he shared with his assistant director Koji Asaka. In the summer of 1925, she attacked Mizoguchi in a jealous rage, wounding him in the back with a razor. The scandal that followed led to Mizoguchi’s suspension from the studio, interrupting the filming of *Shining in the Red Sunset*; it was completed by his friend Saegusa.

J.D. Andrew has suggested that the films Mizoguchi made after his return to the studio in October 1925 begin to take on a different character, but that from this time began both his obsessive perfectionism and his preoccupation with the suffering and hostility of women; it is difficult to judge since almost none of these early films survive. The first of his pictures still extant, *Furusato no uta* (*The Song of Home*), is a studio assignment remote from Mizoguchi’s personal concerns, lauding traditional rural values over those of the wicked city, although it contains some montage experiments in the manner of Minoru Murata. The script by Ryunosuke Shimizu won a Ministry of Education award.

Then came the success of *A Paper Doll’s Whisper of Spring* (1926), praised for its sensitive portrayal of the emotional conflict created by male egotism. The film was ranked seventh in the first Kinema Jumpo list of the best ten movies of the year. After that Mizoguchi was able to persuade his old school friend Matsutaro Kawaguchi for the first time to write him a script. The result was *The Passion of a Woman Teacher*, and pleased both Nikkatsu and the public so well that it became the first of Mizoguchi’s films to be exported to Europe, where it had some success. French interest in that film led him to make one with foreign audiences specifically in mind—a portrait of the traditional Japan based on Kyoka Uzumi’s novel *Nihonbashi*.

This was the era of the “tendency film” (keiko eiga), a manifestation of the new socialist consciousness. The extent of Mizoguchi’s own commitment to this movement is much discussed. Kawaguchi saw his friend as an opportunist merely following the Marxist fashion of the time, but Ritchie and Anderson may be right in regarding the ambiguity of Mizoguchi’s position as a characteristic shared by many Japanese. At any rate the leftist tendency led Mizoguchi into a clash with Minoru Murata, a right-winger who was not only Mizoguchi’s chief rival as a director but had become Nikkatsu’s secretary in charge of production. Nevertheless Mizoguchi’s own position as head of the script department enabled him to make *Tokyo March* (1929), of which a fragment survives showing a use of newsreel techniques. It had success enough for the company to sanction *Metropolitan Symphony* (1929), coscripted by the Marxist Fusao Hayashi who had a great influence on Mizoguchi at this time. The film ran into trouble with the censors and brought a police reprimand for the director and jail for Hayashi, but it still placed tenth in the Kinema Jumpo list.

No less influential than politics in Mizoguchi’s life and perhaps his work in this period was his impulsive marriage to Chieki Saga, an Osaka dance-hall girl whom he met in 1926. Chieko’s efforts to regulate her husband’s life led to violent fights and brief separations, repeatedly resolved with his promises of reform.

Mizoguchi’s first sound film, *Furusato* (*Home Town*), made in 1930, was also one of the first in Japan, and like other pioneer talkies was marked by primitive recording techniques. The silent film that followed, *Mistress of a Foreigner*, is regarded as the first in which the director systematically employed the long take or “one scene—one shot” method that became so much a part of his mature style. He found justification for the technique in the psychological experiments of his friend...
Dr. Konan Naito. As the director himself explained, “During the course of filming a scene, if I feel that a kind of psychological sympathy has begun to develop, then I cannot without regret cut into this. Rather, I then try to intensify, to prolong the scene as long as possible.” Around this time Mizoguchi began to interest himself in the study of music, starting with Beethoven. He was also a member of a folk art group including the philosopher Kitaro Nishida, and wore clothes of a material woven and dyed by himself.

And Yet They Go (1931), a late “tendency” film, was followed in 1932 by The Man of the Moment, which was Nikkatsu’s first success in sound despite production difficulties as a result of a strike of benshi that year. It also marks the end of an uninterrupted series of films for the studio.

For some time he had been discontented with his salary and the company’s policies, especially since a new management had instituted an even more dictatorial regime. Mizoguchi signed a contract with Shinko Studios, and began work for them by spending two months on location in China shooting The Dawn of Manchuria and Mongolia (1932), a propaganda piece that failed embarrassingly and led to Mizoguchi’s refusal to undertake another project for six months.

Having been shown a version of Kyoka Izumi’s novel Giketsu, Kyoketsu, Mizoguchi set out in 1933 to adapt it for the screen. But the novelist, who had greatly disliked the director’s earlier adaptation of Nihonbashi, would not cooperate. The studio arranged a meeting at last, and the silent film Taki no Shiraito was made in the face of continuing disagreement. Izumi had objections to the cast Mizoguchi wanted, but the director got his way, while demanding freedom to at shoot his own pace. Beginning without a completed script, so that changes had to be made from day to day, Mizoguchi spent forty days shooting. The result of his obsessive care was a success with both critics and public, ranking second in the Kinema Jumpon list for 1933.

The film tells the story of the tragic love of the heroine Taki no Shiraito for a weak and passive young student, Kinya. Taki, a stage performer specializing in a kind of juggling display with water jets, is a prototype of the rebellious women who appear in many of Mizoguchi’s films, working for her financial independence, taking the initiative in the love affair. In the face of terrible difficulties, Taki contrives to support Kinya through his studies to become a lawyer, only to have him as her prosecutor when she is accused of murder. The story ends with the suicide of both lovers. Close-ups and the normal procedures of narrative editing are freely used, the film shows Mizoguchi’s increasing tendency to favor the long shot and the long take. It is remarkable also for its subtle but intense eroticism.

Gion Festival, made in the same year, had to be shot in haste to be in time for the festival of its title, a great annual celebration in Kyoto. An unexceptional studio assignment, it marked the beginning of Mizoguchi’s association with art director Hiroshi Mizutani, who had been impressed with Taki no Shiraito and was to remain with the director for the rest of his career. As obsessed as Mizoguchi himself with detailed research in the interests of authenticity and historical accuracy, Mizutani’s sets became an essential part of the one scene—one shot method, leading at least one Japanese critic to suggest that the setting is the central factor, even the “hero” in Mizoguchi’s films, though others have found the scrupulously detailed settings too museum-like. Mizoguchi himself, speaking to film students, stressed the importance of atmosphere, saying that atmosphere to a film is like light to painting. According to the critic Yasuzo Masumura, it determines the very nature of Mizoguchi’s realism, since his motive in devoting such attention to set detail was to provide an atmosphere that would draw the most authentic performances from his actors....
In 1937 the Daiichi Eiga Company went out of business, and Mizoguchi returned to Shinko Kinema in Tokyo, where he first made *Aien kyo (The Straits of Love and Hate)*, adapted from Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* in collaboration with Yoda and Kawaguchi...Mizoguchi said that he was influence by Von Sternberg in this film, especially in the use of sound, and critics have noticed in particular his debt to *The Docks of New York* (1928). In 1936 Mizoguchi had spent an afternoon with Von Sternberg in Kyoto, insisting that the protesting visitor watch a bad print of one of Von Sternberg’s own movies. It was during the making of this film that his associates begin to talk of Mizoguchi’s obsessive concern to perfect his actors’ performances. It is said that over three days he rehearsed one scene with Fumiko Yamajiji almost seven hundred times. Yoda records that with actors, as with the writer himself, the director gave only a general idea of what was required, leaving the performers “to live and create themselves.” Designer Mizutani recalled that if a long scene was failing to work, Mizoguchi would have the actors rehearse it on their own and tell him when they felt ready....

Despite the exhausting nature of Mizoguchi’s method, Kinuyo Tanaka found it justified by its effect. It worked because of the tension it created in everyone. In spite of what many thought, she believed he had a great respect for actors and what they could do in the space he gave them. His instructions were few and general. She heard him say a hundred times: “Be a mirror to the character, reflect it, be natural”; never much else....

During the filming of the second part of *Chushingura*—but without interrupting it, as McDonald notes, for even a day—Mizoguchi’s wife Chieko went finally insane and was committed to an institution for the rest of her life. Mizoguchi went to live with her war-widowed sister Fuji and her two children. He was made president of the Directors’ Society, and engaged in researching projects for state policy films. His other accommodations to wartime requirements included two more ventures into the unfamiliar and uncongenial territory of the samurai film, *Miymoto Muhashi* (1944) and *Meito Bijomaru* (1945), undistinguished work done without enthusiasm. *Danjuro sandai* (1944), a theatrical subject, he later dismissed: “A very bad historical film—let’s not talk about it.” *Hisshoka (Victory Song)* was another patriotic piece made in 1945 at the instigation of the Information Bureau.

After the Japanese surrender, Mizoguchi found himself elected president of the labor union organized at Shochiku in response to the policy of the occupation forces. After three months, unwilling even to consider the notion of halting film production by strikes, he resigned. His first hesitant attempt at conformity with the American forces’ demand for “democratic” subjects was *The Victory of Women* (1946), described by Keiko McDonald as “an outspoken celebration of women’s rights.”...

Mizoguchi was in a creative and emotional depression in these postwar years, shocked and confused by the Japanese surrender. Critics were inclined to regard him as a “grand old man” clinging to outdated styles. His politics were as confused as ever: again heading a left-wing union in 1948, in 1949 he was made president of the right-wing Directors’ Association, a post he held for the rest of his life. Audie Bock believes that “the accusation that he did not really grasp the new postwar humanism proves itself in the similarity of the prostitutes’ dismal fate in the 1948 *Women of the Night* and the 1931 *And Yet They Go.*” During the filming of *Women of the Night* Mizoguchi broke down in front of prostitutes in a Yoshiwara hospital, cursing the villainy of all men, including himself.

*Women of the Night* was a commercial success and ranked third in the *Kinema Jumpo* list, while Tanaka’s performance as Fusako again contributed to a Mainichi Concours award. It is a stark and pessimistic “view of prostitution seen as the epitome of the social and economic evils suffered by postwar Japan” (Keiko McDonald)....

According to Yoda, Mizoguchi was provoked into making his next film, *The Life of Oharu* (1952), by the irritation he felt at the success of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* at Venice the previous year. Whatever the truth of this, it was a consciously ambitious film, a high point in the director’s career, initiating a new phase. Collaborating from the start with Kinuyo Tanaka, recently returned from America, Mizoguchi began without normal studio finance, subcontracting the production through Shin Toho. Shooting was done in a “bombed-out park” near Kyoto where the noise of trains passing every fifteen minutes determined the schedule, but nothing could disturb the director’s legendary concentration. Since *Mis Oyu* he had taken to using a portable urinal to avoid having to leave the set. Nothing could begin till the crane arrived from Kyoto, and authentic props had been collected from museums. As usual, scenes were shot and reshot again and again. Strict controls on the budget were ignored, and production cost forty-six million yen. The obsessive perfectionism paid off. Although in Japan it was a commercial failure and only a modest critical success, *The Life of Oharu* was chosen for the 1952 Venice Film Festival and shared a Silver Lion for best direction with John Ford’s *The Quiet Man*. It was the beginning of Mizoguchi’s belated international recognition, only four years before his death.

Most of the story, set in the seventeenth century, is told in flashback as Oharu, now fifty, contemplates a statue in a Buddhist temple and recalls her past. In her beautiful youth daughter of a samurai at the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, she
had fallen in love with Katsunosuke (Toshiro Mifune) a man of low class. He was punished on discovery by beheading, while she and her parents were exiled. After attempting suicide, Oharu was taken as mistress by Lord Matsudaira in Edo, bearing him a son. Dismissal forced her to work as a courtesan, then a maid, before marriage brought her an interlude of happiness, cut short when her husband was murdered. She took refuge in a convent but because men forced sexual attentions on her was expelled, and sank to begging and prostitution. The flashback ends as she collapses from illness. Informed by her mother that her son has succeeded Lord Matsusairu, Oharu returns to Edo, only to be humiliated by her past. She resumes her vagrant life.

_The Life of Oharu_ was adopted by Yoda from a famous picaresque novel by the seventeenth-century writer Saikaku Iharu. Jonathan Rosenbaum finds in this film a combination of the detailed historical realism of Saikaku’s original novel and something of the social criticism of Mizoguchi’s films about modern geishas. However, the persistence of Oharu’s spirit in the face of her endless misfortunes seemed to Jun Izawa to make the film more romantic than realistic.

The new philosophical breadth often remarked in Mizoguchi’s later works is strong here. “For Mizoguchi the rights of women are merely a logical extension of the rights of man,” wrote Andrew Sarris and, of the ending, “Just one more misfortune after another. Yet Oharu endures. She sees her son one last time, and then wanders into eternity as a street singer, a pagoda-shaped hat forming her last silhouette. In the last frames of the film Oharu pauses, turns to look at a distant pagoda, her spatial and spiritual correlate, and passes off the screen while the pagoda remains.” Rosenbaum calls it “a coda that tells us nothing and, by doing so expresses everything.” But where he finds a “relentless polemical thrust,” Sarris sees Mizoguchi’s “sublime directional purpose” as “a manner of looking at the world rather than a means of changing it.”

The rigorously controlled style is both a vehicle for the theme and a means of eliciting such varied responses. Tadao Sato considers Mizoguchhi’s style, which has been used for “outward picturesque beauty” in the films of the previous two years, to have here a more expressive purpose. He refers, as do many critics, to the early scene of the banishment of Oharu and her parents. The camera at first remains static, seeming to watch the family crossing the bridge in “cold abandonment,” but when they have reached the far side, the camera advances to glimpse them from beneath the girders of the bridge, the movement expressing solicitude for the victims. The power of the scene’s final image, according to Richard Tucker, “comes from the parallel between the crushing of the three people by social regulations and the visual crushing of the small figures by the enormous black masses on the screen.” Sato connects such effects, and in particular the constant shifting of the camera between points of momentary fixity, with the methods of traditional Japanese arts and theatre, and with Buddhist thought itself, which “apprehends society and man in their ever-changing aspects.” Burch suggests that the spectacular use of the long take in _The Life of Oharu_ may also have been stimulated by Mizoguchi’s desire to outdo the William Wyler of such films as _The Little Foxes_ or _The Best Years of Our Lives._

The moving camera is naturally much occupied with Oharu herself — Kinuyo Tanaka in one of her most poignant roles. Typically the reserved distance of the shot (and the frequent choice of a back view) throw emphasis on the posture of her whole body to express her condition and relation to the world. It is an example of Mizoguchi’s obsession, noted by Dudley Andrew, “with the gait of women, with their swoons, with their averted or penetrating gaze.” Ichiro Saito’s “prodigious musical score” also contributes powerfully to the film’s effect and helped gain the composed a Mainichi Concours award.

Beginning with the success of _The Life of Oharu_, Mizoguchi began to be adopted as a hero by the critics and young filmmakers of the French New Wave. Jacques Rivette, writing in _Cahiers de Cinéma_ in 1958, pointed out how Mizoguchi’s films communicated across barriers of culture in a familiar tongue, “the only language to which a filmmaker should lay claim: the language of _mise-en-scène_.” In particular the young French enthusiasts admired Mizoguchi’s long take and what Audie Bock calls “the centrifugal force applied to the edges of the frame.” In their critical polemics Kurosawa and Mizoguchi (then the two best-known Japanese directors) were seen as opposites, with the latter much preferred.

Following the foreign success of _Oharu_, Masiachi Nagata, an old friend, offered the director a rare carte-blanche contract for _Ugetsu monogatari_ (1953)—and even so Mizoguchi found himself influenced by the company to provide _Ugetsu_ a less bitter conclusion than he had wanted. The script was adapted by Yoda and Kawaguchi from two stories in an eighteenth century collection of the same title by Akinari Ueda, with borrowings also from Maupassant’s short story “Décoré!” During the civil wars of the sixteenth century the potter Genjuro leaves home eager to sell his wares and becomes lost in a dream world of dangerous beauty, seduced by the ghost of a long-dead princess. When the dream breaks he returns to his village, to a vision of his wife whom we have seen murdered by starving soldiers, and to humble toil to raise their young son. In a parallel narrative, Genjuro’s brother Tobei, eager to be a great soldier, cheats his way to brief eminence as a general. When he is confronted by his wife in a brothel, where she works after being raped by soldiers, he returns contritely with her to the village to join his brother.

In one of many letters to Yoda, Mizoguchi explained what he wanted to emphasize as the main theme of the film: “Whether war originates in a ruler’s personal motives or in some public concern, how violence, disguised as war, oppresses and torments the populace, both physically and spiritually!” And this theme is expressed not through documentary realism, but through a grippingly realized vision of the past in which natural and supernatural, grim reality and distracting dream, deceptively coexist. Such critics as Dudley Andrew and Max Tessier have noted the relevance of the subject, and in particular, Genjuro’s story, to a director’s own case as creator of artistic illusions in a violent world.

Mizoguchi told his cameraman Miyagawa that he wanted the film “to unroll seamlessly like a scroll-painting,” and the transitions of mood and atmosphere, for example from the bustling market to the mansion of the ghost princess, are achieved largely by rhythmically fluid camera movement. In one
of the most famous scenes, at the climax of the haunted love affair, Genjuro and the ghost Wakasa make love by a spring while the camera shifts uneasily away, following the stream, until a swift dissolve brings us smoothly to a long shot of the lovers in fluttering kimonos, playing on the shore of Lake Biwa in the glittering sunshine. Miyagawa remembered the creation of these shots as the only occasion Mizoguchi ever praised him for his work. Lake Biwa is also the setting for another celebrated scene when, in the enveloping mist, the boat carrying the two families encounters another containing not a ghost but a boatman dying of wounds. Donald Ritchie draws attention to the formal beauty and conservative moral message of *Ugetsu* as exemplified and framed by the opening and closing shots. “*Ugetsu* opens with a long panorama around a lake, a shot which begins on the far shore and then tilts down to reveal the village at the conclusion. It closes with the child and the father offering a bowl of rice at the mother’s grave. . . with the camera moving off into an upward tilting panorama which describes the movement of the opening.” These “separate but similar” shots are “like brackets to the film” suggesting “a sameness, a spiral-like quality of experience,” echoing “the stories of the two women, separate yet inverted: the wife moves from life to death, the ghost from death to life.”

“One of the most perfect movies in the history of Japanese cinema.”

But the immediate reception of the film in the West was more significant. Mizoguchi made his first trip abroad, accompanying the film to the Venice Festival, along with Yoda and Tanaka. Tanaka found him keeping to his hotel room praying before an image of the Buddhist saint Nichiren, whose sect he had joined under the influence of Nagata. Mizoguchi also had an uncommunicative meeting with the once-admired Wyler, whose *Roman Holiday* was a rival to *Ugetsu* for the Silver Lion. Mizoguchi’s prayers were answered, and his film also won the Italian Critics’ Award.

In 1954 Mizoguchi and Kinuyo Tanaka quarreled over Tanaka’s project to direct a film with the support of Ozu and Naruse. But it was still a prolific year for Mizoguchi, with three films, two of them considered among his finest. *Sansho Dayu* (*Sansho the Bailiff*) is described by John Gillett as “not only a great classic of world cinema, but one of Mizoguchi’s most probing and rigorously worked period pieces.” Tessier calls it one of the director’s most moving works, “fully meriting the adjective ‘sublime’ often abused in reference to Mizoguchi.”

In eleventh-century Japan, a provincial governor teaches his children that “a man without pity is no longer human,” but his concern for human rights causes him to be exiled. Traveling to join him, his wife Tamaki (Kinuyo Tanaka) is sold into prostitution on Sado Island, while his son Zushio and daughter Anju are enslaved on an estate under the brutal bailiff Sansho. After ten years, Zushio has compromised his humane principles to the extent of becoming an overseer, shocking his sister by branding an aged runaway. When they hear news that their mother is still alive, Anju persuades Zushio to escape, giving her own life to cover his tracks. Seeking justice from the prime minister, Zushio is appointed governor of the province, the post once held by his now dead father. He frees all the slaves and banishes Sansho, then goes in search of his mother, whom he finds living blind and maimed on the shore of Sado Island. He convinces her of his identity and they embrace.

Although the script is based on a version by the novelist Ogai Mori, the story is very well-known in Japan. By presenting this familiar tale “in an unfamiliar, challenging framework,” explains Tony Rayns, Mizoguchi produces “an almost visionary account of the wheels of history turning.” Images of ancient stone relics, which open the film and recur to mark each ten-year interval, are used to “evoke the period in which the story is set from a present-day perspective,” both “actualising” the narrative and asserting “the film’s meditative stance,” inviting the audience’s reflection. On the other hand, the political and moral choices facing all the characters, by being centered on the inner conflict of Zushio himself, “become highly engaging issues cutting across the schematization of the melodrama.” This “coexistence of direct engagement and reflective distance” means that the images are used both literally and figuratively. Rayns cites for instance the opening scenes of the journeying family, “developed through chiaroscuro images whose fragility intimates the precariousness of the family unit.” The mode of narration is calculatedly equivocal, with flashbacks and “languorous dissolves” to express shifts of time and the divisions between individual members of the family. Mizoguchi refuses to make of all this one single statement; “his subject is as much the lines of male/female force within a family as it is the historical struggle between totalitarianism and liberal humanism.” The various themes and images are united in a final shot where the camera cranes up from the pitiful reunion of mother and son. Panning away to the seaweed gatherer at work on the wave-washed beach, taking the film out of the world of the individual and historical into the contemplative detachment of Mizoguchi’s Buddhism.

Like its immediate predecessor, *Sansho the Bailiff* had a better reception abroad than in Japan, in 1954 sharing the Silver Lion at Venice with Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai...* Mizoguchi’s last film was a return to black-and-white [he had done two in color], and to a familiar theme. *Akasen chitai* (*Street of Shame*, 1956) depicts the red-light district of modern Tokyo through the stories of five prostitutes of various backgrounds and character who work at the “Dreamland” brothel. The director’s original plan was for a semidocumentary shot on location, but the brothel owners refused to cooperate. The action takes place, as Anderson and Ritchie explain, against the background of one of the “heated and widely publicized” debates on prostitution in the Diet, and was released while the actual debates were continuing.
The film proved to be one of Mizoguchi’s biggest successes at the box office; despite the cool objectivity of its approach, condemned at the time by some Japanese critics, it may have helped to bring about the reforms of 1957. It was also “the very first outstanding film on Japanese contemporary life to command a large American audience.” Philippe Demonsablon compared Mizoguchi to a composer working with rhythm and tonality, and wrote that “like Ophuls and Preminger, Mizoguchi’s entire art, with all its artifice, is aimed at allowing actors to reveal the fugitive truths of their being.”

Tadao Sato, considering the extent to which the recognition of Mizoguchi’s genius had been left to Western (and in the first instance to French) critics, wrote that in Japan, “while Mizoguchi was greatly applauded as a realist, as an inquirer into human nature, and as an aesthetic artist, a great deal of criticism asserted that his strong attachment to old manners was a form of escape, and that the length of his shots and the slackness of his tempo reflected conservatism in cinematic methodology.” However, Sato pointed out, Japanese critics could no longer call Mizoguchi old-fashioned when the French nouvelle vague took him as a model.

The treatment of women, Mizoguchi’s favorite theme, is a key to his work. Dudley Andrew believes he saw women “as representative of culture, of the artistic impulse. Of the downtrodden, of history, and of revolt,” and that increasingly for him social problems were seen “as emanations of a cosmic fiction” to which the only possible response was a stoic awareness. Women critics have been sharper in their comments, Amy Taubin for instance noting an element of sadism. Audie Bock finds “an ambivalent attitude towards women” connected with Mizoguchi’s “enigmatic political stance toward oppression, poverty, and even the Japanese family.” She stresses the extent to which this ambivalence derives from his turbulent personal life, quoting Matsuo Kishi’s view that the director was “unusual in the extent to which he suffered at the hands of women. He hated women; he was contemptuous of women. On the other hand, when he fell in love, it was with the sincerity of a little boy.” Sato considered Mizoguchi’s work “the purification of a national resentment” about the tragic role of women, while Anderson and Ritchie identify a recurrent motif in the film as Mizoguchi’s favorite myth: “A man’s soul is saved by a woman’s love.”

As influences, Mizoguchi himself acknowledged L’Herbier, Von Sternberg, Wyler, and Ford, while others have proposed Murnau, Ophuls, and Cukor. When Mizoguchi died, Kurosawa, a director often seen as his exact opposite, said, “Now that Mizoguchi has gone, there are very few directors left who can see the past clearly and realistically.” Acknowledged as one of the greatest of all movie directors, Mizoguchi himself said, at the height of his international success, “Today and as always I am interested in showing how a particular people live. Since I do not want my spectator to be driven to despair by the spectacle, however, I also want to make a sense of the new for him, so that he will not despair. And yet I cannot altogether disregard the old. I love the past and I have but little hope for the future.”


It’s never been contested that Kenji Mizoguchi (1898-1956) is among the greatest masters that the medium has ever known; but if this is so, he belongs nonetheless—along with directors like Bresson, Murnau, Dreyer and Ophuls—to the obscurer shadows of the inner sanctum. People know more about him than they know his actual work. Indeed, he is almost certainly less well known than his fellow countrymen Kurosawa and Ozu, about whom well-researched studies and biographies have long existed in print. By contrast, there has not been an English-language study of Mizoguchi’s cinema taken as a whole since the monograph written by Keiko McDonald twenty years ago.

Despite this relative obscurity, there is a feeling in the air that Mizoguchi is alive and relevant. But there is also the matter of Mizoguchi’s style; a specific way of setting up his scenes that speaks forcibly and directly over the gap of years to the modern viewer: the serious modern viewer that is, who takes world cinema, and not just Hollywood, as the object of his interest and curiosity. So I think it is worth making the claim right at the beginning of this book that Mizoguchi is perhaps the greatest master ever of the method of shooting known as extended sequence or long-take composition—the very method, coincidentally, that is the signature of many of the most interesting contemporary film directors; in different ways of course (everyone’s signature is at least slightly different), as well as for different reasons, and towards different ends: but united in opposition to that other mode of contemporary film-making which relies for its effects on multiple alternation of camera angles, rapid-fire editing and unremitting pace of delivery. …

It goes without saying that the cinema which emerges in its different ways from this preference for long takes makes heavy demands on the viewer: minimalism, in any form, can be uncomfortable. There are times when such a mode of directing seem to simply slip into arid formalism. When it does not work it can be boring and aggravating. One can feel sympathetic to the oft-voiced verdict: ‘Watching X is like watching paint dry.’ Yet, conversely, when such methods really do work, there is simply nothing to compare to them.

Sometimes it’s almost as if patience with the long take—a sense of its sombre existence (even if the director isn’t
actually using it the whole time)—is the precondition for cinema saying anything powerful at all….Reliance on the long take has to be balanced against the dangers of formalism. Yet whether the long take is deployed consistently throughout a film, or whether it is used sparingly but intelligently, it seems able to bring something to the possibility of cinema of which other forms of mise en scène are incapable.

...As women are the centre of Mizoguchi’s art, so they were at the centre of his existence. The ‘bare facts’, or some of them can be stated quite easily. In his twenties—as a young filmmaker based in the Kansai region—he frequented the tea houses, dance halls and brothels of the great cities of Osaka and Kyoto. In a famous incident early in 1925 Mizoguchi was wounded in a knife attack by a jealous girlfriend. Hospitalised, and removed from work for three months, he returned to his old haunts on his recovery, and the following year married an Osakan bar hostess name Chieko Saga. There are different verdicts about the success of this marriage. Kaneto Shindo...takes a cynical view of it. He implies that she was stingy with money and that the pair quarrelled frequently. But other directors who were closer to the director than Shindo ever was testify on the contrary that the union was a happy one—at least during the early days and during the 1930s. Tragedy struck at the outbreak of the Pacific war. In 1941, at the time of the release of the first part of The Loyal 47 Ronin, Chieko went mad, compelling Mizoguchi to place her in care (his great fear was that he had given her syphilis, though tests proved that neither she nor he was infected by the disease). To complete the matrimonial side of the story: a little after her death in 1951, Mizoguchi married her widowed sister, Fuji, adopting the two young girls from the latter’s previous marriage, whom he brought up by all accounts with affection. (Yoda gives a somewhat darker account of family life: ‘I never once saw him smile at a child.’)

...Mizoguchi was probably the most cultivated (in the sense of educated and knowledgeable) of all the classical Japanese film directors. An autodidact whose knowledge came equally from life as from study, his intellectual curiosity was phenomenal. Film, painting, literature and music were always, in his eyes part of single continuum….With Mizoguchi, this emphasis on ‘preparedness’, on the sacred seriousness of art, was taken to a much higher level than it was with all but the most austere of his contemporaries. He demanded complete dedication from all the people he was involved with: cinema, as an art form, deserved nothing less if it was to take its place where Mizoguchi believed it belonged, in the exalted company of music, painting and poetry.…

In several films made between the mid-1930s and his death in 1956, Mizoguchi turned his gaze relentlessly, and with the power of a great social critic, onto the society he saw around him in Japan. These seven films (which include some of his most admired works) are set for the most part in the contiguous milieu of prostitution and geishadom.

The Tradition—and Its Representation
No doubt prostitution existed, and continues to exist, in most societies, if not all. In Japan, however, it has had an especially complicated history dating back a thousand years to Heian times and beyond. Into that history is woven (paradoxically) some of the greatest achievements in Japanese culture. The various strand of this story though fascinating in themselves, are not my concern here. One strand, however, that is worth highlighting—because it is central to Mizoguchi’s nuanced relationship with the whole phenomenon—is the way that the original culture of courtesanship and high-class prostitution was superceded, during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the subtly different culture of geishadom.

Courtesanships, as an institution whose primary purpose (beyond all the frills) was the regulated exchange of sexual favors for money, continued alongside this new culture. Yet at a certain moment during this period, the licensed quarters lost their hegemony to a newer and freer institution that was based—theoretically at least—not as much on sex as on entertainment.

Now it is true that sex, bought and sold, is part of a geisha’s world too, hypocritically concealed in some places, in other places more or less acknowledged. Nonetheless, whether sexually inflected or not, the fact remains that the geisha’s main social function was an artistic one: it was to sing and dance and play samisen at the banquets thrown by wealthy clients at tea houses. Acquiring these skills meant a long and arduous learning process, comparable in many ways, strange though this may sound, to the education of a modern ballet dancer. So it is not entirely misleading to talk about a geisha’s life in terms of a ‘vocation’. The critic may rightly ask whether that vocation was freely chosen. Maybe not in many or even most cases: children were frequently sold into the profession by their parents. Moreover, the terms of indenture whereby the geisha was expected to pay back to the geisha house, out of her earnings, the large sums of money spent on her artistic education and on her wardrobe, were often harsh, especially if (as was often the case) the mistress of the house was cruel or rapacious. Still, as Lesley Downer and Liza Dalby among others have argued, the institution was not wholly negative—even for the women involved. In a society such as Japan’s where, until recently, women were otherwise kept in the background, the geisha house—peopled and managed exclusively by women (often strong, intelligent, sophisticated women)—paradoxically offered a kind of utopian space, a segregated atmosphere of calm and of busyness, where the feminine world could blossom on its own terms.

This is certainly the feeling elicited by a number of films which explore this phenomenon, linking it (where it needs to be linked) with more traditional forms of prostitution. While geishadom was the ‘subject of subjects’ for Mizoguchi, it was
also (and is) no less compelling a topic for his contemporaries, and continues to haunt modern directors….

Do such films romanticise the milieu they evoke? Art, by definition, aestheticises, subjecting even the grimmest subject matter to the transforming rigour of shape and colour and lie. Films and paintings (and books too for that matter) answer to their own truth before they answer to history or sociological fact. Yet of course the work of art is a representation of something: there is always a human and psychological subject matter which can either be handled with depth and delicacy, or else carelessly, dishonestly, sentimentally. In this particular subject matter the cliché that looms is a romanticised version of ‘the whore with the heart of gold’, a complaisant way of looking at a given milieu—that—we may feel—should have required from the artist a harsher and more honest moral judgment… Yet the converse danger in these matters is a sort of sanctimonious political correctness which stridently demands, in front of a work of art, that it must nail its ideological colours to the mast. Can the painter Toulouse-Lautrec or the New Orleans photographer Bellcq be asked to ‘come out’ with a judgment (one way or the other) concerning the whorehouses they haunted and chronicled? Their art would be a lesser thing if they did so.

Even so, there is no getting away from the fact that fierce moral indignation was part—perhaps even the defining part—of Mizoguchi’s attitude towards this fascinating, complex and deeply embedded element of Japanese culture. The director broached the topic in seven surviving films, three of which date from before the war. The pre-war films are Osaka Elegy and Sisters of the Gion (both released in 1936) along with The Straits of Love and Hate (1937). (This last film is very rarely screened but copies of it exist, and who knows, one day it may become more widely known.) From the post-war period are Women of the Night (1948), Gion Festival Music (1953), The Women of Rumour (1954) and finally Mizoguchi’s swan song Street of Shame (1956)….  

Post-war  

The war came and went, with its attendant horrors. Out of its ruin came despair but also a new humanism. Early in 1948, in the company of Yoda, Mizoguchi visited the prostitutes’ ward of the Osaka Municipal Hospital as research for a film he was planning about street conditions in the wake of the collapse. Two versions of this very famous visit. In Yoda’s memoirs, the teasing voices of the prostitutes are foregrounded. “When we entered the sick-room (according to Yoda) the girls clustered round and started shouting ‘Hey, look at this little fellow—they say he’s a film director! D’you think it’s possible?’ ‘He’s blushing, what a timid guy!’ ‘Come over here, sweetie! What brings you here? You want to sleep with us?’” “We were all highly embarrassed,” Yoda concludes primly. Kaneto Shindo’s documentary about Mizoguchi—already much cited—came out ten years after Yoda’s memoirs, and Shindo, unlike Yoda, focuses on Mizoguchi’s response. According to the Shochiku producer, Hisao Itoya, who was present that fateful day, Mizoguchi was overcome with emotion and could scarcely bring his words out. ‘If you are here’, he told the assembled prostitutes, ‘it’s the fault of men.’ Then lowering his eyes, and close to tears: ‘It is my fault too!’

The Brothel or ‘Maison Close’—in Life and Art  

Fusako and Kumiko and the other women portrayed in Women of the Night engage in prostitution in the most primitive conditions possible. To say that they ply their trade ‘on the street’ is almost a euphemism: in post-war Osaka, a major industrial city, the very streets have been blown away, and the women congregate in open lots and bombed-out ruins close to the main roads leading to the city’s slowly reopening factories. It’s from the industrial proletariat servicing these factories that they draw the bulk of their clientele, accosting them on their way to and from work. Charges, perforce, are minimal, given what the factory hands themselves are earning; and thus for the women to earn a living at all, large numbers of clients must be serviced on each working day.

The ‘house’ or bordello, operating in some long-established licensed quarter, must by contrast have seemed to Fusako and women like her a haven of civilisation. There, at last, one has a roof over one’s head and guaranteed rice in the bowl. The dangers of a freelance existence on the street (including unprovoked attacks by strangers) are avoided or at least minimised. In addition there is free health inspection and medical care. Nonetheless, in the immediate post-war era, it was exactly this domiciled, quasi-official protected status of the licensed quarter that constituted prostitution’s affront to society. The brothel, it was thought, could perhaps, as a known quantity, be tackled and eradicated. Legislation began to be introduced in European countries—France most famously—to outlaw the maison close and the red-light district. Japan, where the institution was as deeply engrafted as anywhere in the world, in due course followed suit.

This is the social context surrounding the events portrayed in the last film Mizoguchi ever made, Street of Shame, released in 1956, the year in which he succumbed to leukemia at the age of fifty-eight. At the end of the movie, the brothel owner Taya congratulates himself that the threatened legislation to close the house in the Yoshiwara (Tokyo’s red-light district) seems to have been defeated; but, in fact, it was in that very year, 1956, that the measures in question were finally passed. The succès d’estime that surrounded Mizoguchi’s film following its release in early summer had a sociological byproduct: the movie was at least partially instrumental in, so it is said, in pushing these anti-brothel measures through parliament. Whether and to what extent, this makes the film a mere ‘propaganda movie’ will be discussed later. First, though, and for the sake of clarity, it is interesting to lay out the lines of the critique Mizoguchi is offering.
‘Dreamland’, the invented locale of the action, is an average modern brothel in the Yoshiwara. Times are hard (perhaps they are always hard!). ‘Courtesans used to be rich’, opines one of the girls, but -whether she is right or not—that is very far from the case now. All the girls are in debt to the brothel’s shrewd, business-minded madam, Mrs Taya (the excellent Sadaki Sawamura), and one sees immediately that it’s in the madam’s interest (and of all madams like her) that they should be in debt. It gives her a hold over her employees that is, in essence, identical to the slave owner’s hold over his or her chattels. As long as the girls are in debt they must work for her; and in all cases save one, the debt is so deep, and so well devised, that there is little chance of them buying their freedom. Yasui (Ayako Wakao), the single employee to escape this regime, does so by engaging in methods that are essentially similar to the madam’s—i.e. by loaning out her savings to her colleagues, while charging them extortionate interest rates (rates she is ruthless in enforcing). She ‘collects’, too, on an even grander scale, from her male clients (one in particular who is eager to marry her), by promising favours she has no intention of granting.

In a sense, Yasumi is the only ‘professional’ among the employees/ For this is the second most striking thing about Dreamland and places like it: any residual glamour that once attached to the profession of courtesanship (if only the glamour of a set-apart caste) has long since vanished or been amortised. The place and inhabitants are dingy. The girls are not so much professionals as amateurs, involved in the game because there is no other way to keep body and soul together. Homely looking Yumeko (Aikop Mimasa), from the depths of the country, has an adult factory worker son who is desperately ashamed of her. Frumpish, bespectacled Hanae (Michiyo Kogure), cursed with a permanent cold, has an invalid husband and child to support. Frumpish, bespectacled Hanae (Michiyo Kogure), cursed with a permanent cold, has an invalid husband and child to support: prostitution, for her, was the last resort after she and her man balked at a planned double suicide. Only the reckless, insolent and forcibly sexy ex-teenager Mickey (Machiko Kyô) shows any aptitude for the game, and she, in a way, is the most amateur of all: a middle-class girl on the run from her authoritarian father, choosing a way of life which can be certain of mocking his values and exposing his paternalistic hypocrisy.

As a realistic or semi-realistic critique of the sadness and tawdriness of brothels, the film has few equals and is among the most famous of Mizoguchi’s works. Donald Richie calls it ‘the best of all films examining the problems of women in post-war Japan’. Jean Douchet (French Mizoguchi expert, onetime contributor to Cahiers du Cinéma) goes much further. ‘For me, along with Chaplin’s M. Verdoux and Renoir’s The Rules of the Game, [it is] the greatest film in the history of cinema.’ ...Street of Shame is fuelled by a fierce and pitiless indignation, and like all Mizoguchi films, is impressive for its dedicated moral seriousness. But it lacks the redemptive tenderness of Mizoguchi’s finest works, and strikes me as being uncharacteristically cold.

...Let us recapitulate for a moment: for the customer, as for the ‘service-provider’, the brothel is a house of illusions. The institution, it goes without saying, is rooted in profound ambiguity. Sometimes, as in Street of Shame’s Dreamland, the illusions are palpably kitsch. The large plastic scallop in the hallway on which Mickey, on her arrival, strikes up a pose as the Venus de Milo, gestures toward a world of beauty, art and refinement that can only be mocked by the establishment’s prosaic reality. The gap between aspiration and gross actuality is poignant as well as obvious, and it is tempting to conclude that this is the moral economy of all brothels. So it is, in a way, and yet one can still be tender towards illusions: they are part of human life and human need.

Gilberto Perez: The Life of Oharu: Not Reconciled

A work of mature mastery, sorrowful and self-possessed, The Life of Oharu (1952) introduced an international audience to the art of Kenji Mizoguchi. It is an art both attached to tradition and radically original.

The son of a roofing carpenter, Mizoguchi was born in Tokyo in 1898, during the Meiji period, when Japan gave up its isolationism and opened itself to modernization from the West—including, of course, the movies, a line of work Mizoguchi took up as a young man. Of the many films he directed in the 1920s and early 1930s, little survives. His two films from 1936, Osaka Elegy and Sisters of the Gion, bitter portrayals of wronged women in contemporary Japan, were a breakthrough. By then he had developed his own unmistakable style, avoiding close-ups and reverse angles and favoring a distant, mobile camera and prolonged, choreographed takes. This style can be seen at its purest in The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum (1939) and the two-part The 47 Ronin (1941–42).

A few years after the war, as if to confirm the opinion of critics who were calling him old-fashioned, Mizoguchi turned to classic Japanese literature for a series of films that, beginning with The Life of Oharu and continuing with Ugetsu (1953) and Sansho the Bailiff (1954), would win him a top prize at Venice three years in a row and make his reputation in the West, which was then belatedly discovering the cinema of Japan. Some Japanese critics at the time objected to the liberties he took in adapting national classics. But that an artist can take liberties and still remain true to a tradition only attests to its vitality. As a national storyteller, Mizoguchi has few peers among filmmakers anywhere.

These celebrated 1950s films don’t adhere so strictly to the long-take technique Mizoguchi perfected in the late 1930s and early 1940s, are more amenable to cuts and closer views; but his distinctive style nevertheless abides. And it is consummately...
at play in *The Life of Oharu*, which opens with a camera movement that steadily follows from behind a woman walking in the dark outskirts of old Kyoto. She is our protagonist, Oharu (Kinuyo Tanaka), and we follow her at the start as we are to follow her through the course of her life. She notices something offscreen and turns her veiled face away, and Mizoguchi’s camera, with characteristic tact, slows down and lets her recede, in felt deference to her diffidence. A woman and a man come into view, evidently a prostitute taking a customer to an inn; he tries to break away, but she seizes him and ushers him to the inn door. This prompts a cut closer to Oharu, herself a prostitute walking the streets—a striking cut, by about ninety degrees, to a lower angle on her other side. Mizoguchi compared his long takes, with the camera moving and pausing and moving again—poised to move even when pausing—to the traditional picture scrolls of Japanese art. If the easel paintings of the West are windows opening onto another world, picture scrolls are more like texts to be read. And if scrolls usually picture things from above, befitting the position of a reader at a table rather than a viewer at a window, in a similar way (as Noël Burch has noted) Mizoguchi often photographs things from a high angle. But no less often, he comes down to the ground, and movements of descent and ascent are characteristic gestures of his camera. And not only camera movements: cuts like that first one in *The Life of Oharu* will shift perspective from the lofty to the earthly, from the involved to the detached.

*The Life of Oharu* was adapted by the director and his regular scriptwriter, Yoshikata Yoda, from Saikaku’s *The Life of an Amorous Woman*, a novel from the seventeenth century related in the first person by an unnamed woman confessing to her numerous carnal sins, and thereby implicating a whole society. Though not the narrator, the film’s Oharu is seen from the start to be the prime mover of the story, the principal motivator of the camera’s movement. And though no saint either, she is a nobler and graver figure than the novel’s narrator, and one who more palpably suffers oppression and injustice at the hands of society. The novel is comedy, erotic and satirical and at times harsh; the film is melo-drama, leavened with an incisive humor that yet does little to mitigate a mounting sadness.

Having introduced Oharu as an aging streetwalker, the film goes into an extended flashback when, at a temple housing many statues of Buddha’s disciples, she sees in one of these figures a resemblance to the love of her youth. A forbidden love: she was a lady at court and the man (Toshiro Mifune) was a lowly page. In Mizoguchi, as in Kurosawa—though not in Ozu or Naruse—the actors act with their whole bodies, in a gestural manner that owes much to the Japanese theatrical tradition. Look at Tanaka and Mifune when the young Oharu backs away from the impetuous page and the two enter a garden: all in one uninterrupted take, he approaches her on his knees and embraces her around hers, she further retreats, and the camera follows at a distance and pauses as, in an exquisite swooning gesture, she amorously succumbs and faints in his arms. As she drops to the ground, the camera tilts down with her, and two stone ornaments rise side by side into view at the bottom of the frame. And as he carries her away, the camera stays in the garden for an extra moment after they leave, and, in a gesture of its own, tilts down a bit more, so that the two stone ornaments rise a bit higher into the frame, suggesting something like two erect phalluses, his and hers, for she has been as decisive as he in consummating their love.

Their breach of the feudal hierarchy entails severe punishment: Oharu and her family are banished from court, and the page is beheaded. At his execution, he dictates a last letter to her, in which he bids her to marry for love. The camera follows the executioner’s gleaming sword as it touches the page’s neck, is raised to strike the fatal blow, and, the bloody deed done out of view, is then swung back. When her dead lover’s letter reaches Oharu, she reads it in held long shot, at the bottom right of the screen, by a pair of hanging kimonos that obstruct our view; we hear her crying but can’t see her face, and can barely make out the knife she now intends to use on herself—though the glint of the blade recalls the executioner’s sword. And in the next shot, which moves with her out into a bamboo grove, the thin stems surrounding her like so many prison bars, and shows her mother wresting the suicidal knife from her and holding her back when she threatens to throw herself down a well, the camera gets no closer and takes a higher perspective—a veritable scroll shot. Why keep us at such a distance at this point of heated emotion? You could say that Mizoguchi aims to cool down the emotion, to maintain composure in the face of misfortune. You could also say that he doesn’t want to confine the emotion to individuals, that he wants us to feel the misfortune as spreading through-out the space the characters inhabit. The violence acutely represented by the execu-tioner’s blade is in the very air and manifests itself again in the knife that emerges from behind the handsome kimonos disembling an oppressive social order. We are not to focus solely on the plight of individuals but to sense the pervasive strictures of a society.

Like Saikaku’s novel, *The Life of Oharu* tells a picaresque story in which the protagonist wanders through various stations on the road of life. But the picaresque protagonist usually has ups and downs, and Oharu has only downs, one after another, an accumulation of sorrows adding up to melodrama. In *Sisters of the Gion*, one of the two geisha sisters is a good girl, generous and compliant, the other a bad girl, rebellious and manipulative, and things turn out badly for both of them—no way can a geisha get a break in life. For Oharu, who is both generous and rebellious, things turn out badly whatever social role she assumes: court lady, concubine to a lord and mother of his heir, courtesan, wife, nun, common
prostitute—no way can a woman get a break under feudal, mercantile, patriarchal rule. Women in Mizoguchi are consistently central and consistently por-trayed with a sympathy that has no need for idealization. Some have questioned his feminism, which he may not have lived up to personally; some have speculated that he harbored feelings of guilt with regard to women and sought their forgiveness. How-ever that may be, in his art he was a critic of society, whose wrongs were for him most evident in the wrongs done to women.

The flashback to Oharu’s past eventually returns to the opening camera movement behind the aging streetwalker and the abrupt cut closer to her on her other side. Only after these two repeated shots does the film dissolve back to the temple where Oharu has been recalling her past: the same shots that began the author’s prologue now conclude the flashback enacting the character’s memories. The images of Oharu’s past are thus to be seen as both the character’s and the author’s. Mizoguchi at once detaches us from Oharu’s subjectivity—these are not her mental images but an objective reality—and identifies his enactment with her recollection.

The author’s epilogue—Saikaku’s novel has nothing of the sort—seems to promise a happy ending to the character’s sad story. The son Oharu bore when she was chosen for her beauty as a lord’s concubine has succeeded his father and, as the new lord, wants to take his old mother into his care. Once again, as she was in her youth—this is a film of repetitions—Oharu is ceremoniously carried in a palanquin to the lord’s manor. But there she’s peremptorily told that she has disgraced the clan by suffering is inevitable does not mean resignation which a chorus on the soundtrack takes up as she moves along. The camera moving with her comes to a pause as she pauses and bows to a pagoda in the distance, but when she starts moving again, it does not keep pace with her, letting her leave view and at the same time ascending, so that the final image centers on the screen the pagoda pointing toward the sky. In his later years—he died of leukemia in 1956, at the age of fifty-eight—Mizoguchi was drawn to Buddhism. But the Buddhist recognition that suffering is inevitable does not mean resignation to injustice. In every circumstance she finds herself in, Oharu stands for an alternative to the dominant order. To the world she is soon to leave, she is surely not reconciled.

The author’s prologue now concludes the flashback enacting the story. The son Oharu bore when she was chosen for her beauty as

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opening camera movement behind the aging streetwalker and the abrupt cut closer to her on her other side. Only after these two repeated shots does the film dissolve back to the temple where Oharu has been recalling her past: the same shots that began the author’s prologue now conclude the flashback enacting the character’s memories. The images of Oharu’s past are thus to be seen as both the character’s and the author’s. Mizoguchi at once detaches us from Oharu’s subjectivity—these are not her mental images but an objective reality—and identifies his enactment with her recollection.

The author’s epilogue—Saikaku’s novel has nothing of the sort—seems to promise a happy ending to the character’s sad story. The son Oharu bore when she was chosen for her beauty as a lord’s concubine has succeeded his father and, as the new lord, wants to take his old mother into his care. Once again, as she was in her youth—this is a film of repetitions—Oharu is ceremoniously carried in a palanquin to the lord’s manor. But there she’s peremptorily told that she has disgraced the clan by becoming a prostitute and will not be allowed to live with her son, or even to see him—except briefly, from afar, as she saw him once before in the street when he was a boy and was passing by with his entourage. The scene of her last look at her son unfolds in a sunlit garden, as he and his attendants stride along a veranda. On her upward glance at him, we cut, not to her point of view, as we might expect, but to a distant perspective on her from the veranda, where no one returns her glance, the lordly group entering and leaving view in the shadowy foreground, the camera moving with her as she rises to her feet in pursuit. After another cut, she reenters view, again a small bright figure seen from the veranda, and again the large dark figures come and go in front and the camera moves with her as she keeps trying to get a closer look. Mizoguchi’s skill at cutting is seldom noted; here each cut punctuates Oharu’s feeling of being put back in her place, at an insuperable distance from the looming, ruling shadows.

Her story ends as it began: the hierarchy that cruelly thwarted the passionate love of her youth now thwarts the old mother’s love for her son. She escapes his prohibitive domain and becomes a mendicant nun. The film’s concluding shot follows her as she goes from one house to another reciting a prayer for mercy, which a chorus on the soundtrack takes up as she moves along. The camera moving with her comes to a pause as she pauses and bows to a pagoda in the distance, but when she starts moving again, it does not keep pace with her, letting her leave view and at the same time ascending, so that the final image centers on the screen the pagoda pointing toward the sky. In his later years—he died of leukemia in 1956, at the age of fifty-eight—Mizoguchi was drawn to Buddhism. But the Buddhist recognition that suffering is inevitable does not mean resignation to injustice. In every circumstance she finds herself in, Oharu stands for an alternative to the dominant order. To the world she is soon to leave, she is surely not reconciled.

The online PDF files of these handouts have color images

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS SERIES 28:**

February 18 Satyajit Ray, *Charulata/The Lonely Wife*, 1964, 119 minutes
February 25 Metin Erksan, *Dry Summer*, 1964, 90 min
March 4 Monte Hellman, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, 1971, 103 min

Spring break March 17-22
March 25 Agnes Varda, *Vagabond*, 1985, 105 min
April 1 Gabriell Axel, *Babette’s Feast*, 1987, 104 min
April 8 Louis Malle, *Vanya on 42nd Street*, 1994, 119 min
April 22 Tommy Lee Jones, *The Three Burial of Melquised Estrada*, 2005, 120 min
April 29 José Padilha, *Elite Squad*, 2007, 115 min
May 6 John Huston, *The Dead*, 1987 83 min

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