

Kinuyo Tanaka ... Tamaki
 Yoshiaki Hanayagi ... Zushiô
 Kyôko Kagawa ... Anju
 Eitarô Shindô ... Sanshô dayû
 Akitake Kôno ... Taro
 Masao Shimizu ... Masauji Taira
 Ken Mitsuda ... Prime Minister Fujiwara
 Kazukimi Okuni ... Norimura
 Yôko Kosono ... Kohagi
 Noriko Tachibana ... Namiji
 Ichirô Sugai ... Minister of Justice
 Teruko Omi ... Nakagimi
 Masahiko Kato ... Young Zushio
 Keiko Enami ... Young Anju
 Bontarô Akemi ... Kichiji
 Chieko Naniwa ... Ubatake
 Kikue Môri ... Priestess
 Ryosuke Kagawa ... Ritsushi Kumotake
 Kanji Koshiba ... Kaikudo Naito
 Shinobu Araki ... Sadaya
 Reiko Kongo ... Shiono
 Shozo Nanbu ... Masasue Taira
 Ryonosuke Azuma ... Landlord
 Saburo Date ... Kimpei
 Sumao Ishihara ... Yakko
 Ichirô Amano ... Guard
 Yukio Horikita ... Jiro
 Film Editing by Mitsuzô Miyata

Kenji Mizoguchi (16 May 1898, Tokyo—24 August 1956, Kyoto) directed 90 films, the last of which was *Akasen chitai/ Street of Shame* (1956), the first *Ai ni yomigaeru hi/The Resurrection of Love* (1923). Some of the others were *Shin heike monogatari/Legend of the Taira Clan* (1955), *Chikamatsu monogatari/The Tale of the Crucified Lovers* (1954), *Ugetsu monogatari/Ugetsu* (1953), *Saikaku ichidai onna/The Life of Oharu* (1952), *Genroku Chûshingura/The 47 Ronin* (1941), *Zangiku monogatari/The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums* (1939), and *Gion no shimai/ Sister of the Gion* (1936)

from World Film Directors, V.I. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., NY, 1987. Entry by David Williams

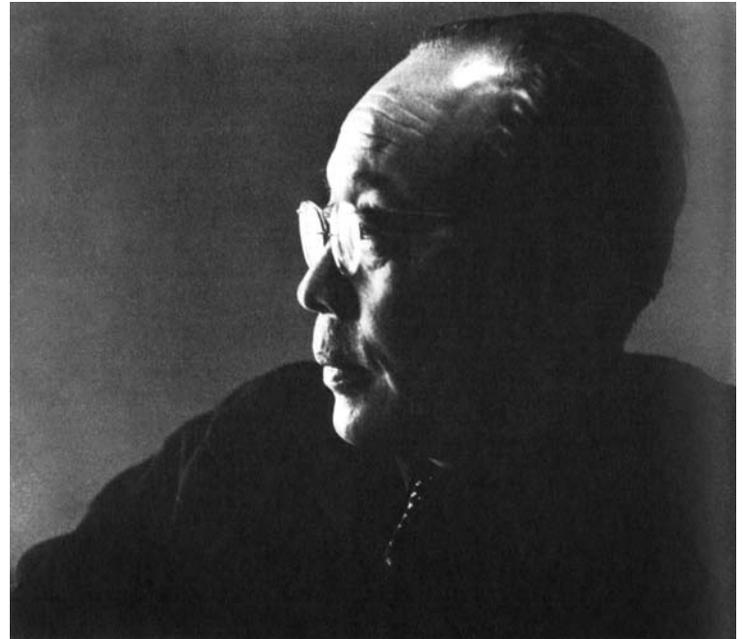
Kenji Mizoguchi (May 16, 1898-August 24, 1956), Japanese director, was born in the middle-class district of Hongo, in Tokyo, near the Yushima shrine. His father, Zentaro, was a roofing carpenter, and his mother, Masa, the daughter of an unsuccessful

September 25, 2007 (XV:5)

Kenji Misoguchi

Sansho the Baliff/Sanshô Dayû

1954 120 minutes



Hachiro Okuni ... Saburo Miyazaki
 Jun Fujikawa ... Kanamaru
 Akiyoshi Kikuno ... Guard
 Soji Shibata ... Sado Man
 Akira Shimizu ... Slave Trader
 Goro Nakanishi ... Guard

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi
 Based on the story "Sanshô dayû" by Ôgai Moru
 Screenplay by Fuji Yahiro and Yoshikata Yoda
 Produced by Masaichi Nagata
 Cinematography by Kazuo Miyagawa

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, Yoshio, 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 Mizoguchi'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 Isihama elementary school and there met Matsutaro Kawaguchi, who became a successful novelist and Mizoguchi's collaborator on many of his best-known films.

When Mizoguchi 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 let two brothers 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 Kyoka 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 Eiao 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

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 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 Jumbo* 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 Jumbo* list.

No less influential than politics in Mizoguchi's life and perhaps his work in this period was his impulsive marriage to Chieko Saga, an Osaka dance-hall girl whom he met in 1926. Chieko's attempts 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 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 Jumbo* 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....



Often considered “the forerunner of realism in the Japanese cinema,” *Osaka Elegy* (1936) also shows a concern for the formal beauty of its images that is equally characteristic of its director. An immediate critical success, this was Mizoguchi's first

association with the long-suffering Yoshikata Yoda, which lasted until the director's death. He was the ideal collaborator for so demanding a master, submissively revising the script, in this case more than ten times, before it was grudgingly accepted. Yoda was never told precisely what was wrong (Mizoguchi habitually placed all his associates in the same state of uncertainty), but was repeatedly instructed to create characters so real that the audience would smell their human odor. "Describe for me the implacable, the egoistic, the sensual, the cruel. . .there are none but disgusting people in this world." Yoda himself described the pent-up emotions that charged Mizoguchi's formally meticulous film: "He does not have the courage to face persons, things, and ideas that assail him. The anger and resentment which he cannot deal with makes him cry hysterically. This is the source of that intensity revealed in *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*." Admired as it was by the critics, *Osaka Elegy* was a financial failure. The director was summoned before the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the film was only just passed by the censors, so that its distributors, Shochiku and Nikkatsu, were nervous of publicizing it....

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 influenced 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 Yamajij 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, *Miyamoto Mushi* (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 Junpo* 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

form 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. ...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 correlative, 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.”...Birch 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*....



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 Ôgai 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. *Akassen 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.”



Sanshō Dayū Dudley Andrew & Carole Cavanaugh. bfi Publishing, London, 2000

Mizoguchi’s version of the Sanshō story outstrips ideology by dwelling on the inhumanity of political corruption. His film inverts its source to dwell on individual suffering, rather than on political remedies such as the Imperial rectification of rule that Ôgai proposed. This is not to say that Mizoguchi does not rewrite history for the political purposes of the present, for his *Sanshō* clearly uses post-war liberalism to correct neo-Confucian ideology. But what sets him apart from Ôgai is that he brings no sense of conviction that his corrective provides a workable alternative to the system his film abolishes. It is the political uncertainty of *Sanshō Dayū* that makes the film unexpectedly modern melodrama and painfully relevant to 50s Japan.

Sanshō Dayū as a Melodrama of Post-War Uncertainty
Not unlike his treatment of Saikaku’s *Kôshoku ichidai onna* in *The Life of Oharu* (1952), Mizoguchi manages to uphold his source in *Sanshō Dayū* and to critique it at the same time. There is no doubt of the reverence the film holds for the legend it retells; nonetheless the Confucian hierarchies of aristocratic rule do not restore the cinematic Zushiô as they do his literary forebear; they defeat him and undermine his idealism. Patrimony does not realign the family to its rightful place of prestige; it expels what remains of them to the desperate shore of history. Sanshō’s former slaves do not work harder and prosper under his rehabilitated stewardship; they riot and burn his compound. No temple is erected to Anju’s memory; she is commemorated only in the ephemerality of ripples on a pool of water.

Mizoguchi does not simply rework his source, he replenishes the traditionalist 1915 story with emotionalism, if not

the heightened sentimentality, of melodrama, the genre of modernity. He makes no room for epiphanous dreams, magical talismans, disguises, repeated numbers, parallel experiences, helpful strangers or a happy ending. Peter Brooks discusses melodrama in contrast to tragedy as the style’s more dignified forebear, but is it not the fairy-tale and its patriarchal views of the family and domesticity that melodrama plays upon and finally rejects? At the heart of every melodrama is an imaginable but unattainable happy ending. Melodrama’s negation of the fairy-tale arises from its modern refusal to subscribe to the traditional genre’s optimism and sense of resolution. In doing away with the sacred myths of a reconstructed past, Mizoguchi invokes in their place a mode of emotional realism that Peter Brooks argues arises in response to the desecralisation of the modern world.

Beyond melodrama but arising from its broken promise of happiness, Mizoguchi’s most stunning revision of Ôgai is his invention of the father’s liberal idealism—the cause of his exile—summarised in his explanation to his son that all human beings are equal in their right to happiness, as assertion difficult to imagine for a Heian aristocrat. The claim for happiness as a native rather than an imported ideal was on the minds of other film-makers as well in the post-war years. Chishû Ryû, the wise father in Ozu’s *Late Spring* (1949), insists to his daughter that the purpose of marriage is to gain individual happiness, an idea inconceivable in Japan before the American Occupation. Masauji’s lesson is religious and political. He teaches not only that others deserve happiness but that a ruler must have compassion for others whatever the cost to himself, an ideal that is the director’s most radical departure from the traditional Sanshō legend and from the 1915 version. The insertion of ideals inconsonant with medieval ideology generates the modernist tension in the film missing from Ôgai’s story.

Significantly, the noble father’s idealistic mantra is not merely memorised and repeated; it unlocks the transformative episode in which Zushiô transfers his knowledge to Tarô, the good son of the wicked bailiff. In a brilliant stroke of dramatisation, Mizoguchi makes strategic use of a face-to-face meeting between sons of characters who represent moral polarities—one epitomises evil, the other benevolence. Zushiô instructs Tarô according to his own father’s ethics: ‘It is compassion that makes us human. Even if you yourself suffer, you must have compassion for others.’ Tarô’s subsequent flight from the slave-compound to a monastery exquisitely symbolises the desire for an impossible transcendence that Brooks identifies as a condition for melodrama. But in the sons’ encounter, Mizoguchi positions himself squarely among the ‘melodramatists [who] refuse to allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence; and [who] locate that transcendence in the struggle of the children of light with the children of darkness, in the platy of the ethical mind’. Each son will defy or fail his father; and each operates in a world made more immanent by failure and defiance, while their fathers occupy a realm of mythic tragedy....

Where the longevity and deployment of the ‘Sanshō’ tale inside Japan are unmistakable, so too has been that tale’s increasing internationalisation via Mizoguchi retrospectives around the globe. In 1994 Criterion issued a variorum laser disc of *Sanshō Dayū*, making use of the scholarly research on the legend commissioned by the American filmmaker Terence Malick. Few were aware of Malick’s short-lived adaptation of the film for the New York stage in 1994 until a still from the Mizoguchi movie appeared in the

Sunday *New York Times* feature on *The Thin Red Line*. Now it is rumored that Malick may remake *Sanshō Dayū*.

This dynamic afterlife substantiates the two related themes that run through Mizoguchi's version: the theme of ritual narration which makes possible the theme of survival. As for the film's survival, the critics at *Cahiers de Cinéma* had much to do with that. They ranked *Sanshō Dayū* as the top film of 1960, the year of its Paris release, ahead of *L'avventura*, *A Bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) and *Tirez le pianiste* (*Shoot the Piano Player*) in that order. They applauded the purity of its construction, the mature wisdom of its narration. And yet they sensed something fresh about Mizoguchi's story-telling, a 'tableau primitif', wherein you could sense the rebirth of cinema. A tale of origins, *Sanshō Dayū* is set at so remote a time that Mizoguchi could imagine himself returning to the rudiments of both morality and narrative art at one and the same stroke. The urge to renew himself and his art through 'Sanshō' welled up in Terence Malick as it did in Mizoguchi, a paradoxical urge given the familiarity of the story....

Whatever the judgment, then or now, Mizoguchi confronted issues paramount to Western intellectuals during the cold war, particularly the *universality* of human values, and the distinctiveness of *individual* perspective. An elite audience in the West was primed to take Mizoguchi as a kind of spiritual emissary whose delicate 'musical' sensibility, having been put through the hell of wartime Japan, was capable of registering and expressing feelings of degradation and hope the rest of us could scarcely imagine. Indeed, *Sanshō Dayū*'s themes of exile and slavery resonate even more strongly today in a world where human rights violations have become epidemic....Perhaps to counter the West's patronising and missionary attitude, Mizoguchi meant to reclaim for Japan a native strain of humanism that goes back to medieval times. In any case, one cannot deny the universality of the father's dictum, 'all men are born equal in the world and all have a right to happiness.' Nor can one deny the equally universal impulse to doubt the foundation of such claims, since *Sanshō Dayū* tests the virtuous family *à la* Job, and questions both the evil order of the universe and the power of men to act morally within it.



FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Oct 2 Jean-Pierre Melville, **Army of Shadows/L'Armée des ombres** 1969
 Oct 9 Akira Kurosawa **Ikiru** 1952
 Oct 16 Jiří Menzel **Closely Watched Trains** 1966
 Oct 23 Buñuel **That Obscure Object of Desire** 1977
 Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972
 Nov 6 Charles Burnett **Killer of Sheep** 1977
 Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987
 Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989
 Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002
 Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 2000

Contacts:

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
 ...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>
 ...for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us
for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/search.html>

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center
 and State University of New York at Buffalo
 with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation