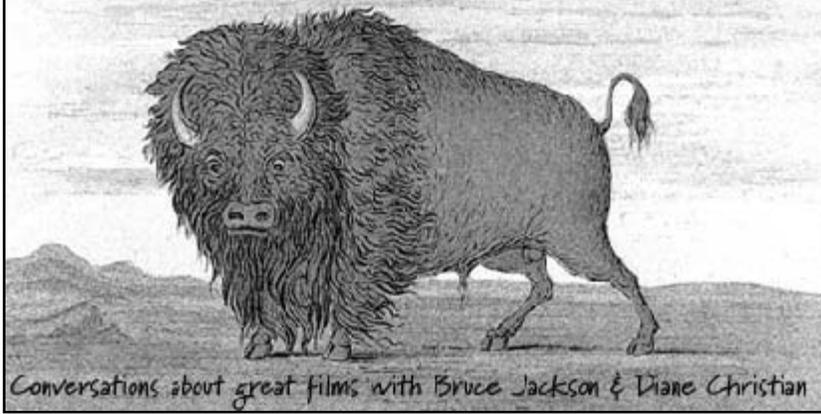


# The Buffalo Film Seminars



## Ugetsu Monogatari (Tales of a Pale and Mysterious Moon After the Rain), 1953, 93 min

Masayuki Mori....Genjurô  
 Machiko Kyô....Lady Wakasa  
 Kinuyo Tanaka....Miyagi  
 Eitarô Ozawa....Tôbei  
 Ikio Sawamura....Genichi  
 Mitsuko Mito....Ohama  
 Kikue Môri....Ukon  
 Ryosuke Kagawa....Village master  
 Eigoro Onoe....Knight  
 Saburo Date....Vassal  
 Sugisaku Aoyama....Old Priest  
 Reiko Kondo  
 Shozo Nanbu....Shinto Priest  
 Kozaburo Ramon....Captain of Niwa  
 Ichirô Amano....Boatsman  
 Kichijiro Ueda....Shop Owner  
 Teruko Omi....Prostitute  
 Keiko Koyanagi....Prostitute  
 Mitsusaburô Ramon....Captain of  
 Tamba Soldiers  
 Kichijiro Tsuchida....Silk Merchant

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi  
 Writing credits Matsutarô Kawaguchi,  
 Akinari Ueda (stories), Yoshikata  
 Yoda

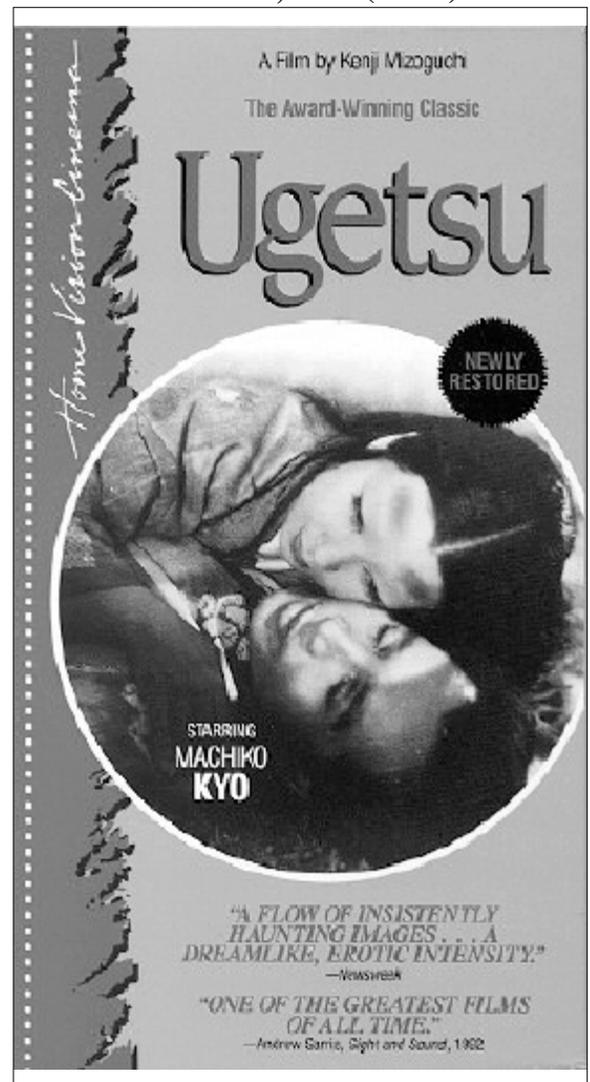
Produced by Masaichi Nagata  
 Cinematography by Kazuo Miyagawa  
 Film Editing by Mitsuzô Miyata  
 Production Design by Kisaku Ito  
 Costume Design by Kusune Kainosho

## KENJI MIZOGUCHI (16 May 1898, Tokyo—24 August 1956, Kyoto, leukemia) *Biography from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia*: “As a youth, Kenji Mizoguchi (growing up in desperate poverty) was a witness to the selling of his older sister as a geisha and his father's brutalization of his sister and mother, both of which had a penetrating effect on his worldview. It is no surprise, then, that once he reached his artistic maturity, Mizoguchi's chief thematic concern was the role-

and particularly, the exploitation-

of women in society. The abuse of second-

class members of Japanese society had its roots in the nation's tradition; as such, many of his films reflect upon the social and sexual mores of feudal Japan. Mizoguchi began his film career as an actor, commenced directing in 1922, and ended up making over 80 features. Stylistically, his best films are noted for their expert use of shadow and light, graceful camera movement, and long takes. His initial artistic achievements, [Osaka Elegy](#) and [Sisters of the Gion](#) (both 1936), examine the plight of women in a male-oriented prewar society. [Osaka Elegy](#) is the story of a telephone operator whose life is left in shambles after being seduced by her boss; [Sisters of Gion](#) (which Mizoguchi remade in 1953 as [Gion Bayashi](#)) details the conflict between a tradition-bound geisha and her younger, more progressive-minded sister. During World War 2, Mizoguchi temporarily abandoned his emphasis on women to spotlight his country's militarism: the twopart [The Loyal 47 Ronin](#) (1941-42) is an epic about the legendary, historical figures who, as an act of honor, committed mass suicide. In the postwar years, his films remained concerned with Japanese history, but from a more critical and humanistic perspective as they depicted the manner in which women were victimized by a corrupt class system. *The Life of Oharu* (1952) was the first of many masterpieces. The film's heroine is a wealthy, respected woman who is seduced by a servant, and ends up a prostitute. The two main characters in [Ugetsu](#) (1953) are men: ambitious peasants, one craving wealth and the other wishing to become a samurai. In the course of the scenario the former abandons his wife, who is summarily murdered; the latter's mate is raped and becomes a prostitute. In [Sansho the Bailiff](#) (1954), a provincial governor's family is forced into exile, with the wife becoming a prostitute and the children finding themselves in a labor camp. [Chikamatsu Monogatari](#) (1954; U.S. title, [The Crucified Lovers](#)) tells of a forbidden affair between a merchant's spouse and her servant. In [Princess Yang Kwei Fei](#) (1955; original Japanese title, *Yokichi*)-set in China rather than Japan-an emperor falls for a beautiful servant. [Street of Shame](#) (1956), Mizoguchi's last film, is an examination of the lives of various prostitutes toiling at Dreamland, a present-day Tokyo brothel. Its point: the manner in



which women are treated in Japan had changed little over the centuries.”

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

[His] early experiences were to have a powerful influence on Mizoguchi's films, like much else in his turbulent personal life.... 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 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 Kyoka Izumi for the aestheticism of his sentimental Meiji melodramas.

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 one 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 Yoda 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

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 attempts to regulate her husband's life led to violent fights and brief separations, repeatedly resolved with 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.

Hiroshi Mizutani's sets became an essential part of the one scene—one shot method. [Mizutani was as obsessed as Mizoguchi with detailed research in the interests of authenticity and historical accuracy.] One Japanese critic suggested 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 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

His instructions were few and general. . . "Be a mirror to the character, reflect it, be natural."

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*

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 Junpo* list.

*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.

*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.

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."

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.

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."

**from Peter Bogdanovich's *Movie of the Week: 52 Classic Films for One Full Year*. Ballantine NY 1999.**

Internationally acknowledged as one of the towering works in world cinema, *Ugetsu* (1953) is probably the best known of Kenji Mizoguchi's eighty films. To the Japanese, Mizoguchi is far more representative of the East than Akira Kurosawa, with his more Western-influenced films, and therefore *Ugetsu* ranks high among Japan's most sublime artistic achievements and is, as well, one of the ten finest pictures made by anyone anywhere.

The full title *Ugetsu Monogatari*, means "Tales of a Pale and Shimmering Moon after the Rain," and the picture is, among other things, the most moving ghost story ever filmed, the only one I've ever seen that turns ghosts into living people in a fractured universe.

Mizoguchi played many of his sequences in a single, fluid shots that do not seem like created scenes so much as reality captured through a magical time machine. No other picture-maker in history could do in long shots—scenes shown from a distance—what Mizoguchi did repeatedly. Which is why the large screen is so important for the truest cinematic achievements: the reduction from the mythic size in which they were envisioned not only robs the artist of the scope of his canvas, but reduces everything to the level of a reproduction in

<http://us.imdb.com/search.html>

a book or magazine. This is especially true with a subtitled film, and with Mizoguchi's amazing, often heartbreakingly long shots—a kind of Japanese scroll in motion—capturing fluidly an epoch in history. The size helps to make the evocation resonate; the small screen not only loses impact but makes the viewing more of a strain.

A hallmark of Mizoguchi's work was his extraordinary empathy with and understanding of women and their often subservient roles in society. As a child, he had seen his callous

At least fifty of his films have been lost, but the thirty-odd that remain, of which I have been able so far to see only a handful, place him securely among the immortals of the screen. With Jean Renoir in the West, Kenji Mizoguchi stands as the greatest of the East, a poet-painter of film at the highest level of achievement. As with only the finest art, his work is transcendent, enriches our lives, makes us better people.

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**from Akira Kurosawa *Something Like an Autobiography*. Knopf, NY 1982.**

I am often accused of being too exacting with sets and properties, of having things made just for the sake of authenticity, that will never appear on camera. Even if I don't request this, my crew does it for me anyway. The first Japanese director to demand authentic sets and props was Mizoguchi Kenji, and the sets in his films are truly superb. I learned a great deal about filmmaking from him, and the making of sets is among the most important. The quality of the set influences the quality of the actors' performances. If the plan of a house and the design of the rooms are done properly, the actors can move about in them naturally. If I have to tell an actor, "Don't think about where this room is in relation to the rest of the house," that natural ease cannot be achieved. For this reason, I have the sets made exactly like the real thing. It restricts the shooting, but encourages that feeling of authenticity.

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**Kenji Mizoguchi by Alexander Jacoby. *Senses of Cinema* Great Directors Critical Database**

Although a much more profound humanist than Kurosawa,

father's abuse of his mother and older sister, seen his sister sold off into the life of a feisha, suffered through his wife's madness brought on by syphilis. There are no films in history that portray with such sympathy the brutalizing, harrowing lives of women as *Ugetsu*, *The Life of Oharu* (1952), *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954), *The Princess Yang Kwei-Fei* (1955), and his final tragic *Street of Shame* (1956), known in England as *Red Light District*.

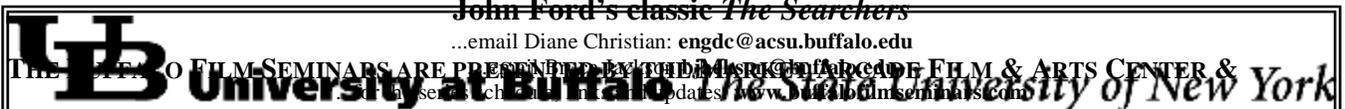
Mizoguchi rarely, if ever, advertised his social concerns with the sort of condescending didacticism which appealed to the message-hungry middlebrows of *Sight and Sound* and its ilk. As for his style, with its extraordinary elaboration, delicacy, beauty and grace, it must have struck the puritans who then dictated taste as decadent aestheticism. Naturally this sort of thing went down rather better in France where Godard and Rohmer, then the young Turks of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, hailed *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) as one of cinema's supreme achievements and evoked comparisons with Homeric and Arthurian legend. But Mizoguchi's art eludes east *auteurist* categorization in a way that, say, Ozu's films do not. He vacillated politically between feudalism and feminism, militarism and Marxism.

In *Oharu* itself, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, *Sansho Dayu* and the finest sequences of *Shin Heike Monogatari* (1955) he evolved his mature style: a *mise-en-scène* of exquisite beauty patterned on traditional Japanese painting (whence, the preference for high-angle shots, and the sense of human figures lost in the landscape), yet made fluent and wholly cinematic through elaborate camera movements and the choreography of actors on screen. It is a formal style, not a formalist one, and the astonishing visual beauty of Mizoguchi's images never deadens the power of his human drama, or his sense of outrage at oppression. The supreme demonstration of his method is the scene of the murder of the heroine in *Ugetsu*, staged in a long shot: the wounded Kinuyo Tanaka, stabbed by bandits in a quarrel over food, crawling away in the foreground, while, in the distance, the thieves squabble over the food they have robbed from her. In its juxtaposition of high tragedy and intransigent physical realism, the scene deserves the adjective Shakespearean.

Join us next week, Tuesday October 14, for John Wayne in

John Ford's classic *The Searchers*

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