

Document Citation

Title	Ugetsu (Ugetsu monogatari)
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Source	<i>Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts</i>
Date	1958 Mar 11
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ugetsu monogatari (Ugetsu), Mizoguchi, Kenji, 1953

MINNEAPOLIS SOCIETY OF FINE ARTS MEMBERS' FILM SERIES

"THE ETERNAL PROBLEM"

Program Notes
Film No.: 6
March 11, 1958

UGETSU (UGETSU MONOGATARI) (Japan, 1954)

Production: Daiei Motion Picture Company
Producer: Masaichi Nagato
Director: Kenji Mizoguchi
Cast: Machiko Kyo, Masayuki Mori
Story: Yoshikata Yoda

In 1951 the conclusion of the Peace Treaty restored autonomy to the Japanese motion picture industry, and in the same year, with significant timing, a film of extraordinary power and beauty, Kurosawa's Rashomon, was awarded the Grand Prize at the International Film Festival, in Venice. This distinction came as a complete surprise to the western film world which almost totally ignored the importance and extent of the film production in the remote east. As other films followed, among them such masterpieces as Gate of Hell, The Magnificent Samurai, and Samurai, it became unmistakably clear that Japan had developed an independent and superior film art without precedent or comparison. At first, the mere exotism and pictorial beauty of those foreign works, so strikingly different from certain stereotypes in the western productions, captivated every viewer. The critical reception, although generous in its praise, was reserved in drawing definitive conclusions from the evidence of four or five great films. But with the passing of time, with more productions to judge and the opportunity to re-appraise the first impressions, it appeared that Japan's new film fame was based on more lasting qualities than the strangeness or novelty of a few chosen examples.

Although those first importations had been selected with particular care and caution, they were not at all unique efforts, straining the country's creative, technical and financial resources. They were the result of consistent artistic development. In 1899 Japan produced the first feature film and five years later a studio was established and production started. In the postwar decade from 1946 to 1956, Japanese production amounted to 2,300 feature films. The majority of these were contemporary subjects of which but few have been shown abroad, and our information is still fragmentary. It is likely that our present appreciation of the Japanese film is one-sided; but it is not inconclusive. Whatever additional intelligence a more exhaustive study may add to our understanding, creations like Ugetsu and those mentioned before cannot be accomplished for the mere sake of gaining an international market. They presuppose a tradition, a specific working environment and a propitious cultural climate. More revealing than the statistics of production figures, trade balances, and studio facilities, is the fact that Japan has many outstanding directors and excellent actors, both tried and promising, capable of maintaining high standards on a sustained basis.

The Japanese films opened our eyes to unsuspected beauty in cinematography, without falling into the trap of mere pictorialism. The visual excitement is derived from dramatic or psychological incident and fused into a unified style; the epic breadth of the screen drama justifies the deliberate visual exploration. For all the magnificently costumed historicism, the pictorial settings, the ghostly apparitions, the excessive passions, the endless sword play, the violence and hue and cry, these stories are not "Gothic" tales or oriental versions of Scott and Dumas; the heroes are no Ivanhoes, D'Artagnans or Robin Hoods. The romantic kinship exists only on the very surface of events; but the moral rationale as well as the underlying formal pattern relates them

to a totally different tradition. In all those films the tradition, hundreds of centuries old, is essentially theatrical or, at least, a brilliant adaptation of stage traditions to a modern medium.

The main traditional sources are the Nô drama and the Kabuki play; both are rigidly formalized and stylized in mask, costume and gesture. Although their subtler meanings and esthetic intricacies escape western apprehension, their precision and expressiveness, as well as the virtuoso skill of their execution, fascinate also the uninitiated. The Nô play is lyric, esoteric, symbolic, sophisticated and emotionally restrained; its essential quality is suggestion. The Kabuki drama is popular, epic, broad and eventful; it is performed in an acting style which, though expansive, exaggerated to the grotesque, is nevertheless highly stylized, even ritualistic. This accounts for many peculiarities of the Japanese historical film: the violent expression of emotions, the acrobatic intricacies of the sword fights, the exquisiteness of the love scenes, the abrupt alternation between sublime lyricism and terrifying animality.

Ugetsu stands firmly in the tradition. Set in the late sixteenth century, a period of political chaos, it tells the involved story of two brothers, a potter and a farmer, who leave their village in order to make their fortunes in a war-torn world, one by excessive profit in selling his wares, the other by becoming a soldier and sharing in the spoils. What conveys to this film a special quality are the unnoticeable, subtle transitions from realism to fantasy, so inextricably blended that one follows without resistance from one realm to the other. Thus the potter's lady love is in fact a ghost; but the sword he has retained does not vanish in smoke with the mansion; and as he returns to his home at the end of the journey, the dead wife takes care of the weary, wounded husband, only to disappear at dawn. The suggestive power of this motion picture is so intense and consistent that no rational query destroys the magic spell. Without any doubt, this exquisite beauty is largely due to the superb photography whose infallible pictorialism reaches the rare heights where cultural differences cease to matter. The doubt whether the motion picture is a legitimate art form, has rarely been dispelled more conclusively and precisely with the legitimate means of the medium proper.

Kenji Mizoguchi Filmography: Saikaku Ichidai Onna (Life of Oharu, 1952), Sansho Dayu (1954), Chikamatsu Monogatari, Yokihi (Yang Kwei Fei, 1955), Shin Heike Monogatari (Taira Clan Saga, 1956), Akasen Chitai (Street of Shame, 1956).

Next Film: The Earrings of Madame De ... (French, 1954), directed by Max Ophuls, with Danielle Darrieux, Charles Boyer, Vittorio de Sica.

Notes prepared by George Amberg