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UGETSU

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi, Script by Y. Yoshikatu and M. Kawagu from the book by Uedo Akinari. Photographed by Kasuo Miyagawa. Music by Fumio Hayasaka. With Machiko Kyo, Masyaku Mori, Kinuyo Tanaka, Sakae Ozawa.

...Ibsen...wrote: "Life is a contest between the phantoms of the mind" -- a remark which, I think, goes a long way towards explaining why Ibsen's realism has so much substance, and why the tensions between his characters have such depth. Against this richness, the realism of many so-called realistic films appears thin, for the very reason that these films do not take seriously enough into account the phantoms of the mind. Since fantasy is an essential part of the total world, we crave, however vicariously, to make up for its loss. And so, if we cannot have a fool-blooded realism, we can at least supplement our normal fare with a relish of vampires and flying saucers. Mizoguchi, however, does not appear to be inhibited by such an impoverished realism. The conventions he uses -- of the fable -- allow him to create both a world of actuality, in which such urgent problems of the fear of war and the lack of money are made vivid and true, and a world in which the phantoms of the mind are given full play. In doing so, he reminds us indeed that these two worlds are interdependent.

Ugetsu...is an essay in the uncanny: that is, it preserves a surface of ordinary everyday happenings whilst at the same time creating a childhood world of animistic fears, so that the predicaments of the characters are plausible both in naturalistic terms and in terms of the rich, more obscure movements of the mind. This dualism is both established and sustained by the conservatism of Miyagi. For when she asks her husband to accept his lot and to disregard the itch of ambition, she does in effect voice the theme on which the conventions of the film are based. Life is for her...a covenant between the dead, the living and the unborn; our duty therefore is not to rebel against the parental images, but to accept tradition and honor the dead.

Within the context of this theme the convention of the ghosts becomes plausible, for they represent the manner in which the past, with all its phantom memories, desires and histories, plays a vital part in the present and gives it meaning. Whether or not we find this conservatism repugnant, we must admit that it allows Mizoguchi the chance to realize vividly a number of humanist truths about the nature of inspiration, the interplay of motive and ideal, and the importance of piety ("a reverence for life")...The paradox may well be that liberal humanism can only work under these conservative conditions.

Not surprisingly, the realism of Ugetsu is close to the realism of Greek drama. And this is not fortuitous. In his film Mizoguchi depends on the Noh theatre, both for his type of plot and for the style in which he composes his images. And the Noh theatre, as Ezra Pound pointed out, has similarities with both the Greek and the Shakespearian drama; for all of them are developments of the miracle play. Ugetsu is Shakespearian in the function of its images (Mizoguchi uses the symbol of war in much the same way as Shakespeare uses the symbol of storm), and in its double plot; and Grecian in that its ghosts play the same part as do the gods in Greek mythology, and that its unity is built up around a single moral conviction. Moreover, I believe that Mizoguchi would have agreed with Aristotle that a work of art should imitate the movements of the mind and not an ordering of facts; for it is in this sense, above all, that his realism is classical.

-Eric Rhode, Sight and Sound, Spring '62

THE PRINCIPAL FILMS OF KENJI MIZOGUCHI (1898-1956)

- 1923: FOGGY HARBOR
1924: SONG OF THE MOUNTAIN PASS; TURKEYS IN A ROW
1925: STREET SKETCHES
1926: A PAPER DOLL'S WHISPER OF SPRING; PASSION OF A WOMAN TEACHER
1929: TOKYO MARCH; HOMETOWN; METROPOLITAN SYMPHONY
1931: AND YET THEY GO ON; THE DAWN OF THE FOUNDING OF MANCHUKUO AND MONGOLIA
1932: TIMELY MEDIATOR; GION FESTIVAL; WHITE THREADS OF THE CASCADES
1936: SISTERS OF THE GION; THE GORGE BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE; OSAKA ELEGY
1937: AH! MY HOMETOWN
1939: THE STORY OF THE LAST CHRYSANTHEMUMS
1940: WOMAN OF OSAKA
1941: THE LIFE OF AN ARTIST
1942: THE LOYAL 49 RONIN OF THE GENROKU ERA
1944: THREE GENERATIONS OF DANJURO
1946: UTAMARO AND HIS FIVE WOMEN; WOMEN'S VICTORY
1947: THE LOVE OF ACTRESS SUMAKU
1948: WOMEN OF THE NIGHT
1950: SKETCH OF MADAME YUKI
1952: THE LIFE OF O-HARU
1953: UGETSU; GION MUSIC
1954: SANSHO, THE BAILIFF (Sansho Dayu)
CHIKAMATSU MONOGATARI
THE TAIRA CLAN (Shin Heike Monogatari)
1955: YANG KWEI FEI
1956: STREET OF SHAME; AN OSAKA STORY