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In any event there was, in Japan, an early public acceptance of the realistic historical film, an agreement from the man in the balcony that his problems were much like those of the samurai on the screen. Consequently, Japanese directors retained a freedom to make pertinent, living historical films, something which was often denied like-minded directors—and Dreyer is the most obvious example—in the West.

Not that the Japanese do not make historical distinctions. Indeed, in common use, the distinctions are indelible. The period film is always thought of as an isolated genre and it is indicative of Japan's attitude toward itself that it should make such a rigid division between the *jidai-geki*, the period drama, and the *gendai-geki*, the film about contemporary life. Yet this dichotomy exists only because of the traditional Japanese fondness for, and dependence upon, intellectual categorization. The continuum of history flows serenely over all barriers and the Japanese, in life as in films, quite accepts a living past. He no more questions this than he questions that, after a hard day's work, he comes home, takes off his business suit and gets comfortable in a kimono.

This, naturally, implies a double standard. There is no more truly logical connection between kimono and business suit than there is between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The Japanese is necessarily of two minds—mutually incompatible to Western eyes—about his world.

This pattern is reflected over and over in the Japanese film. It becomes a theme of the greatest importance to

both the literature and the cinema of the country. It has, indeed, become the protean symbol of modern Japan: emotionally the present is a simple continuation of the past; at the same time the contrast between old and new is so glaring that it can lead to tragic complications.

One of the most perfect statements of this theme was Mizoguchi's *Sisters of the Gion* (Gion Shimai, 1935), a picture which has been called "the best Japanese prewar sound film." The sisters are geisha from Kyoto's well-known Gion district. The younger is quite modern, inclined to ignore the traditions of her profession in particular, Japanese traditional society in general; the elder possesses all the virtues of the legendary geisha. At the end the younger is in the hospital, the result of an automobile accident occasioned by her excesses; the elder remains too encumbered by tradition to rejoin the man she really loves, and of whom the younger disapproves. Completely conditioned by her code, the elder will always be afraid of going against custom; the younger, with every chance of recovery, will probably take up just where she left off. *

If Mizoguchi's sentiments occasionally, and almost by default, went to the elder sister, his ending leaves her condemned. The problem suggested by the film, however, is a very vital one, and by implication goes far beyond the narrow world of the geisha. The situation is such that the spectator too must make a choice.

This problem of choice is one which animates all Japanese literature and, by implication at least, most Japanese films. In the Noh the choice has already been made

before the play begins, and if the choice has been for personal indulgence over social or ethical duty one may be certain that ghostly or monstrous revenge is not far behind. In the Kabuki the choice constitutes the plot: will the lovers neglect duty because they love each other; can the hero bear to decapitate his own son, as duty plainly demands, so that his lord's son may be saved? Even lyric poetry reflects the choice: the elegiac quality of so much Japanese verse is occasioned by the poet's regrets—that he followed the path of personal inclination, or that he did not. This problem, a truly existential dilemma and one particularly pertinent to this century, is often brilliantly presented in the Japanese film.

Sometimes the problem becomes the theme, as in *Sisters of the Gion*. More often, however, directors are constitutionally on one side of the fence or the other. Indeed, one may categorize directors and their films by reference to their position regarding this most burning of questions. This is what I have done later in this book. Any generalization tends to be damaging but, in this case, the damage is slight. Any director worthy of the name in Japan continues to reflect, in no matter how oblique a manner, this most basic of Japanese facts of life. He may favor the traditional, as does Ozu, yet he is acutely aware of the disadvantages. He may fight against the traditional, as does Kurosawa, and yet any statement he makes is predicated upon its existence.

One of the results of the growing realism in the Japanese cinema of the thirties was a dissatisfaction with the traditional. The *shomin-geki* and the period film, if

honest, could not show traditional life as being particularly pleasant. At the same time, then as now, polemic was rare; the dissatisfied found it enough merely to show things the way they were, this often amounting to condemnation.

An example is the late Tomu Uchida, a director since the twenties but whose best work did not appear until shortly before the war. *Earth* (Tsuchi, 1939), a near documentary, showed only what existed. It chronicled the seasons and used only the slightest of stories. A farmer loses his inheritance, is forced into poverty, is driven to despair, yet still manages to hope. It aimed at a complete naturalism yet was not so much interested in farm life, in the manner of a film like Georges Rouquier's *Farré-bique*, as in the misery which life on the soil can entail, particularly in Asia. The interest in the seasons was not in their more decorative aspects, but as a manifestation of nature, a raw force, neither friend nor foe, against which farmers must traditionally struggle. The film was not unlike, and bears comparison with, Alexander Dovzhenko's 1930 picture of the same title; the difference is that while the Russian peasant landowners are struggling against the collectives, the Japanese are struggling against the very circumstances of their traditional heritage. Dovzhenko can show the triumph of the collectives; Uchida must show that peasants always fail but, at the same time, that they survive.

Another way in which dissatisfaction with the traditional was evidenced in Japanese films was in the number of pictures about children which appeared during

perspective is narrow though his penetration is profound. A director like Imai or Shinoda has all the advantages of multiple perspective—each film is different—but, perhaps because of this, each has yet to make a truly personal film. Kurosawa, the complete individualist, is committed to no world view. He is continually experimenting, yet his statement is uniquely his and, while over and over again emphasizing the same ideas, he is, at the same time, interested in the new, the radical, the untried. Ozu cherishes his self-imposed limitations, but Kurosawa will not tolerate limitations. Each has made his quality a strength. One may then arrange Japanese directors on a kind of scale in which Ozu would represent the extreme right, and Kurosawa the extreme left.

If one did so, Mizoguchi would probably fall directly in the middle, since his films partake of both qualities. In a picture such as *Sisters of the Gion* both extremes are present: the elder sister is from a world which Ozu knows well; the younger fits into the world of Kurosawa. In Mizoguchi, particularly in the postwar films, we find a balance, rare in Japanese cinema, between the classic poles of the traditional—the acceptance of feudal values, the affirmation of the home, the joy of submitting to restraint; and the individual—the impatience with restraint, the criticism of all traditional values, the joy of overcoming obstacles, of enlarging horizons.

This becomes apparent if we examine a single, though important, aspect of Mizoguchi's later films: his treatment of women. The director's major theme—and no

matter what his Japanese reputation for extreme eclecticism, Mizoguchi's pictures are built, or can be arranged, around a theme—is women, their position or lack of it, their difference from men, their relations with men, the profoundly intricate relations between women and love: this theme is just as much Mizoguchi's as it is Marcel Carné's or George Cukor's.

That most perfect of all his films, *Ugetsu* (*Ugetsu Monogatari*, 1953), presents the theme in its most perfect form. A potter, caught in the period of civil wars, leaves his wife and small son behind, and goes to sell his wares. There a beautiful lady buys his stock, takes him home, and eventually seduces him. He stays on only to awaken one morning to find both mansion and lady gone. He had been enchanted. Rushing home he finds his wife waiting for him. But the next morning he awakes and discovers that she too was a spirit, and has been dead for some time.

These two women represent the extremes of Mizoguchi's theme: it is much more than simply profane vs. sacred love. Rather, it displays a subtle irony: in the end both women died needing love, the spirit in the haunted mansion is to be equated with the loyal and loving wife. They are equal and it is this parallel that interests Mizoguchi, just as much as did the similar parallel of *Sisters of the Gion* or the parallel conflicts which decide the fate of the heroine in *Osaka Elegy* (*Naniwa Hika*, 1936).

The point of *Utamaro and His Five Women* (*Utamaro o Meguru Gonin no Onna*, 1946) is that all, no matter