

Ugetsu monogatari (1953) Kenji Mizoguchi (1898-1956)

aka Ugetsu.

P Michell, 2015.

Title means ‘Tales of the Moon and Rain’.

Director: Kenji Mizoguchi

Producer: Masaichi Nagata

Screenplay: Matsutarō Kawaguchi, Yoshikata Yoda, based on two classic tales by Akinari Ueda

Cinematography: Kazuo Miyagawa

Editor: Mitsuzo Miyata

Costume Design: Tadaoto Kainosho

Art Direction: Kisaku Ito

Music: Fumio Hayasaka, Ichiro Saito, Tamekichi Mochizuki

Cast: Masayuki Mori (Genjuro), Machiko Kyo (Lady Wakasa), Sakae Ozawa (Tobei),

Kinuyo Tanaka (Miyagi), Mitsuko Mito (Ohama), Sugisaku Aoyama (Old Priest),

Ryosuke Kagawa (Village Chief), Kikue Mori (Ukon).

BW-94m.

Analysis:

From Senses of Cinema – Ugetsu (Issue 36, July 2005)

Dan Harper.

In the history of world film, 1953 was an exceptionally fruitful year. In Italy, Federico Fellini introduced his semi-autobiographical hero Moraldo to the world in *I Vitelloni* (1). In Sweden, Ingmar Bergman nailed his reputation as a filmmaker of genius with his first great film, *Sawdust and Tinsel*. In Japan alone two of its greatest film artists created masterpieces: Yasujiro Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* was released, a film that has turned up on Ten Best lists ever since (at least since foreign distributors finally decided that it be shown in the West); and Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* was immediately hailed as one of the most beguiling films ever made, whetting Western audiences’ appetite for Eastern exoticism – something that had been created by Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) and considerably expanded by Teinosuke Kinugasa’s *Gate of Hell*, also released in 1953, and shot in glorious Agfacolor. Mizoguchi’s film was in black-and-white but had the advantage of being billed as a ghost story. As audiences quickly discovered, however, *Ugetsu Monogatari* is a peculiarly Japanese ghost story.

Very quickly the film has introduced us to one of the central themes of Japanese film: the resigned acceptance of the way things are rather than an insistence on change and resistance to the status quo. While Kurosawa was often on the side of the latter, showing how diligence can sometimes create incremental change (in *Ikiru*, 1952, and *Red Beard*, 1965), Mizoguchi, a traditionalist, is always on the side of the former, since it is the only way to attain serenity – what has come to be known as *mono no aware* (2). But of course,

Mizoguchi must allow Genjiro to learn this for himself, at great cost to those he loves most. [Donald Richie defines *mono no aware* as “that awareness of the transience of all earthly things, the knowledge that it is, perhaps fortunately, impossible to do anything about it: that celebration of resignation in the face of things as they are.”]

Typical of Mizoguchi films, the best performances belong to women: Kinuyo Tanaka’s long-suffering Miyagi, whose patience is rewarded only after her apotheosis; Mitsuko Mito’s playing of Tobei’s wife, who teaches him that position and respectability come with a heavy price; Machiko Kyo’s perfectly realised portrayal of a young woman utterly, distractedly devoted to love and the happiness it gives her. But there is also her startling look of terror and sadness when she finds the Sanskrit prayers written on Genjiro’s skin. And then there is the long closing sequence, exploiting Mizoguchi’s love for long takes, as Genjiro returns home. The wisdom he has attained allows him even to accept the great loss he discovers in his hut, and the presence of a love so obstinate that it could not be taken away.

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Literary background:

Ugetsu Monogatari (雨月物語 *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*⁹) is a collection of nine supernatural tales by the Japanese author Ueda Akinari, first published in 1776. Largely taken from traditional Japanese and Chinese ghost stories, the collection is among most important works of Japanese fiction of the 18th century, the middle of the Edo period. Edo literary achievements are normally associated with the fiction of Ihara Saikaku and drama of Chikamatsu Monzaemon in the Genroku period and the popular literature of Takizawa Bakin in the later Bunka Bunsei period. *Ugetsu Monogatari*, then, occupies an important yet often overlooked position between these two moments in Edo literary history. The collection is the author's best known work. He had previously written two *ukiyo zoshi* in 1766-7^[1] and a second collection *Harusame Monogatari* was not printed until 1907.

Overview from Sadoul’s ‘Dictionary of Films’ (1965, 1972):

... like so many of Mizoguchi’s films, *Ugetsu* is a study in feminine psychology, social mores, and the intense correlation between women and love. The phantom princess and the wife are similar in their love for the potter, who destroys both of them because he doesn’t give them the love they need. The wife of the ambitious famer is degraded because he, too, fails her. Its parallel stories with a unifying moral theme give it something of the force of a classical tragedy.

Mizoguchi’s depiction of his character’s 16th world has an almost palpable air of realism, with impeccable period reconstruction and an all-pervasive sense of continuous war that permeates the film. Though Mizoguchi saw it in parallel to postwar Japan and its problems, its success clearly lies beyond its own time. Both allegorical and realistic, it is an intensely moving film experience. Stylistically it is one of Mizoguchi’s most

accomplished films, full of beauty of classical Japanese paintings and are even occasionally reminiscent of C16th Flemish artist, Breughel. The scene on the lake, the potter and the phantom princess breakfasting on the lawn, and the final shot as the camera slowly rises to take in the whole village have a poetic simplicity. Throughout, **fantasy is given the force of reality and the power of tragedy**. Its stylistic perfection and the rich overtones of its theme make *Ugetsu Monogatari* one of the most beautiful films of all time.

Synopsis by BFI:

“The director’s unique establishment of atmosphere by means of long shot, long takes, sublimely graceful and unobtrusive camera movement, is everywhere evident. A ravishingly composed, evocatively beautiful film.”
Rod McShane, *Time Out Film Guide*, 2011

With a title sometimes flowerily translated as ‘Tales of the Pale and Silvery Moon after the Rain’, Kenji Mizoguchi’s 1953 film *Ugetsu Monogatari* is a lyrical blend of period (C16th) drama and ghostly fable. Uprooted by civil war, two peasant couples are split apart when the men – against the counsel of their wives – leave their families in search of greater fortune.

Ugetsu Monogatari is filmed in Mizoguchi’s distanced but all-encompassing camera style, full of flowing movement and respect for the action’s context, as the story of the men’s striving assumes the quality of an allegory. The film is especially celebrated for its subtly achieved supernatural elements: the spectral appearance of a boat through the mist, and the scenes in which the potter (Masayuki Mori) is lured to the castle of the mysterious Lady Wakasa (Machiko Kyo).

Another rural period film with a superstitious dimension, Kaneto Shindo’s *Onibaba* (1964) involves the curse of a dead samurai’s mask.

TCM Overview:

The early 1950s was the golden era of Japanese cinema. Directors such as Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, and Kenji Mizoguchi, now freed from the constraints of making wartime propaganda films, produced masterpieces such as *Rashomon* (1950), *Tokyo Story* (1953), and ***Ugetsu Monogatari*** (1953) respectively. Of the three directors, Mizoguchi was the oldest and had already made more than 80 films, but was little known in the West. Today, he is still not as well known to American audiences as Kurosawa, but he is highly regarded by critics and film scholars. "Like Bach, Titian, and Shakespeare, he is the greatest in his art," wrote French critic Jean Douchet, and *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby called him "one of the greatest film directors of the sound era."

Mizoguchi himself once said, "It was only when I passed 40 that I understood the human truths I want to express in my films. And since then, the cinema has become an extremely difficult art for me." Born in 1898, Mizoguchi began his film career in the silent era, and became known for his women's films in the 1930s. After World War II his talent reached its full flowering, with films such as *The Life of Oharu* (1952), ***Ugetsu*** (both of which

won awards at the Venice Film festival in consecutive years), and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954). He died in 1956, at the relatively young age of 58.

Based on two stories by the 18th century writer Akinari Ueda from his collection *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Tales of the Moon and Rain), **Ugetsu** is a ravishingly beautiful meditation on war, greed, and sexual desire, and a seamless blend of fantasy and realism. Set during a civil war in 16th century Japan, it's the story of two peasants who leave their wives behind as they seek fortune and glory - the potter Genjuro hopes to make money selling his wares, and Tobei wants to become a samurai. Genjuro is seduced into forgetting his wife and child by a mysterious noblewoman, Lady Wakasa, who is not what she seems. Tobei achieves his goal of becoming a warrior through deceit. And both men's wives pay the price for their husbands' ambition.

Technically and visually, **Ugetsu** is a marvel. From the opening shot, the camera is constantly moving. Cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa recalled that Mizoguchi told him that the beginning of the film should unfold like an *emakimono*, a medieval Japanese scroll painting, saying, "The pictures should roll out like scrolls." Miyagawa estimated that 70% of the shots in **Ugetsu** were tracking shots. He also pointed out that the camera was never still during the scenes in Lady Wakasa's home, which was modeled after two historic Imperial villas. Sometimes the movement in those scenes is barely perceptible, but Mizoguchi wanted the constant motion to suggest something unsettling about the place and its inhabitants. Adding to the spooky atmosphere is a musical score by frequent Mizoguchi collaborator Fumio Hayasaka, which mixes Japanese and Western instruments and rhythms to great effect.

The famous Lake Biwa scene is pure visual poetry, with its boats moving in and out of the mist. But assistant director Tokuzo Tanaka remembered the filming of the scene as pure agony. It was shot in a studio tank, in freezing-cold February, with Tanaka and another assistant in the tank hidden behind the boats, moving them. In those days before wetsuits, they only had hip boots to protect them, but the smoke that was creating the misty look wasn't cooperating, and the implacable perfectionist Mizoguchi kept insisting on take after take, saying "the smoke is wrong."

Near the end of **Ugetsu**, a virtuoso 360-degree shot of Genjuro's homecoming follows him as he enters a cold, empty house, walks around and out and back in again, to find his wife cooking over a warm hearth. It's one of those breathtaking "how did they do that?" scenes that director Masahiro Shinoda must have had in mind when he commented, "No matter how often we watch **Ugetsu**, we learn something new each time about the possibilities of cinema."

Bosley Crowther's *New York Times* review makes it clear how "exotic" **Ugetsu** must have seemed to American audiences and critics who had little exposure to Japanese cinema's stately pace, stylized acting, and historic and cultural context: "**Ugetsu**...will be hard for American audiences to comprehend...both the theme and style of exposition...have a strangely obscure, inferential, almost studiedly perplexing quality. Indeed, it is this peculiar vagueness and use of symbolism and subterfuge that give to this Oriental [sic]

fable what it has of a sort of eerie charm." More than fifty years later, informed by a wider worldview, the impact of this timeless film is stronger than ever. As Roger Ebert wrote in 2004, "At the end of **Ugetsu**, aware we have seen a fable, we also feel curiously as if we have witnessed true lives and fates."

... Margarita Landazuri

Internet Links:

Senses of Cinema link on Mizoguchi:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/mizoguchi/>

Book Review - *Mizoguchi and Japan* by Mark Le Fanu:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/book-reviews/mizoguchi-and-japan/>

Ugetsu Stories:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ugetsu_Monogatari

Notes:

This film used to make all the top ten lists for the greatest movies ever made. However, with the discovery of Ozu and the (justified) cinematic canonization of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi has been neglected. This is a pity, for he was one of the supreme masters of the cinema. *Ugetsu Monogatari* is one of the most beautiful explorations of the human spirit ever put on the screen. Rarely has black and white been used more beautifully, or the supernatural portrayed more convincingly. If Dreyer is the great "Protestant" of the cinema, and Bresson, Rossellini, and, it must said, Hitchcock and Ford, its great "Catholics", Mizoguchi is its greatest Buddhist.

Joesph Harder (1999)

The work of a mature artist, it resonates with Buddhist practice, and is a profoundly moving tale of the suffering of the human condition, the violence of war, the possibilities of art uplifting the spirit, the possibilities of redemption of character. The closing scene is one of such deeply-felt compassion and understanding that it is almost frightening; it prefigures in a way the stunning and more personal close of the subsequent Mizoguchi film "*Sansho the Baliff*".

On a lighter level, it is an amusingly sly allegory of the actual history of Japan for the 20 or so years prior to 1953, where in the end the women, embittered (or dead) as a result of their men's quixotic quest for military glory or war-profiteering, entreat them to give up their misguided and destructive dreams, settle down, and get back to their real responsibilities.

... Notmicro (2004)