UGETSU

a KENJI MIZOGUCHI *film*

JANUS FILMS

"One of the greatest experiences of cinema."
—DAVE KEHR

"Quite simply one of the greatest of filmmakers," said Jean-Luc Godard of Kenji Mizoguchi. And *Ugetsu*, a ghost story like no other, is surely the Japanese director's supreme achievement. Derived from stories by Akinari Ueda and Guy de Maupassant, this haunting tale of love and loss—with its exquisite blending of the otherworldly and the real—is one of the most beautiful films ever made.

Japan • 1953 • 97 minutes • Black & White • 1.33:1 aspect ratio • In Japanese with English subtitles • Screening format: DCP

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

This new 4K digital restoration was undertaken by the Film Foundation and Kadokawa Corporation at Cineric Laboratories in New York. Special thanks to Masahiro Miyajima and Martin Scorsese for their consultation on this restoration. Restoration funding was provided by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association in association with the Film Foundation and Kadokawa Corporation.

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KENJI MIZOGUCHI

Kenji Mizoguchi created a cinema rich in technical mastery and social commentary, specifically regarding the place of women in Japanese society. After an upbringing marked by poverty and abuse, Mizoguchi found solace in art, trying his hand at both oil painting and theater set design before, at the age of twenty-two in 1920, enrolling as an assistant director at Nikkatsu studios. By the midthirties, he had developed his craft by directing dozens of movies in a variety of genres, but he would later say that he didn't consider his career to have truly begun until 1936, with the release of the companion films *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion,* about women both professionally and romantically trapped. Japanese film historian Donald Richie called *Gion* "one of the best Japanese films ever made." Over the next decade, Mizoguchi made such wildly different tours de force as *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (1939), *The 47 Ronin* (1941–42), and *Women of the Night* (1948), but not until 1952 did he break through internationally, with *The Life of Oharu,* a poignant tale of a woman's downward spiral in an unforgiving society. That film paved the road to half a decade of major artistic and financial successes for Mizoguchi, including the masterful ghost story *Ugetsu* (1953) and the gut-wrenching drama *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954), both flaunting extraordinarily sophisticated compositions and camera movement. The last film Mizoguchi made before his death at age fifty-eight was *Street of Shame* (1956), a shattering exposé set in a bordello that played an important role in the outlawing of prostitution in Japan. Few filmmakers can claim to have had such impact.

CAST

Lady Wakasa	Machiko Kyo
Genjuro	Masayuki Mori
Miyagi	Kinuyo Tanaka
Tobei	Sakae Ozawa
Ohama	Mitsuko Mito
Ukon	Kikue Mori

FROM THE OTHER SHORE

By Phillip Lopate

Often appearing on lists of the ten greatest films of all time, called one of the most beautiful films ever made, or the most masterful work of Japanese cinema, *Ugetsu* comes to us awash in superlatives. No less acclaimed has been its maker, Kenji Mizoguchi: "Like Bach, Titian, and Shakespeare, he is the greatest in his art," enthused the French critic Jean Douchet; and not far behind were Jean-Luc Godard, who declared him "the greatest of Japanese filmmakers, or quite simply one of the greatest of filmmakers," and the *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby, who extolled him as "one of the great directors of the sound era." In other words, Mizoguchi belongs in the same exalted company as Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, Carl Dreyer, Alfred Hitchcock, Max Ophuls, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson, and Akira Kurosawa (who looked up to the older man as his master). This near-unanimous reverence for both *Ugetsu* and Mizoguchi among world filmmakers and critics may be puzzling to the American moviegoing public, for whom both names remain relatively unfamiliar. In order to understand what the fuss is about, we may need to take a step back from these superlatives, or at least put them in context.

Mizoguchi (1898–1956) began his career in the silent era and made dozens of fluent, entertaining studio films before arriving at his lyrical, rigorous visual style and patented tragic humanism, around the age of forty. His first masterworks were a pair of bitterly realistic films, made in 1936, on the subject of modern women's struggles, *Sisters of the Gion* and *Osaka Elegy.* These breakthroughs led to the classic *Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (1939), set in the Meiji era, about a kabuki actor who stubbornly hones his craft with the aid of his all-too-sacrificing lover. In this film, Mizoguchi perfected his signature "flowing scroll," "one shot–one scene" style of long-duration takes, which, by keeping the camera well back, avoiding close-ups, and linking the characters to their environment, generated hypnotic tension and psychological density. During the early forties, the director was hampered by the Japanese studios' war propaganda effort, though he did make a stately, two-part version of *The 47 Ronin.* After the war ended, he turned to a series of intense pictures advocating progressive, democratizing ideals, which fell in with the occupation's values while wobbling aesthetically between subtle refinement and hammy melodrama.

Then, in the fifties, he regained his touch and created those sublimely flowing, harrowing masterpieces

that represent the pinnacle of his directorial achievement: *The Life of Oharu* (1952), *Ugetsu* (1953), *A Story from Chikamatsu* (1954), *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954), *New Tales of the Taira Clan* (1955), and *Street of Shame* (1956). Except for the last, these pictures were all set in earlier times: Mizoguchi, drawing on Saikaku, Chikamatsu, and other classical writers, had become a specialist in the past, reinterpreting national history as much as, say, John Ford, and insisting, like Luchino Visconti, on accurate historical detail, borrowing props, kimonos, suits of armor from museums and private collectors. He attributed his fascination with traditional Japanese culture partly to his own relocation from Tokyo to the Kyoto area.

No doubt, some of Mizoguchi's belated international renown (he won Venice Film Festival prizes three years in a row, for *The Life of Oharu, Ugetsu,* and *Sansho the Bailiff*) had to do with satisfying the West's taste for an exoticized, traditional Japan. But he also fit the profile of the brilliant, uncompromising auteur (a perfectionist who would demand hundreds of retakes and move a house several feet to improve the vista). Also, his moving-camera, long-shot aesthetic exemplified the Bazinian mise-en-scène aesthetic that the young *Cahiers du cinéma* critics were championing, and anticipated the widescreen filmmaking of Michelangelo Antonioni, Miklós Jancsó, Nicholas Ray, and others.

Mizoguchi engaged with the past not to recapture nostalgically some lost model of serenity but, if anything, to reveal the opposite. In preparing *Ugetsu,* he was drawn to sixteenth-century chronicles about civil wars and their effect on the common people. As a starting point, he and screenwriter Yoshikata Yoda adapted two tales from an eighteenth-century collection of ghost stories, Akinari Ueda's *Ugetsu monogatari* (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*), retaining much of the imagery while altering elements of the stories. The perennially dissatisfied Mizoguchi stressed in his notes to the long-suffering Yoda: "The feeling of wartime must be apparent in the attitude of every character. The violence of war unleashed by those in power on a pretext of the national good must overwhelm the common people with suffering—moral and physical. Yet the commoners, even under these conditions, must continue to live and eat. This theme is what I especially want to emphasize here. How should I do it?"

Ugetsu ended up concentrating on two couples. The main pair are a poor potter, Genjuro, who is eager to make war profits by selling his wares to the competing armies, and his devoted wife, Miyagi, who would prefer he stay at home with their little boy and not take chances on the road. (The acting between these two is beyond exquisite: the brooding Masayuki Mori, who played Genjuro, and the incomparable Kinuyo Tanaka, cast as his wife, were two of Japan's greatest actors, though filmed by Mizoguchi in a determinedly unglamorous, non-movie-star way.) The second couple are a peasant, Tobei, who assists Genjuro in his trade but would rather become a samurai, and his shrewish wife, Ohama, who ridicules her husband's fantasies of military glory. In this "gender tragedy," if you will, the men pursue their aggressive dreams, bringing havoc on themselves and their wives. Still, the point is underlined that these men don't want to escape their wives; they only want to triumph in the larger world, so as to return to their wives made into bigger men by boastworthy adventures and costly presents.

Are we to take it, then, that the moral of the film is: better stay at home, cultivate your garden, nose to the grindstone? No. Mizoguchi's viewpoint is not cautionary but realistic: this is the way human beings are, never satisfied; everything changes, life is suffering, one cannot avoid one's fate. If they had stayed home, they might just as easily have been killed by pillaging soldiers. The fact that they chose to leave gives us a plot, and some ineffably lovely, heartbreaking sequences.

The celebrated Lake Biwa episode, where the two couples come upon a phantom boat in the mists, is surely one of the most lyrical anywhere in cinema. Edited to create a stunningly uncanny mood, it also prepares us for the supernatural elements that follow. The dying sailor on the boat is not a ghost, though the travelers at first take him for one; he warns them, particularly the women, to beware of attacking pirates, another ominous foreshadowing.

It is the movie's supreme balancing act to be able to move seamlessly between the realistic and the otherworldly. Mizoguchi achieves this feat by varying the direction between a sober, almost documentary, long-distance view of mayhem and several carefully choreographed set pieces, such as the phantom ship. A particularly wrenching scene involves the potter taking leave of his wife and son: the pattern of cuts between the husband on the boat, moving off, and the wife running along the shore, waving, comes to concentrate more and more on her stricken, prescient awareness of what lies ahead (he, still having no idea, does not deserve our scrutiny). Later, the bestial behavior of the hungry, marauding soldiers coming upon the potter's wife is shot

from above, with a detached inevitability that makes the savagery more matter-of-fact, the soldiers pathetically staggering about in the background (an effect that must have inspired Godard and François Truffaut in their distanced shoot-outs).

Mizoguchi's artistry reaches its pinnacle in the eerie sequences between Genjuro and Lady Wakasa. Bolerolike music underscores the giddy progression by which the humble potter is lured to the noblewoman's house, is seduced by her, and experiences the ecstasy of paradise, only to learn that he has fallen in love with a ghost. Machiko Kyo, one of Japan's screen goddesses, plays Lady Wakasa with white makeup that resembles a Noh mask and slithery movements along the floor like those of a woman fox. Interestingly, she seduces Genjuro as much with her flattery of his pottery as with her dangerous beauty. Previously, we have seen Genjuro (a surrogate for the director?) obsessed with his pot making, but it is only when Lady Wakasa compliments him on these objects, which she has been collecting, that he appreciates himself in this light, making the telling comment, "The value of people and things truly depends on their setting." In so doing, he embraces Mizoguchian aesthetics, while she raises him from artisan to artist, putting them on a more equal social footing. Their love affair plays out in the rectangular castle of shoji-screened rooms, around an open courtyard, an architectural setting much more aristocratically formal than the village sequences. There is also a breathtakingly audacious shot that tracks from night to day, starting with the two of them in a bath together, then moving across a dissolve and an open field, to pick them up picnicking and disporting in the garden.

As Mizoguchi's great cinematographer, Kazuo Miyagawa, stated in a 1992 interview, they used a crane 70 percent of the time in filming *Ugetsu*. The camera, almost constantly moving—not only laterally but vertically—conveys the instability of a world where ghosts come and go, life and death flow simultaneously into each other, and everything is, finally, transient, subject to betrayal. At her wedding to Genjuro, Lady Wakasa sings: "The finest silk / Of choicest hue / May change and fade away / As would my life / Beloved one / If thou shouldst prove untrue." The camera's viewpoint is always emotionally significant: we look down from above as Lady Wakasa leans over Genjuro to seduce him, as though to convey his fear and desire, while we are practically in the mud with Tobei as he crawls along on his belly, before witnessing his big break—the enemy general's suicidal beheading, for which he will take credit.

Just as the camera's image field keeps changing (without ever losing its elegantly apt compositional sense), so too do our sympathies and moral judgments shift from character to character. No doubt, Genjuro is right to want to escape the clutches of his ghostly mistress, yet she has given him nothing but happiness and is justified in feeling betrayed by him. Tobei is something of a clown, a buffoon, yet his pain is real enough when, puffed up with samurai vanity, he finds his wife working in a brothel. The complex camera movement that follows Ohama from berating a customer to stumbling upon the open-jawed Tobei, and the ensuing passage in which she struggles between anger, shame, and happiness at being reunited with him, demonstrate the way that this director's compassionate, if bitter, moral vision and his choice of camera angle reinforce each other. Mizoguchi's formalism and humanism are part of a single unified expression.

Perhaps the most striking instance of this transcendent tenderness comes toward the end, when Genjuro returns home from his journey, looking for his wife: the camera inscribes a 360-degree arc around the hut, resting at last on the patient, tranquil Miyagi, who we had assumed was dead, having seen her speared earlier. We are relieved, as is Genjuro, to see her preparing a homecoming meal for her husband and mending his kimono while he sleeps. On awaking, he discovers that his wife is indeed dead; it appears he has again been taken in by a woman ghost. The sole consolation is that we (and presumably Genjuro) continue to hear the ghost of Miyagi's voice, as she watches her husband approvingly at his potter's wheel, noting that he has finally become the man of her ideals, though admitting that it is a pity they no longer occupy the same world. One might say that Mizoguchi's detached, accepting eye also resembles that of a ghost, looking down on mortal confusions, ambitions, vanities, and regrets. While all appearances are transitory and unstable in his world, there is also a powerfully anchoring stillness at its core, a spiritual strength no less than a virtuoso artistic focus. The periodic chants of the monks, the droning and the bells, the Buddhist sutras on Genjuro's back, the landscapes surrounding human need allude to this unchanging reality side by side with, or underneath, the restlessly mutable. Rooted in historical particulars, *Ugetsu* is a timeless masterpiece.

Phillip Lopate's latest book is **A Mother's Tale.** *He has written extensively on the movies for the Criterion Collection,* **Film Comment, Cineaste,** *and the* **New York Times,** *and is a professor at Columbia University.*