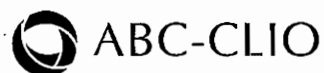


Encyclopedia of Religion and Film

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Mizoguchi, Kenji (1898–1956)

Kenji Mizoguchi, along with Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, is part of the so-called holy trinity of 20th-century Japanese filmmakers. Though less well known than Kurosawa outside of Japan, critical acclaim has raised Mizoguchi to an exalted status in the history of Japanese film, particularly in the genre of political filmmaking (he has been called the “father of feminist film”). From his early experimental films of the 1920s and early 1930s, through his neorealist middle period of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and into his much-celebrated classic period in the decade before his death at the age of 58, Mizoguchi produced a total of 85 films, though many of the early works have been lost.

The first of Mizoguchi’s films to garner international acclaim, *Saikaku ichidai onna* (*The Life of Oharu*, 1952)—an adaptation of Ihara Saikaku’s *Life of an Amorous Woman* (1696)—is a tale of a samurai’s daughter living within the walls of Kyoto’s Imperial Palace. As with most of Mizoguchi’s films from the late 1930s on, the protagonist is a good woman caught amid an array of forces beyond her control—forces that ultimately lead to her ruin. Her early love affair with a man of humble origin brings about the initial fall from grace, as her lover is killed and Oharu is forced into exile. From this point begins an almost unrelenting downward spiral as she attempts suicide, becomes mistress to a nobleman, then a high-class courtesan, a maid, a Buddhist novice, and a beggar. Finally, she is forced into the meanest form of prostitution. The one possibility of hope amid all this despair comes with the film’s climax, where Oharu tries to reclaim her illegitimate child. Although this, too, ends in failure and exile, the closing scene reveals that Oharu has returned to her robes, chanting Buddhist sutras as she goes from door to door in a small village. Her final gesture in the film is a slight bow to a distant temple, perhaps a stoic acceptance of the sufferings of human—and especially a woman’s—life.

Even more than the dark *Oharu*, Mizoguchi’s next film *Ugetsu monogatari* (*Tales of Ugetsu*, 1953) presents a story and evokes a mood that are strikingly Buddhist; the filming itself consciously mimics the light touch and dreamlike quality of traditional Buddhist scroll paintings (*e-maki*). Set in the turbulent 16th century, *Ugetsu* opens with the story of two poor brothers—one a potter, the other a would-be samurai—who dream of better lives. The film chronicles their ups and downs and those of their wives, who more often than not suffer the brunt of their husbands’ mistakes—in a way that evokes Mizoguchi’s mastery of mood and emotion. While the hapless Tobei tricks his way into the samurai ranks, his “sensible” brother Genjuro finds himself seduced into a life of luxury by a noble lady who is ultimately revealed (by a wandering Buddhist mendicant) to be a ghost. Returning home to his abandoned wife and young son after years away, Genjuro

wakes the next morning to find that this too, was an illusion—his wife had in fact been killed years before by drunken soldiers and his son raised by a village elder. Tobei also returns to his wife, who—though very much alive—has been raped and forced into prostitution. Finally, the chastened family settles down to a simple farming life.

The most overtly religious of Mizoguchi's films, *Sanchô dayû* (*Legend of Bailiff Sansho*, 1954), tells a tale—not of the eponymous bailiff, a symbol of all that is wrong in the world—but of the fall from grace of an aristocratic family. Set in the turbulent Kamakura period (1185–1333), when Buddhism was undergoing significant transformation and popularization, the general theme of this film is repeated in mantralike fashion by Zushio, the hero, in words taught to him by his exiled father: “A man without pity is no longer human.” Separated from both parents and taken as slaves by the cruel Sansho, Zushio and his sister Anju grow to adulthood, the former with an increasingly hardened heart. Upon hearing the news that their mother may still be alive and living as a courtesan, Zushio escapes from Sansho and becomes a governor of the province. Taking the route of compassion over political ambition, his first act is to exile his nemesis Sansho and liberate the bailiff's many slaves. Resigning his post and learning of his sister's suicide, Sansho goes in search of his mother, who recognizes him only by his presentation of the family heirloom, an ancient statue of the bodhisattva Kannon, goddess of mercy. Their reunion, one of the most heralded scenes in Japanese film, powerfully evokes the redemption of Zushio, a redemption that is, as critics have noted, at least as Christian as it is Buddhist, given the pietà-like staging and the heavy emphasis on mercy and forgiveness.

Mizoguchi did not limit his representation of religion to these films, however. One of his early films, *Samidare zoshi* (*The Chronicle of May Rain*, 1924), was banned in Tokyo for being sacreligious. Its theme: a Buddhist priest lusting after a geisha. A decade later, during a time of growing nationalism and state control, *Orizuru Osen* (*Downfall of Osen*, 1935) depicts a gang of corrupt Buddhist monks who profit from the sale of stolen temple goods. In *Shin heike monogatari* (*Tales of the Taira Clan*, 1955), we see the arrogance and hypocrisy of the “warrior monks” (*sôhei*) as they make their way down into Kyoto to challenge the Imperial guard. Mizoguchi never shied away from depicting the ugly realities of institutionalized Buddhism in premodern and modern Japan. This cannot be taken, however, as an antireligious sentiment, as Mizoguchi's later works reveal a deep religious sensibility, one that may well be connected to the director's own growing religiosity in later life; around the time of the making of *Ugetsu*, he embraced Nichiren Buddhism, a popular sect combining devotional flavor with strong sociopolitical commitment (Mizoguchi's father had embraced Nichiren Buddhism after the devastating 1923 Kanto earthquake).

Indeed, associates and later critics such as Alain Masson have suggested that Buddhism was the guiding vision behind Mizoguchi's last great films. The message of stoicism in the face of immeasurable suffering—once again, usually on the part of women—resonates well with Buddhist teachings, although such a reading may well subvert or minimize the political message of liberation that critics often read into these films. It can be argued that it is precisely the *jidai-geki* (“period films”), generally considered Mizoguchi's greatest works, that offer up the heroines to the intricate and inevitable workings of cultural forces, while the *gendai-geki*, or modern dramas, leave room for solidarity and social change. On an esthetic level and in a manner that is quintessentially Japanese, the Buddhist truths of suffering, change, and impermanence—symbolized most adroitly by Mizoguchi's obsession with the subtle play of light and shadow—can be appreciated not only for the sadness they bring but also for their beauty.

James Mark Shields

See also: Buddhism; Japan; Kurosawa, Akira; Miyazaki, Hayao; Ozu, Yasujiro.

Further Reading

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Mormonism

From the beginning, Mormons have had two vibrant narratives that would later affect their attempts at the arts: a new scriptural testimony and revelation containing 1,000 years of biblical-era stories and their own dramatic 19th-century history, including elements of violence, persecution, endurance, communitarian idealism, and their own very real pioneer American exodus. Today, the Mormon relationship with film can be found in films about Mormonism, in “official” films produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), in films made by Mormons, and most interestingly, in a new genre of films (by Mormons) that address Mormon theology, history, and culture, and which are aimed primarily but not exclusively at Mormon audiences.