



Thanks to the enterprise of the Gate Cinema, another film by Mizoguchi - *The Life of O-Haru* - has become available in this country. Mizoguchi died 20 years ago; of over 70 films attributed to him, this is only the third to receive a commercial release in London. Yet if the cinema has yet produced a Shakespeare, its Shakespeare is Mizoguchi.

I understand that the Gate company intend to put a 16mm print of *O-Haru* into distribution; this means that although Mizoguchi films are virtually inaccessible to cinema audiences, four of them (all fine and characteristic works) can be booked by film societies and the teachers of those film studies courses that are proliferating all over the country. The four taken together offer a complex and coherent (if far from complete) idea of Mizoguchi's achievement. All are late works, the product of the last four years of his life; all are 'period' films, against which would need to be set the contemporary dramas in which he was equally prolific. It is as if we knew nothing of Shakespeare except *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*: the comparison is not arbitrary, for it is the late plays of Shakespeare that, for English audiences, *Ugetsu Monogatari* and *Sansho Dayu* inevitably evoke, in their movement towards a quasi-mystical harmony and reconciliation. In particular, one might place beside the recognition scene of *Pericles* the final mother and son reunion of *Sansho*, set similarly against the background of the sea, which accumulates such complex resonances in the course of the film. The effect in Mizoguchi is bleaker, more qualified by a sense of loss, but there is a similar sense of moving beyond tragedy towards a total command of human experience.

The style of the films expresses a mastery which is as much spiritual as technical. The world Mizoguchi presents is full of cruelty, violence and disorder; the style, placing it at a contemplative distance that does nothing to soften its anguish achieves a serenity totally devoid of complacency.

Mizoguchi is one of the screen's greatest masters of the sequence-shot, wherein a complex action that would usually require a whole sequence for its realization is organised within a single take. This involves certain procedures that together constitute Mizoguchi's camera style: extremely mobile camera-work, tracking and craning shots predominating over static takes; composition in depth, often with simultaneous action in foreground and background; a certain distance of the camera from the characters, preserving the unity of the action rather than fragmenting it through editing. The first shot of *Shin Heike Monogatari* ('Tales of the Taira Clan') - one of Mizoguchi's only two colour films - is a magnificent example: the camera moves over a crowded market place full of strife and discord: the individuals on whom it lingers shout hysterically of a divided land, rival factions, imminent war; the calm and detached camera movement keeps the spectator at a distance encouraging him to see whole what from a close position would appear fragmented, placing him in a position of understanding. An even finer example is the scene of the mortal wounding of Miyagi in *Ugetsu*: as she staggers on along the path with her child, the distance of the camera and the strict continuity of the action enable us to see her desperate emaciated assailants, in long shot in the valley below, fighting over the rice cakes for which they have killed her, and a scene that might have been shot and edited purely for direct emotional impact becomes a compassionate mediation on universal suffering.

Each of the four films is quite distinct in tone and, though they are closely related stylistically and thematically, Mizoguchi is (again, like Shakespeare) too rich and complex an artist ever to repeat himself. At first glance, the ideological position of the films seems bewilderingly inconsistent, ranging from the 'conservative' acceptance and resignation of *Ugetsu* to the 'progressive' defiance of *Shin*

*Heike*; from the sanctification of the mother in the former to the casting off of the mother in the latter; from the bleak pessimism of *O-Haru* to the qualified affirmation of *Sansho*. Chronologically, the films are progressively more optimistic (in terms of the protagonist's ability to change society), but I don't think too much should be made of this. In fact, the outcome of each film seems partly determined by Mizoguchi's fidelity to the historical setting, partly by the social status of the protagonist within it. Thus *O-Haru*, as unattached woman in a society where men make all the rules, is defeated at every turn and loses everything except her humanity; the hero of *Ugetsu*, a peasant, achieves a qualified personal fulfillment but can do nothing to affect destiny on a socio-political level; Zushio (in *Sansho*), who is of noble birth, effects one magnificent but limited reform before going into exile; Kiyomori, at the end of *Shin Heike*, has outrageously and successfully defied the whole ideological structure of his time because he comes to maturity at the brief period in the twelfth century when the samurai class were in a position to assert themselves politically.

What is consistent through all this is the emphasis on personal integrity and self-definition, growing out of an awareness of self and of the conditions of one's existence. Awareness is one of the supreme Mizoguchian values, expressed everywhere in the style of the films. The other is the preservation of essential human feeling in a violent and brutalising world, the central theme of *Sansho Dayu*.

Mizoguchi's films were previously regarded as unexportable (in contrast to the much more 'westernised' cinema of Kurosawa). The time seems ripe for such an assumption to be decisively challenged: we are far more cinematically aware now, far better equipped to 'read' films instead of merely responding to their subject-matter, thus more likely to appreciate the work of a master who expresses himself through *mise-en-scène* as surely and completely as Shakespeare through the rhythms of blank verse. In the early sixties, a Mizoguchi season at the National Film Theatre played to half-empty houses; now, if one of his films is shown there, it is difficult to get a seat. One hopes that *The Life of O-Haru* will be sufficiently successful to encourage our more enterprising distributors to release other Mizoguchi films - particularly *Chikamatsu Monogatari* ('The Tale of the Crucified Lovers') and the other colour film *The Empress Yang Kwei-Fei*. *Shin Heike* alone established its director as one of the cinema's supreme colourists.

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