

Some Viewing Notes for *Maborosi* (1995), Directed By Hirokazu Kore-eda

Today you're seeing this director's first feature film. If you haven't seen his latest (*Shoplifters*), view it today at 5:30 or Thursday the 24th at 5:30/8:00 PM, OKC Museum of Art!

On the Director:

Kore-eda got his start in television and documentary, and one can definitely see the influence of documentary in the camera work in this film. He originally studied literature and, according to some accounts, had hoped to become a novelist. Once established in cinema, he became prolific; he makes a film every 1-2 years. Kore-eda edits his own films.

The script was adapted from the 1983 story "Maboroshi no Hikari," by Teru Miyamoto (an English translation of which is available in *Phantom Lights and Other Stories by Miyamoto Teru*, translated by Roger K. Thomas). Kore-eda was inspired to adapt the novel to screen after working on a documentary called *However*, through which he met a grief-stricken widow and came to want to explore the nature of grief in response to an inexplicable death.

Many critics see Kore-eda as the successor to Yasujiro Ozu in the making of quiet, lyrical, "humanist" realism in Japanese cinema. While Kore-eda is aware of the comparison—and flattered by it—he says he's as influenced by many other filmmakers, including Chinese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien (*Taipei Story*, *The Assassin*) and Brit Ken Loach (*Riff-Raff*, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*), and thinks that, from Japanese film, Mikio Naruse (*Floating Clouds*, *Late Chrysanthemums*) was more of a direct influence, especially in their views of human nature.

Visual motifs:

- The use of windows as frames
- The idea of "illusory light" as thematized in the use of chiaroscuro and only natural lighting on set
- Long shots of roadways, train tracks, alleyways, tunnels, pathways, stairways, and hallways
- The use of tableau-like *mise-en-scène* and lingering shots that have the effect of paintings
- A limited color palette
- Stillness as aesthetic: note that there are very few panning or tracking shots, zooms or close-ups (Cinematographer Nakabori Masao won awards for his work on this film at the Venice Film Festival and the International Cinematographers Festival.)
- The final, cathartic conversation between Yumiko and her second husband Tamio in the evening out on the jetty represents a really interesting choice for how one might film an emotional scene. What are your thoughts on being so distant from the couple? What effect does this scene leave you with?

Symbolic elements to watch/listen for: bells, trains, bicycles, flames, clocks, boats aground

Sound: Note the contrasting ambient sounds in the two major settings: the sounds of traffic (and especially trains) in the city vs. the silence and sounds of the wind and ocean in the seaside village of Noto

Lasting impressions:

David Desser aptly refers to Kore-eda's work in spiritual terms, as capturing the "imagination of the transcendent," while others make an excellent point: that quiet films like Kore-eda's have the power to transform the director and the audience into good listeners.

The idea of the "transcendent" is validated by Professor of Buddhist Studies Francisca Cho, who sees in *Maborosi* the enactment of a pre-modern Buddhist concept of *yūgen*, which privileges an aesthetic of dimness, of embracing absence as possible presence: "The obscuring nature of darkness embraces what is silent and formless. In tandem with this eclipsing of vision and sound, the ideal of *yūgen* sacrifices the conceits of intellectual knowledge in favor of alternative kinds of discernment." Because we never learn the "why" of Ikuo's death, we, like Yumiko, must abandon trying to answer for why "in favor of the task of *looking* at what *is*, which necessitates that we unburden ourselves of the intellectual strain of making sense of things." It should be noted, however, that Kore-eda says Buddhist concepts never crossed his mind until someone asked him about the "Zen" qualities at a film festival after it screened!