

Love and Death in the Japanese Cinema (3) : Re-evaluation of *Gate of Hell* (*Jigokumon*)

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Introduction

In the fifties, Japanese films emerged from obscurity to become a part of most filmgoers' experience and a routine task for film critics. *Rashomon* was the revelation of the 1950 Venice festival and the veil of ignorance began to be lifted. Succeeding festivals provided a few more glimpses of some beautiful historical and legendary dramas. *Gate of Hell*,¹⁾ which was released in 1953 and was awarded the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1954, was of their company.

Based on a Kan Kikuchi story about palace intrigue and lost love, *Gate of Hell* was directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa, starred Kazuo Hasegawa and Machiko Kyo, and was photographed in Eastman Color by Kohei Sugiyama. A modified Eastman-Color process gave Sugiyama the means of capturing the graceful impressionism of the Japanese print. Visually it must be one of the most enthralling films ever made.

Kinugasa had been working in the cinema since about 1927 ; his *Crossways* (1929) was shown in France and, during the 30's, by the Film Society in London. With his contemporary, Kenji Mizoguchi, he seems to be the leading exponent of this genre. As in Mizoguchi's film, the story is taken from classic literature and is set in a remote period of the past during one of the civil wars which make up so great a part of Japanese history.

It is 1160, and two rival families are struggling for power ; a revolt against the Emperor Goshirakawa has just been suppressed by his regent Kiyomori. This, however, is only the background. An episode in the revolt contrives the meeting of the film's two leading characters, Kesa, wife of a warrior in the service of the Imperial Palace, and Morito, one of Kiyomori's soldiers, who falls violently in love with her. And the tragic affair between the two begins.

It is said that *Gate of Hell* was ordinary enough for the domestic market and was exotic enough for the foreign market.²⁾ To Western audiences, the dramatic progression in *Gate of Hell* was certainly less concentrated than in *Rashomon*. But it is none the less a rare, exotic work of art. Unfortunately enough, *Gate of Hell* was considered in Japan as one of Kinugasa's worst films. Japanese critics neglected the thorough investigation of the film. It seems likely that the re-evaluation of this film would prove that it is truly

international in its universal human appeal.

Source

The source for *Gate of Hell* is the *Gempei Seisuiiki*, a historical record of the struggles between the rival Taira and Minamoto clans for supremacy over all the land. It was during this period that the tragic affair of Kesa and Morito took place, culminating in 1160 in the death of Kesa and Morito's becoming a monk.

The known facts are as follows³⁾:

Kesa was the only child of a widow who was called Koromogawa after the place in which she had lived. Kesa's mother also took over the upbringing of an orphaned nephew, Morito Yendo, who was a year older than Kesa. Kesa and Morito grew up together and not surprisingly, fell in love. Morito asked his aunt to promise him Kesa in marriage and tried everything he could think of to marry her. Unfortunately, when Kesa was fourteen, her mother had Kesa married to Wataru Watanabe, a wealthy young samurai. There was no alternative for Kesa.

When Morito was seventeen, he happened to see Kesa at the dedication of the Watanabe Bridge. After about half a year he rushed to his aunt's house and drew his sword to kill her, but she saved herself by promising that she would arrange for him to see Kesa that evening. She wrote to Kesa, and her dutiful daughter answered her summons. But Kesa was stunned when she arrived to find her mother preparing to kill herself.

Kesa meets with Morito and tells him she still loves him, but the only way they can be together is for him to kill her legal husband. They make plans to accomplish this : Morito is to come to the house that night and murder Wataru in his bed. Kesa will have her husband drink wine to make him sleep soundly and will have him wash his hair so that Morito can identify him in the dark. Kesa then returns home, washes her own hair, puts her husband to bed in her room, and takes his place in his bed.

Morito arrives and carries out the plan, including cutting off the head of his victim. He is stricken with horror when he finds he has killed his beloved Kesa, who was only seventeen. He realizes now that Kesa had to marry her mother's choice and that, once married to Wataru, she could never be Morito's, no matter what her own feelings might be in the matter.

Morito confesses his crime to Wataru and they both become monks. . . . (Morito, in fact, lived to the age of 79, and achieved fame as an influential religious figure, “venerable Mongaku.”)

This story has been re-told many times and, naturally, the historical facts have not always been rigidly observed.⁴ The credits for the film *Gate of Hell* mention that it is “From a play by Kan Kikuchi.” The reinterpretations of the story from the *Gempei Seisuiiki* form the most brilliant part of the writings of Kikuchi. In his five-act play *Kesa's Husband (Kesa no Otto)*,⁵ the emphasis is laid on the demonstration of Kesa's devotion and loyalty to her husband rather than on the presentation of the affair between Kesa and Morito. There is a record of a performance by Sumizo Ichikawa and Minosuke Bando at the Yurakuza Theater in 1935.⁶

Story

Near the end of Heian era, the Minamoto clan under Yoritomo is attempting to take over the reins of government from what it considers the effete and pleasure-loving court in Kyoto.

The film begins with an attack by on its enemies, the Taira, and to protect the Emperor and his sister a volunteer is sought to pretend to be the Emperor's sister and lead the attackers astray. Lady Kesa volunteers and departs in the Imperial carriage. Her entourage is pursued by the attacking forces but she is led to safety by Morito, a headstrong and accomplished warrior.

Kesa has fainted on the way. Morito brings her to his house, and then clashes with some warriors who join treachery. One of them is his own brother. Morito learns that it was his brother who led the enemy attack. In the confusion Kesa gets away.

In despite of Morito's bravery, the Emperor and his sister are fallen into the hands of Minamoto supporters. Morito departs for Itukushima Shrine where Kiyomori, the military leader of the Tairas, stays for regular worship. When Morito arrives, Kiyomori enjoys an ancient court dance. Immediately after he is informed of Minamoto's treachery, Kiyomori launches the counterattack and suppresses the palace revolt. The peace in Kyoto is restored.

At the Jigokumon (gate) Morito learns that his brother has been killed. He also meets Kesa again. She has received the honor of going to serve the Emperor's sister and declines Morito's invitation to her and her aunt to visit his house.

When Kiyomori assembles his victorious men to grant their requests in payment for service in battle, they are all scandalized when Morito says he wants nothing but Kesa as his reward. At this time we learn that she is married to Wataru, one of nobles who works for the Emperor.

In Kesa's house a servant woman and a next-door wife make fun of Morito's rough ways and Kesa is

embarrassed. When her husband returns home she is apologetic about Morito, afraid she may have inadvertently encouraged him. Wataru tells her not to worry—he will protect her.

Kiyomori sends for Kesa. She plays the *koto* for him until he excuses himself and sends in Morito. He has told Morito that if Kesa will accept him, it can be arranged. But Kesa tells Morito that she already has a husband and leaves him alone.

Wataru's friends drink with him and when he learns that he is to be matched against Morito in the next day's tournament, they are confident he can win.

When Kesa returns, she tells her husband of her rejection of Morito and also that she finds the whole matter quite upsetting. Wataru tells her that Morito doesn't seem to understand that power cannot move a woman's mind and he promises to protect her.

At the tournament Morito embarrasses Kesa by stopping his horse before her in the stands, and then goes on to win his race against Wataru.

Later there is a closing ceremony and then a party at which nobles and samurai drink together. Morito's pride is hurt when Wataru's friends imply that Wataru could have won if he wanted to, and Morito is on the verge of drawing his sword when he is asked to leave by Kiyomori's representative.

Morito goes to see Kesa and is told that she is visiting her aunt. When he finds that she is not at her aunt's he forces the old woman to write a note summoning Kesa because she is ill.

When Kesa arrives in response to the fake message, she is seized by Morito who threatens to kill her whole family if she won't go with him. Under this kind of duress she agrees to help in a plan to kill her husband.

Back at her house, Kesa gives a piece of jewelry to her maid. She asks her husband to check out her room—she thought she heard something there—and when he does so she plies him with sake and plays the *koto*. She asks him to sleep in her room and when he goes to bed she extinguishes a lamp as a signal to Morito, who is approaching outside.

Morito enters the house, slashes at the figure in Wataru's bed and is horrified to learn that he has killed Kesa. He is overcome with grief and asks Wataru to kill him. Wataru hurries to Kesa's body and asks why she didn't confide in him? Why didn't she rely on him?

He won't kill Morito—that won't bring Kesa back—and Morito cuts off his top-knot to renounce the world of power he has known, to become a monk and spend the rest of his life reflecting on his transgressions.

Thematic

As unattractive as some of Morito's attributes might be, we must admire his loyalty. Even when his own brother gives him information that would indicate he is on the losing side, Morito refuses to betray his lord. Historically, the facts about the battle in the film are

true—Kiyomori did route the Minamotos on this occasion and the Tairas won the day.

The display of enemy heads after a battle, incidentally, was a common practice during this period of bloody strife.

Ironically, after Morito became the monk Mongaku, he joined forces with Yoritomo, who came to lead the Minamotos to final victory in the long rivalry. It was Yoritomo who had a shrine erected to Mongaku in Kamakura, which featured a nude statue of the monk.

Becoming a monk, incidentally, was not only a means of atonement but was also a way of escaping punishment for a crime. One might question Morito's sincerity, except that as a monk he was so active in worthwhile causes that his imprisonment would have been contrary to the social good. It should be noted that in any event he would bear a sense of guilt for life.

Rashomon concerns the samurai code in relation to suicide, but Kesa's arranging for her own murder falls into a somewhat different category. Her motive to die might have been self-sacrifice for her husband's safety or blaming herself for not preventing what happened. There was no direct compulsion for her to die, although other possible solutions would have been less dramatic.

Style

Teinosuke Kinugasa began his career as a female impersonator on the stage and moved to movies when they were still in their infancy.⁷⁾ His early directorial efforts were highly experimental, but he later made films of all types, primarily period pieces.

Gate of Hell does not examine or criticize the feudal system; it merely tells an old story well with feudal obligations taken for granted. Its impact lies in the subtle use of color (it is the first feature film to be made anywhere in Eastman Color) and the charm of its exotic story.

The story allowed Kinugasa to experiment with color and create "the most beautiful color photography ever to grace the screen."⁸⁾ Certain colors dominate the screen in specific scenes: red and orange during the palace revolt; blue with touches of purple during a horse race; a warm rose glow breaking through the blackness of night. He would probably have preferred the film's success to have been based on these elements rather than on exotic interpretations.

The scroll paintings that introduce the main sections of the film are particularly appropriate devices. The scroll technique of story-telling featured great pictorial detail and was developed during the period when the seat of government had been established at Kamakura by the Minamoto clan after they eventually overcame the Tairas. The subject matter of these paintings often concerned the war between the clans, and the scrolls used in the film are said to be authentic masterpieces. By dissolving from battle scenes and that of the horse race to live action, a unique flavor of antiq-

uity is added to this story of feudal codes and sacrifice.

In the film, in complete disregard of the historical facts, Morito meets Kesa for the first time after she is married. Their meeting is suitably dramatic—both are performing dangerous deeds for their clan and their Emperor and they share in the ruse of pretending to evacuate the Emperor's sister. Kesa's fainting also allows Morito's lips to touch hers before they ever exchange a word. Morito's hot temper is established early in the film when he slashes off the legs of the table. Later he kicks a dog and a bucket and breaks the strings of a *koto*. In contrast, Lady Kesa's character is indicated by her action of burning incense for the unknown dead.

Music plays an important part in the film, not only in the underscore, a sort of symphonic treatment of Japanese themes, but also in the "source" music. This would include the *biwa* player, the *gagaku* drum, and, especially, Kesa's playing the *koto*. It establishes her as a well-bred and talented young woman; it allows her to express her unspoken emotions through her music; and it gives the ever-fiery Morito a dedicate target to smash in his frustration. Appropriately, her *koto* music is faintly repeated when Wataru finds her dead.

Other uses of music would include the melodic flute over the scene of Kesa in the garden with her husband, the heavy, rhythmic drums at the horse race, lighter drums over the ceremony that follows the race, drums and flute as Morito is ordered out, and drums building to the murder of Kesa.

The use of the gong in *Gate of Hell* is again not strictly in the Kabuki sense of announcing the coming of night. It is midnight when it strikes, preparing us for Morito's impending arrival. The second beat is on Morito's actual entrance into the garden and it continues at intervals as he comes closer to the house, creating suspense and a feeling of doom with its fateful overtones.

Gate of Hell followed closely on *Rashomon*'s success and it was felt that the word "gate" must appear in the title. It is interesting that it is the same gate in both films, used dramatically in the case of *Gate of Hell* as a place for Morito to periodically appear out of and to disappear into at the end.

Conclusion

The victory of *Rashomon* caused truly national jubilation. Some critics even compared the film festivals to the Olympic Games. Each failure to win a festival prize was regarded as a national disaster. According to Anderson and Richie, director and producing company issued public apologies, and when the Japanese delegates got back home, they filled the popular and trade press with articles on "What I learned at Cannes about How to Produce Prizewinners."⁹⁾

When the news of the Cannes award was reported, it is said that Kinugasa could hardly believe it.¹⁰⁾ He must have been even more surprised when some French

critics saw in the film themes similar to those in such great classics as *Phaedra* and *Tristan and Isolde*.¹¹⁾ He undoubtedly handled these traditional themes with absolute assurance. The consequence was that he reached international fame.

Japanese critics were completely embarrassed by the foreign success of *Gate of Hell*. Foreigners seemed to suggest that Japanese critics did not know their business. Since no critics included it into "Best 10" list in 1953,¹²⁾ they felt that they were insulted and injured. There were also many articles claiming that Japan had suffered a national insult. One critic pointed out, once again according to Anderson and Richie, that "in the same way, foreigners—forever souvenir-hunting—always pick Japanese-style paintings on silk rather than our oils on canvas."¹³⁾ The problem stemmed from the difference in tastes between Western and Japanese critics, or the neglect of Japanese critics' duties?

There are no doubt many Japanese films that, whatever their quality, are culturally too alien to be understood by Western audiences. The foreign success of *Gate of Hell* indicated that Western audiences were ready to accept the Japanese films on their own terms and to see that they dealt not with materials that were peculiarly Japanese, but with emotions that were common property of humanity. The re-evaluation of the past films as well as the promotion of the newcomers are needed for intercultural communication now ever more.

Fortunately for Japan, there are increasing number of enthusiastic scholars who are into re-evaluating Japanese films overseas. As a result, Japanese film studies show impelling, restless and dynamic movements. Donald Richie undertook in the leading role, primarily in the US, in his comprehensive study of Japanese films during the late 1950s to the 60s.

As the study of film was popular in American universities throughout the 1970s, the faculty of film often attached to language or literature departments realized an opportunity to form new academic disciplines of the genre study and the auteur theory. Based on the pioneering work by Richie, such film scholars as Audie Bock and Joan Mellen applied these new disciplines to the study of Japanese films and attempted in-depth studies of important Japanese filmmakers, namely Mizoguchi, Naruse, Ozu, and Kurosawa. However, though of high standard in their quality of works, Japanese cinema still remained largely unexplored in the Western publications in volume, in quantity.

In the 1980s, the study of Japanese cinema became one of the major growing areas in cinema studies, along with the rapid growth in Japan's economy. Growing popularity of the Japanese films in academics led to the new approaches to issues including semiological or socio-political analysis. Some of these have been put forth by the brilliant younger generation of film scholars since the early 1990s.

Recent ideas about intertextuality provide a more helpful paradigm than traditional notions of auteurism. Stylistic practice with ideological agenda in new ways makes an original and significant contribution to the contemporary study of national cinemas. One of the prominent works, which is an issue rarely approached by Japanese scholars, is done by Darrell Davis.¹⁴⁾

In his recent book, *Picturing Japanese-ness*, Davis explores the role of 1930s Japanese cinema in the construction of a national identity and in the larger context of Japan's encounter with the West and modernity. Davis demonstrates how many prewar Japanese films employed what he calls monumental style—an aspiration to reclaim the cinema for Japan, to transform Japanese tradition from a cultural legacy into a sacrament. Carrying his discussion of monumental style into the postwar era, he lends new perspective to such celebrated films as *Gate of Hell*. According to him, the success of *Gate of Hell* is attributable largely to the use of techniques pioneered in the prewar period films, especially in films of the monumental style.¹⁵⁾ The irony of Kinugasa's success lies in the postwar recuperation of a style forged to express an indigenous national identity free from foreign adulteration. He says :

Like SLR cameras, videodecks, automobiles, and silicon chips, *Gate of Hell* flows with that ever widening river of postwar goods Japanese-designed for Western consumers. A high-profile production of Daiei, the studio that released both *Rashomon* and Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu*, the film is a repackaging of *jidai geki* to suit art house tastes for exotica. From the start it is easy to identify what made the film a festival favorite. Based on a story by an author with an international reputation . . . , the film uses big stars with worldwide popularity. . . . The newly introduced Eastman-color process is prominently featured Finally, the opening musical theme sounds like a Japanization of a score for a John Ford Western. . . . (and) the richly orchestrated score conforms more to someone's idea of the "mysterious Orient" than to any authentic reproduction of Japanese music.¹⁶⁾

Cinema has above all proven to be the art of the twentieth century, the art of modern man, of scientific, technologized, dynamic Western man, and it has been Japan's goal since the beginning of the Meiji era to compete on every level with the West. It became very much a standard of value, associated as it was with the West, that is, with the very latest in modern scientific achievements. But if Japan has proven a significant adaptor, its filmmakers have proven themselves equally original, putting film to very markedly and strikingly Japanese uses.

Notes

- 1) The detail information of the film is as follows:
Gate of Hell (Jigokumon)
 Released in 1953 by Daiei-Kyoto
 Color, running time 89 minutes.
 Credits :

Produced by Masaichi Nagata
 Directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa
 Screenplay by Teinosuke Kinugasa
 Based on the play by Kan Kikuchi
 Photography by Kohei Sugiyama
 Art Direction by Kisaku Itoh
 Color Guidance by Sanzo Wada
 Music by Yasushi Akutagawa

Cast :

Morito Kazuo Hasegawa
 Kesa Machiko Kyo
 Wataru Isao Yamagata
 Kiyomori Koreya Senda
 Shigemori Yataro Kurokawa

- 2) Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie, *The Japanese Film : Art and Industry* (New York : Grove Press, 1960), p. 228.
- 3) The following facts are taken from the original Japanese source and translated by the authors.
 "Mongaku Hosshin (Vol. Tsu, No.19)," *Gempei Seisuiiki*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo : Kokumin Tosho Co., 1928), pp. 659-669.
- 4) This story was treated by Ryunosuke Akutagawa in his "*Kesa and Morito (Kesa to Morito)*." Akutagawa's particular genius for the macabre is splendidly displayed.
 "*Kesa to Morito [Kesa and Morito]*," *Akutagawa Ryunosuke Zenshu*, Vol. 3 (Tokyo : Iwanami Shoten, 1996), pp. 123-135.
- 5) Compared with Akutagawa's novel, Kikuchi's play is rather poor, but popular.
 "*Kesa no Otto [Kesa's Husband]*," *Kikuchi Kan Zenshu*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo : Bungei Shunju, 1993), pp. 207-220.
- 6) "Notes of *Kesa no Otto*," *Kikuchi Kan Zenshu*, Vol. 1, p. 602.
- 7) Kinugasa played the heroine and looked very much like a woman in his dress, wig, and make-up in *The Living Corpse (Ikeru Shikabane)* directed by Eizo Tanaka in 1917.
 Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, p. 39.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- 10) Masayoshi Iwabutch, "1954 in Japan," *Sight and Sound* Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 1955): 203.
- 11) Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Films*, trans. Peter Morris (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1972), p. 165.
- 12) None of 33 judges cast a vote to *Gate of Hell* at "Kinema Jumbo Best 10 in 1953" although it was listed the 4th place in the Box-Office Best 10.
Sengo Kinema Jumbo Best 10 Zenshi [The Complete History of Kinema Jumbo Best 10 since the End of the War] (Tokyo : Kinema Jumbo Co., 1984), pp. 38-43.
- 13) Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, p. 233.
- 14) Darrell William Davis has been a postdoctoral fellow at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities. He received his Ph. D. in 1990 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and was born and raised in Tokyo. He teaches film and literature at the University of Southern California.
- 15) Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness : Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 220.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 221.

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