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## **Nationalism, Censorship and Subversion: An Exploration of Meaning in Kenji Mizoguchi's War Years Pictures (1939-1945)**

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### **Abstract**

The late-1930s, and early-1940s was a time of great political upheaval and social change in Japan. Increasing military influence on domestic policy and a focus upon nationalistic thought had a profound effect on the social role of cinema and the creative freedoms of film-makers. Even as a recognised director, Kenji Mizoguchi did not escape these strictures.

This primary purpose of this paper is to analyse three key elements that had a profound effect on both Japanese cinema and Mizoguchi's film style, during this period. Firstly, I will analyse this period in terms of politics and the rise of nationalism in a socio/political context. Secondly, it is important to examine how cinema in Japan was subject to extremely strict censorship, and how Mizoguchi responded to these strictures. Lastly, I will explore both Mizoguchi's personal, and professional position during this period in which the director worked.

Mizoguchi's film style changed quite dramatically during this time, and here there are questions to be considered. Did the director have to develop a film style which embraced a more Japanese aesthetic at the level of *mise en scène*? If so, was this a conscious decision, or, one where the director instinctively resorted to motifs and modes of expression rooted deeply in traditional Japanese culture? With this in mind, and by offering a deep textual reading, two key films of this period will be considered, *Genroku Chushingura* (1941-1942), and *Meito Bijomaru* (1945). Employing a reading which is reliant upon the contemporary socio/political climate, and the influence of traditional art, will allow us to understand both the pressure, creative restriction, and the ideology of an artist working during a particularly turbulent and harrowing period of Japanese history.

### **Keywords**

Kenji Mizoguchi, Japanese Cinema, Censorship, Nationalism, Film History

## Introduction

The rise of nationalism during the 1930s and 1940s in Japan resulted in an extremely turbulent period in that country's history. Military and government control affected all areas of Japanese life from politics to the arts. As a form of mass-communication, cinema was not spared from these strictures, and was used by the authorities to promote a specific ideology, designed to promote patriotism and unquestioned loyalty. This paper will explore how cinema negotiated these rules by focusing on one of the most polemic film directors of the period, Kenji Mizoguchi. To achieve this, it is important to position the director in a historical and political context. This will be achieved by first exploring how cinema was affected by certain restrictions imposed on it by the authorities, before focusing more specifically upon Mizoguchi's relationship with both his art, and the government. Mizoguchi's feelings towards this period of history remain unclear, with previous research only serving to reveal contradictions. However, by applying close textual readings of two of his most revealing war-time pictures, *Genroku Chushingura* (1941-42), and *Meito Bijomaru* (*The Famous Sword Bijomaru*, 1945), and by utilising contemporary archival research, the paper will address these inconsistencies.

## The 1930s, Censorship and Propaganda

1930s Japan was a time of great political upheaval and social change. Increasing military influence on domestic policy and a focus upon nationalistic thought had a profound effect on the social role of cinema and the creative freedoms of filmmakers. State control of film content became more prominent as military personnel began to adopt a propaganda role, requesting that films contain specific thematic elements and be shot in certain locations such as the recently occupied Manchuria. Even as a recognised director of over fifty motion pictures, Kenji Mizoguchi did not escape these strictures. The cinema was a target for the authorities keen on expanding the nationalist rhetoric. As Peter High reports, political influence upon the film industry was confused and desultory up until the establishment of the ill-named Film Control Committee in 1934, set up to debate the "entertainment – propaganda function" of cinema. Later the same year, the Greater Japanese Film Association was formed. The Association's statement of purpose was to promote the production of quality films which would "1) Exalt the spirit of the nation, 2) Stimulate national industry and research, 3) Provide wholesome public entertainment" (High, 2003, p.61). By 1936, the Ministry of Home Affairs had taken over control of the film industry and made it "responsible for the national spirit of self sacrifice" (McDonald, 1994, p.60). Self-regulation was finally brought to an end with the passing of the more draconian Films Law in 1939. The prolific Mizoguchi historian, Saso Tsutomu, believes that as these various new film laws were introduced, and as Japan changed politically, Mizoguchi's film style altered to accommodate this.

Furthermore, as Japanese imperialism took hold, the director's focus shifted inwards, away from the influence of a European and American cinematic style, and more towards his own society and culture (Saso, 2006, p.114). This description seems most logical: that Mizoguchi began to see the effect that both militarism and imperialism were having on society. To exhibit western cultural influences became politically extremely hazardous. Mizoguchi had to produce work which was totally in keeping with the themes that he was addressing, but at the same time he also had to disguise these themes through traditional and more 'patriotic' art forms. To this end, Mizoguchi's opposition to the regime would manifest itself filmically in the form of rebels, the downtrodden, outsiders, and broken and beaten individuals, all of who exist in an unfair and unfeeling society. By drawing on traditional Japanese cultural heritage, the director was able to develop a technique which was both empathetic to the people, but acceptable to the regime. Saso strongly suggests that this approach was unequivocal, that Mizoguchi stood side by side with the Japanese people, sharing their concerns and fears about the direction in which society was heading (2006, p.114). Saso's point is crucial. Not only does it enable us to unify both Japanese film and society; it also allows us to view Mizoguchi as a director who examined the personal conflicts within the individual as well as the moral conflicts and constraints of both family and society.

Nowhere can this be witnessed more clearly than in his first film for Shochiku, *Zangiku Monogatari* (*The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*, 1939), Mizoguchi challenges the viewer by encouraging self-assessment and questioning social responsibilities. I would argue that to achieve this successfully, Mizoguchi *had* to develop a film style which embraced a more Japanese aesthetic at the level of *mise en scène*. As High (2003) posits: "the authorities could gladly accept this and applauded it, even though Mizoguchi nowhere proclaimed the absolute superiority of Japan or the 'Japanese Spirit'" (p.187). This response may be explained by two pragmatic strategies. Firstly, a retreat into residual cultural references was a way to please the authorities and keep working. Secondly, because residual cultural motifs provide a readily exchangeable currency, they can be subtly subverted and made to contain more ambivalent ideas. If, as Saso claims, Mizoguchi was a director of the people, highlighting their hardships, their concerns and giving them a voice through his work, how do we account for those views, including High's, which suggest that the director was fearful of censorship and aimed to appease authority? For example, Audie Bock does not see the director as such, and suggests that Mizoguchi was "a disappointment to those who wanted to see him as the champion of the left" (1990, p.39). It is also fair to say that Mizoguchi seemed to be fully co-operative with the nationalist spirit of the period; he became a government advisor on the matter of relevant film themes, and openly promoted "the need for film practice to change with the times to express current political reality with the proper 'expressive gesture'" (Andrew & Andrew, 1981, p.13). During the war years he

continued to make propagandist period dramas such as *Genroku Chushingura*, and *Meito Bijomaru*. He also worked on other government directed pictures such as *Miyamoto Musashi* (1944), and the joint directed *Hissshoka* (*Victory Song*, 1945). All of these films, to some degree, saw Mizoguchi referring back to this “proper expressive gesture” which he believed could be achieved “by adopting the spirit of Japan’s noble past” (Andrew & Andrew, 1981, p.13). Indeed, it may be considered that the two positions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Mizoguchi’s ability to remain on the right side of authority during this difficult period may well be explained by the fact that his own interests in Japanese culture happily coincided with the approved cultural ideology of the ruling regime. Adding weight to this pro-nationalist positioning of Mizoguchi in the war years is the well-documented account of his trip to Manchuria in 1943 to search for locations for a proposed Shochiku picture. Mark Le Fanu recounts this episode well:

*During this journey, Mizoguchi demanded to be treated like a general (he had already intended to go to China wearing a sword), and flew into a petulant rage when the company liaison officers in Shanghai accorded him with less respect than he felt was due (2005, p.180).*

Therefore, as Mizoguchi was involved with the imperial government as advisor and as a director of appropriately themed pictures, it could be easy to label him as a mere marionette, the government’s cinematic stooge. However, let us examine this in context.

### **Commentator or Collaborator?**

Firstly, we need to take into account Mizoguchi’s political leanings; this proves to be a challenge as such an examination proves contradictory. In a 1964 *Cahiers du Cinéma* interview, lifelong friend and collaborator Kawaguchi Matsutaro noted that:

*Mizoguchi was an opportunist. When, for example, Marxism penetrated Japan, he followed the fashion. Then, during the war, the communists were persecuted and so Mizoguchi veered to the right. Then came democracy, so he became a democrat (in Giuglaris & Mnouchkine 1964, pp.25-26).*

This is a subject also tackled by Joan Mellen in *The Waves at Genji’s Door*. Mellen provides a wonderful analysis of *Zangiku Monogatari* observing that the film is not just a tale about warring actors but is in fact hugely critical of society. She considers it to be “one of the most brilliant satires of the Japanese family system” (1976, p.160). It is hard to imagine how a film which questions the hierarchal structure of society could be shown in such a tense political climate. But Mellen, in a significant observation, notes that this was achieved by a clever manipulation of tradition, to make a veiled contemporary social comment. She notes “Mizoguchi’s tactic of disarming the authorities with potboilers so that he might acquire some measure of space to do films in which he believed” (1976, p.160). According to Mellen,

Mizoguchi's films of this period included innocuous characters and theatrical settings as represented in this film by a kabuki troupe, in order to evade censorship. For Mellen, Mizoguchi used tactics of "subterfuge to confuse the militarists" (1976, p.160). LeFanu cites scriptwriter Yoda's view that "Mizoguchi was 'a man of the left' whose single most defining character trait was an 'undying hatred of oppression'" (2005, p.21). Finally, Mizoguchi's assistant director on *Genroku Chushingura*, Kaneto Shindo, insisted in an interview with the *Nihon Sankei Shinbun* that, despite his excursions to Manchuria and his government projects, Mizoguchi was not a loyalist, and did not even understand loyalism (2009, p.16). From such observations we can establish that Mizoguchi was not simply an opportunist, but a creative artist who was acutely aware of, and sensitive to, the political situation. Though evidence about his personal politics is somewhat contradictory, we can be assured that his pragmatic response was entirely motivated by the desire to continue making films. And in pursuing an informed analysis of his films in this period, it is possible to interpret their ideological frames of reference. While other directors such as Yamanaka Sadao were being drafted into the armed forces, Mizoguchi managed to continue working relatively unhindered. Film examples of this sleight-of-hand, such as *Genroku Chushingura* and *Meito Bijomaru*, will be considered below.

### ***Genroku Chushingura***

Mizoguchi's most famous wartime picture is without question his adaptation of Mayama Seika's play *Genroku Chushingura*. Beginning in late 1701, Lord Asano (Arashi Yoshisaburo) is tricked into unsheathing his sword in the Shogun's Palace, an action which is punishable with an order to commit seppuku (ritual suicide). Asano's loyal samurai, now master-less, holds the wicked Lord Kira (Mimasu Banho) responsible. Fourteen months after the incident, head warrior Oishi (Kawarazaki Chojuro) assembles Asano's former samurai to avenge the death. The various studies of this film in respect of the relationship with traditional Japanese art have been well chronicled. The most comprehensive study is found in the book *Cinematic Landscapes* (2008), where Darrell William Davis highlights the film's stylistic elements as well as its social function. His fascinating in-depth study also offers the reader an insight into the artistic creation of the film, particularly the way in which it is constructed, so as to be 'familiar' to a contemporary audience, encouraging a certain way of seeing. The film, as was the case with many pictures of this period, sets out to promote a feeling of national identity and to inspire pride in the traditional arts. Davis observes that it was made to stir emotion, and to infuse a nationalistic response:

*This is the intended effect of the film, as a kokusaku ("national policy") project: a nationalist promotion of the classical Japanese heritage to fire up the war effort. Mizoguchi was not alone in the effort to render classical Japanese arts and ethics as a monument to Japanese identity (2008, p. 189).*

The Japanese arts to which he refers relate to the Genroku period (1688-1704), a time that witnessed a flourishing of art and literature amongst the chōnin (townspeople). Although utilised during the war years to promote a sense of Japaneseness, the Genroku period is crucial in Mizoguchi's work. For now however, let us concentrate on Davis' observations.

Beyond its nationalistic propaganda function, the employment of Genroku culture invokes the idea of a specifically Japanese way of seeing. Davis observes that this is achieved by deploying a wealth of traditional Japanese material:

*Everything about Genroku Chushingura indefatigably emphasises the artistry in Japanese architecture and design, costume and manners, paintings and gardens. More than this the systematic patterns of decoupage invite a mode of perception that reflects the serenity, decorum, and tenacity of the depicted historical world (2008, p.210).*

Davis adds that because the story was well known, "Mizoguchi could take for granted a familiarity with so many elements of plot, character, allusion and allegory" (2008, p.188), and the director concentrated his creative energies into artistic composition. Mizoguchi's recourse to the traditional arts to inform his visual style was already long established but now with the backing of a government endorsed project, he was able to develop his production design on an ambitious new scale.

*Genroku Chushingura* marked a crucial point in Mizoguchi's artistic development. As a director of over sixty pictures and despite his previous altercations with the censors, the Shochiku Company gave him a free rein over the film's production. Such was the scale of the planned production, a satellite company Koa Eiga was established to manage it. Up until the war, Shochiku were known for their romantic home dramas. The government restriction on content however, resulted in these films being deemed inappropriate and, as a result, Shochiku were forced to cease their production. Feeling financial pressure, the company sought to gain favour with the authorities by setting up Koa Eiga, an off-shoot fully committed to government policy films. The propagandist intentions of Koa are clear in *Genroku Chushingura* on the front titles. The Shochiku logo is accompanied by two epitaphs, the first reading 'Protecting the home of soldiers for East Asian Development' and the second 'Selected as a National Film by the Cabinet Intelligence Bureau'. Taking advantage of the production's official support, Mizoguchi recruited his own veritable army of assistants and consultants. He enlisted the services of no fewer than four assistant directors, three lighting engineers, two art directors (including regular collaborator Mizutani Hiroshi), six set decorators and three historical consultants. He also appointed specialist advisors on matters as arcane as shōji paintings, noh theatre, the accuracy of bukezukuri (specially designed military accommodation), traditional gardens and military arms. Filmed between June 1941

and February 1942, the production was a mammoth enterprise. Running to over three-and-a-half hours, it was released in two parts each costing in excess of ¥500,000 (at a time when an average feature was turned in for around ¥100,000). Reaction to the film was generally favourable; who would criticise a film which so proudly endorsed the Japanese Spirit, especially at a time of war?

When viewing the film today, it is difficult to see how *Genroku Chushingura* could have been seen as a kokusaku (national policy) picture. Mizoguchi championed humanism over violence, and the film transcends its original purpose with its beautiful camera work and superb attention to historical detail. This radical aesthetic transformation of the source material and ideological remit is revealed at the film's climax. The most celebrated scene in this classic tale presents the December snow battle between Asano's forty-seven ronin and Lord Kira. This episode, seen countless times in plays and in literature, is the focal point of the story. However, in Mizoguchi's film the climactic battle where revenge is meted out does not appear. In this blatant act of self-censorship, the director's deliberate avoidance of this celebrated conflict may be interpreted as a tacit rejection of militaristic might. But equally, Mizoguchi was never an action director and his resolution focuses more characteristically on the female response, rather than the masculine show of violence. The director chose to have Lady Asano (Miura Mitsuko) and Lady Toda (Umemura Yoko) read the events of the battle from a delivered message. The reason behind the tears of the two women after the revenge plot has been realised is difficult to define; are they tears of joy or regret? Are they glad that revenge has been achieved or distraught that such an event had to happen? Both interpretations are plausible. It is equally possible to adopt a contemporary interpretation, which aligns what may have been a predominately female audience's sympathy with the grieving women receiving news of death in battle.

*Genroku Chushingura* is a visually stunning work which promotes both the elegance and beauty of Japanese art and design as well as human traits such as loyalty, honour and brotherhood. Even though the Japanese government presented the film as propaganda, it can be read as a strong rejection of violence. A meditation upon human frailty and weakness, it eschews the battle sequences and graphic fight scenes of its fabled source. This is in truth an examination of human reaction, especially in times of hardship and desperation, represented in the film by the ronin. It is especially interesting to imagine how a contemporary Japanese audience would have responded both to the manner of the film and to its humanistic message. Perhaps the film encouraged its audience to look beyond their expectations, to see beyond the celebration of Japan's noble heritage. The film's triumph of style over narrative serves to emphasise aesthetically the status which Mizoguchi accorded the spiritual power of Japanese cultural traditions.

## ***Meito Bijomaru***

Made around three years after *Genroku Chushingura*, at the tail-end of World War 2, *Meito Bijomaru* is a film generally disparaged by critics. Keiko McDonald deems the film unworthy of detailed examination. She notes that when watching *Meito Bijomaru* “the viewer thinks ruefully of the Mizoguchi so richly inventive, elsewhere, of codas genuinely resonant with feeling and meaning” (1994, p.69). In *Mizoguchi and the Art of Japanese Cinema*, Sato Tadao asks “Is this what one expected of the master?” before going on to note that “among all his extant films, this is the worst in terms of quality of workmanship” (2008, p.86). Mizoguchi made a trilogy of ‘propaganda’ films during 1944 and early 1945: *Danjuuro Sandai* (*The Three Generations of the Danjuuro Family*, 1944), *Miyamoto Musashi* and finally *Meito Bijomaru*. Although *Danjuuro Sandai* is lost, the other two films are still available; so, this rejection of them, while not surprising, is somewhat curious. Perhaps this critical neglect may be attributed in part to Mizoguchi’s own recollections recorded in *Kinema Junpo* in 1954. Of *Danjuuro Sandai*, Mizoguchi remarked that it was a “disgusting period”. He dismissed *Miyamoto Musashi* as a film he was forced to make: “I avoided the draft by making films like this”. When asked about *Meito Bijomaru*, he commented: “Nothing to say” (1954, p.53). In addition, in an NHK radio interview with Hazumi Tsuneo, Mizoguchi spoke of the “barbarous” qualities of “stridently political films” and further noted that these films “don’t need to be filmed with such an impassioned attitude” (Jacoby, 2002). Of course, Mizoguchi’s own remarks may well have been coloured by post-war denial. However, I feel that the 2006 re-assessment of *Meito Bijomaru* by Saso and Nishida, albeit brief, offers a welcome re-evaluation.

Saso and Nishida accept that the negative historical context certainly affects the film in terms of the subject matter. This is highlighted by contemporary reviews which point out the film’s failures. This criticism is quite wide-ranging but focuses primarily upon weaknesses of story and character. For example, a review from *Nihon Eiga* observed that in terms of character, the film is unconvincing: “It is very unfortunate that the ideals and spirit that Kiyohide tries to portray do not convince the audience” (in Saso & Nishida, 2006, p.112). However, Saso and Nishida find some redeeming qualities in the plot:

*When we look at the film today, the fact that the main plot of the film is less than convincing actually saves it. In the case of the previous film, Miyamoto Musashi, if you remove the outer frame of logic, the film has absolutely nothing, but in contrast, this film has a very interesting flavour (2006, p. 112).*

I would agree with their evaluation of both films, particularly *Meito Bijomaru* which offers us a valuable opportunity to explore the film-maker’s work at the zenith of government oppression and turbulent social conditions. The film was made in response to government demand for pictures that inspired Japanese values and portrays the story of famous Edo-era



swordsmith Yotsuya Masamune. The film is set at the end of the Edo period (1603-1868), where the famous swordsmith Masamune, named in the film as Sakurai Kiyone (Hanayagi Shotaro), creates a sword for the Kuwana clan's top warrior, Onoda Kozaemon (Oya Ichijiro). However, during a procession to the clan's castle, the group are attacked by samurai, and the prized sword is broken in battle. Wracked with guilt, Kiyone offers to commit suicide, but is stopped by Onoda's daughter Sasae (Yamada Isuzu). To atone for his error, he begins to hone his skill under the auspices of artisan swordsmith Yamatomori Kiyohide (Yanagi Eijiro) in Kyoto. Meanwhile back at his estate, Onoda is visited by fellow Kuwana clan warrior Naito Kaname, who reveals how he feels about the severity of Onoda's punishment for his failure in battle but will speak with their lord on his behalf. However, this comes at a price, this being that he must allow Naito to marry his daughter. The offer is refused and, in a fit of rage, Naito murders Onoda before travelling to Kyoto to escape punishment. In the meantime, we see Kiyone, alone and intoxicated in a bar because of the news of Onoda's death and Sasae's disappearance. However, the pair reunite by chance and discuss a plan of revenge for the murder of Onoda. Sasae reveals that she knows that Naito is the murderer and that he has fled to Kyoto. She suggests that Kiyone forge a sword to avenge her father. Eventually the sword is finished and is taken to Kyoto where Sasae has been waiting. She finally confronts and defeats Naito, who, after the fact, is revealed as a government sympathiser.

A crucial element of this film is the continual reference to the Japanese national religion, Shinto. However, before we move on to discuss this further, I feel that the ending is worth brief examination. Of all of Mizoguchi's surviving work, *Meito Bijomaru's* closing scene is quite possibly the happiest. As Sasae and Kiyone drift peacefully down-stream in a boat, they gaze lovingly into each other's eyes, and we witness (unprecedented in a Mizoguchi film), a finale which has a happy, romantic closure: the loving couple are destined to be together.



**Figure 1** Sasae and Kiyone gaze lovingly at each other in a rare romantic closure

**Source:** *Meito Bijomaru* - 名刀美女丸. Shochiku DVD Collection

However, I feel that considering the year of release, 1944, it would have been counter-productive for scriptwriter Kawaguchi to end the film in any other manner. Through the revenge narrative, they have carried out a duty to the emperor by killing one of his opponents. Their loyalty to the national cause is rewarded with a romantic and satisfying conclusion. Yamada's performance here is also telling. In the previous scene she was exacting revenge for her father and honouring the emperor by duelling and defeating Naito. In this scene however, the white robes of revenge are replaced with an impeccably worn, traditional kimono. Her behaviour is also a far cry from the previous scene: she is now timid and shy, her demeanour a perfect example of the conventions of behaviour for a Japanese woman. Unusually for a Mizoguchi film, the *dénouement* marks a perfect resolution of social duty and personal happiness. The sentimental union of the couple is perfectly inscribed within its ideological framework.

### Theatre as Temple

One of the most striking elements of *Meito Bijomaru* is the film's continual visual and verbal references to Shinto, which was sanctioned as the national religion during the Second World War period. Isolde Standish notes that Shinto was merged with Neo-Confucian teachings to create an "innate Confucian ethic that became the ideological mainstay of the Tokugawa hegemony, being re-appropriated by nationalist scholars such as Kita Ikki (1883-1937) in the 1930s and 1940s" (2005, p.177). Throughout the film we are reminded of this re-appropriation. We constantly see shide, angled paper decoration, placed purposefully within the mise en scène. These are attached to either a piece of braided rope called shimenawa or a branch from the sacred sakaki tree known as tamagushi. *Meito Bijomaru* leaves the viewer in no doubt as to the purposes of the Shinto imagery and dialogue. By using these communicative devices the audience is being constantly reminded about their own place in the world, their responsibilities to state, emperor and their own spirituality. Visually and verbally the very essence of Japaneseness is being communicated through the myths and legends of Japan. To a contemporary audience, such reminders would have resonated deeply.



**Figure 2** Shide, placed prominently within the mise en scène

**Source:** *Meito Bijomaru* - 名刀美女丸. Shochiku DVD Collection

At first glance, *Meito Bijomaru* seems vastly different from previous Mizoguchi films. The most striking element of the work is the uninspiring mise en scène. For example, where previous films such as *Taki no Shiraito* (1933), *Gion no Shimai* (1936), and *Zangiku Monogatari*, were atmospheric in their visual style, *Meito Bijomaru* is functional at best. Let us

try to establish why this is the case. One reason, which I have already highlighted, is a lack of resources. Film during this period was not deemed a necessity, and raw materials were being put to 'better use.' However another, more realistic reason, would have been that talented set designers had been drafted. None the less the film is not without its merits. For example, Mizoguchi's trademark one-shot-one-take style is very much in evidence. We see this in one of the opening sequences, where Sasae and her father Onoda are practising kendo. Kiyone then arrives to present his master with the feted sword. The length of shot here, at 1m.33s, is characteristic. This is not the only scene to involve such a long take. For example, the scene where Naito murders Onoda is just under three minutes, and the bar scene, where a drunken Kiyone argues with other patrons, is two minutes fifty-five seconds. There are further elements of Mizoguchi's familiar style which are apparent in *Meito Bijomaru*, such as the long-shot and the obscured shot. However, for the moment, let us consider Mizoguchi's use of camera position.

One example is the parade scene where Onoda and his fellow clansmen are attacked by samurai. We see the procession in long-shot, positioned between two large trees. Here it is almost as if we are crouched, spying on the parade.



**Figure 3** Camera angle and distance positions the viewer as onlooker

**Source:** *Meito Bijomaru* - 名刀美女丸. Shochiku DVD Collection

As the procession moves slowly from right-to-left of shot, we are then placed directly in front of Onoda, who is walking in line, directly to the left of the lord. The stark contrast of the long-shot, then combined with a quick cut to deep within the heart of the procession, seems sinister. If there is to be some kind of confrontation, then Onoda seems to be

the focus. However, we are reassured, as he glances proudly down to his side, looking at his newly- forged sword. His face then breaks into a confident and proud smile from which we can take comfort, knowing that he is protected by such a grand weapon. The camera now cuts to Naito, who is walking behind Onoda; however, his expression is focused and unemotional. Following a light-hearted scene between Sasae and Kiyone, our attention now returns to the parade, which we again view in long-shot. However, this time the perspective is more sinister. We view the parade head-on, as they come ever closer towards the camera. Our perspective is obscured as again, we are positioned behind trees. This time however, there is more attention on the foreboding shadows that they cast.



**Figure 4** Camera distance and shadow indicate a looming danger

**Source:** Meito Bijomaru - 名刀美女丸. Shochiku DVD Collection

Our fears are realised as, from where we are positioned, samurai appear from all corners of the shot, and set about attacking the procession. A fierce battle ensues, but Mizoguchi does not cut immediately to the action; he keeps the camera in position as if wary to engage. We are rooted to the spot, reluctant to intervene, watching helplessly as the two sides battle. What is the reason for this delay in joining the *mêlée*? Is this an ambiguity towards both the emperor's army and the Tokugawa government's samurai? Or are we positioned as a rebel, opposed to the fruitless cause of the emperor? It is a fascinating scene. Mizoguchi eventually moves in, but then immediately focuses upon the destruction of Onoda's prized sword. His visual treatment of this act is stark and poignant. I suggest that he is using symbolism to create a feeling of foreboding, implying political disillusion and military defeat. In one short edit at the finale of the attack upon the entourage, Mizoguchi cuts to and

dwells upon the very essence of the bushido code, the katana, lying broken and dirty on the ground at the soldier's feet. Contextually, this visual message is telling indeed.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have examined Mizoguchi's creative practices in response to the constraints of social and political upheaval. I have suggested that the evidence for the development of Mizoguchi's visual style is to be found in his studied recourse to the traditional arts. No less importantly, I have also indicated that a further catalyst for this shift in style is directly related to Mizoguchi's turbulent social environment, where he drew inspiration from the political tensions that encompassed contemporary Japan. Despite the critical debates about Mizoguchi's war-time allegiances, the films examined suggest that he was not a director to shy away from social commentary during times of upheaval and unrest. The lack of a battle scene in *Genroku Chushingura*, and the telling battle scene in *Meito Bijomaru*, goes some way to confirming that even though he was making films under the auspices of the imperial government, he still managed to include visual elements which were strikingly subversive in their potent symbolism. Through a carefully crafted mise en scène, Mizoguchi tapped into the residual culture in a manner with which contemporary audiences would have been very familiar. The director's concentration upon mise en scène over narrative placed an aesthetic and emotive emphasis on elements of recognisable Japanese tradition which, in times of crisis, proved comforting to an audience whilst at the same time appeasing the authorities.

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