

**From Osaka to the Gion: Vernacular Modernism in Kenji Mizoguchi's *Osaka Elegy* (1936) and *Sisters of the Gion* (1936)**

Paul Spicer  
Hiroshima Jogakuin University, Japan

**Abstract**

One of the most innovatory models for re-appraising the way in which popular cinema is able to articulate social and cultural change has been provided by Miriam Hansen's idea of 'vernacular modernism' (Hansen 2000). Hansen examines how cinema provided a popular, quotidian modernism in the context of western industrial influence upon East Asian culture. However, her definition does not explore the notion of vernacular as an embedded discourse, one which combines both traditional and modern forms. In an article entitled 'Vernacular Culture' in the Journal *American Anthropologist*, Margaret Lantis uses vernacular to connote 'the culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations' (1960: 205).

This paper will examine how Kenji Mizoguchi deploys this 'regional vernacular style' through two of his seminal 1930s pictures. This will be explored through two areas where this style might be most obviously articulated; contemporary culture, and *mise en scène*.

**Keywords:** Japanese cinema, culture, Mizoguchi Kenji, Isuzu Yamada, Vernacular Style, *mise en scène*, Miriam Hansen, Margaret Lantis, tradition, modernity

## Introduction

In her article ‘Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism’ (2000), Miriam Hansen argues that the dominance of classical Hollywood cinema, both at home and abroad, can be explained in its ability to enable audiences to negotiate the profound social and cultural changes wrought by 20<sup>th</sup> century modernisation:

I take the study of modernist aesthetics to encompass cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as the mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio, and cinema. I am referring to this kind of modernism as vernacular (2000: 11).

Hansen uses the term “vernacular”, in preference to “popular”, as a way of distinguishing mass cultural production from the avant-garde of high modernism. She explains that, “The dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, combined with the connotations of language, idiom and dialect, makes me prefer the term vernacular, vague as it may be, over the term popular” (2000: 11). However, we need to ask what additional value does substituting the term vernacular for popular have in identifying the cultural and aesthetic functions of cinema? From her article, the precise use of the term vernacular is still vague (as Hansen admits) and is employed to describe an experience of modernity, and a function of Hollywood narrative cinema, which she describes as universal.

However, Hansen’s ideas of the vernacular are most useful for this study. She observes that Chinese culture had developed responses to modernisation in a wide range of media, and on a mass scale, spawning a recuperated or internalised vernacular. Moreover, she continues, “this modernist vernacular may not always have tallied with the ideals of national culture formulated in literary and political discourse at the time, but it clearly represented an idiom of its own kind, a locally and culturally specific aesthetics”. Hansen elaborates on this point, noting that:

Shanghai cinema of the 20s and 30s represents a distinct brand of vernacular modernism, one that evolved in a complex relation to American – and other foreign – models while drawing on and transforming Chinese traditions in theatre, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular (2000: 13).

While Hansen’s attention to the discursive formation of local cultural practices is useful, her attribution of vernacular modernism to the international hegemony of classical Hollywood cinema may be problematic. The reception of classical Hollywood film is not exclusive to Chinese (or Japanese) cinema, and although Hansen admits to the tension between tradition and the influence of western modernism, her emphasis seems to focus much more on the reception of Hollywood. However, beyond Hansen’s usage, there is another suggestive application of the term vernacular in anthropology.

In an article entitled ‘Vernacular Culture’ in the Journal *American Anthropologist*, Margaret Lantis uses the word to connote “the culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations” (1960: 205). Her definition offers a way of interpreting local speech acts, mannerisms, and gestures associated with particular regional, sub-cultural, or event-specific behaviours. Lantis suggests that:

Vernacular culture, like any functional, unitary segment of the total culture, has the following components:

Values and goals, especially those that bring people to the situation

Appropriate time, place and artifacts

Common knowledge, e.g., regarding an industry, a sport, or hospitals

Attitude systems (including emotions) of participants

System of relationships (this subsumes social identification) or at least a pattern for relationships (in cases of transitory ones)

Sanctions Communication, including but not limited to special terminology and manner of speech (1960: 206).

This taxonomy may be usefully appropriated in order to interpret the local communities' "cottage industries", along with the bohemian and artisanal sub-cultures, which Mizoguchi so favoured in his films. It is crucial, when exploring the local, that any analysis of *mise en scène* should pay attention to these measurements of social behaviour, their rules and transgressions in the discreet milieux of the teahouses and the Gion. The concept of vernacular culture enables us to discover, further, the importance of film within a tightly controlled creative environment. It allows us to be sensitive to the particularities and subtleties of these micro-communities as rendered in Mizoguchi's films, and draws attention to the importance of diverse, local histories, mannerisms, customs, and speech.

Both Hansen and Lantis' models provide a way of negotiating the complex cultural and political influences (from inside and outside Japan) upon the Japanese cinema during the career of Kenji Mizoguchi. It allows us to address his films' thematic concerns, their *mise en scène* and visual style, their formal strategies of narration, including modes of performance, character construction, and spectatorial identification, and the films' address to, and function within, a specific horizon of reception.

In this article, I shall examine two of Mizoguchi's mid-1930s films, *Osaka Elegy (Naniwa Eregi, 1936)* and his follow-up, the Kyoto-set *Sisters of the Gion (Gion no Kyōdai, 1936)*. Using both Hansen and Lantis' ideas, we will discuss how these two films, above all of Mizoguchi's 1930s work, represent a unique brand of vernacular modernism. This can be witnessed on multiple levels, from speech, to costume, to film style, and served to highlight a cultural struggle between tradition and modernity.

### **A Modernist Film Style?**

Taking both Hansen and Lantis' notions on board enables us to identify in Mizoguchi's work an evolving cinematic discourse which was essentially popular in its modes of address (Shimpa melodrama) and cultural reference (traditional arts and practices). But it also allows us to examine the influence of a modernity which bluntly challenged the established social order and, in regard to Mizouchi's work, forced him into a dramatic change of creative direction, none more so than in the manner in which he presented his work.

Certain writers on Mizoguchi have argued that it is possible to identify a specific film style in the director's early 1930s films. It is argued that his style reflects the classical mode, but also displays its own discursive characteristics (see McDonald 1984; Kirihara 1992). Burch (1979) notes that although there are elements of a more "exotic" manner of film-making; "all the basic principles of the Western system are observed" (1979: 217). Burch goes on to suggest that within this stylistic framework Mizoguchi was never comfortable, noting that elements of the

classical style, such as the “complementary close-ups”, are included in a way which seems to “bother” Mizoguchi”, and the director would “prefer to keep his distance” (1979: 217). Burch further discusses this idea when analysing Mizoguchi’s 1933 film *The Water Magician* (*Taki no Shiraito*), noting that although the drama develops in a style which is within the framework of Western editing, Mizoguchi keeps his camera at a distance, neglecting the requirement of shot change (1979: 218). Burch’s comments are clearly witnessed when watching Mizoguchi’s work of the mid-1930s. Made for Daiichi, the films were conventional Meiji period pieces which came in the form of *The Downfall of Osen* (*Orizuru Osen*, 1935) *Oyuki the Madonna* (*Maria no Oyuki*, 1935), and *Poppy* (*Gubijinso*, 1935), all of which were relatively unsuccessful, both commercially and critically. He recalls of the time that, “somehow, everything went wrong” (1954: 52), and his views are compounded by critical reaction. In a 1935 review of *The Downfall of Osen* for *Eiga Hyoron*, Kurata notes that Mizoguchi “obviously expended great effort in expressing the historical period of the narrative of this film, but he appears to have failed to depict everything as well as he had intended” (1935: 115–116). Murakami goes one step further, and in a review of the same film, insists that Mizoguchi is “one of the most established directors in Japan, one who has experimented with many kinds of subject matter and technique, though he has recently fallen into a rut of meaningless Meiji era films” (Andrew & Andrew 1981: 167). It is difficult to surmise why Mizoguchi returned to such films, especially since at Daiichi he was working with producer and long-time friend Nagata Masaichi. This partnership had promised a fresh start and creative latitude. Some evidence about this may be gleaned from a 1954 interview with *Kinema Junpo*, where Mizoguchi discusses the problems that he had overcoming “poor adaptations and bad scripts” and how he found it difficult to accurately portray his characters and their situations, as well as the distinctly regional vernacular in which they existed. (1954: 51–52)

It is clear from Mizoguchi’s *Kinema Junpo* recollections that the director was frustrated. Struggling to portray society with any meaning or accuracy and devoid of any artistic challenges, he found himself directing ‘comfortable’ pictures that proved unpopular and were widely criticised. The uneven filmic balance between an older, Edo era inspired director who was living in a modern and changing world can be seen clearly in these films. Although there was no doubt about his knowledge and passion for Japanese tradition and art, which can be seen in these early films, he had in the early 1930s films, struggled to portray modern life successfully. Hansen notes that negotiating the relationship between foreign and traditional art forms was complex, and Mizoguchi’s films of the period, a confusing mix of both, saw unspectacular returns both in terms of critical and commercial acclaim.

It is clear from these early failures that a traditional director was trying to come to terms with a modernising culture, but struggling to find a balance. Mizoguchi highlights this problem in an essay written for *Nikkatsu Cinema Magazine*. He notes:

I am fascinated by the Edo era and feel that we have seen a small influence from it on modern art ... I always tried to put this Edo culture, or at least this interest in Edo, at the heart of my filmmaking. On one hand, I try to maintain this challenge of Edo, but, alternatively, as a man who lives in the modern age, I am also attracted by contemporary society, such as the decadent life in the cafés and dancehalls (1926: 33).

Although Mizoguchi highlights the challenges that modern directors faced, representing the modern age was an issue that had blighted him. As long-term screenwriting partner and collaborator Yoshitaka Yoda recalled, although Mizoguchi was attracted to contemporary

society, he could not portray it, and had always struggled to understand this world or its inhabitants (1970: 205–206). But as a director of over thirty pictures, the criticisms prompted – we may say shamed – Mizoguchi into a stringent reassessment of his work, especially following the failures of his films from the first half of the 1930s. Andrew and Andrew note that “He decided to limit the risks by sticking strictly to areas of Japan he knew intimately, and so planned films in the cities of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe” (1981: 10). The return to the sub-cultural underbelly of Kansai, a world that Mizoguchi knew intimately, resulted in two landmarks of 1930s Japanese cinema, *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*.

In terms of the social context, both *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion* are striking in their portrayals of Kansai society, albeit from contrasting social perspectives (those of a modern girl in Osaka, and a trainee geisha in Kyoto). The euphoric integration of all things western, that had accompanied the country’s modernisation during the early part of the twentieth century, had now given way to a much stronger nationalistic drive, and modes of thought which strayed from this path were swiftly suppressed, or, in the case of cinema, ended up on the cutting room floor. So, what do these two films in particular tell us about the period in regard to both social attitudes and modernisation? Remarkably, considering the period, both films heavily question traditional methods, keenly observing a more individualistic, modern, and liberal way of thinking. The films are not subtle in their handling of the way such thoughts are delivered, and both involve a lone female protagonist fighting against the accepted norms of society.

Mizoguchi enabled Japanese audiences to find stimulus and solace in respect for their desires and fears in response to twentieth-century social and political transformations. He did this by situating these contradictions of tradition and modernity within recognizable social milieu and regional *demi-mondes*. For example, western costumes and hairstyles, cafés, and technology, seen throughout *Osaka Elegy*, are in stark contrast to local language and colloquialisms, traditional architecture, costume, and familiar cultural symbolism, which is seen in his follow-up film, the Kyoto-set *Sisters of the Gion*. The latter is particularly rich in modernist representation, as Mizoguchi begins to introduce specific ideas which would have been unrecognisable and particularly ‘foreign’ to a contemporary audience.

### **Familiar Locales**

*Osaka Elegy* is set in the modernistic metropolis that is 1930s Osaka, where Ayako’s (Isuzu Yamada) behaviour is accentuated alongside the modern and vibrant cityscape which incorporates corporate offices, modern stores and cafés. However, in *Sisters of the Gion*, the emotional outbursts of Omocho (again played by Yamada), are often located in more traditional locales and offer direct confrontations between tradition and modernity, youth and maturity, male and female. As previously mentioned, this is achieved through the verbal register, however Mizoguchi achieves further discomfort through a carefully crafted *mise en scène*. In order to fully appreciate the radical nature of these characters, we first need to be able to understand how Mizoguchi visually presented different modes of individualism, and, secondly, how he positioned these within the *demi-mondes* of modern and traditional landscapes. Although *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion* represent different social worlds, both introduce aspects of modernity in settings that Mizoguchi could confidently portray. Crucially, these films, told through the story of feisty females, reveal much about Mizoguchi’s response to processes of modernisation, and its effect on those who either embrace or are wary of it. Both films portray their locales with accuracy and sensitivity. In order to recreate the distinct manners and customs of Osaka and Kyoto respectively, it was crucial that Mizoguchi paid close attention to the details of *mise en scène*, as well as the authenticity of dialogue, the local architecture characterisation, regional humour and social practices.

We shall now focus on key elements of both *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*, to test the appropriateness of Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism, and further adapt Lantis' anthropological approach. The work will highlight some of the key methods by which Mizoguchi dealt with social conformity when faced with cultural modernity. In this way it may be possible to identify the constitutive elements and aesthetic function of what we might call a vernacular film style.

***Osaka Elegy.*** Of the two Kansai films it is *Osaka Elegy* that displays a city at the height of a modernistic revolution. Ayako (Isuzu Yamada) resides in a busy and vibrant Osaka, she is the young, fashionable *moga* (modern girl), observed by the newspapers of the day as: “A woman with domestic aspirations [...] and romantic goals” (Kirihara 1992: 36). The neon lights of the cityscape are captured evocatively, and as Toshie Mori indicates, “*Osaka Elegy* sets out to show the same mixture of the modern and the traditional that existed in the time and place in which the film was set” (Phillips & Stringer 2007: 40). It is useful to refer back to Hansen's model of vernacular modernism: Hansen's ideas regarding Chinese, and specifically Shanghai cinema, is key, as we can see a similar relationship. In *Osaka Elegy*, Mizoguchi highlights the struggle between traditional Japan and the unfamiliar modernist ethos. There are many examples: the telephone is an icon of 1930s modernity, and Ayako is an integral part of this evolving, technically rich landscape, working as a receptionist for Asai Pharmaceutical. This mixture is highlighted further by the costumes. Throughout the film we see western-style business suits alongside traditional Japanese yukata and kimono, as well as the soundtrack of big band jazz, indicating that we are in a city which is embracing a range of influences. The set design of the Asai Pharmaceutical offices is also indicative of western style, and although the period is not obvious from a single signifier, the *mise en scène* as a whole establishes that this is contemporary Japan. It is also important to note Ayako's work; as a receptionist, she is dealing with various parties, judging the callers, and responding appropriately. Lantis notes that such a position within vernacular culture is a good example to examine the characteristics of metropolitan life, as well as the effective differences. The receptionist must address people from both the inside and outside of the organisation, and respond to these people accordingly (1970: 202). Ayako, like Mizoguchi, is struggling to come to terms with this role, as a conduit of information between contrasting groups in her culture, “a complex of values and behaviours” (1970: 203).

In addition, it is also crucial to note the verbal vernacular. The *hōgen*, or colloquial accent, is an important signifier of local community and milieu, and the language spoken throughout *Osaka Elegy* is an accurate representation of the language of the city. Communication is more direct than in standard Japanese, and deeply expressive in terms of personal emotion. The film also contains the famous elements of regional humour, particularly in the dialogue between Asai (Benkei Shiganoya) and his wife Sumiko (Yoko Umemura), during the film's opening sequences. This, along with location signifiers such as Osaka wan (Osaka bay), Kōraibashi (Korai bridge), the socially diverse district known as Dōtonbori, and the Osaka neon, enables us to experience the city topographically.

Within this world, Ayako is the product of a modernising Japan; she is strong-willed and independent, and exhibits passionate desires without restraint. Mizoguchi deftly places her on the cusp of the old world and the new, in such a manner that a contemporary audience would immediately recognise. She experiences the frustrations of a modern female who is in conflict with societal expectations and rules. Her actions and reluctance to conform, especially during the latter stages of the film, would have no doubt agitated many older cinemagoers. Such struggles do, as Hansen herself admits, highlight the “pressures of modernity through their

thematic concerns, through particular oppositions and contradictions” (2000: 14). Ayako is a conduit for such conflict; she is impatient, tempestuous, and, despite the problems she encounters with her relationships, society, and her family, is determined to reach her goals at any cost, even if this involves conflict with her surroundings. Her direct language, flagrant disregard for social hierarchy, and scheming manner, seems outrageous in a contemporary society which frowns upon such selfish outbursts. Hansen notes that such stark contradictions (visual and verbal, traditional and modern) are “enacted through the figure of the woman” who “serve as the focus of social injustice and oppression ... thwarted romantic love, rejection, sacrifice” (2000: 15). These experiences are emphasised through their failure to adhere to societal rules, and subsequent codes of behaviour, all of which occur in traditionally familiar surroundings. A contemporary audience would immediately recognise these important cultural signifiers and specific social milieux, which are being violated by the most un-Japanese outbursts. Here, there is no place for personal expression, and characters such as Ayako, as Hansen mentions, must serve as a warning for others who dare to question the social order.

***Sisters of the Gion.*** If *Osaka Elegy* is set in a modern, bustling centre of modernism, *Sisters of the Gion* relies heavily upon recognition of more local practices, and the rules and expectations within a specifically Japanese sub-culture. Mizoguchi recreates the mood and atmosphere of the Gion through his accurate recreation of the area in which the film is set. Architecturally, the labyrinth of alleyways, narrow buildings, and streets full of teahouses, portrays the Gion perfectly. Let us now build on our awareness of how visual style is deployed alongside traditional artistic forms, as part of the vernacular style, working with architectural features and other elements of the production design. Such a study works in tandem with Hansen’s ideas of performance to incorporate what Lantis calls “local variants” (1960: 204). Mizoguchi does not just represent the inner sights and sounds of the Gion, but also recourse to more traditional and culturally ingrained Japanese traditional art. Here we shall examine another key scene from the film which utilises such art, but is used alongside regional architecture and local business practice. Lantis’ anthropological approach serves us well, and, by exploring the local rule systems, we discover that societal restrictions are even more conspicuously drawn. They are, in fact, even more rigid than in broader sections of society, and hence the rebellion of characters, such as Ayako and Omocha, become more intense, communicating with an audience at a sensory level.

This anthropological approach is helpful in assisting us to identify the importance of local setting, and the visual elements that enhance the claustrophobic, closed social world. This localisation helps to reinforce the local rule-systems, and makes certain themes, such as female emancipation or sexual freedom, even more shocking. Mizoguchi’s framing, his camera-work, and the way he constructs his *mise en scène*, ensures that when his characters break out, the audience immediately recognises the magnitude of this rebellion. This is further achieved by Mizoguchi’s recourse to a more traditional and culturally ingrained Japanese traditional art, which in-turn has a dramatic effect on his *mise en scène*. Here we shall examine another key scene from the film which utilises local architectural features of the Gion, as well as a traditional Japanese art style.

This scene prefigures Omocha’s outburst, and we are witness to the resulting circumstances of a merchant’s bankruptcy. In this opening scene, the camera tracks slowly from right to left, past rooms with scattered door panels, into an area where a group of men are frantically bidding at an auction. The camera tracks on, through an empty room, past windows covered by wooden frames, before finally embarking on a 180-degree pan into a fade and cut, to a room occupied by two men. Lantis calls this the “organizing principle”, and that our first question should be

“What are these people doing here? Or, formally, why are they here? When we can answer the question, even partially answer it, we can begin to understand the roles of the participants” (1960: 206). In this case we can still hear the shouting, indicating locale, and then realise, through the anguished expressions of the on-screen characters, that the auction was forced, and we are in the company of a bankrupt merchant. However, we can gain so much more information with knowledge of the locale. Keiko McDonald notes how, during this scene, camera movement works in tandem with the building’s interior, to give the audience information on both the profession of the owner and our location. These buildings act as a signifier, indicating location and business type. McDonald notes that such shots were not accidental, and that “Mizoguchi takes full advantage of the typical architecture of a merchant’s house in the Kansai area: narrow in front and deep in back”. She adds that “the camera work piques our curiosity: we want to know what kind of merchant has gone bankrupt, and all the more so, since the single travelling shot has exposed us to the extent of his wealth” (1984: 46). This is an important observation. An empathetic reading relies on Japanese cultural and geographical knowledge to build a picture of the merchant’s situation. With knowledge of local culture and business practices, the viewer is immediately part of a narrative which unfolds through the lateral dolly-shot and recognisable architecture. However, the privilege of a culturally informed perspective is restricted by the manner in which the camera places the viewer to the action. The scene ought, through Japanese eyes, to be familiar, yet this establishing sequence is a process both of recognition and de-familiarisation. Keiko McDonald, as a shrewd Japanese commentator on Mizoguchi’s work, calls this the “shock of recognition” (1984: 165), which is arguably a function of the tension which has been described above.

This kind of camera work was a stylistic trope in Mizoguchi’s work, from this period onwards. Both the opening and closing scenes of *Sisters of the Gion* deploy camera movement reminiscent of the unrolling of the *emakimono*. Emakimono are painted hand scrolls which depict stories containing themes such as the supernatural, love, hardship, war, and traditional folktales. The scrolls are illustrated stories, which are read from right to left, at arm’s length, and are revealed as the reader winds the scroll, exposing the next section of the tale. Emakimono reveal an uninterrupted narrative, which unfolds at the will of the reader. It may be salutary to relate this narrative unfolding to the apparatus of cinema. Incorporating the structure of the emakimono with the architecture of Kansai and the images of wealth, Mizoguchi constructs a dramatic tension between the familiarity of the subject matter and the distantiating of the viewing perspective. Again, the impact of these techniques through the *mise en scène* is evidence of Mizoguchi’s development of a distinctive vernacular style, which arguably reached its apotheosis in the 1950s, in *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku Ichidai Onna*, 1952), *Ugetsu Monogatari*, (1953) and *The Woman in the Rumour*, (*Uwasa no Onna*, 1954). *Sisters of the Gion* marked the end of Mizoguchi’s Daiichi period, and the Nagoya project which would have completed the trilogy was never realised due to Daiichi’s collapse in 1936. Nonetheless, the legacy of the two Kansai films endures. Both films highlight the conflicts of modern thinking female protagonists, living in a modern yet traditionally rich culture; and the director’s committed renditions of the vernacular particularities of distinct local communities enabled him to examine human relationships and social conventions with unflinching candour but sympathetic integrity.

## Conclusion

Both Hansen’s and Lantis’ different disciplinary perspectives upon the concept of the vernacular have been adapted in this article in order to better appreciate Mizoguchi’s use of a dynamic field of *mise en scène*. A close analysis of visual style in two of Mizoguchi’s most



celebrated 1930s films reveals a rich quotidian vocabulary, by which, it was argued, he enabled audiences to confront contemporary anxieties attendant upon social change. By analysing local architecture, regional practices, and colloquial language, I was able to offer readings of specific regional milieu, which proved a dynamic site for the exploration of culturally informed influences. Furthermore, I was able to identify the ways in which Mizoguchi elaborated and developed this vernacular vocabulary across a variety of different subjects, combining traditional motifs and contemporary styles.

Similarly, this study has documented the dominant role of the female protagonist in Mizoguchi's films: an individual who is frequently the catalyst of change, the victim of exclusion, and the embodiment of irreconcilable impulses. The tension in Mizoguchi's films exists between the narrative impetus and *mise en scène*. It is the historical process of narrative which frequently destabilises the aesthetic composition. And, as we have discussed, it is his women who are the agents of change. This is no accident, nor should it be read simply as a manifesto. Woman is the catalyst in the arduous struggle between tradition and modernity. Her narrative function is to stimulate discord and to create upheaval, yet, because of her subordinate position in society, she can also be recuperated in order to maintain the status quo.

Both films reveal the tension between the traditions of social organisation and the intervention of modernity. And this tension is played out in the juxtaposition between finely observed *mise en scène* and melodramatic performances. A contemporary audience would doubtless be attuned to the specificity of this emotional landscape, which would intensify their recognition of the characters' individual personal rebellions. Throughout the intensely constructed and specific worlds within their narrow social strata, an audience can recognise a specifically local emotional landscape in which the human drama unfolds. Mizoguchi's fine attention to detail in creating these specific sub-cultural worlds emphasise their rules and codes of behaviour. A Japanese audience would recognise these regional *demi-mondes* and understand the rules, beliefs, and clues that underpin society. This is what makes any transgression of those rules shocking, daring and revolutionary. Mizoguchi creates his worlds in fine detail, so much so that when a character challenges its order, it makes the questioning of her surroundings more radical and dramatic. The director's concerns about the social and political transformation of Japan can be identified most readily and most powerfully in the precise details of local culture and customs within distinct *demi-mondes*, and modernity's effect upon their agents.

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**Author Contact Email:** [pspicer@gaines.hju.ac.jp](mailto:pspicer@gaines.hju.ac.jp)