

California State University Monterey Bay

Character Evolution:
A Comparison and Analysis of Character
Progression

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INTRODUCTION

The first few weeks of this class I was not too sure what to expect. I had never really taken a cinema class before, but the concept seemed fairly interesting. I have been interested in various aspects of Japanese culture for a long time, which is why I decided to major in it. However, film was something I never really thought about when I considered Japanese culture. Since I did not know much, if anything, I decided that taking this course would be very worthwhile for me. While watching a variety of films in this class, I became very interested with Akira Kurosawa's films, how he managed to go about directing the film and portraying his characters. Other films by other notable directors, such as Ozu and Mizoguchi, were all also interesting in their own way because of the unique directing styles. Each director's personal touch was very apparent in each movie we watched, which is an aspect I feel made the class that much more interesting to go to week in and week out. After watching many movies by many different directors, I became better at seeing the differences between each movie such as screenshots, characters, and story progression. What interested me specifically was character progression in each movie we watched. I have never really watched any Japanese movies before this class, so all the information I had to go on was my own experience watching American-style movies. From the movies I have watched, I feel that characters progress in a completely different way a lot of the time. Personally, I feel that there is a big emphasis put on the plot of the story, and characters more or less revolve around this idea. However, the movies we watched in class I felt were more character driven. The characters were almost always more fleshed out, and even insignificant characters seemed like they served some kind of purpose in the movie. This interest led me to wonder how Japanese private and sociopolitical problems influenced directors proceeded with character progression. In order to answer this, I wanted to examine four prominent Japanese directors and analyze their directing

styles and how it influenced the way they portrayed characters in their movies. To do this, I believe it is necessary to pick something unique about each director and focus on how that quality is conveyed in the movies.

KUROSAWA

I thought it was very interesting how Kurosawa had a short fuse, which led to many incidents during his career. (Wild, 2014) I think that throwing small tantrums and fits added to the movies he was directing. In my opinion, anger is a form of passion, so to see such anger come from Kurosawa, to me, meant that he was truly invested in his work and simply wanted the best. From watching Kurosawa films in class I was able to gain valuable insight into why he was considered one of the great directors of his time, if not one of the greatest of all-time. From watching each of his movies I noticed they held many things in common.

Male and Female Protagonists

One major thing that I noticed about Kurosawa's films was his portrayal of his male and female protagonists. Many of his characters tended to be a bit more masculine, guys who are strong and even a bit intimidating. I believe this is due to how strict his father was, who came from a samurai family and tended to be very strict. Such attitude is typical of many of his characters from the movies we watched. Yet, at the same time I also believe his father was also responsible for the softer side that was seen at times. (Wild, 2014) This can be seen in Red Beard when Red Beard decides to lie to the old man's daughter about the nature of his death. In his eyes, there was no need for her to know about the exact nature of his death, especially considering her circumstances. (Red Beard) Similarly his father also sometimes showed compassion, always waiting until he could no longer see Kurosawa, during his visits, before

going back inside the house. In a similar sense, I thought that some of his female characters were portrayed in a way which reflected how he saw his mother. Princess Yuki was a strong character, but kept silent throughout the film because of necessity. (Hidden Fortress) I feel this really reflects the strong, yet silent type of person he viewed his mother as. His mother was able to calmly carry burning pot outside, char her hands in the process, and not show any sign of pain. (Wild, 2014) I feel this situation in particular greatly affected how Kurosawa viewed strong women and how he chose to portray them in his movies. Generally, I believe that his life at home when he was a child greatly influenced how he wanted to portray his male and female protagonists. From the instances above, I feel comfortable saying that his parents played a significant role in how he chose to go about depicting many of the characters in his movies.

Wartime Influences

During World War II, the Japanese film industry's censorship laws changed what Kurosawa could and could not do with his films. Things had to be more Japanese, so to speak. However, after the war ended, the American occupation shifted things in the opposite direction. This allowed Kurosawa to go with more western film ideas. Although this was a time of great change, it helped dictate what Kurosawa, as well as others, did when shaping their characters in scripts. (Wild, 2014) Akira Kurosawa is also unique in the sense that he also grew up in a time where films were silent. Such films put a great emphasis on the cinematography, because aside from the actor's expressions, there was not much else to focus on because dialogue was a non-issue. I feel that growing up in this environment certainly inspired Kurosawa to take approaches that put great emphasis on the types of shots he was using in order to properly convey his characters and how they progressed. Although he had a lot more to work with by the time he

because a fairly established director, I believe that old films certainly had a profound effect on how Kurosawa decided to go about his camerawork.

OZU

Ozu's directing style is remarkably different when compared to Kurosawa. This is an aspect that is extremely noticeable when watching Tokyo Story. The very way Ozu goes about directing this film directly effects the ways in which he can portray his characters. In my opinion, Tokyo Story is more driven by the characters and their interactions, rather than any plot. This leads Tokyo Story to be completely absent of any single main character, but instead have a plethora of characters in which he can flesh out.

Limitations

A key point when talking about Ozu's characters is analyzing the situations of the characters in his movies. The theme of a family drama certainly shapes how a director goes about portraying his characters. In Tokyo Story, the storyline is very much rooted in reality and in a way puts limitations on what his characters are able to do. When considering limitations, Ozu is considered to be the exact opposite of Kurosawa, choosing to embrace them, rather than refute them. (Schrader & Richie, 2005) This is very clear in Tokyo Story which is a more family oriented drama. The plot for this movie is rather simple: the burden of parents who are visiting their children in the city. Having such a plot, this leaves Ozu to put more emphasis on emotions with his characters. The storyline was very unique, as there was no major plotline like in other movies and gave me the impression of a simple Japanese family's life. Being so grounded in reality, I feel this is what gave the expressions a more realistic feel. This sense of reality put

limitations on his characters, which I believe helped shaped the characters Ozu wanted the audience to see.

Camerawork

His unique camerawork was also essential in establishing how an audience saw his characters. Almost all of the shots were from a more grounded level, save for a few scenes. The angles gave the impression that the audience is watching from the same room the actors were in and gives a strong sense of relatability. (Richie, 1974) This is compared to other films where the camerawork seems to more focus on many angles in order to create a different sort of effect, depending on the scene. Also, there were many more single-person shots in this film during dialogue between two people. A good example of this is the beginning of the film, when the grandfather is conversing with the neighbor. The camera is focused on him, and it quickly cut to the neighbor lady. Other movies have shots where there is a wider area captured on camera. However, in this movie almost everything was more focused and didn't capture as much of the surrounding area. Instead, much of the focus was on the characters themselves, rather than their surroundings.

MIZOGUCHI

In our textbook, Ozu is considered to be on the opposite side of the spectrum of Kurosawa when talking about limitations. Also according to our textbook, Mizoguchi falls somewhere in the middle of the two. (Schrader & Richie, 2005) I believe that *Ugetsu Monogatari* is a perfect example of this because it is a clear balance between the two directors. There are essences of fantasy, which allows for some flexibility when considering character development. However, the fantasy in the movie never exceeds anything past traditional spiritual legends,

meaning that there are limitations to abide by. After reading more about Mizoguchi, I believe some of his films, such as *Ugetsu Monogatari* have much more meaning behind them and are influenced by events that took place long before he entered film.

Feminism

One such piece of his history is his relationship with women. When he was a teenager his sister was sold off to a geisha house, while his mother was often beaten by his abusive father. Later, his wife would be committed to an asylum after going insane. (Sato, Vasudev, & Padgaonkar, 2008) With the American occupation of Japan there was also an increased emphasis put on women in movies, which I believe led Mizoguchi to depict the characters the way he did. The men were perceived as guys who wanted money and honor without really taking the concerns of their wives very seriously. In short, they tended to be short-sighted and selfish. This attitude directly effects the progression of the female characters because they are the driving force behind their husband's intentions, yet do not have much say in the matter at hand. In short, I believe the role of women in his life is a driving force in what led Mizoguchi to make this a story of tragedy. All the events and decisions made by the male characters in the movie ultimately led to the tragedy that befell their wives.

Camerawork

While Mizoguchi was clearly passionate about how women played their roles in his films, the camerawork was also important to how the characters were fleshed out, particularly during climatic or key points of the movie. What is unique about how he goes about *Ugetsu Monogatari* is that the camera is always moving. This leads to a variety of shots, each of which attain a different effect. (Sato, Vasudev, & Padgaonkar, 2008) Inside the house of Lady Wakasa the camera is barely

moving, yet it helps create a spooky atmosphere which helps the character of Lady Wakasa go from a rich and mysterious beauty, to creepy undead spirit. (Ugetsu) The vast amount of these kinds of shots help a character progress just as any script would do. By choosing moving shots, Mizoguchi decided on a specific strategy in how this would not only appear to the audience, but also how these kinds of shots would actually relate in terms of character progression. I believe this is especially true in the case of Lady Wakasa's spirit.

CONCLUSION

While there are many factors that influence a director's way of portraying characters, it can be decided that not all are necessarily film related, while others are. In the case of Kurosawa and Mizoguchi, some influences were so great it is hard to think that they did not have any sort of effect on character portrayal and progression. In the case of Kurosawa, his parents played a key role in how he went about portraying men in Red Beard and Hidden Fortress in a rather masculine fashion, while the women tended to be the strong quiet type. Mizoguchi's experiences on the other hand led him to portray women as the victims of men's actions in Ugetsu Monogatari. Likewise, the husbands were the negligent and rather selfish characters in the movie that was the ultimate source of their wives misfortunes. While Ozu surely had his own personal reasons for choosing the type of characters he did, in the case of Tokyo Story it took the form of a family-style drama. A topic that is very much rooted in reality and as such gives each of his characters a more down-to-earth aura. In all cases, the effects of both prewar and postwar Japan influenced how each went about directing their movies. However, Japanese and American censorship was something that did not dictate the way they ultimately decided to portray their characters. Something that was extremely universal, and is to be expected in film, is the importance of camerawork and how it related to character development. Each director had their

own preferred method of camerawork and each employed it masterfully to complement their own unique style. Kurosawa would use a fair amount wider shots which helped shape characters in a way relative to their surroundings. Ozu on the other hand, judging by Tokyo Story, used a variety of low shots which gave each of his characters a sense of relatability and truly went hand in hand with his embracement of limitations. In Ugetsu Monogatari, Mizoguchi skillfully used many shots where the camera was constantly in motion. This particularly helped the character of Lady Wakasa transition from two different kinds of characters, as a slightly moving camera surely helped to create a more creepy character. Overall I think that personal events effectively help shape how directors depict characters in their movies and how they progress. For example, Kurosawa's characters in Red Beard and Hidden Fortress progress in such a way that is typical of a lot of movies. There is character growth and at the end their maturity through the duration of the movie is capture in a few final scenes and a happy ending. Mizoguchi on the other hand has character growth in Ugetsu Monogatari, but it comes in the face of tragedy. Losing a wife and having another wife become a prostitute inspires the men, but at an obviously great cost. Each of these kinds of progressions falls in line with what each director experienced while growing up or during other trying times in their lives. So while there are certainly some things that undoubtedly influence a director, such as censorship and key life events, I believe that it is nearly impossible to precisely explain what drives a director to portray their characters the way they do. Without asking the directors themselves, the best thing that can be done is comment on the obvious and sheer speculation.

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