

---

# Edo travels to the islands. The influence of *ukiyo-e* on Ozu Yasujirō's film *Ukigusa*

**Lorenzo Javier Torres Hortelano  
(Universidad Carlos III, Madrid)**

*If I were the emperor  
of a desert island,  
how wonderful it would be!*  
(Natsume Sōseki)

It is always an enriching experience to see one of Ozu's films. It is even more so if the analysis is based on comparing it with such a vast and evocative text as the Edo period of Japanese art in its most popular representation, the *ukiyo-e*. This is the period in which traditional Japanese culture reached its highest sophistication.

Let us remember that this is the era of the political reunification of the nation and the establishment of the capital in a place far removed from the battlefields of the war – Edo (today Tōkyō); somehow this makes artistic expression easier. Moreover, Confucian ideology triumphs, so the former tradition is guaranteed. In spite of a certain official puritanical rigour that this Confucianism might entail, the new merchant class created the counter-culture of the “floating world”. This euphemism refers to the new style of life associated with the pleasure quarters of the big cities, whose main exponent was that of the Yoshiwara.

The experience, we must say, has been exciting. The method used has consisted, more than undertaking a purely cinematographic analysis, in trying to compare, gather together and seek the nuances that

make *Ukigusa* (*Floating Weeds*, 1959) a perfect example within the vast oeuvre of Ozu Yasujirō. Thus we shall see that this film borrows various elements from *ukiyo-e* (colors, compositions, characters, etc.), but also the atmosphere of the floating world, all in a really masterly way. What Ozu adds, amongst other things, is that touch of unmistakable humour which, in a certain way, is not so far removed from *ukiyo-e* as one might think at first.

For this reason we have introduced pairs (sometimes trios) of prints/stills which have not been chosen with regard to historical, religious or ideological criteria – above all when it comes to the prints. The idea is to highlight through formal, aesthetic and thematic elements the type of relationship that seems to us to have *universal* or *transcendental* qualities. This would in itself be a valid common denominator, as well as clarifying, but with sufficient ambiguity for those pairs to enable us to jump the space/time barrier. It is not a chance selection, although it does seek that mysterious experience of surprise and questioning that a spectator feels before any work of art.

We must not forget, however, that the prints that we are presenting are finished works and valid on their own; whereas the stills with which we are pairing them belong to a wider and qualitatively different artistic text; even if it is only because, originally,

they were moving images. This already indicates an important difference between the two groups: the woodblock prints belong to a particular author and moment of the Edo period, while the stills all come from the same film. We have organised it in this way so that our method is not too chaotic and to thus allow *Ukigusa* to provide a certain order. For this reason, we must state that we have selected the stills first and then selected shapes, colors, structures or themes that reminded us of them. And possibly unconsciously, our mental archive went in the opposite direction and influenced us in choosing certain stills. Be it as it may, we recommend readers to first *read* the corresponding still and afterwards let themselves be carried away by the evocations of all kinds that they find when confronting the accompanying print(s).

What is more, the inclusion of all kinds of styles and schools of *ukiyo-e* allows us to savour something of that *floating world* that gilds the Edo period. Finally, we invite readers to dwell on this confrontation which, in principle, may seem artificial, but we are sure it will allow them to see for themselves both the *floating world* and *Ukigusa*.

Ozu Yasujiro directed *Ukigusa* in 1959 as a remake of one of his early films *Ukigusa monogatari* (Story of Floating Weeds, 1934). Moreover, both films are based closely on George Fitzmaurice's *The Barker* (1928). It was one of three films that Ozu shot outside the Shōchiku film company<sup>2</sup>, more specifically for the Daiei Studio.

Ozu specialized in a particular Japanese genre, *gendai-geki*, or “domestic genre”. As David Bordwell establishes:

“this style dissects each scene into neat, static shots. Although the spectator may not notice it, there is a great deal of editing [...] this approach avoids exaggerated action, complex camera movements, and dynamic montage [...] this style does not rely on opaque shots; each composition is highly legible. This style's closest kin is Hollywood cinema 1917–25, the one-bit-of-information-per-shot approach of Fairbanks, Lloyd, Lubitsch, and William De Mille. There is also certain playfulness about the style, as unexpected

cuts and sudden screen entrances disturb the limpid flow of information.<sup>3</sup>

This long quote from Bordwell will suffice for us to connect this particular film with Edo culture in two ways: first, in accordance with the traditional *Edokko* character; and secondly, but more importantly, with the main Edo painting genre, *ukiyo-e*.

Thus in Bordwell's expressions such as “neat, static shots” and “one-bit-of-information-per-shot approach” we can see the idea that the compositions and close-up frames used by Ozu are quite similar to a pictorial composition. Any of the illustrations/stills that we include below can serve as an example.

In fact, there are certain qualities in Ozu's films, taking into consideration the whole of his work, that seem very similar to those we can find in *ukiyo-e*, above all, the humanity with which Ozu treats his characters, the human dimension which lies behind the way he photographs them. This is not just on a thematic level – most of his films are family stories – but also on a technical or editing level. His style lacks tracking shots or moving shots or punctuation between shots such as, for example, a chain of fade-outs. Besides he uses almost exclusively the 50 mm focus on the camera (the one most similar to the angle of human vision, Still 1/Fig. 1/Fig. 2). Without doubt, as we can see in these examples, this option allows Ozu to highlight the expressiveness of his character's faces. Continuing with his use of the camera, he usually places it low down<sup>4</sup>, which prevents the sitting position of the characters from looking strange even to western spectators.

It is usually claimed that *ukiyo-e* was a new artistic form in which art was somewhat humanised or at least there was a greater approximation to Man, also coinciding with the appearance of new urban classes who had had no part in the feudal wars. Also, in *ukiyo-e* the artist, the engraver and the printer are unified through the technique of woodblock print.

The predominant themes of the pictures are feminine beauty (Still 2/ Fig. 3/ Fig. 4), the Kabuki theatre and landscapes. When they merged these themes gave rise to the “floating world”.

It was the Kabuki that began to prevail among the lower classes over the Nō theatre, more traditional and mystical, to which it responded with dynamism, color and distortions; in short, visual dazzle that included rotating stages, props managers and assistants within sight of the audience (Still 3/ Fig. 5/ Fig. 6). In the case of the Kabuki it is very interesting to observe how its representation in engravings showed this change that we have referred to among the Samurai and the new merchant class. Thus there would be an intermediate position in the flow between both worlds: that of their encounter through the exaltation of beauty. This flow is represented graphically in the undulating lines, both of nature (the sea, the rain, the wind) and of woman (her face, her clothes, her body, Still 5/ Fig. 7). Let us remember, besides, that inside *ukiyo-e* the representation of feminine beauty gave rise to an exclusive genre: the *bijinga*, whose greatest exponent was Kitagawa Utamaro (1754–1806).

*Ukiyo* means “things that happen, that do not last for long and the love of the pleasures of life, capturing the spirit of the times”<sup>5</sup>. It is interesting to remember that it is a much older concept that has its roots in Buddhism. This, however, was written with different characters, meaning “sad world”, whereas *ukiyo-e* is commonly translated as “images of the floating world”. Thus, we must not forget about the title of the film, *Ukigusa – Floating Weeds*. In fact, the *floating weeds* are the entire theatre company that visit the little town on the coast and arrive by boat (F6) and later will leave by train. Likewise, we see that the influence of Zen Buddhism crystallises in these predominant gaps in the compositions which are at the same time so similar to Ozu’s style (Still 5/ Still 6/ Fig. 8).

From the beginning, *ukiyo-e* was related to the trading class of the cities or *chōnin* – which meant, generally speaking the lowest class –, who, as we have pointed out before, demanded a culture different from the ancient tradition. They are chronicles of the ephemeral world of the pleasure quarters, of the Kabuki and puppet theatre (*bunraku*).

Inspired by a world that passes by our side, this art is one of those that best tried to understand the beauty of the human stimulus. Perhaps for this reason woodblock prints were chosen as the means for its popularisation.<sup>6</sup>

But not everything in these artistic representations is heroism and drama. Thus, both in the art of *ukiyo-e* as well as in *Ukigusa* (in all of Ozu’s work, if we want to be fair) everyday things have as much importance as the plot, the characters, etc. We can observe this in the simplicity with which, for example, a mere village street of the village is represented in which the characters are carrying out absolutely normal everyday activities, far removed from the drama of the Kabuki .

Let us now look at the synopsis of *Ukigusa*. Accompanied by his Kabuki troupe, Komajurō arrives at the Wakayama peninsula and visits his ex-lover and their son, Kiyoshi, who doesn’t know that Komajurō is his father. Their house is a haven of peace and tranquillity for Komajurō. But his mistress, Sumiko, finds out and gets jealous. She is warned not to tell Kiyoshi anything, but she induces Kayo, another beautiful performer, to seduce the boy. When Komajurō finds out, he berates Sumiko and Kayo. Meanwhile, the troupe has disintegrated. Kiyoshi runs off with Kayo but returns. He tells Komajurō to leave them alone and beats him when he discovers that he is his father. The old actor apologetically leaves Kayo behind. The actors leave the village by train, and Komajurō and Sumiko are reunited.

We can formulate a semantic chain in *Ukigusa*:

Floating weed/Kabuki=former lover=prostitutes/  
evanescent world

This would be very similar to another chain that we could extract from the world of Edo: “Floating world”=Kabuki=areas of pleasure.

The function fulfilled both by the *ukiyo-e* print and by Ozu’s films, is to prevent, for a few magic moments, all this human world from slipping away forever.

We see this in Still 7/Fig. 9: the people are passing through human constructions; thus, for a moment, everything seems made to human scale; but, without a solution of continuity, the shot will soon be empty. It is a floating, ephemeral world, like those streets that disappear into the background of the picture whose end we cannot see.

*Ukigusa*, with the aim of getting even closer to this primitive and impalpable character that is perceived in the *ukiyo-e* technique, has an anachronistic character: there are no cars or TV sets, etc. Also, travelling Kabuki actors were common in the cinema between the wars. Another anachronistic key is the music, which dates from the early Shōwa period. Finally, we must not forget that this is a remake of a film from Ozu’s silent period, *Ukigusa monogatari* (Story of Floating Weeds), released in 1932. All this takes us away from the dramatised or caricatured expressions of the Kabuki and so we return to a place where beautiful serenity reign.

Complementing this serenity, there are other elements that link the film with Japanese tradition: the kimonos that Ozu himself occasionally wore – as is seen continually reflected in his diary. But the

important thing now is to note to an element that we pointed out at the beginning and on whose trail we were put by the main character of *Ukigusa monogatari*, Kihachi, who probably inherited some of his features from the *Edokko*, which is an old stereotype of the Edo period. This term is connected with a certain mischief or picaresque of the urban characters, loud, full of cheek and sometimes vulgar enthusiasm: “having to do with the transfer of influence between classes, specifically from the exalted Samurai to the lowly *chōnin*, or ‘townsman’”<sup>7</sup>. Thus, as Gregory Barrett points out “Kihachi is a comical character from the lower classes who is quick-tempered and affectionate” but, at the same time “Ozu sees only fleeting happiness among friends and kin before the inevitable sadness of separation”<sup>8</sup>.

*Edokko* literally means “child of Edo”; today the term is used for third generation Tōkyōite. “The Kihachi character, a modern variety of *Edokko*, was based partly upon Ozu’s own father and other men he met growing up in Fukugawa.”<sup>9</sup> The first description of *Edokko* appears in *Sozoro monogatari* (Idle Tales, 1641):

“*Edokko* therefore suggest bluster and illusion, craft and exchange, if not charlatanism, a character and “a culture of movement and performance”. [...] To sing a song, to drink wine, to console yourself by being carried away while afloat, not to be worried about the last penny you spent – and not allow your heart to sink holding it like a gourd in the water. That’s the way to live in this floating world.”<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, both in the *ukiyo-e* and in *Ukigusa* there is a constant flow between the two great universes: on the one hand, the one that is more human and closer to the people (Still 8/Fig. 10), and

the other one, more serene, desiring pure and empty beauty that is represented, in this case, by some framed clumps of flowers.

We cannot include here all the richness we think we have found in the confrontation shown, although we hope that it will serve as a stimulus to encourage the reader/viewer to try it themselves. The task is exciting, since there are other films by Ozu that we could have included in the comparison, for example, *Banshun* (Late Spring, 1949). The unconscious of the spectator/subject is anchored at the intersection of both universes. That is precisely what we have tried to do in this article: to enrich that unconscious of the reader/viewer through fluid confrontation, through images from such different origins, but from the same universes.

### Illustrations

Fig. 1: Tōshūsai Sharaku: “Kabuki Actor Oniji Otani in Edobei Yakko’s Character”, 1794/95

Fig. 2: Katsukawa Shūn’ei (1762–1819): “Ichikawa Ebizō as Gonogorō Kamakura Kagemasa and Sakata Hangorō III as Yotahei no Hahazu”

Fig. 3: Chōkōsai Eishō (1790–1823): “The Five Parties of the Year: Dolls Party”

Fig. 4: Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806): “Making up her lips with carmine”

Fig. 5: Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825): “Actor at the stage: Kōraiya”

Fig. 6: Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861): “From Fujiwara no Michinobu”

Fig. 7: Suzuki Harunobu (c. 1725–1770): “Young Woman under the Summer Rain”

Fig. 8: Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847–1915): “Shinagawa mokoshi no tsuki”, from *Musashi hyakkei no uchi* series

Fig. 9: Utagawa Hiroshige: “Goyu, women stopping to the travelers (Station n° 36)”, 1832, from *The 53 Stations of the Tokaido* series

Fig. 10: Nakamura Hochu (c. 1752–c. 1810): *Korin gafu* (Painting collection with Korin style), 1802

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Clements (Ed.), *The Moon in the Pines: Zen Haiku*, London: Frances Lincoln 2000, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The others are *Munakata kyōdai* (The Munakata Sisters, 1950) and *Kohayagawa-ke no aki* (The End of Summer, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988, pp. 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with low angle.

<sup>5</sup> José Miguel Medrano (Ed.), *Budismo: monjes, comerciantes, samuráis. 1000 años de estampa japonesa*, Madrid: Centro Cultural Conde Duque, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Svanascini, Osvaldo, *La pintura zen y otros ensayos sobre arte japonés*, Buenos Aires: Ed. Kier 1979, p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> David Desser (Ed.), *Ozu’s Tokyo Story*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Barrett, *Archetypes in Japanese film: the sociopolitical and religious significance of the principal heroes and heroines*, London/Toronto: Associated University Presses 1989, pp. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Desser 1997, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Yūichirō Kojirō, “Edo: The City on the Plain”, in: *Tokyo Form and Spirit*, Minneapolis/New York: Walker Art Center 1986, pp. 48–49.