

Chronicle of Shame: Imamura's Mizoguchi

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Abstract

Mizoguchi Kenji's 1956 film *Street of Shame*, and Imamura Shōhei's *The Insect Woman*, released seven years later, are important representations of the role of women in Japanese society, particularly in their depictions of prostitution. With their films often characterised as traditional, beautifully crafted melodramas, and as "messy" modernist quasi-documentaries, respectively, Mizoguchi's and Imamura's work seems to be stylistically poles apart, but their cinematic portrayals of prostitutes and their lives have much in common beyond their shared, topical subject-matter. After a brief review of the ways in which both films, despite their differing cinematic approaches, function as social documents, followed by a survey of the careers of both directors, and their relations to the world of prostitution, this paper presents a reading of *The Insect Woman* that explores its many parallels with, and apparent reworkings of elements of *Street of Shame* - at the level both of individual scenes and characters, and of larger structure - and speculates that Imamura may well have seen Mizoguchi's final masterpiece before or during the making of his own film.

Key words: Japanese film, Mizoguchi Kenji, Imamura Shōhei, prostitution

Almost halfway through Imamura Shōhei's 1963 film *The Insect Woman* (*Nippon konchūki*: 0:55:30), cutting away from contemporary newsreel footage of political protests, the camera pans down from a USAF Douglas C-54 Skymaster flying overhead, to focus on a two-room shack in which one of the film's supporting characters, Midori (Harukawa Masumi), is preparing to set out for work. Onscreen captions establish that the sequence takes place at some date between 1955 and 1959, and given the aircraft activity, it seems likely that the demonstrations are those protesting against the extension of a runway at the Tachikawa Airbase at Sunagawa in western Tokyo in September 1955. On the buildings either side of Midori's shack can be seen two signs advertising "Rose Futon", an established brand that still exists today.

A futon company also appears at in Mizoguchi Kenji's *Street of Shame* (*Akasen chitai*, 1956: 1:20:40),² but it is a fictional one named "Niko-niko do futon ya" ("House of Smiles Futon

1 Except in quotations from external sources, Japanese names are given in the Japanese order of family name followed by first name, throughout this paper, with macrons used to indicate long vowel sounds when transliterating Japanese names and words.

2 References to *Street of Shame*, including dialogue translations, are to the Eureka Entertainment (2008) R2 DVD release of the film, and for *The Insect Woman*, to the Criterion Collection (2009) R1 DVD release. Original titles in

Store ”). The shop is the culmination of the ambition of one of the film’s five heroines, Yasumi (Wakao Ayako), bought after the bankruptcy of its previous owner, who was one of her customers. It is Yasumi’s way out of a life of prostitution and exploitation at “Dreamland”, a fictional brothel located in Yoshiwara, which had been Tokyo’s actual, licensed red light district since the seventeenth century.

In *The Insect Woman*, both the futon company signs and the demonstration footage are typical features of Imamura’s documentary-style approach to his subject, which led him to eschew “the convenience of ... using a set or post-production dubbing” in favour of real location filming with wireless microphones (Imamura, 2001: 44; cited in Standish, 2011: 121). The experiences of the main character Tome (Hidari Sachiko) are linked throughout the film to actual events at the level both of individual historical incidents - although as Standish (2011: 88-89) points out, Tome makes a habit of being confronted by political protests “to which she is indifferent” - and of broader social trends and developments, to the extent that they become “a microcosm for Japan’s modern era” (Desser, 1988: 124).

By contrast, *Street of Shame* makes use of a number of sets (built by Mizoguchi’s regular designer, Mizutani Hiroshi), most striking of which is the kitsch interior of Dreamland which, with its Botticelli Venus clam-shell, interior courtyard with arched bridge and artificial cherry blossoms, and walls lined with blown-up *shunga* prints and Titianesque nudes, combines Western and Japanese erotica.³ However, when the camera goes beyond the studio it is to locations that firmly place the film in the immediate post-war era: such as the factory grounds, overgrown with weeds, hemmed in by broken-down warehouses and with a skyline dominated by chimneys and criss-crossed with power lines, that forms the backdrop of Yumeko’s humiliating rejection by her son (1:04:39 to 1:09:16); and most notably the nearly two-minute pan across the Tokyo skyline, ending on the Yoshiwara red-light district, that forms the background to the film’s opening credits, cutting to a street-level establishing shot for the opening scenes - and as McDonald (1984; in Eureka Entertainment, 2008: 9) points out, the city shown here is “fully restored and functioning” with the impression of Yoshiwara as “a stagnant place, quite out of keeping with all that civilisation should imply” generated by the “eerie” electronic music, composed by Mayuzumi Toshiro, that recurs throughout the film at moments of particular social disconnection and dissonance. Mayuzumi, it is worth noting at the outset, had previously written the music for Mizoguchi’s *The Woman in the Rumor* (*Uwasa no onna*, 1954), and would go on to compose the scores for eight films directed by Imamura, including *The Insect Woman*.

The plot of *Street of Shame* is also rooted in historical events: specifically, the ongoing attempts in 1956 to pass the Anti-Prostitution Law, which would eventually outlaw the public solicitation and management of prostitutes in Japan, to the extent that it has been suggested (Le Fanu, 2005: 84) that the film itself became part of the wider, real-world debate on the issues

kanji are given in the filmography. It is notable that neither of the commonly-used English titles of these films gives a wholly accurate sense of the Japanese originals. “Akasen chitai” is more accurately translated as “red line district”, the Japanese equivalent of “red light district”, and “Nippon konchuki” as “an entomological chronicle of Japan”. Other films referred to in this paper are given the most commonly used English title listed by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

3 Le Fanu (2005: 86) argues that this set, which he describes as “ugly”, is “excessively artificial and studio-bound”, and that this has a damaging effect on the film as a whole, making it “wooden and arthritic” - although ugly, excessive artificiality may well have been an actual feature of Yoshiwara brothel interiors at the time.

that it addressed:

The succes d'estime that surrounded Mizoguchi's film surrounding its release in early summer had a sociological byproduct: the movie was at least partially instrumental, so it is said, in pushing [the] anti-brothel measures through parliament.

Jacoby (2008) also states that *Street of Shame* " is held to have been instrumental in ensuring that prostitution was declared illegal in Japan ". Both it and *The Insect Woman* function, therefore, as valuable social documents, through their portrayal of women in general - the changing social roles and images of whom " provide a good index of Japan's cultural agenda at a given moment " (Desser , 1988: 108) - and specifically in their depictions of women working in the sex industry. Alongside Suzuki Seijun's *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon* , 1964) and *Story of a Prostitute* (*Shunpu den* , 1965) , Mizoguchi's " leisurely paced, beautifully acted melodramas [and] Shohei Imamura's grittier modernist films ... pinpoint ... the status of women in Japan and chronicle the relationship of prostitution to major cultural shifts within Japanese society "(Porton 2006: 232) .

Writing as encyclopaedist of prostitution, Porton argues that the subject-matter of their films provides a point of contact between the works of Mizoguchi and of Imamura that stands in contrast to their considerable stylistic differences:

Nothing could be further from the languid pace and traditionalist emphasis of Mizoguchi's late masterpieces than the unabashedly modernist films of Shohei Imamura ... Imamura seems to be making a point that is oddly congruent with the conclusion implicitly reached by Mizoguchi in *Street of Shame*: to survive in the hyperkinetic capitalist ambience of post-World War II Japan, hookers and madams need to be as ruthless as the corrupt businessmen who seek out their services.

Imamura's modernism is seldom questioned. For Standish (2006: 257) , *The Insect Woman* represents an " attack on romance " , along with the films of Ōshima Nagisa, Suzuki's *Gate of Flesh* and *Story of a Prostitute*, and Teshigahara Hiroshi's *The Woman in the Dunes* (*Suna no onna* , 1964) . Lim (2009) describes Imamura's early career as being like a " patricidal rampage " with veteran directors and traditional attitudes as its targets: " there was no aspect of the official culture that Imamura sought more vigorously to revise than the depiction of women as passive victims who achieved transcendence through suffering ". However, the extent to which Mizoguchi's films participate in such a depiction - and the extent to which Mizoguchi himself can be said to have been a " feminist " - has been the subject of debate. On one side we have a view in which Mizoguchi " may be taken as paradigmatic of the classical/transcendental image of women " (Desser , 1988: 110) , as seen, for example, in Sato's analysis(1982: 178) of the climactic scene of one of the director's earlier films about prostitution, *Women of the Night* (*Yoru no onatachi* , 1948) , as a cinematic failure which nevertheless " leaves a powerful impression [of] the depth of Mizoguchi's imagination ... looking up to the woman as a sacred being and ' looking down ' on the pitiful ". In opposition to this, there is the view of Mizoguchi as a political feminist, as held by Mellen, for whom " critics who lack Mizoguchi's appreciation of the need for Japanese women to alter their conditions cannot help but misunderstand his films " (1976: 309;

4 Richie (2005: 78) points out that the label is not a straightforward one: " the Japanese call Mizoguchi a ' feminist ' , though in Japanese the term means not one who believes in women's rights, but merely one who likes and concerns himself with women " .

in Desser , 1988: 111) . Lim (2009) sums up the approach of Imamura's *The Insect Woman* as "neither critique nor celebration" (with "Imamura's stance, while far from warm, [being] wholly nonjudgmental") whereas the debate on Mizoguchi can be crudely summarised as centring on the extent to which his feminism is perceived to be one of celebration or of critique. Finally, in the field of predominant cinematic style, the two directors seem to be far apart in their chosen genre, with Mizoguchi's films frequently described as melodramas and Imamura's as - in the director's own words - "a bit like documentaries" (interview with Nakata, in Quandt: 116) .

The careers and directorial approaches of the two film-makers seem to have been as diverse as their characteristic styles. Imamura Shōhei graduated from Waseda University and began his career in film-making in 1951, by which time Mizoguchi Kenji had been a director for over a quarter of a century, and had directed more than 70 films. Their working lives - Mizoguchi died in 1956 - barely overlapped. In contrast, Imamura worked for three years as an assistant director at Shōchiku (1951-54, years during which Mizoguchi made no fewer than eight films for Daiei) with another great master of Japanese cinema, Ozu Yasujiro, and his reactions to this experience are well documented. Imamura several times recognized Ozu's influence, both positive and negative, in a number of areas: "Ozu was a great director. It was while working for him that I learned most of the basics of filmmaking, and I'm sure that everything I learned is reflected in the films I've made" (interview with Nakata, in Quandt: 112) . However, Tessier (1984, in Quandt: 45) argues that Imamura was "in no way influenced by Ozu" in terms of the social milieu depicted in their films, and Richie (1995, in Quandt: 9-10) goes further, stating that he "deeply resented Ozu's methods and did not like working with him. What he disliked was what he saw as Ozu's celebration of the official version - the serene world of Japanese aesthetics" . One of the methods in which he and Ozu differed was in their direction of actors, with Imamura stating that his practice, in contrast to the detailed instructions of Ozu, was to "give [actors] the freedom, as much as possible, to act as they wish" (interview with Ciment, in Quandt: 130) . Mizoguchi's approach was different still: with the goal of "exciting" but "painful" and "arduous" multiple rehearsals being to find "a level of play - of relaxation almost - whereby the drama could 'take off' and the film itself come to life", with the result that actors found his standards "unbelievably demanding" and, on occasions, personally traumatic (Le Fanu, 2005: 42) . Sato (1982: 158-59) says that his "tyrannical behaviour was legendary", but also that he "felt that the actor must devise his own performance" . It seems unlikely that Imamura would have chosen to emulate the method of Mizoguchi's actor-direction - a method which made the production of *Street of Shame* "a hellish experience" (Sato, 1982: 189) - any more than he did Ozu's, but he may have felt some sympathy with its aims.

However, when we return from the issue of method to that of social milieu, the potential affinity between Imamura and Mizoguchi seems much stronger. Although coming from an upper middle-class background, Imamura's empathy with working-class women came from personal experience (interview with Nakata, in Quandt: 117):

When Japan lost the war, I had to face personal hardship for the first time. In my black market days, I was basically looked after by prostitutes and hostesses and came to depend on them heavily. I also came to know everything that was good and bad about them, and realized how honest and instinctual they were ... I found myself feeling more and more at

ease with them, and losing any sense of superiority.

This experience found its counterpart in the person of Kawashima Yūzo, a director described by Imamura as his teacher, who worked with Imamura first at Shōchiku and then at Nikkatsu; a man who “ shared my interest in society's ‘ lower dregs ’ ... [and who] had a reputation for profligacy in his personal life ” (interview with Nakata, in Quandt: 113) , a heavy drinker and customer of geisha and frequenter of red light districts; a man whose death at the age of 45 was caused, in Imamura's view, by a combination of “ fear, alcohol, women, wastefulness, mediocre work [and] ill health ” (Imamura and Shobo , 1969 , in Quandt: 140) , and who the younger man admired greatly. Kawashima was also the director of a film that Le Fanu labels as “ ‘ Contra ’ Mizoguchi ” : *The Sun Legend of the End of the Tokugawa Era (Bakumatsu taiyōden)*, Nikkatsu , 1957) , which was released the year after *Street of Shame*, and in which “ the brothel was simply and lyrically celebrated ” (Le Fanu , 2005: 88) , making it “ probably one of the most joyous films in the Japanese canon ” .

There is little joy or celebration in Mizoguchi's Dreamland, a locale in which “ any residual glamor that once attached to the profession of courtesan ... has long since vanished or been amortised ” , with the result that *Street of Shame* is all-but-unequaled “ as a realistic or semi-realistic critique of the sadness and tawdriness of brothels ” (Le Fanu , 2005: 85) . But like Imamura and his mentor Kawashima, Mizoguchi's experience of the world of the courtesan, the bar hostess and the prostitute was a personal one, and well-documented one. His family was indebted to the patronage of his sister Suzu, who was sold as a geisha when Mizoguchi was a child, and whose subsequent aristocratic marriage enabled her to help her brother make a career; as Sato (1982: 40) rather bluntly puts it , “ Mizoguchi lived off a viscount because of his elder sister's connections ” . Later, he “ bought himself many prostitutes, and was acquainted with geisha, prostitutes (*shogi*) , independent prostitutes (*shisho*) , part-time maid/part-time prostitutes (*yatonna*) , and prostitutes who worked with foreigners ” (Sato , 1982: 40) ; a range of experience that would have been familiar to Imamura's heroine Tome. Eventually, he married an Osaka bar hostess and dancer - both “ an aggressive and strong-willed woman ” and “ an attractive person with a soft heart ” according to Sato (1982: 69-70) - and their marriage, accounts of the happiness or otherwise of which vary (Le Fanu , 2005: 23; Sato , 1982: 69-70 also suggests that there was infidelity on both sides) , lasted through her mental illness and eventual institutionalisation, until her death.

First-hand experience, then, informed the work of both Mizoguchi and Imamura, and both directors made a number of films that portrayed prostitution, and the worlds of the geisha and the bar hostess that existed in close proximity to it, throughout their careers. Both *Street of Shame* and *The Insect Woman* were made, as we have seen, at a time when a number of film-makers were addressing the issues it raised; neither film, it is clear, exists in a vacuum. However, there are a number of elements of Imamura's film that suggest that it can be fruitfully read as a response to Mizoguchi's, or as a modernist re-interpretation of it, in a way that goes beyond a simple sharing of topical subject-matter.

Street of Shame is not, it must be said, the only film by a near-contemporary of Imamura's that *The Insect Woman* might be seen to reference. At 1:22:30 , for example, the camera focuses on Tome's *tabi*-clad feet as she goes up the stairs to her apartment, in a shot that recalls the

repeated, reluctant journeys into the world of the hostess bar made by Naruse Mikio's heroine, Keiko, in *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (*Onna ga kaidan wo agaru toki*, 1960). The echoes of Mizoguchi's last film in *The Insect Woman*, however, are more numerous, and extend from small details, to larger structural parallels. The scene cited at the beginning of this paper provides a starting-point for an examination of these correspondences, as it introduces the character of Midori's husband who, like Yasukichi (Maruyama Osamu), the husband of Mizoguchi's Hanae (Kogure Michiyo), is the primary carer for the couple's baby while his mother is out at work. Yasukichi is a sick and broken man, who in his happiness at Yorie's (Machida Hiroko) decision to leave the brothel and get married, tells her that "The women who work at Dreamland are the scum of the earth" (0:33:10) in the presence of five of those women (including his own wife), further imploring her to "Just be a good wife and take care of your husband". Later, when his attempt to commit suicide is thwarted by Hanae's return home, he declares that "I'm no good. I'm not good enough to accept the sacrifices that you make" (0:44:15), and in this he resembles many of Mizoguchi's men. We first meet him carrying their child on his back, the style traditionally favoured by Japanese mothers, and this is also how we are introduced to Midori's husband Ken (Ozawa Shoichi) in *The Insect Woman*. Ken is a rather comical, domestic, vital Korean who "has no direction in life" but whose sexual powers are "You know ... amazing" (0:58:29), and compared to whom Midori's previous, American lover was "just a kid". Midori is introduced to prostitution by Tome, and Ken tags along, eventually pocketing a share of the fee.

Ken, despite his superficial similarity to Yasukichi, is the antithesis of the Mizoguchi male. Midori, living in a shack and the mother of a child scalded to death by the negligence of Tome, her maid turned friend turned madam, has a background suitably tragic for a place as an employee of Dreamland, alongside Mizoguchi's Hanae (invalid husband), Yorie (sold into prostitution as a teenager), Yasumi (father imprisoned for embezzlement), Mickey (like Midori, the former girlfriend of an American, with a philandering father) and Yumeko (widowed with poor rural in-laws to support). She is lectured by Tome and exhorted to work harder, in a sequence (1:17:24 to 1:20:48) that mirrors Hanae's scoldings by Tatsuko (Sawamura Sadako), the madam of Dreamland, in which she is reminded that "You're not exactly a member of the idle rich" (0:13:40) and later told to "Do something about your scruffy appearance ... You're supposed to be for sale" (0:46:35). Hanae, who had in the previous scene declared dramatically that "I will live to witness with my very own eyes the eventual downfall of prostitution!" (0:45:10),⁵ is cowed and apologetic in response, whereas Midori's reaction to Tome's scolding is an attitude of sulky defiance, meeting Tome's final accusation that "You can afford to be in love because I take care of you" with a shrug and pout of studied indifference. Neither a "sacred being" to be looked up to, nor a victim to be pitied, Midori is one amongst a gallery of "examples of the Imamura heroine: sometimes crude and inarticulate, often unprincipled and irrational, but possessing a sharp instinct for self-preservation and a great zest for life", of which Tome is "the first fully fleshed-out" instance (Kim, 2003).

5 A characteristic Mizoguchi touch, like the rhetorical questioning of the reasons behind female suffering that closes *Sisters of the Gion* (*Gion no shimai*, 1936), or the defiance of the "delinquent" Ayako at the end of *Osaka Elegy* (*Naniwa erejii*, 1936).

The Insect Woman's greatest detailed debt to *Street of Shame* lies, though, in the characters of Tome, and her daughter Nobuko (Yoshimura Jitsuko), whose varying roles and diversity of experiences seem to accommodate several aspects of the lives of Mizoguchi's heroines. Both Nobuko and, to a lesser extent, her mother remind us of Yasumi, the only one of the five main Dreamland prostitutes to successfully escape the brothel by the end of *Street of Shame* (Yorie leaves to get married, but returns, disillusioned), and that only by being prepared to be opportunistic, calculating, and even ruthless. Tome is more opportunistic than she is calculating, but she is prepared to advance herself by betrayal, informing on her former madam to the police, and then taking over her stable of prostitutes. Nobuko, like Yasumi, is prepared to practice deception, as well as use sex, as a means to obtain a larger sum of money from her patron than she would otherwise be able to save. Like Yasumi, her money will go into an enterprise unrelated to sex, although it is notable that Yasumi's futon business will still cater to the bedding needs of brothels - soon after opening, she is visited by Taya (Shindō Eitarō), her former employer - and that she will continue to lend money to her former colleagues on the side. For McDonald (1984; in Eureka Entertainment, 2008: 14-15), her actions represent a "policy of absolute expediency" that must be viewed within the context of the film's "terrible" suggestion that "captive women have no choice":

Yasumi's history may offer the last word on this matter of non-choice, since her career suggests that only a total sell-out, body and soul, will offer the oppressed woman the illusion of escape from her fate. Yet even this escape costs dearly, as Yasumi's unpleasant character shows.

Yasumi's deception leads to a physical assault from which she is fortunate to escape unharmed. In contrast, Nobuko is told by Karasawa (Kawazu Seizaburo), who is her mother's former lover, that "The choice is up to you. I believe in freedom" (1:48:25). She appears to submit under his blandishments and caresses to his preferred option of a life as his mistress; and promptly runs off to the country with his money, leaving him "bamboozled and left hanging by a young girl" (1:52:10), and quite literally at one point, toothless.

Nobuko and Tome call Karasawa "Papa" and "Father", and their peasant upbringing is, in Lim's (2009) words, "a hotbed of carnal grotesquerie" that stops just short, as Standish points out, of actual incest, but which has still invested them with a "sexuality free from the taboos of modern society ... an exaggerated sexual energy which spills over into quasi-incestual relationships" (2011: 90). Incest actually makes a brief appearance in *Street of Shame*, during the masterful sequence (0:56:38 to 1:02:52) in which Mickey (Kyō Machiko) is confronted by her father (Ogawa Toranosuke), who comes to Dreamland armed apparently with respectability and righteous moral indignation against her, only to be revealed as a philandering hypocrite, and eventually driven out away by his daughter's offer to "be the last word in debauchery" (1:02:04) and sleep with him for 1500 yen. "Bastard! What a melodrama", sniffs Mickey as her father attempts a dignified retreat. Mickey is arguably the most overtly sexual of the Dreamland prostitutes, but incest is clearly a taboo here. Despite the detachment with which her story, and its defining parental confrontation, is presented - McDonald (1984; in Eureka Entertainment, 2008: 13) argues that "we see how things are, and feel nothing" - it is in the much more melodramatic story of Yumeko (Mimasu Aiko) that closer parallels to Imamura's Tome are to

be found.

Aging and uncertain of her future in a industry that is itself uncertain, supporting her in-laws and son, who live in rural poverty, Yumeko is rejected by her son Shuichi (Irie Yosuke; another pitiful Mizoguchi man) as a “ dirty whore ” who should be ashamed of herself (1:08:54); a rejection which tips her into an insanity that is symbolised by her obsessive singing of a song from her youth. The poverty of Tome’s upbringing is more extreme, but less sexually conservative, and her daughter’s reaction to the revelation of her life as a prostitute is much less overtly dramatic: “ Mama, what do you do for a living? ” (1:27:00) , Nobuko asks a little tentatively shortly after arriving in Tokyo unexpectedly to find Tome beating one of her prostitutes for working on the side; and her acceptance of the situation is almost entirely without histrionics, save for a moment of understandable, uncomfortable petulance when she hears Tome address Karasawa as “ Father ” for the first time (1:28:50) . Instead, it is Tome herself who reacts with violent emotions when, released from jail, she learns that Nobuko has become Karasawa’s mistress. In a single-shot scene (1:42:08 to 1:44:38) that is the mirror image of Yumeko’s factory encounter with Shuichi, Nobuko tries to persuade Tome of the social necessity behind her actions (“ What other way is there? We’re poor. We have nothing ”) and, in response to her mother’s question , “ Don’t you understand why I struggled so hard to raise you? ” apologises for having been a “ burden ” . In contrast, when Yumeko tells Shuichi, in response to his question/accusation , “ You know what you are? ” that “ I have to do what I do at my age, because I wanted to raise you ” , his reply is a painful challenge: “ Isn’t your duty to raise me? ” hinting at the tragic disconnect between familial, social and financial expectations that traps all of the women of *Street of Shame*. Shuichi runs away; Nobuko promises that “ We’ll all live together soon ” ; which was, of course, Yumeko’s hope for her own future with her son. Tome does not go mad, and she must eventually accept the situation and move on, as she has always done throughout the film. Her self-pity is momentarily expressed in the same form as Yumeko’s: “ Betrayed by all that I have loved , / I wander through this bitter life alone ” , she sings (1:47:05) . There are a number of other moments throughout the film in which Tome’s extremes of emotion lead variously to physical violence, to expressions of religious devotion, or even to self-harm that hints at a possibly deeper mental instability, seen when she plunges first her hand and then that of her maid into a pan of boiling soup (recalling, no doubt, her part in the scalding to death of Midori’s daughter while in her care) , shouting “ It’s not hot! It’s not! ” (1:16:39) . However, these moments must all be walked through, like the muddy puddles and stones that impede, but do not ultimately defeat the progress of the resilient Tome in the film’s final scene.

The Insect Woman and *Street of Shame*, then, employ a number of shared details, although in service of quite different conceptions of the challenges with which their heroines are confronted, and the fates that await them. Viewed holistically, rather than just in their details, Mizoguchi’s and Imamura’s approaches to structure also tend, in fact, to be less strikingly different than they first appear. *Street of Shame* is a highly structured film; indeed, one critic argues that it “ suffers from being over-schematic ” (Le Fanu , 2005: 86) . In apparent contrast, Imamura favoured “ messy ” films, citing his “ preference for shooting true things ” and explaining further that “ I show true things using fictional techniques but maintaining truthfulness ... I’d like to destroy this premise that cinema is fiction ” (interview with Ciment, in Quandt: 131 , 130) . As Lim (2009)

points out, though , “ despite the impression of perpetual chaos, there is nothing messy about this film’s structure, its achievement of a cosmic perspective through precise rhymes and parallels ” . Whereas Mizoguchi’s scheme is a largely diachronic one - with its five women embodying five different experiences of prostitution, with differing journeys into and/or out of brothel life - Imamura’s structure is principally synchronic and circular, with Tome’s experiences repeating and folding back on themselves as she moves from one role to another. At the end of the film, Tome is back where she started, trudging insect-like over a muddy hill-side, whereas in contrast, her daughter Nobuko has, if not broken the mould, at least begun to shape the earth for herself, quite literally in fact, as she simultaneously drives a tractor and deftly manoeuvres her new husband.⁶ Mizoguchi also makes use of a kind of implied circularity in the form of Shizuko (Kawakami Yasuko) , the girl from Kyushu whose debut as a prostitute, beckoning to potential customers and almost to the cinema audience itself, forms the film’s arresting final image, reinforcing the suggestion, according to McDonald (1984; in *Eureka Entertainment* , 2008: 19) , that “ first and last always, Mizoguchi seems to have been convinced that the tragedy of one woman would inevitably be followed by that of another ” .

The apparent detachment of Imamura’s directorial eye is another area in which we might expect to find his film most distant from that of Mizoguchi. Kim (2003) , for example, states that although *The Insect Woman* “ sounds melodramatic in outline, Imamura studiously denies us any prolonged emotional indulgence in Tome’s turns of fortune, keeping us at a distance from her suffering ”; Lim (2009) describes the film’s view of Tome as “ a specimen under glass ”; and Richie (1995; in Quandt , 20-21) argues that Imamura’s use of “ enddistancing devices ” enable the film to refuse “ the consolations of plot, and consequently [seem] to imply that this was not a fiction film, but rather, the real thing, actual life observed by the documentary camera ” , summarising Imamura’s method as being that of an “ intellectual who ... like a scientist, displays his findings ” . As we have seen, *Street of Shame* undoubtedly has its moments of melodrama, of overt appeal to the emotions, particularly in the story of Yumeko, and in Hanae’s defiant vow to see the end of prostitution, but McDonald argues that, in the film as a whole , “ Mizoguchi adopts a style of cold detachment and naturalistic observation, discarding the lyrical and sentimental tone which got in the way in the realistic study of prostitutes in [*Women of the Night*] ” (1984; in *Eureka Entertainment* , 2008: 9) . For Le Fanu (2005: 86) , this atypical tone is problematic:

Street of Shame is fuelled by a fierce and pitiless indignation, and, like all Mizoguchi’s films, is impressive for its dedicated moral seriousness. But it lacks the redemptive tenderness of Mizoguchi’s finest work, and strikes me as being uncharacteristically cold.

Le Fanu locates the source of these shortcomings both in the “ multipart ; choral ’ nature of the scenario that Mizoguchi arrived at in collaboration with his new scriptwriter Masashige Narusawa ” , and in its position right at the end of the director’s career: “ Mizoguchi was old and ill when he made the film, and maybe one can’t help feeling that it shows ” . An alternative view is put forward by Concannon (2011) , for whom the film “ has the rough energy of a much younger filmmaker, as Mizoguchi experiments with a more urgent style and a daringly innovative soun-

6 Yoshimura had also played Haruko, the heroine of Imamura’s previous film, *Pigs and Battleships* (*Buta to gunkan* , 1961) , who had, like Nobuko, broken away from the sordid manipulations of her family to make her own life at the end of the film.

dtrack ”; something closer to an Imamura film, perhaps.

Might Imamura Shohei have seen *Street of Shame* when it was released in 1956? There seems to be no reason to assume that he could not have done so. If he had, and whether one regards it as an uncomfortable cinematic departure for its director, or as a bold experiment in a new style, Mizoguchi’s final film, as this paper has attempted to show, may have provided not only a rich source of characters, plot details and social observation, but also an innovative, already modern-looking thematic space for further modernist reinterpretation and reworking in *The Insect Woman*.

Filmography

Gate of Flesh (*Nikutai no mon* - 肉体の門)(1964) . Dir. Suzuki Seijun, Nikkatsu.

The Insect Woman (*Nippon konchūki* - にっぽん昆虫記)(1963) . Dir. Imamura Shōhei , Nikkatsu.

Osaka Elegy(*Naniwa erejii* - 浪華悲歌)(1936) . Dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, Shōchiku.

Pigs and Battleships (*Buta to gunkan* - 豚と軍艦)(1961) . Dir. Imamura Shōhei, Nikkatsu.

Sisters of the Gion (*Gion no shimai* - 祇園の姉妹)(1936) . Dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, Shōchiku.

Street of Shame (*Akasen chitai* - 赤線地帯)(1956) . Dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, Daiei.

Story of a Prostitute (*Shunpu den* - 春婦伝)(1965) . Dir. Suzuki Seijun, Nikkatsu.

Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate (*Bakumatsu taiyō-den* - 幕末太陽傳)(1957) . Dir. Kawashima Yūzo, Nikkatsu.

When a Woman Ascends the Stairs (*Onna ga kaidan wo agaru toki* - 女が階段を上る時)(1960) . Dir. Naruse Mikio, Tōhō.

The Woman in the Dunes (*Suma no onna* - 砂の女)(1964) . Dir. Teshigahara Hiroshi, Tōhō.

The Woman in the Rumor (*Uwasa no onna* - 噂の女)(1954) . Dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, Daiei.

Women of the Night (*Yoru no onnatachi* - 夜の女たち)(1948) . Dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, Shōchiku.

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