

Maborosi (1995)

Major Credits:

Writer and Director: Kore-eda Hirokazu

Cinematography: Nakabori Masao

Cast: Esumi Makiko (Yumiko), Naitô Takashi (Tamio), Asano Tadanobu (Ikuo)

Production Context:

Kore-eda (b. 1962) aspired to be a novelist and began his film career as a documentarist; *Maborosi*, his first feature, loosely based on a novel by Teru Miyamoto, won international prizes and critical acclaim. His goal was to present a story through the play of light and shadow in empty space rather than through close-ups of human faces and dramatic action. He also sought to document the physical environment and everyday life of a contemporary city (Osaka, in this case) and an isolated seaside village on the Noto Peninsula (North Japan). Kore-eda has gone on to create a significant body of work that has consistently earned praise from a global audience, including *After Life* (1998), *Nobody Knows* (2004), *Still Walking* (2008), *I Wish* (2011), and *Like Father, Like Son* (2013).

In keeping with his intention to depict universal themes instead of individual psychology, Kore-eda cast Esumi Makiko, a fashion model who had never acted before, in the lead role. To enhance the story's allegorical effect, he deliberately restricted the camera movement and color palette, employed only natural lighting, and frequently shot the characters in silhouette. The resulting synthesis of sensory experience and philosophical contemplation has been rarely achieved in the cinema; among Japanese films, perhaps only Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) achieves a similar evocative effect.

Cinematic Aspects:

Like all Japanese filmmakers, Kore-eda studied the pantheon of his country's great directors during the studio era—Naruse, Goshô, Mizoguchi, Kurosawa—but he was most influenced by perhaps the most enduring of them all, Ozu Yasujiro. Ozu was the cinema's poet laureate of "dailyness," revealing the contemporary lives of ordinary people. His distinctive visual style is apparent in a number of stylistic choices that mark *Maborosi*:

- *Tatami* shots: the camera is placed at a low angle (perhaps two feet off the floor) for interior shots, imitating the perspective of a Japanese person seated on a *tatami* mat.
- "Pillow" shots: transitional still shots of carefully arranged objects that signal a shift in scene. In *Maborosi*, these include shots of the cellar stairs, a red mailbox, an old Singer sewing machine, a clock and a lightbulb, the boy and the master asleep in a rowboat on shore.
- Long takes: suspending not only the pace of the narrative but seemingly time itself. The most striking example is the 2:15 long shot of the funeral procession as it moves across the horizon.

Kore-eda adds his own distinctive signature to *Maborosi* in a number of ways:

1. Sound Track: Kore-eda employs diegetic sound (moving trains, rushing wind and roaring sea, birdsong) to enhance the tactile sensation of the physical environment and non-diegetic sound (especially the bicycle bell) to suggest memory.
2. Music: Kore-eda uses simple melodies played on single instruments—guitar, piano—early in the film, then introduces native instruments to create a more exotic atmosphere as the story moves to Noto, reaching a climax of intense and strangely mournful non-diegetic music to enhance the funeral procession.
3. Lighting: The most distinctive of all Kore-eda's stylistic choices is his use of a single intense light source to illuminate the surrounding darkness, deliberately underexposed for contrast. "I was experimenting to see how much I could communicate of the characters' feelings by making the light and shadow and the sound that the central character experiences reverberate within the frame," he has said.

Questions for Discussion:

1. While many critics have described Kore-eda's cinematic style as "poetic," other viewers may find his brand of what is now respectfully termed "slow cinema" to be simply *dull*. What are the particular elements of poetry to be found in *Maborosi*? Does the film successfully avoid dullness? What is required of the spectator in order for Kore-eda's "experiment" to work?
2. Perhaps the most enduring theme of Japanese literature is *mono no aware*, which translates as "the transience of things." Ikuo cryptically refers to this emotion early in the film when he describes his "sadness" at the thought of the sumo wrestler cutting his topknot. At the time, the idea hardly registers, but later on, Yumiko is very much in the grip of *mono no aware*. How does the film elaborate upon and resolve this theme?
3. We learn the meaning of the film's title near the very end. In what sense is this revelation an epiphany for the spectator? How does the concept of the *maborosi* reverberate in our memory of the film?
4. In a narrative that depicts the quotidian dimensions of existence (note how Kore-eda avoids any dramatic portrayal of the event at the beginning that precipitates the story), what are we to make of the strange and protracted climax? Is the central question that haunts Yumiko's memory ever resolved? (Think about this last question carefully.)