

WOMAN IN THE DUNES (1964)

Main Credits:

director: Hiroshi Teshigahara

cast: Kyoko Kishida (the woman); Eiji Okada (the guest)

Background:

The film is a considerably altered version of a novel of the same name by Kobo Abe, one of Japan's leading contemporary authors. In general, Teshigahara has simplified the novel's psychological details--the man's background, extended conversations with the woman and the villagers, various digressions--in order to emphasize the allegorical theme. In the novel we know from the outset that the man will never return to Tokyo; in the film, we learn this only at the very end.

Teshigahara's father was the foremost practitioner of the Japanese art of formal flower arrangement. After making several films, the director took up the craft and has subsequently earned international fame himself, while ceasing to make films. The actor Eiji Okada first gained fame as the star of Alain Resnais' classic of the French new wave, Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959).

Woman in the Dunes is one of the last of an era of artistically successful Japanese films spearheaded by the great triumvirate of directors, Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Akira Kurosawa. Japanese cinema suffered a critical decline in the sixties due to the commercial success of master movies and the incursions of television.

Stylistic Aspects:

The cinematic style of Woman in the Dunes is a mixture of realism (long takes, depth focus, mise-en-scène), expressionism (montage sequences like the attempted rape, superimpositions), and allegory. Few filmmakers (one thinks of David Lean's epics or John Ford's Monument Valley) have created a more powerfully sustained sense of place: the environment may truly be considered the film's protagonist.

1. composition - Note the way in which Teshigahara creates a sense of confinement by continually dividing the interior of the house into smaller rectangular units or by deliberately intersecting the frame with various foreground figures.

2. microscopic close-ups - Alternating with extreme long shots, they help to present the central theme of freedom. They also add to the tactile, often erotic quality of the images (e.g., the panning shot down the woman's throat). Some shots, such as the one of the insect climbing the sides of the glass jar) comment on the fate of the central characters.

3. montage - the expressionistic shots of shifting sand; the rapidly edited rape sequence.

Themes:

As in Mizoguchi's Ugetsu and Kurosawa's Ikiru, the theme is "the finding or losing of identity" (Donald Ritchie). The film's postscript (taken from the novel) about Junpei Niki being a "missing person" is ironic, since we understand that he has found himself at the end.

Although Woman in the Dunes has been cogently analyzed as a Taoist allegory, it also bears comparison to Camus' myth of Sisyphus.