



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Woman of the Dunes

(Suna no onna)

Hiroshi Teshigahara's most famous film follows a hapless entomologist who misses the last bus home and ends up stranded on a beach in the hut of a destitute young widow. Anticipating Oshima Nagisa's *In the Realm of the Senses* in its frank depiction of the destructive and claustrophobic relationship between the two leads, the film also has a strong absurdist undertow. Sand has never been more inventively used by a filmmaker. It is at once a force of nature (the widow's husband is said to have died in a sandstorm), a barrier to the outside world and, in the scene in which the man cleans grains off the woman's body, there to heighten the eroticism. The minimalist score by Takemitsu Toru adds to the growing unease.

Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight & Sound*, November 2006

It is no exaggeration to say that in this work Teshigahara has made one of the most atmospheric and tangibly real films to come out of the astonishing Japanese Cinema. We follow a young entomologist who is inveigled by the local villagers into spending a night in a shack owned by a young widow and situated at the bottom of a large sand-pit. Unsuccessfully trying to leave the next morning, he becomes resigned to his new condition and finds himself sexually attracted to the young woman.

To achieve his effects, Teshigahara, aided by his great cameraman, Hiroshi Segawa, creates a multitude of wonderful textures, constantly emphasizing the ever-shifting sand, sometimes pouring down like a waterfall and at others resembling a solid cliff preventing the man's escape. As the *Monthly Film Bulletin* commented at the time of the film's release 'the oppressive claustrophobia of the cluttered shack is set against the limitless expanses of sand, sea and sky; the gloom of the night scenes gives way to the blinding glare of the day-time sun; human skin suggests the cratered surface of the moon or becomes indistinguishable from the sand itself...'.

Equally striking is the way Teshigahara composes his images in such a tightly restricted set up: the framing and viewpoints always seem apt, there is a judicious use of close-up and couple's close proximity seems to pull the characters together, giving the erotic passages a deeply charged intensity.

Much depends on the quality of the two leading players and both admirably serve Teshigahara's purpose, often working under hot, sticky and difficult conditions surrounded by the ever-present walls of sand.

Kyoko Kishida, in particular, brings out the female character's weird obsessiveness and becomes increasingly human as the story progresses. Viewers are given plenty of opportunity to argue over what allegory actually means – how a sense of freedom can be tempered by circumstances or how people can be forced to come to terms with a strange and unexpected environment, almost against their will. Only rarely does the film put a foot wrong (it could be argued that the 'public rape' in front of the villagers lacks real impact and a proper sense of outrage); for the most part, however, Teshigahara's direction is admirably concentrated, the film is of consistent visual interest and there is an early Takemitsu score for admirers to relish.

John Gillet, extract from BFI DVD booklet for *The Woman of the Dunes*, 2006

A contemporary review

Teasingly opaque, broodingly erotic, with its suspiciously comprehensive symbol in the shape of the ubiquitous sand and its angular, minatory score: nothing could be better calculated to evoke that bland English distaste for the enigmatic and the ambiguous than this bizarre allegory. In fact, thanks to Teshigahara's sureness of touch and generally firm control over his refractory material, and the formidable technical authority displayed by the director, cameraman and editor, the film works perfectly.

The theme might be characterised, very roughly, as a set of sardonic and paradoxical glosses on the Marxist definition of freedom as the recognition of necessity, though the attempt to reduce the film's complex visual poetry to simple verbal formula is a self-defeating exercise that will attract only the literal-minded. The extraordinary visual appeal of the film lies in the fascinating textures conjured up out of sand, sea and human flesh, and in the pictorially striking and emotionally suggestive pattern of contrasts, and also of weirdly disturbing resemblances, it creates. The oppressive claustrophobia of the cluttered shack is set against the limitless expanses sand, sea and sky; the gloom of the night-scenes and interiors gives way to the blinding glare of the day-time sun; human skin suggests the cratered surface of the moon or becomes indistinguishable from the sand itself. Appearances are both delusive and alarmingly unstable: the sand, at times deceptively solid-looking cliff, at others resembles a river in spate. For the most part, Teshigahara adopts an appropriately tight probing shooting style, with considerable reliance on close-up, but any risk of monotony is avoided not only by the clever set-ups and often striking camerawork but also, and less expectedly, by flashes of dry, oblique humour. Actually, the film succeeds even when judged on the simplest level of character development and human interest, and here much credit is due to the sensitive playing of the two principals. Eiji Okada admirably conveys the transition from brash discontent to tranquil resignation, and Kyoko Kishida gives a haunting portrayal of the woman, with her obsessive attachment to her wretched home and paltry possession, her troubled humility and her sudden moods of fear and gaiety. The feeling of sexual tension too is disturbingly tangible, and the erotic scenes have a charged and compelling intensity.

Above all, Teshigahara strikes a nice balance between the mundane and the portentous; by anchoring his parable in the fascinating details of day-to-day life in this strange environment, and in the man's attempts to escape, he ensures that, like all good allegories, the film works on the primary level of fact and incident. From the remarkable sequence accompanying the credits, with grains of sand magnified to the size of boulders, which casts a menacing shadow over the apparent normality of the opening scene and perfectly prepares us for the peculiar happenings to follow, the director's control falters only once, in the scene of the public rape. In a curious way, this is at once too melodramatic and too reticent: the prancing villagers seem less like an evil nightmare than so much local colour, and the scene lacks genuine horror. The film quickly recovers from this lapse, however, and the moving final scene has an air of wry, unsentimental acceptance that, far-fetched as the comparison might seem, is not so far removed from the spirit that pervades Ozu's elegiac domestic dramas. The fact that it is not annihilated by this comparison is perhaps the best tribute one can pay to this distinguished and absorbing film.

***Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1965**

WOMAN OF THE DUNES (SUNA NO ONNA)

Director: Hiroshi Teshigahara
Production Company: Teshigahara Productions
Producers: Kiichi Ichikawa, Tadashi Ono
Production Manager: Iwao Yoshida
Assistant Director: Masuo Ogawa
Script Supervisor: Eiko Yoshida
Screenplay/Adaptation: Kôbô Abe
Original Novel: Kôbô Abe
Director of Photography: Hiroshi Segawa
Lighting: Mitsuo Kume
Stills Photography: Yasuhiro Yoshiyoka
Editor: Fusako Shuzui
Designer: Kiyoshi Awazu
Art Directors: Totetsu Hirakawa, Masao Yamazaki
Title Designer: Kiyoshi Awazu
Music: Toru Takemitsu
Sound Recording: Ichiro Kato, Jyunosuke Okuyama
Sound Effects Editor: Keiji Mori

Cast

Eiji Okada (entomologist Junpei Niki, the man)
Kyoko Kishida (the woman)
Hiroko Ito (entomologist’s wife – in flashbacks)
Koji Mitsui
Sen Yano
Ginzo Sekiguchi
Kiyohiko Ichihara
Tamotsu Tamora
Hiroyuki Nishimuti

Japan 1964
124 mins

JAPAN 2021
100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Tokyo Drifter (Tôkyô nagaremono)
Fri 3 Dec 20:50; Thu 23 Dec 18:30
Black Rain (Kuroi ame)
Sat 4 Dec 17:50; Tue 28 Dec 18:15
Straits of Hunger (aka A Fugitive from the Past) (Kiga kaikyô)
Sun 5 Dec 16:30; Sat 18 Dec 14:30
Woman of the Lake (Onna no mizûmi)
Mon 6 Dec 18:00; Wed 15 Dec 20:50
Silence Has No Wings (Tobenai chinmoku)
Mon 6 Dec 20:55; Wed 15 Dec 18:00
The Long Darkness (Shinobugawa)
Wed 8 Dec 20:40; Sun 19 Dec 12:40
Pale Flower (Kawaita hana)
Thu 9 Dec 18:00; Sun 19 Dec 18:20
Death By Hanging (Kôshikei)
Fri 10 Dec 17:50; Fri 17 Dec 18:00
After Life (Wandafuru raifu)
Fri 10 Dec 20:40; Mon 13 Dec 20:40; Wed 29 Dec 14:20
In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)
Sat 11 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 18:20
Muddy River (Doro no kawa)
Sun 12 Dec 11:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby);
Thu 23 Dec 20:40
The Demon (Kichiku)
Sun 12 Dec 14:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby);
Sun 19 Dec 16:00
The Man Who Stole the Sun (Taiyô wo nusunda otoko)
Sun 12 Dec 18:00; Thu 16 Dec 20:10
Tampopo
Mon 13 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King’s College
London); Fri 17 Dec 20:45; Tue 28 Dec 15:10
Philosophical Screens: Tampopo
Mon 13 Dec 20:15 Blue Room
Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no sôretsu)
Tue 14 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 15:50

The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On (Yuki Yukite, Shingun)

Sat 18 Dec 11:40; Mon 27 Dec 18:20
Woman of the Dunes (Suna no Onna)
Sat 18 Dec 17:30
Moving (Ohikkoshi)
Sat 18 Dec 20:35; Wed 29 Dec 20:30
Fire Festival (Himatsuri)
Mon 20 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 13:20
Suzaku (Moe No Suzaku)
Tue 21 Dec 17:45; Thu 30 Dec 21:00
Shall We Dance? (Shall we dansu?)
Tue 21 Dec 20:30; Thu 30 Dec 17:40
Love Letter
Wed 22 Dec 20:50; Tue 28 Dec 12:10

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