



**IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS**

# Kwaidan

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

From Masaki Kobayashi, best known for his socially conscious dramas (*Black River*, 1957; *The Human Condition*, 1959-61) and intense samurai epics (*Harakiri*, 1962; *Rebellion*, 1967), *Kwaidan* comes as something of a surprise. His first film in colour, it adapts four ghost stories by the Greek-born, Irish-raised, Japan-dwelling writer Lafcadio Hearn.

Though it deals with ghosts, malevolent for the most part, *Kwaidan* is almost too beautiful to be scary; and unlike most ghost movies, it makes little use of darkness. Shot almost entirely on sets constructed inside a vast disused aircraft hangar and hand-painted by the director himself, the film rejects the least concession to naturalism; everything is stylised to the nth degree. So is the score, on which Kobayashi worked for six months with composer Toru Takemitsu to produce eerie and unsettling tones that combine evocatively with the dreamlike visuals. From the elegiac sorrow of 'Black Hair' through the icy remoteness of 'Woman of the Snow' and the implacable malice of 'Hoichi the Earless' to the sardonic humour of 'In a Cup of Tea', each tale sustains its own individual mood; but all are unforgettably, hauntingly beautiful.

Perhaps most beautiful and stylised of all is a fifth story, encapsulated within 'Hoichi the Earless' – a telling by the tale's unlucky protagonist, a blind lute player, of a sea battle famous in Japanese history: the Battle of Danno-ura, fought out in 1185 between two samurai clans. Interspersed with ancient tapestries, it's a gloriously coloured and defiantly unrealistic representation of medieval naval warfare.

At the time of its production, *Kwaidan* was the most expensive film ever made in Japan. It exhausted its budget three-quarters of the way through filming; Kobayashi was forced to sell his house, and his production company was bankrupted. But on its release it was hailed as a rare masterpiece, and won the Special Jurists' Prize at the 1965 Cannes Festival.

**Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2020**

## **Contemporary reviews (initial three-story release)**

Kobayashi's own words can speak for *Kwaidan*. With this film (five years to prepare, a year to shoot), he says, he wanted to create 'a gorgeous multi-coloured scroll painting based on the lines and tones of an India-ink brush painting.' And so it is. But it is not so much that the colour in *Kwaidan* is ravishing (one has come to expect that of the Japanese cinema) as the way Kobayashi uses it to give these stories something of the quality of legend.

**Monthly Film Bulletin, September 1967**

Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, an expensive, widescreen, three-episode film based on ghost stories by Lafcadio Hearn, has been described as academic; but it is academic in the good as well as the bad sense of the word. It is slow, perhaps over-elaborate in relation to its material, and sometimes too concerned about explaining things to its audience (for example, the use of superimposition to convey recognition). On the other hand, the better parts of the film are a striking demonstration of what academic direction is about: a careful script, a

rehearsed and controlled rather than a spontaneous and erratic style of performance, a meticulous massing of effects towards a foreordained conclusion, a respect for the audience and also for the separate creative contributions to be made by the different members of the film unit. Largely shot in the studio, *Kwaidan* has imaginative sets and decors; the colour is exceptionally subtle; and the use of electronic and natural sound in a non-naturalistic way is hauntingly and chillingly effective.

Lafcadio Hearn was an Irish-American who lectured at Tokyo University, married a Japanese, and became a Japanese subject; the stories show varying degrees of adjustment between Western and Eastern ways of thinking and feeling. The first, 'The Black Hair', is about a samurai who divorces his wife to marry a rich woman who will bring him advancement. He is unhappy, continues to remember his first wife, and in the end returns to her to a night of love. When he awakens in the morning, however, he finds that he has been sleeping with a decayed corpse, and he is pursued through the rotting, deserted house by its black hair, the black hair of which he dreamt in his long exile. The echo of *Ugetsu monogatari* consorts uneasily with the elements of Hammer horror. In the later story, 'In a Cup of Tea' (a warrior swallows the soul of a young lord, whose ghost comes to avenge him), the emphasis is less Western; while the longest, 'Hoichi the Earless', undoubtedly gains its authority through its formal, Noh-like treatment.

The 'Hoichi' episode begins with a description of a 12th-century sea-battle between the Heike and the Genji: the Heike are annihilated. Centuries later a blind musician is summoned by the ghost of one of the Heike warriors to sing before them. His absences from the temple where he lives are noticed, and the priests try to protect him by painting him with sacred texts. But they forget to paint his ears, and when his nocturnal visitor arrives to call him his ears are torn from his head. In retrospect this finely expressive piece – using paintings to contrast with formalised scenes shot in a studio tank – consists of a series of recitals or tableaux, re-enactments of the legendary event; the principal of arrangement is essentially non-narrative and non-dramatic. The horrific climax belongs to a different category of the imagination, more familiar to Western audiences and for that reason less interesting. It is in the retelling of the battle as, with ragged banners flying, ship after ship moves to destruction through the smoking mist, and the faces of the warriors express only the anguish and tragedy of defeat, that the film finds its true purpose.

All good fantasy has its own logic. 'Hoichi the Earless' is logical (if the priests hadn't forgotten his ears, they wouldn't have been pulled off) and so is 'In a Cup of Tea' (if a man swallows someone's soul, sooner or later that someone is going to want it back). Oddly enough, though 'Hoichi' is the most ambitious episode, it is the first story, 'The Black Hair', which most repays a second viewing.

The story is told from the samurai's point of view, cutting from the present and his spoilt, idle wife to recollections of the woman he cast aside. Each time he comes back to her it is merely a dream, until the final return (but this is not real, either). He asks her to forgive him, caressing her black hair; she says 'What greater happiness than to see you again, even for a moment?' to which he replies, sealing his own doom, 'Nothing shall ever separate us again.' She is a ghost with awareness, a succubus come from the grave to find her own momentary happiness, a demon released from hell to pursue her betrayer: only on a second viewing can the way this part is played be properly appreciated.

**James Price, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1967**

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## KWAIDAN

*Director:* Masaki Kobayashi  
*Production Companies:* Ninjin Club, Bungei Productions  
*Executive Producer:* Shigeru Wakatsuki  
*Screenplay:* Yôko Mizuki  
*Original stories:* Lafcadio Hearn  
*Director of Photography:* Yoshio Miyajima  
*Art Director:* Shigemasa Toda  
*Music:* Toru Takemitsu  
*Sound:* Hideo Nishizaki

In partnership with



## Cast

Rentarô Mikuni (*samurai*)  
Michiyo Aratama (*1st wife*)  
Misako Watanabe (*2nd wife*)  
Ganemon Nakamura (*Kannai*)  
Noboru Nakaya (*Heinai*)  
Katsuo Nakamura (*Hoichi*)  
Ganjirô Nakamura (*head priest*)  
Takashi Shimura (*priest*)  
Joichi Hayashi (*Yoshitsune*)  
Keiko Kishi (*the woman*)  
Tatsuya Nakadai (*Minokichi*)  
Mariko Okada  
Tetsurô Tanba

Japan 1964  
162 mins

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## IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

### The Uninvited

Thu 1 Dec 18:05; Sat 17 Dec 14:30 (+ intro by broadcaster and writer, Louise Blain)

### Kwaidan (Kaidan)

Thu 1 Dec 20:00; Tue 13 Dec 17:40

### Night of the Eagle

Fri 2 Dec 21:00; Sat 10 Dec 12:10

### Daughters of Darkness (Les lèvres rouges)

Sat 3 Dec 20:45; Tue 13 Dec 21:00

### Transness in Horror

Tue 6 Dec 18:20

### Let the Right One In (Låt den rätte komma in)

Tue 6 Dec 20:45; Thu 22 Dec 18:15

### Philosophical Screens: The Lure

Wed 7 Dec 20:10 Blue Room

### The Lure (Córki dancing)

Wed 7 Dec 18:15; Thu 22 Dec 20:45 (+ intro by Dr Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies at King's College London)

### Cat People

Wed 7 Dec 20:50; Mon 19 Dec (+ intro by Clarisse Loughrey, chief film critic for The Independent)

### Black Sunday (La maschera del demonio)

Fri 9 Dec 21:00; Sun 18 Dec 18:30

### Ring (Ringu)

Sat 10 Dec 20:40; Tue 13 Dec 21:05;  
Tue 20 Dec 21:00

### Atlantics (Atlantique) + Atlantiques

Sun 11 Dec 14:50; Tue 27 Dec 18:20

### Sugar Hill

Sun 11 Dec 18:00; Sat 17 Dec 20:40

### Häxan

Mon 12 Dec 18:10 (+ live score by The Begotten); Sat 17 Dec 11:45 (with live piano accompaniment)

### Sweetheart

Mon 12 Dec 21:00; Tue 27 Dec 12:40

### Arrebato

Wed 14 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by writer and broadcaster Anna Bogutskaya);  
Fri 23 Dec 18:05

### The Final Girls LIVE

Thu 15 Dec 20:30

### One Cut of the Dead (Kamera o tomeru na!)

Fri 16 Dec 18:15; Fri 30 Dec 20:45

### The Fog

Fri 16 Dec 21:00; Wed 28 Dec 18:10

### Being Human + Q&A with Toby Whithouse and guests (tbc)

Sat 17 Dec 18:00

### Day of the Dead

Mon 19 Dec 20:40; Thu 29 Dec 18:20

### Society

Tue 20 Dec 18:15; Wed 28 Dec 20:50

### Interview with the Vampire

Wed 21 Dec 18:10; Thu 29 Dec 20:40

### Ginger Snaps

Wed 21 Dec 20:50; Tue 27 Dec 15:10

### A Dark Song

Fri 23 Dec 20:45; Fri 30 Dec 18:20

### City Lit at BFI: Screen Horrors –

### Screen Monsters

Thu 20 Oct – Thu 15 Dec 18:30–20:30 Studio

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