

UKIGUMO (Mikio Naruse, 1955)

Sometimes the critic is faced with a paradox. Certain film-makers are elevated, at one time or another, to the rank of major author. This has always been the case throughout the history of reflection on cinematographic art. But this accolade has not always been accompanied by the necessary arguments to justify such a status. I am referring, of course, to those types of critical study that attempt to guide the viewer along paths that offer an accessible approach to the works of the respective authors. I will therefore not concern myself with all the cinematographic writing that is based on a non-transferable personal taste and is entirely unhelpful to the viewer of the films, and that is most ardently protected by the more or less justified prestige of the fashionable critic of the day. But even if we concentrate on the criticism that claims to seek “to understand how we understand films” or, more simply put, to try to explain how the film-maker (I use the synecdoche despite the fact that in cinema the individual is always collective) is capable of facilitating our access to the possible world that is built before our eyes, the problem persists. Among other reasons, this is because not all film-makers are equally “detectable” when it comes to describing their personal *maniera*, as long as we aim to avoid empty words and commonplaces.

To avoid beating about the bush and take the most immediate example, I would say that, as far as I am concerned, at least three directors have always given me trouble when I try to explain (to myself and to others) the reasons for the obvious fascination that I have for their films. They are: Howard Hawks, Eric Rohmer and Mikio Naruse. Of course they are authors (just to be clear, I use the term without any “film politics” connotation) sufficiently different from each other that, from the outset, we can assume that the three cases will not have a similar explanation. What I would like to invite you to do here is to join me on a tour of the reasons (better or worse, more or less interesting) that critics have offered to decide that Mikio Naruse (1905-1969, author of no less than eighty-nine films between 1930 and 1967, of which more than seventy have survived, making him unique among the Japanese directors of his generation) should occupy a prominent place in the list of great Japanese film-makers (an affirmation that I share) and, later, on a less highbrow level and without affectation, to find a way to suggest, from our modest perspective, how we might understand a little better the issues at stake in his films both in general and, in a very special way, in the singular film that is *Ukigumo* (translated into English as *Floating Clouds*).

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The fact that Naruse’s work has not received the same bibliographic attention as that devoted to his fellow Japanese film-makers (I am thinking, of course, of Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa) makes the evaluation of the approaches to his films presented by Spanish and foreign critics (including Japanese) more straightforward. And the book published jointly by the Filmoteca Española and the San Sebastian International Film Festival in 1998, to celebrate the seasons that both institutions dedicated to him, still provides the basic resources for this task.¹

A quick review of Japanese literature on Naruse offers a set of evaluations that are not a great deal of use (although they sometimes offer suggestive ideas) when addressing the aesthetic-formal dimension of his art, in which he was just one more film-maker working in the same way as the others hired by Toho (the production company in which he spent almost his entire career after his departure in 1935 from the Shochiku company where he had started his career), maintaining “a vital harmony with the Japanese studio system”, who was not known for shows of vanity or great ambitions, and who was sincere and profoundly humble although not without his manias (his actors

¹ Hasumi, S. and Yamane, S. (eds.), *Mikio Naruse*, San Sebastian-Madrid, San Sebastian International Film Festival/Filmoteca Española, 1998.

and technicians always complained that they could never consult the scripts during filming and about the superficial or non-existent work instructions). In short, he is seen as someone “lacking self-expression” but whose “use of dramatic techniques that relied on looks and body language rather than resorting to dialogues to express everything” we nevertheless cannot fail to recognise (S. Hasumi and S. Yamane), even if, assuming the testimonies referred to are true, this is a credit to the actors rather than to the director.

For his part, Shigehiko Hasumi, after supporting the debatable idea that “a film is something very simple” and affirming that all the great film-makers have demonstrated that “a film is made up of only a few elements”, such that “creativity and originality in cinema can be reduced to a sensitivity and a desire for simplicity”, proceeds to identify these elements in Naruse’s films, in his modesty as a film-maker, in search of minimal arguments combined with critical moments capable of exerting a strong sensory attraction on the viewer. And, he notes, “for those critical moments Naruse only needed a man and a woman.” This way of seeing things leads him in the direction of *Ukigumo*, the last scene of which seems to condense what he calls, coining an elegant expression, “the ultra-sensitive focus of the film”. The critic does not fail to see that there is an aspect of *Ukigumo* that makes it stand out from the rest Naruse’s work, which more typically involves what is known in Japanese culture as *shomin geki*² (works that explore the daily life of normal people from middle- or working-class families) than by the disturbing emotional quagmire explored by the novelist Fumiko Hayashi (see below). We must therefore be very careful not to extrapolate some of the obvious virtues of *Ukigumo* to Naruse’s body of work as a whole.

If we now shift the focus towards European criticism, it should be remembered that, following the path opened by Kurosawa and Mizoguchi, at the beginning of the nineteen-fifties, at least one film by Naruse was released and was well received by French critics in 1953: *Okāsan* (which translates as “Mother”). In the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* (No. 43, January 1955), a perceptive Doniol-Valcroce pointed out in his review that this film (clearly aligned with the model of the *shomin-geki* genre) is less the case of a story and more that of a chronicle, and that we would be mistaken if we expected to see in it a kind of “Japanese neorealism”, to the extent that the “addition of episodes” leads to the disappearance of exoticism and culminates in an “adult naivety, a resigned modesty, an art of half-measures”. Unfortunately, this premiere was short-lived and Naruse’s work remained in the dark in Europe until well into the nineteen-eighties, coinciding with the season dedicated to him by the Locarno International Festival in 1984.

When in 1979 Noël Burch published his influential *To the Distant Observer. Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, his overall approach to the film-maker followed the same template applied to those like Mizoguchi and Ozu who were much better known in the west at the time: as in the case of these film-makers, Naruse’s most important work, Burch argues, corresponds to the interwar period when he shot what he considers his masterpiece, a 1935 *shomin-geki* classic entitled *Tsuma yo bara no yo ni* (which is usually translated as “Wife! Be like a rose!”). According to Burch and his particular reading of Japanese cinema, with this film Naruse joined the “subversive” work being carried out by other film-makers of his generation (including Ozu and Mizoguchi, among others), producing in his works a significant aesthetic and narrative shift in Japanese cinema (at least a significant part of it) in the direction of a notably eccentric anti-illusionist and discontinuous art in relation to the inflexibly codified norms of western cinema. In reference to Naruse’s films in the years after the Second World War, the judgement of the French-American scholar was, in contrast, indisputable: “Excellent stories in the form of a *shomin-geki*, in the class of a Becker or a Lattuada [...], dramatised portraits of modern Japanese life in opposition to the conflictual universe of a Mizoguchi and tributaries of the western mode of representation”, that construct which Burch, in another context, gave the name “Institutional Representation Mode”.

2 The other major Japanese genre is perhaps *jidai-geki*, or films telling stories that take place in different historical periods.

Comentado [MI1]: Error en el original

Meanwhile, as we might expect, it took much longer for the Spanish critics to come across this film-maker. Miguel Mariás is recognised as being the first to have noted the interest in Naruse's cinema in successive texts that appeared in 1988, 1993 and 1998³. In these, Mariás maintains that the best works of the Japanese film-maker (of the twenty-one that he claims to have seen) are "as good as the best of Mizoguchi, Ozu, Ford, McCarey, Chaplin, Rossellini, Dreyer, Renoir and Hitchcock" and that, in the case of *Ukigumo*, it is possible to find similarities with Rossellini (*Stromboli, Europa 51*), Dreyer (*Gertrud*) and Godard (*Vivre sa vie*). He also compares Naruse to Antonioni and Cukor (*The Chapman Report*, 1961; *Rich and Famous*, 1981) as an author of "films about solitary women". But in the moment of truth, he recognises that he fails to identify – "beyond features that are repeated, but not systematically and infallibly"⁴ – a recognisable style.

These heterogeneous features might be summarised as the film-maker's *impassiveness* in the face of the facts (not to be confused with indifference or nonchalance) that reminds us of the "most humanitarian, concerned or dramatic" Rossellini. Basically, Mariás suggests, Naruse could be regarded as a pessimistic "realist" who does not succumb to the "formal predetermination" that authors such as Ozu, Bresson or Antonioni could be accused of. He is someone who moves comfortably among the "dramas of real life", without being conditioned by a limiting attachment to Japanese traditions.

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At this stage of the reflection, it does not seem impertinent to suggest that we are confronted with a kind of "Naruse mystery": a director without recognisable attributes (consider, in contrast, those attached to his compatriots Ozu and Mizoguchi, to name only a few). Neither coming up with a list of film-makers with whom he could be compared helps a great deal when the breadth of the field is so great, nor does accumulating heterogeneous features located at very different levels help focus our efforts, and the presentation of certain features of his personality that seem to coagulate in this "sensitivity and simplicity" slogan helps even less, if it is not explained (beyond generic statements of the type "a man and a woman") how this is reflected in the images and sounds of the specific works that make up his filmography.

As if this were not enough, I would also like to point out that Naruse was very much admired by his professional colleagues. Akira Kurosawa, who was the film-maker's assistant director in one of his films (*Nadare*, 1937) did not hesitate to acknowledge that his cinema "at first glance seems placid and conventional [but] later reveals itself as a deep river with a quiet surface disguising a fast-raging current underneath. His skill in this was unmatched"⁵. The same is true of one of the leaders of the "Japanese new wave", Kiju Yoshishige Yoshida, who describes Naruse as "the great shadow", someone who watched people "plunged into deep silence"⁶. In his own way, one of the great turn of the century Taiwanese film-makers, Edward Yang (1947-2007) paid tribute to him in writing in 1998 describing what he called "Naruse's invincible invisible style": "Naruse lacks style, compared to the great stylists in the short history of one hundred years of cinema [...]; Naruse's work had little impact compared to Kurosawa's successes at Cannes and Venice and the analyses of and praise for the charm of the static, monotonal Zen style of Ozu, while Naruse quietly told his stories [...];

3 These are all referenced in the book by Hasumi and Yamane already referred to.

4 Among which he quotes, listed in no particular order: a certain fondness for using the inner voice of the heroin, a couple of inserted close-ups of shoes, the frequent use of brief lateral travelling shots, brutal narrative ellipsis, the non-dramatisation of tragic or melodramatic events, filming a conversation with the couple with their backs to the camera, etc.

5 See the excerpt from his autobiography included as a preface in the book by Hasumi and Yamane (*op. cit.*), pages 13-14.

6 Kiju-Yoshishige Yoshida: "Invirtiendo la luz y la sombra o, gente que se separa: Yasujiro Ozu y Mikio Naruse", in Hasumi and Yamane (*op. cit.*), pages 158-162.

what makes Naruse so special [...] is that he never tried to give me the impression that he was a great director [...], the only word I can think of to describe him is very simple: generosity”.

But the best is yet to come. If we leaf through Yasujiro Ozu’s diaries⁷, we find the respective entries of 9 February, 28 February and 2 March 1955. In the first of these we read: “Good weather. Ryu [Chishu] came this morning when we were just finishing eating. He left us two bottles of sake. The three of us went [the “third man” is Kogo Noda, screenwriter and personal friend of Ozu] by taxi to the Toho, in Odawara, to see *Floating Clouds* [Mikio Naruse] and *Meiji ichidai onna* [Daisuke Ito]. **I was very impressed by *Floating Clouds***” (the bold text is mine). In the other two entries we find brief allusions to what appears to be Ozu’s reading of the Fumiko Hayashi novel on which the Naruse film is based (see below): “[...] Siesta and reading of *Floating Clouds*” (28/II); “Continuation of the reading of *Floating Clouds*” (2/III).

For his part, Kiju Yoshida, in the text referred to above, allows us to explore this opinion held by Ozu in more depth. First, when he quotes him to offer these insightful words: “Directors are born with a voice or a musical tone, which cannot be easily changed. Naruse and I have a low-pitched voice. Kurosawa’s is relatively high. Mizoguchi seems to have a low tone but in reality the tone of his voice is quite high.” Later, he describes a more extensive opinion from the maestro about his vision of *Ukigumo*: “The other day I saw *Ukigumo* and I really liked it. It appeals to our adult feelings. A great piece of work. Well, it has a few minor flaws. But even taking them into account, its place is at the highest level in the history of Japanese cinema. Having seen this film will mean a delay in this year’s work. I have decided I shouldn’t be so lazy. I haven’t done my job well enough. I think Naruse himself has got himself into trouble making this film. It will be difficult for him to make the next one.”

With all this material in mind, we are left to see if we are capable of explaining in a simple, sensible and plausible way what might be and where we might find the elements of his work that allow us to at least partially unravel the following words by Yoshida, which summarise a large part of the conventional critical discourse about our film-maker: “There is nothing really special about Naruse’s films but people continue to watch them [...] They have an inexplicable attraction. Arguably the explanation is contained in *Ukigumo*.” It is a question of trying to convert the “inexplicable” into “what has not yet been explained”, knowing that there will always be “remainders” resistant to analytical exegesis. I would therefore maintain that if we want to address Naruse’s film-making and the specific meaning of a film like *Ukigumo* in a way that is not merely impressionistic, we must bring into play what I would call a pertinent operational context that allows us to bring to light a series of elements that, without resorting to abusive generalisations, help us to identify, in a sensible way, some of the causes that may underlie the value that we intuitively attribute to a work whose mechanisms for fascination are not located in the world of the ineffable but in a place that has only been partially explored. Let us listen attentively to Naruse’s work.

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It seems to me that a good starting point is to address the appeal to “realism” (I put it in quotation marks to mark its ambivalence in many of the texts referred to) that is repeated over and over again. And almost always compared to Ozu’s film-making, as proved by this anecdote recounted by Keisuke Kinoshita, brought up by Yoshida and referring to Naruse’s traumatic departure in 1935 from Shochiku, where he had started his film career: “Mr. Naruse was very much like Mr. Ozu. His films were copies of Ozu’s films. The people at Shochiku said they did not need another Ozu, and made Mr. Naruse resign. We all feel sorry for him.”

⁷ We quote from *Antología de los diarios de Yasujiro Ozu* (N. Pujol and A. Santamarina, eds.), Valencia, Donostia Kultura/Filmoteca Generalitat Valenciana/CGAI, 2000, pages 176 and 178.

For my part, in the attempt to formalise my position, I will return to my initial, intuitive reaction to Naruse's cinema. From the first moment that I began to systematically explore his films (and, to be more precise, his work of the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties) I could not avoid thinking about Ozu's films. And for good reason: the humus in which the stories of both directors grew was the same; that is to say, the family atmosphere described by their respective films was identical, typical of the *shomin-geki* genre. But at the same time, it became very evident that the stylistic paths taken by the two authors were quite diverse. Ozu's film-making involved a notable stylisation of the reference materials used, so that his thirteen films that span the period between 1949 and 1962 are like a single work, though each of them different from the others, to the extent that the director, in his description of Japanese society, applied what I have called elsewhere a *minimalist and modular* model that allowed him to capture and describe (in the synthetic formula coined by Deleuze) the "immutable form of everything that changes"⁸. In contrast, Naruse's films openly opt for a more primal, more immediate, less formalised realism, more attentive to the diverse than to the identical.

I would argue that three facets of their work allow us to understand this crucial difference: the first, very well captured by Yoshida, refers to the importance that both film-makers attach to the ruptures that life and historical evolution caused in one of the pillars of Japanese society, the family. If Ozu "did not consider [those ruptures and separations] as something irrational, accepting this as something natural in the human condition and describing it quite naturally", Naruse preferred to describe in a "realistic" and unique way how the specific disorders of the war and the definitive westernisation of the country after the defeat of 1945 changed the daily life of ordinary people⁹.

The same thing happens with the references to the lost war that we find in the work of the two film-makers: compare the absent presence of the dead son in Ozu's outstanding *Tokyo monogatari* (1953), or the nostalgia for the past of the old comrades-in-arms in *Samma no aji* (1962) by the same director, with the physical and moral presence of the ravages of the war which Naruse films as authentic visible scars inscribed in a way that is visible rather than merely symbolic in the body of the country and its people¹⁰.

The third, finally, shows the extent to which Naruse's art depended on certain simple staging options. His director of photography Masao Tamai (responsible for the lighting in *Ukigumo*) has related how the director always filmed continuously to ensure the rhythm of the film through the shooting, or how Naruse's camera never followed a character walking¹¹. On the contrary, it combined fixed shots to achieve a rhythm in the scene: "There was a scene in *Yama no oto* (Sound of the Mountain, 1954) in which So Yamamura and Ken Uehara are speaking in front of a temple. The normal thing would have been to shoot the scene with moving shots. But according to the system Mr. Naruse used, one of them took a step forward and looked back, and the other took a step and went a little further forward. This scene was filmed with a fixed shot. This 'looking back' position is very characteristic of Mr. Naruse, who captured the rhythm through the movements of the characters. I created the rhythm by alternating normal lighting with backlighting. Thus, the fixed shots had movement and on the screen we created the effect of a moving shot."

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8 For a more in-depth study of Ozu's poetics, see "Voces distantes", in Santos Zunzunegui, *La mirada plural*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2008, pages 177-192.

9 It only requires listening carefully to the diegetic musical soundtrack of *Ukigumo* (in which the action occurs during the initial moments of the American occupation after the defeat of 1945), which includes everything from American folk songs to Benny Goodman and the Internationale, to recognise this fact.

10 For a brief but meaningful comparison of the worlds and styles of Ozu and Naruse, see Santos Zunzunegui, "La vida y nada más", in *Caimán CdC*, no. 70 (121), 2018, page 47. This text studies how two similar "situational pictures" (a daughter's wedding) work in a film by Ozu (*Banshun*, 1949) and another by Naruse (*Okasan*, 1953) made at a similar time.

11 A statement that should be qualified if we are referring to *Ukigumo*. In this film, a good part of its rhythm is created by the periodic appearance of reverse tracking shots that describe the lingering walks of the protagonists.

Therefore, it should not be necessary to note that when we speak of “realism” we are referring to a realism of “arrival” not of “departure”, more dependent on stylistic options than on a narrow referentialism. How could we not notice that Naruse’s “realism” was constructed? What is the reason, we might also ask, for his constant reluctance to shoot outdoors, preferring the reconstruction of the studio where reality could be modified to make it more intense? And when, for once, he was forced to shoot in natural scenery, as his habitual decorator Satoshi Chuko remembers, a simple change of direction on some stairs (replacing the descent that led to a hot spring bath by an ascent, modifying the meaning of the local geography) was sufficient to re-dimension the meaning of a scene, as occurs in a sequence in *Ukigumo*.

In other words, Naruse’s entire mature body of work can be seen as a reaction to a “scene from his origins”, his exclusion from Shochiku and the subsequent methodical search for a style (of a non-style?) that distances itself from the “Ozu model”. It goes without saying that it is not necessary to choose between one film-maker and the other; it is sufficient to understand that one cannot be explained without the other. Or, if you prefer, to point out that we are dealing with two poetries that look at each other in order to offer the viewer different points of view on the same reality: where Ozu *paints* with melancholy, Naruse *portrays*, drawing up a notarial act of the situations¹². Each of them successfully uses, in a very different way, the formula that maintains that art consists of nothing other than making the viewers see what they would not be able to see on their own.

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Finally, let us address *Ukigumo*, a film that seems to be unanimously acclaimed by the critics as Naruse’s masterpiece. To do this, we need to take into consideration something that everyone knows but which has not been given the relevance it deserves (and involves bringing a new relevant context into play). *Ukigumo*¹³ is, among other things, the adaptation of a pre-existing literary work, the novel of the same title published by the writer Fumiko Hayashi (1903-1951) in 1951, the year in which she died¹⁴. This forces us to take into account the literary origin of the film and to consider the identities of the two artistic products and the modifications that have been made; all the more since Naruse himself has put in writing the extent to which his frequent recourse to Hayashi’s works contributed to his personal learning¹⁵.

The first contact between Fumiko Hayashi’s work and Naruse’s cinema involves frustration. In the middle of the nineteen-thirties, the film-maker, then employed in Shochiku’s Kamata studio, received from Kogo Noda (who would eventually become Ozu’s principal screenwriter) a melodramatic short story by Hayashi entitled *The Fallen Woman*. Despite the fact that the script was ready, the film was never made and Naruse left Shochiku to settle permanently in Toho.

12 Hideko Takamine, who was Naruse’s female star in fifteen films (including *Ukigumo*), describes the world of the director in this way: “All these films used areas where ordinary people lived as scenes and portrayed how those people lived. In his films the exteriors were full of people and the houses were cheap buildings. People ate *ramen* and *ochazuke*, and the characters in his films weren’t all that *glamorous*. Sometimes he inserted shots of men with sandwich boards (*chindon-ya*). That was Mikio Naruse’s world.”

13 Fumiko Hayashi, *Nubes flotantes* (1951; translation and introduction by Takagi Kayoko), Gijón, Satori Ediciones, 2018.

14 A precise and synthetic overview of the figure and work of Fumiko Hayashi can be found in Takagi Kayoko’s prologue to the Spanish edition of *Diario de una vagabunda* (Horoki, 1930), Gijón, Satori Ediciones, 2014. In this autobiographical narration, also taken to the cinema in 1962 by Naruse, the very young author reviews her hard years of childhood, adolescence, her self-taught education and her first steps in the literary world, with a strict and unadorned style.

15 See Mikio Naruse, “Las obras de Fumiko Hayashi y yo” (*Eiga Junkan* magazine, 1956), in Hasumi and Yamane (*op. cit.*), pages 168-171.

But from 1951 onwards (precisely the year of the death of the writer whom the director never got to know personally) Naruse brought several of her texts to the screen, beginning with the novel that Hayashi had left incomplete on her premature death (*Meshi*, 1951). It was the illness of the director intended to carry out this adaptation, Yasuki Chiba, which gave him the opportunity (“thus I had the chance to get involved by chance with Fumiko Hayashi’s literary work”) to direct it. The following year he made *Inazuma* (Lightning, 1952) and this was followed between 1953 and 1955 with the adaptations of *Tsuma* (Wife, 1953), *Bangiku* (Late Chrysanthemums, 1954) and *Ukigumo* (Floating Clouds, 1955). The fact that in 1962 Naruse could bring to the screen *Horoki* (with the film title A Wanderer’s Notebook), the writer’s remarkable autobiography, might be regarded as poetic justice¹⁶.

Ukigumo, which a critic of the calibre of Jean Douchet defined as Naruse’s *Vertigo* (1958), breaks out of the confines of both the *shomin-geki* and of the subgenre known as *fufu mono* (“husband and wife”) to fully establish itself in the world of melodrama. The war has just ended and the physical and moral landscape of Japan occupied by US troops presents a bleak panorama. The young Yukiko Koda (Hideko Takamine) arrives in Tokyo from South East Asia, having been assigned to occupied Indochina during the war, desperately searching for her lover Kengo Tomioka (Masayuki Mori). But the man is only capable of offering the young woman a complex and unsatisfactory relationship full of misunderstandings if not lies. Unable to turn away from the man with whom she even plans a double suicide¹⁷, Yukiko is forced to recall her old frustrations and past abuse, accepting the help of an American soldier, needing to have an abortion and even stealing from her former rapist, now a pseudo-religious swindler, to try to keep Tomioka. Despite her lover’s disaffection, Yukiko convinces him to take her with him to his new professional destination, the island of Yakushima, located off the southern coast of Japan. During the trip, the young woman’s health weakens terminally. In the novel, Yukiko dies alone in a sad shack in the midst of the deluge that falls continuously on the island while Tomioka is away on a forest mission. In summary, Yukiko’s story is that of an obsessive love, sustained by the memory of the love story that took place in Vietnam, which leads her to death after suffering poverty, humiliation, prostitution, the temptation of suicide, pregnancy followed by abortion, theft and the final illness.

The novel (and the film adapted by a woman, Yoko Mizuki¹⁸) presents us with a superb female character (and a memorable performance by Hideko Takamine) who never gives up in the face of adversity and who does not relinquish her passionate love. In contrast, both Hayashi¹⁹ and Naruse and his collaborator draw the precise portrait of a cowardly, selfish and self-indulgent male character. This is how we leave him in the final lines of the novel: “Tomioka imagined himself as floating clouds in the sky. Floating clouds that one day, in one place or another, would disappear.”

If we look more closely at the adaptation, we can see that one of the fundamental modifications of the script in relation to the novel is the suppression of the final chapter of the novel, in which Tomioka resumes his life after the death of his lover, a disappearance that he experiences as a

16 *Horoki* was first brought to the screen in 1935 by Sotoji Kimura for the company P.C.L., the predecessor of Toho.

17 Always postponed because of the man’s cowardice. One of Tomioka’s recurring reflections in the literary work (which is strewn with references to both masterpieces of Western literature and the Gospels) involves the image of Stavrogin from Dostoevsky’s *Demons* putting soap on a silk rope to avoid suffering when he hangs himself. The woman, meanwhile, stoically repeats to herself, “I will die alone.”

18 A freelance screenwriter whose collaboration with Naruse began in 1952 with the extraordinary *Okasan*, written from a prize-winning essay in a primary school children’s competition, and continued with such outstanding works as *Fufu* (Husband and Wife, 1953), *Ani imoto* (Older Brother, Younger Sister, 1953), *Yama no oto* (Sound of the Mountain, 1954), *Ukigumo* (1955), *Shuu* (Sudden Rain, 1956) and *Arakure* (Untamed Woman, 1957).

19 A direct summary of Hayashi’s world view is found in the opening lines of Chapter 37 of *Floating Clouds*: “History repeats itself incessantly, spawning innumerable generations of human beings. Politics repeats the same mistakes over and over again, and wars begin and end in an endless cycle ... In this small group called society, men compete without understanding why they are born and die again and again in an eternal repetition.”

mixture of liberation and a complete indifference to Yukiko's tragedy. The film, in contrast, closes on the image of the man collapsing on the young woman's corpse in the flickering light of the shack in Yakushima where they lived, while outside the modest room it seems that a deluge is about to be released.

In fact, in terms of the relationship between Tomioka and Yukiko, the tone adopted in the final twenty minutes of the film is quite different to that of the novel, the final images achieving an ecstatic dimension. Let us briefly recall them: Yukiko lies unconscious on a modest futon, when Tomioka barges into the humble room. After reproaching the indifference of the woman who has been looking after Yukiko while he has been on duty in the mountains, he kneels next to the lying young woman. When they are alone, Naruse's camera frames the lovers in such a way that Tomioka, with his back to the camera, hides Yukiko's body from us (we cannot know yet that, when she reappears, this will be the last frame of the film). A 180° change of shot with a match cut brings us closer to the couple while Tomioka gently bathes the young woman's feverish face. In the top left of the image hangs a modest oil lamp that dimly illuminates the room. Tomioka stands up, in an American or 3/4 shot that emphasises the lamp, to bring it closer. This is followed by a close-up of Yukiko's face with her eyes closed, which is illuminated by the proximity of the light. Tomioka kneels, carrying the lamp next to the woman and, after placing the lamp on the floor, extracts a stick of lipstick from the young woman's bag and delicately passes it over her lips (the gesture is also recounted in the novel). After which he lifts the lamp closer to the face lying on its side. Close-up of Yukiko, her face transfigured into a translucent mask that seems to absorb light. Close-up of a desolate Tomioka. Then we return to the (extreme) close-up of Yukiko. A change in the music announces a cross fade that takes us to a long shot of Yukiko who, happy and smiling, approaches the camera between trees (we have been transported to Indochina). This shot is followed by a similar shot in which the girl walks away with her back to the camera while the camera follows her in a panning shot between the trees. A new cross fade returns us to the close-up of Yukiko's face. Close-up of Tomioka who is shocked to discover that the woman has just died. As he starts to cry he says her name. Return to a frontal shot of the man and the woman while Tomioka tries, to no avail, to revive the dead woman while saying her name again. Then we return to the shot that opens the scene as Tomioka finally collapses on Yukiko's corpse. Instead of the words "The end", a short text closes the film: "The life of the flower is very short. And even so, it suffers many hardships."

Let us be clear about this: the "Naruse"²⁰ style seems simple. And it is, if we consider how little intrusiveness there is in his stylistic decisions and the quality of its results. Nevertheless, these results would not be possible if it were not for a series of important decisions that shape them. Let us list some of them in a logical order. In the first place, the film would not work as it does without its "authors" (in the plural) having taken certain narrative options: earlier I alluded to the decision not to adapt the final chapter of the book; another example is the fact that in the film Tomioka is present during the agony and final moments of Yukiko's life (which, as a matter of fact, also relocates the place and scope of the gesture of painting the lips of the dying woman), decisively modifying the meaning of the work on which it is based. However, it goes without saying that we do not need to draw attention to everything that the film preserves and "illustrates" (in the noblest sense) from the literary work and the story that it tells because without it the narrative dimensions of the work would not exist as we know them.

This is not to mention what we might call purely cinematographic decisions. Among these are those that decisively affect the impact of the final scene. First, by giving the scene its symmetrical

²⁰ I put the artists name in quotes not to understate his talent but to emphasise that in cinema, as I have already pointed out above, the individual is always collective. "Naruse", however difficult it is for us to admit, is therefore the name of a poetic style in which contributions of all kinds play an essential role. It should be kept in mind that the great Japanese cinema produced by its major companies (Toho, Daiei, Shochiku, etc.) always operated through studios and compact work units that did not differ much from those that existed in Hollywood in the Golden Age.

Comentado [MI3]: Error en el original

dimension, opening and closing it with the same shooting angle. But above all, in that series of shots framed between two cross fades and linked together by jump cuts that transport us to the Indochina of the young woman's enduring memories and turn the scene into a true "death and transfiguration". Yukiko dies, literally, while these images of the past are imposed on us in the form of cinematographic evidence, in such a way that the film ends up spelling out something that the novel tirelessly repeated throughout its pages and that is presented here, unexpectedly, with the irrefutable "truth" of the cinema through a dreamed and deathbed flashback. With Yukiko's illuminated face, cinema produces one of those epiphanic moments that justify its classification as art. But let no one be deceived, no aspect of this effect depends on inexplicable factors. It is all in the images and sounds that the film-maker has arranged for us. In order to grasp the nature of the artist's talent, we only have to observe his handling of the simple components with which he constructs his argument. What one perceptive critic (in memory of his own political past) called "the gang of four": images, noise, dialogue and music. That is cinema.

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