

Suna no onna (Woman in the Dunes, 1964), directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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Okada (the man, Jumpei Niki)
Kyoko Kishida (the woman)

The director Hiroshi Teshigahara began working as a documentary filmmaker before making features in the 1960s. There are elements of documentary-like realism in this film, and expressionistic elements as well. What are examples of each of these approaches, realism and expressionism, in the film?

The first few shots of the film are of grains of sand. The very first is an extreme close-up. We don't yet know what we are looking at. This shot announces the theme of the film, and tells us something about the style. After the first shot, we cut to wider and wider shots of the sand until a sand dune fills the frame. Sand blows across the frame, and a man enters from the bottom (dressed like the peripatetic protagonist of several of the episodes in Akira Kurosawa's Dreams). The camera follows him from behind.

Next, we see the man working: observing, photographing, capturing insects. The shots in this sequence involve several close-ups of insects, juxtaposed through editing with shots of the man, working. At one point he lifts a discarded can and looks inside. We cut to a close-up of an insect scrambling out of the sand. Then we see the man, from a high angle and in long shot, resting in an abandoned boat. How do you think we as the audience are meant to feel about this man? How does the camera work contribute to your reading?

There are a number of symbols at work in the film. Consider the clothing the man wears at the beginning of the film and the possessions he carries with him. What happens to them? The sand pit, a single set in which most of the film unfolds, is a symbolic location. In what way? The sand itself has symbolic meaning. There are numerous visual and narrative references to insects, animals and birds. Why? How does water function as a symbol?

There are several shots in the film from a high angle, looking down on the characters. Some of these shots are "motivated" (i.e., we see from the

reverse angle that there is someone looking at the character[s]) and some are not. What do these shots contribute to our reading of the characters and their situation?

Teshigahara uses shots of the sand as transition shots between episodes. What do these contribute to the pacing of the film?

How would you describe the lighting design for this film? (Teshigahara studied to be a painter before he entered filmmaking.) How does the lighting contribute to a realistic quality in the film? To an expressionist quality? There are several scenes that are played out in near darkness. How do these scenes engage you as a viewer?

How is sound used in the film? How would you describe the sound design? Is it realistic? expressionistic? Think of a scene or scenes in which we heard "diegetic" sound (sound coming from the story space). How would you describe the music for this film? When do we hear it? How does it contribute to our understanding of the scenes in which it is heard?

Is there a social message in this film? What do you think Teshigahara and the author of the novel and screenplay, Kobo Abe, are saying about relationships between men and women? About Japanese society? About the human condition?

Mellon, Joan. Voices from the Japanese Cinema. NY: Liveright, 1975.

