The Ballad of Narayama, winner of the Palme d'Or at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, was directed by Shohei Imamura and is essential for any student of Japanese film.

This is not an easy film. It shows us a remote village in Japan in the late 19th century where poverty is so immediate, so persistent, that the culture of the village involves the killing of surplus male babies and the sale of baby girls (I assume as servants to the wealthy in some other part of Japan - not a developed point). Those adults who survive to the age of 70 are carried by their sons to Mt. Narayama, to die of cold and hunger.

Technically the film suffers from being made over thirty years ago, so, while in color, it feels more like a VHS that has been copied too many times, than like a DVD.

Matters of birth, sex, death, all dealt with graphically. The film reminds us how close in time we are to the desperate hard scrabble life of the peasants not only in Japan but in Europe. In one graphic scene, the village gathers to punish a family that has stolen potatoes - every member of the offending family is hurled into a large pit, and covered with earth.

The director cuts back and forth between the daily lives of the villagers to the nature around them. The life and death of the insects, the snakes, the rats, are all shown as part of a continum of the reality of that time and place.

There is a realism to the film which gives it force. The son of the mother, a strong-willed woman who is determined to go to Mt. Narayama, carries her on his back up to the mountain. Even granting that the film could be made in stages with lots of time for rest, there is no extra to do the carrying, and it isn't over smooth ground. In modern times one might assume computer graphics could make that journey. But in *The Ballad of Narayama* hard work has to be done in person and one realizes, as the son carries his mother on his back over hard rock, just how hard the actual life in that village was.

The film has the power of a Russian novel. I watched it in three stages - I had to quit last night, and picked it up again tonight. Then as it was moving to the end, my friend Bruce Cronin called, asking me to go to where he has set up a website for me (incredible), and after taking a look at that, I went back to the end of the film.

This is a hard film. It is an excellent film. If you want entertainment, skip it. If you love cinema, get it. (I got it from Netflix)

January 18, 2010