A FILMMAKER FOR ALL SEASONS

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An aging couple, Hirayama Shukichi and his wife, Tomi¹ living in retirement in the port city of Onomichi, prepare for a train trip to Tokyo to visit their children. A stopover to see a son in Osaka is to be followed by a stay with their eldest son, Koichi, a doctor. Their quiet preparations and gentle banter set a tone of contemplation and nostalgia. Once in Tokyo, however, they realize that Koichi, living in a poor suburb and with a small pediatric practice, is hardly the success they thought he was and seems barely to have time for them. Their daughter Shige, owner of a beauty salon, seems even less interested in their company; indeed, she appears to be outright resentful of their presence.

Koichi and Shige send their parents to Atami, a hot springs resort highly unsuitable for this elderly couple. When they return early to Tokyo, neither Koichi nor Shige is willing to take them in. Only their daughter-in-law, Noriko, a war widow, seems genuinely loving and kind to them; she invites Tomi to stay at her small apartment, while Shukichi must stay at an old friend’s. When a drunken Shukichi and his friend are brought to Shige’s home by the police, the anger and disappointment the parents feel toward their children and the children toward their parents send the old Hirayamas back home.

On the way home, Tomi is taken ill. A stopover in Osaka to recover for the moment finds the old couple reflecting on their life with a mixture of bitterness and resignation. When the Hirayamas return home, Tomi gets worse. Their youngest daughter, Kyoko, still living at home, sends for her brothers, sister,

and sister-in-law. Shortly after their arrival in Onomichi, Tomi dies. Only Kyoko and Noriko seem genuinely saddened. As Noriko prepares to return to Tokyo, the widowed Shukichi extends his gratitude to her for her love and kindness and urges her to remarry. Noriko’s contemplative journey home ends the film.

That is the simple plot of Ozu Yasujirō’s *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953). Little of this description would indicate that the film is generally acknowledged to be one of the greatest ever made, as indicated, for example, by *Sight and Sound* magazine’s respected surveys of film critics. It is probably the best-known film directed by Ozu Yasujirō, both in the West and in Japan. Ozu himself, at least since the middle of the 1970s, has been considered one of Japan’s best known and most respected directors in the West; in Japan his status as a major filmmaker was established by 1932, and he remained preeminent among film directors until his death in 1963. His position in the pantheon of Japanese film directors in Japan and the West is unmatched.

Ozu’s recognition in the West was a long time in coming compared with that of many Japanese directors working in the 1950s and 1960s. The success of *Rashomon* at the 1951 Venice Film Festival should not make us oblivious to the reality that Japanese producers and distributors created films almost specifically for export to the burgeoning film festival and ‘art theater’ circuit in the United States and around the world, or else sought in their massive output of the 1950s and early 1960s suitable films for export. Such films for export were far more often than not period films, costume dramas, portrayals of the world of the samurai or the geisha. Though Ozu’s first film, *The Sword of Penitence* (*Zange no yaiba*, 1927), was a period piece, he never made another one. So as films like *Ugetsu* (Mizoguchi Kenji, 1953), *Gate of Hell* (*Jigokumon*, Kinugasa Teinosuke, 1953), and the *Samurai* trilogy (1954–5) by Inagaki Hiroshi were winning accolades in the West for their lush visual style or exotic appeal, Ozu quietly went about the business of directing films, typically one and sometimes two per year starting in 1948. For the Japanese exporters of films to the West, Ozu, it appeared, was just ‘too Japanese.’ That this was far from the truth, that the West responded to Ozu with as much enthusiasm as ever a Japanese audience did, became clear only after his death.

As the Japanese film industry declined in the 1960s, the export market paradoxically increased, at least in the United States because of a precipitous decline in Hollywood’s output and the American film industry’s growing inability to reach a target audience. A more demanding college and college-educated audience began turning its back on the perceived immaturity and escapism of Hollywood and found in foreign films, from France, Italy, and Sweden, among other countries, an intellectual content and maturity of themes absent from Hollywood’s wheezing attempts to hold on to its former glory. Thus an audience for Japanese films was ready and waiting. The showing of a handful of Ozu’s films in the mid-1960s at festivals, museums, and New York theaters gradually revealed a director seemingly at odds with the wandering
swordsmen and magnificently costumed women that defined the Japanese cinema for some. Here was a director so steeped in contemporary Japanese culture as to be making films without concessions to an international mass audience. That Ozu was, in fact, very much in tune with the Japanese mass audience (though his films were not box-office giants in the year of their release) made U.S. intellectuals excited about coming to terms with a foreign culture that could produce a filmmaker of this originality and particularity. That his films were relatively plotless and steeped in everyday life made them seem if not part of, then related to, the French New Wave or the severe style and themes of Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman. Seemingly endless arguments over Ozu’s ‘Japaneseness,’ his place in world cinema history, and the depths of his stories and themes testify to this filmmaker’s international significance and universality.

The respect accorded both Tokyo Story and Ozu himself stems from a number of factors. The film is, paradoxically, both intensely insular and immensely universal. Rarely has a film been so immersed in specifics of setting and period, so thoroughly pervaded by the culture from which it was produced. Indeed, so completely does the film derive from particularities of Japanese culture—marriage, family, setting—that critics have argued over the film’s basic themes. Is it about the breakup of the traditional Japanese family in the light of postwar changes (increased urbanization and industrialization, which have led to the decline of the extended family)? Or is it about the inevitabilities of life: children growing up, getting married, moving away from home, having children of their own, leaving their aging parents behind? Of course, though the film is set in a specific time and place, such questions concerning the breakdown of tradition and the changes that life inevitably brings are universal in their appeal. Like Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette) made just a few years earlier, Tokyo Story derives its power from both its unique setting and the universality of its characters and theme.

For film scholars and students, the pleasures and power of Tokyo Story, indeed of Ozu’s oeuvre in its entirety, stem not just from the way in which the film’s thematic range is steeped in Japanese culture, but also, and perhaps more interestingly, from its stylistic practices. Under the influence of critics and historians, ranging from film-critic-turned-director Paul Schrader to Donald Richie (the best-known and most prolific scholar-critic of the Japanese cinema), Noel Burch, and David Bordwell, the Western fascination with Ozu has revolved around his cinematic techniques, which, like his films’ themes, have been endlessly debated and discussed. One debate has centered on his proclivity for the low camera position, said by some to reproduce the typical Japanese perspective of someone sitting on a tatami mat. A more intense debate has concerned his use of ‘empty shots,’ said by many to reproduce the worldview of Zen Buddhism or to reflect the modernist fascination with surface and materiality. In addition to issues of camera placement and mise en scène, critics have noted Ozu’s narrative strategy whereby plot is completely deemphasized.
This is considered by some to deny the cause-effect chain that is a function of Western logocentrism, individualism, and bourgeois capitalism, or to draw viewer attention away from results and toward process. These are just some of the issues that situate Ozu as a filmmaker with a unique and uniquely important cinematic consciousness. Moreover, Ozu is prized by so many film scholars and critics because he offers an alternative to mainstream American cinema (the vaunted ‘classical Hollywood cinema’).

Thus Tokyo Story can be appreciated as a film with universal appeal in its story of aging parents and their disappointments with their children and their lives or as a paradigm of the unique cinema of Ozu. From either perspective, the film is rich in its implications.

NARRATIVE AND SPACE IN TOKYO STORY

One technique whereby a film viewer or ‘reader’ learns to appreciate the particularities of a film is to make comparisons, implicitly or explicitly, with other films. In other words, the viewer analyzes the film against a set of ‘norms.’ In film studies, those norms are based on the classical Hollywood cinema, and indicate not what is right or wrong, but what is usual, typical, or standard, but without value judgment. (For example, there is nothing good or bad about an ‘inch’ or a ‘meter’; either is just a standard measurement.) Thus the characteristics of ‘ordinary’ American film may be used to grasp the uniqueness of Ozu’s cinema in general and of Tokyo Story in particular.

What the typical viewer, Western or Japanese, ordinarily first realizes about Ozu’s films is the apparent lack of plot – not of story, but of story-events. Plot in American cinema is usually tied to the dramatic, the action-packed, the revelatory; it relies on a rigid chain of cause and effect from which extraneous detail is eliminated in the interest of ‘moving the plot along.’ Not so in an Ozu film, where ‘extraneous event’ is an almost meaningless term because the film is made up of a series of moments, cumulative in their power and their emotional effect, but not causal, not story-driven. The clearest indication of how this works can be found, so to speak, precisely in the sorts of things Ozu leaves out.

An important narrative principle for Ozu is the ellipsis, the omission of plot material or even an event. In films like Late Spring (Banshun, 1949) and An Autumn Afternoon (Samma no aji, 1962) the plot point, the dramatic highlight, to which the film has been leading, is elided: these films about a daughter who ought to marry never show the husband-to-be when the daughter agrees to marry. In Tokyo Story we are aware of various sorts of ellipses. There is the ‘minor ellipsis,’ in which certain plot points are dropped. For instance, in one scene, the two oldest children discuss sending their parents on a trip to Atami. This is followed by a shot of people on a seawall then by a shot of the sea seen from an interior, then a shot down the length of a hallway, and, finally, a shot of the old couple in a hotel. Thus we see that the parents are already at the spa, and we understand that Ozu has eliminated scenes in which the parents are told about the trip, are put on a train to Atami, and arrive at the resort.
This sort of minor ellipsis is common in worldwide cinema, but nevertheless needs highlighting here. It involves the principle of retrospectivity, the active participation of viewers, who must constantly reintegrate themselves into the action, reorient themselves within filmic time and space. The greater the ellipsis the more active, the more involved we must be. In Ozu’s films, the variety of ellipses requires that we pay attention. For instance, Ozu often uses what may be called a ‘surprise ellipsis.’ Here plot points prepared for by dialogue and action are, in fact, elided. At the start of *Tokyo Story* the parents discuss changing trains in Osaka and thus seeing their younger son, who lives and works there. The next scene begins in Tokyo at the home of the older son, and shortly thereafter the parents arrive. The Osaka visit discussed by the parents is thus never shown, although we learn that the rendezvous did, in fact, take place. Preparing us for a scene that never occurs onscreen is a daring strategy. Even more daring is the fact that the scene has occurred offscreen. Talked about, prepared for, clearly mentioned, it is then simply elided.

More daring yet is the ‘dramatic ellipsis,’ whereby something important has occurred, but offscreen. In *Tokyo Story* this is the parents’ arrival in Osaka on the return trip and their overnight stay because the mother has become ill. We learn about their arrival secondhand, as it were, after the fact, from the second son, who mentions that they are now in Osaka because of the mother’s illness. By the time we see the couple, they are already at the son’s home and the mother is, for the moment, recovering (though, somewhat rare for Ozu, this prepares us for her eventual demise). The point is that the drama of her illness, the sudden change in plans, is not shown. As just mentioned, the first Osaka trip, which we expect to see, is not shown (something not atypical of Ozu). The second, unexpected stop in Osaka, is shown, however.

Now if the sorts of things Ozu eliminates are often the sorts of things most American films are specifically built around, moments of intense emotion surrounding events like reunions, marriages, illness, we may need to account for this difference. Ozu’s strategies are rooted in elements of the Japanese aesthetic tradition – the deemphasis of drama and the elision of plot elements in theatrical works, the emphasis on mood and tone instead of story in literature. Some of the essays in this volume discuss Ozu’s films in relation to other modes of Japanese art, history, and religion. For now, the important point is the manner in which the story, the drama, is told differently than in American cinema, if just a bit differently.

Ozu’s spatial composition, specifically his ‘screen direction’ and ‘mismatched action,’ can similarly be linked to elements of the Japanese aesthetic tradition. We will look first, briefly, at the way Ozu handles transitional spaces.

Transitional spaces are linked to retrospectivity in general and often ellipsis in particular. Instead of a direct cut between scenes, Ozu often finds ‘intermediate spaces.’ These are sometimes intermediate in a literal sense, in that they fall between the action just completed and the action forthcoming. Many critics have
seen in these intermediate spaces evidence of Japanese aesthetic practices—Zen Buddhism, say, for Paul Schrader and ‘pillow shots’ for Noel Burch. Such spaces are sometimes called ‘still lifes’ and, like the still lifes of classical painting, are often devoid of human figures. Ozu achieves a particular poignancy in many of his still lifes by highlighting the paradox of humanity’s presence by its absence. Transitional spaces help viewers understand that a scene is changing and prepare them for the retrospective activity of reorienting themselves in the next scene. However, though transitional spaces help to indicate a change of scene or locale, it is not always clear where the new locale is until a later shot in the sequence (postponement of narrative information). And transitional spaces do little to help viewers understand how much time has passed. Here is an example of spatial change and temporal retrospectivity in *Tokyo Story*.

Between the first scene of the film, in which the older Hirayamas pack for their trip and discuss the stop in Osaka, and the second scene, which takes place in Koichi’s house in Tokyo, there are three transitional spaces. The first is a shot of smokestacks, a recurring image of Tokyo in the film. It is not, however, an image unique to Tokyo and might as well be one of Osaka, Japan’s commercial heartland. And since the film has prepared us for an Osaka outing, this may very well be our guess.  

The next shot of power lines and a small railroad crossing might be taken as representative of Tokyo, with its high energy and prominence in the postwar era. The following shot, however, makes it clear that we are in Tokyo, with its sign outside of Dr Hirayama’s office (though we do not know that Koichi, the oldest child, is a doctor; in Ozu’s films it is typically difficult to follow familial relationships at first). Careful examination of the exterior shots in the rest of the film reveals that the smokestacks and train station are, in fact, spaces ‘connected’ to Dr Hirayama’s, but nothing so indicates that at the start.

If we have, however, made the spatial transition from Onomichi to Tokyo, nothing in these intermediate spaces, these still lifes, has indicated any specific passage of time. For we find out shortly thereafter, though not before some small, seemingly irrelevant business about cleaning the house and asking a child to give up his room for his grandparents’ visit, that not only has the film made the spatial transition from Onomichi to Tokyo, but so has the old couple. This is the ellipsis we discussed earlier, but we now understand that it occurred in the space and time of the intermediate shots.

This is not to say that Ozu handles all spatiotemporal changes in a deceptive or playful manner. For instance, when Ozu wants to introduce the sequence in which Shukichi and Tomi stay over in Osaka when the latter takes ill, his intermediate spaces are clear and straightforward. The Osaka setting is established beyond a doubt by a shot of Osaka Castle, a massive stone structure instantly recognizable to virtually every Japanese. This is reinforced by a second shot of the Osaka skyline, this time with Osaka Castle in the background, a typical Ozu maneuver whereby the space of a scene is thoroughly explored by reverse angles and camera shifts. And it is to such strategies to which we now turn.
Ozu's scenic construction and segmenting of screen space are among the most notable characteristics of his cinema, yet casual viewers often fail to notice them. One of these is the frequency with which Ozu crosses the so-called 180-degree line. This crossing of the line results in what would be called in American film 'mismatched' action within the same space. Characters who converse with each other seem to shift spatially in relation to each other and to the space in which they are filmed. Examples from Tokyo Story abound. For instance, the first time we see the Hirayamas in the film, they are seated next to each other, each facing right. Yet by the time the sequence ends we suddenly notice that now they are facing left! So bald a juxtaposition seems a bizarre mistake. One might explain it away in terms of the numerous angles and shots between the first time we see the couple and this last time at the end of the sequence. Numerous close-ups have been intercut, and cutaways to a neighbor lady have also occurred. Thus the precise moment of the shift from right to left may have passed us by.

More daring, yet more typical of Ozu, such apparent mismatches are not always disguised by cutaways but, in fact, represent a principle of cinematic spatial construction different from Hollywood's 'norms.' Critics have come to understand that Ozu uses a principle of 360-degree space instead of the 180-degree rule applied in Hollywood. For instance, in one of the most moving scenes of the film, in which the old mother tells her widowed daughter-in-law how much she enjoys her visit, the daughter-in-law is initially screen right! Noriko gently massages Tomi's shoulders as they talk. Noriko then stands to move across the room. In the midst of her standing, Ozu cuts. In a typical American film this would be a cut on action, the action in some sense 'disguising' the actual cut. Ozu cuts on her motion, too, but at the same time shifts the camera across the 180-degree line. Thus, when the cut on Noriko's motion is completed, she is now screen left.

In fact, the rest of this sequence, an important one in terms of its portrayal of loss, regret, and change, Ozu's camera traverses the entire space of the room, utilizing two-shots, close-ups, and reverse shots from every possible angle. Characters sitting side by side are typical in Ozu's cinema, reflective of the non-confrontational stance of the Japanese, a certain politeness. Notice here that Tomi, the mother-in-law, is facing screen left. When Ozu cuts to a close-up of her, however, she is facing screen right. Without the benefit of a cutaway this again appears to be a 'mismatched action.' And when Ozu returns to a two-shot, the screen direction does not correspond to the preceding shot, nor to the one before that. Careful examination of the individual setups reveals that Ozu rarely shoots a scene in a master shot, the whole scene or dramatic sequence done in one angle to which an editor can return periodically after using close-ups, reverse shots, over-the-shoulder shots, or other shots.

Changes in screen direction or seemingly mismatched action also occur regularly when Ozu shows continuous action across contiguous spaces. That is, when a character leaves one room of a house and enters another, Ozu does not
typically imply spatial contiguity in the conventional way. Simply put, in a Hollywood film, when a character exits the frame to enter a contiguous space, screen direction hides the cut. If a character exits screen right, the next shot shows the character entering screen left. A smoothing out of the cut is thus made by the apparent continuity of motion left to right. Hollywood style and other variations on this classical continuity mode strive to achieve the *appearance* of contiguity, whereas such sequences may have no basis in a real space and time. (The Soviet theoretician and filmmaker Lev Kuleshov convincingly proved this with regard to ‘creative geography.’) Hollywood filmmakers regard the cut as something to be elided, to be made ‘invisible,’ and so principles of matching screen direction and eyeline matches have been developed over the years. As we have demonstrated, Ozu often disregards such principles.

Attempting to account for these spatial anomalies can be difficult. Are they a cultural or an individual particularity? I am convinced that a ‘cultural reading’ of screen space in Ozu would be reductive and essentialist, if not basically incorrect. I do think, however, that Ozu has drawn inspiration for his spatialization from aspects of traditional Japanese culture, including, most prominently, architecture. The ‘mismatched’ screen direction in interior sequences (especially in houses) in which characters exit screen right and enter the next scene from the same direction may derive from the modularity of the Japanese home, in which space can be changed by the movement of sliding screens. Lower-level entryways that make a ring or border around the living area in a typical Japanese home provide a variety of entrances and exits into and out of rooms as well. Thus the space of the home itself can shift. Combined with Ozu’s proclivity for using individual setups for most shots, spatial configurations become important in individual scenes but much less so across the cut.

This is not to say that cutting, as such, is not important to Ozu, that the juxtaposition of shots to make meaning, to carry thematic weight, does not occur. There is a very shocking use of such a cut, in fact, in *Tokyo Story*. Tomi, playing with her youngest grandson, Isamu, muses over her fate and his. This, of course, is typical foreshadowing in which a character thinks about the future, cueing the audience to the possibility of the future being cut short. Though rare for Ozu (unlike other filmmakers), this is indeed what happens. But when Tomi muses about Isamu’s future, wondering what will become of him, Ozu cuts to a shot of Shukichi, the grandfather, sitting alone. Is this a kind of ‘melodramatic’ cut, Ozu implying that the same fate, of old age, loneliness, and disappointment, awaits Isamu? Yes and no.

Ozu has said that *Tokyo Story* was his ‘most melodramatic’ film. Indeed, for critic Tony Rayns, Ozu may be taken at his word. The cut just described seems clearly to indicate that Isamu is doomed to a life like Shukichi’s. But Ozu is too subtle a filmmaker, after all. Yes, Isamu may very well be doomed to such a life, but is such a life so bad? Or is there any alternative to such a life? Aging is inevitable, children grow up and grow apart from parents; that is to say, time brings changes. Yet there is also a cycle to life: birth, growth, death, the birth
of a new generation and the pattern begins again. So if *Tokyo Story* is melodramatic in terms of its didacticism, teaching us to respect our elders, for instance, it is also realistic: life goes on no matter what one does. And in being so Japanese in terms of its historical setting and its familial characteristics, the film is also universal.

**A ROUTINE PRODUCTION**

*Tokyo Story* is only one of fourteen films Ozu made between 1948 and 1962. Oddly, this averages out to one film a year, a reminder of the vibrancy of the Japanese cinema in the 1950s, when directors routinely made a film each year, with many making as many as two or three. *Tokyo Story* was little different in its script preparation from most of Ozu’s films. As was their habit, Ozu and co-writer Noda Kogo, with whom Ozu had worked for virtually his entire film career, went to an inn and hashed out the ideas over food, drink, and conversation. In this case, the inn was in Chigasaki and the script took 103 days to complete along with forty-three bottles of sake. Location scouting with Noda and cinematographer Atsuta Yuharu, script in hand, took a little less than one month, first in Tokyo, then in Onomichi. The film itself was shot and edited from July to October 1953. This four-month schedule is typical of Ozu: virtually all of his postwar films took four to five months to shoot and edit. There was no hint that *Tokyo Story* would surpass his other films in worldwide popularity and esteem. In fact, it is arguable to say that *Tokyo Story* is his finest film, whatever one might mean by that. The point is, rather, that this film, made with the same crew Ozu had been using for years and featuring many of the same actors with whom he had worked so often before (Ryu Chishu had been in virtually every Ozu film since *Dragnet Girl* (*Hijosen no onna*) in 1933, was part of a routine, yet unique ‘project.’ With films spanning his career devoted to similar themes and with similar titles (the Japanese titles no less confusing than the English ones; ‘Tokyo’ cropped up in four other films, for instance), Ozu played with variations on a theme. *Tokyo Story*, while it stands by itself as a masterpiece of world cinema, may also be taken as paradigmatic of Ozu’s films, certainly his postwar films geared to the seemingly insular world of the Japanese middle-class family, yet speaking volumes about Japan as a whole and the world around.

**NOTES**

1. The name order is given in Japanese style, last name first, given name second.
2. The Japanese economic miracle, a theme that underlies *Tokyo Story* to some extent, was responsible, too, for making Japan the world’s largest film producer: for instance, between 1957 and 1961 the Japanese averaged 500 feature films per year. Though a decline began in 1962, throughout the rest of the 1960s the Japanese averaged more than 350 films per year.
3. With an output of just over forty films, Ozu is far from being Japan’s most prolific director. With directors like Inagaki and Misumi Kenji, who directed more than 100 films, and Makino Masahiro, who directed well over 200 films, Ozu’s relatively scant output suggests that he was able to invest great care and effort into each film.
4. As if to illustrate the difference between Ozu's style and that of Hollywood, a 16-mm subtitled version of *Tokyo Story* available in the United States uses subtitles to identify the new location where no such indications are present!

5. Of course, one should be leery of such a sweeping cultural generalization. To converse, the Japanese naturally sit opposite each other, or at right angles, or obliquely, or many possible ways. Yet this ‘norizontality’ not only is characteristic of Ozu but may be seen throughout the Japanese cinema. For instance, recall the many dinner scenes in *Family Game* (*Kazoku geemu*, Morita Yoshimitsu, 1984) in which the family members are eating side by side, to great comic effect.

6. For a further discussion of this issue, consult my essay on Ozu’s *Ohayo*, in ‘Childhood and Education in Japan,’ Teaching Module 3 (New York: The Japan Society, n.d.).


8. Ozu's films received more *Kinema Jumpo* Best One awards than any other director (six), yet *Tokyo Story* did not win the Best One in 1953 (it was second).