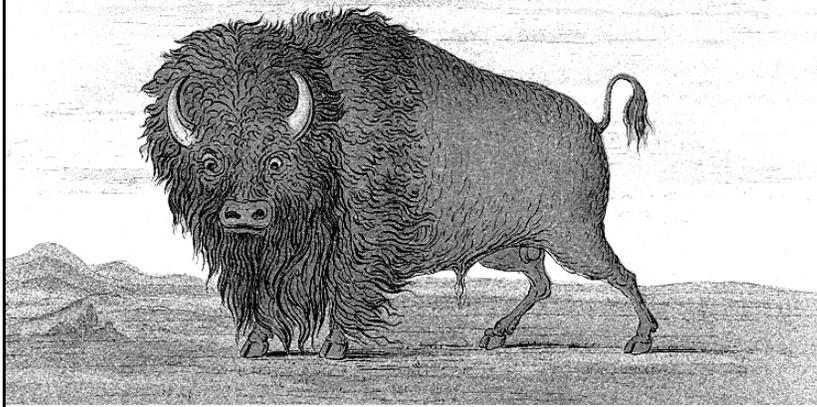
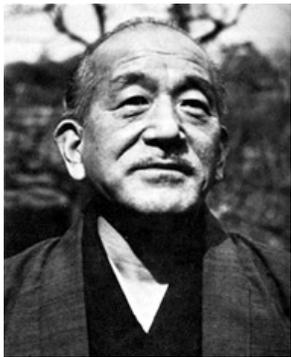


# The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films  
with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson



**YASUJIRO OZU** (12 December 1903, Tokyo—12 December 1963, Tokyo, cancer) directed 54 films, only 33 of which still exist. His work wasn't much known in the west until the 1960s. His last film was *Sanma no aji/An Autumn Afternoon* (1962); his first *Zange no yaiba/Sword of Penitence* (1927); the best known is *Ukigusa* (1959, US *Floating Weeds* 1970). Some of the others are *Umarete wa mita keredo/I was Born But...* 1932, *Tokyo no onna/A Woman of Tokyo* 1933, *Nagaya shinshiroku/Record of a Tenement Gentleman* 1947, *Banshun/Late Spring* 1949, *Bakushu/Early Summer* 1951,

*Higanbana/Equinox Flower* 1958, *Ohayo/Good Morning* 1959 and *Sanma no aji* 1962. The best best published texts on Ozu's life and work are Donald Richie, *Ozu* (1977); David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (rep. 1994); and Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film : Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* rep. 1988). On the web: The University of Tokyo maintains "Behind the Camera," an excellent site on Ozu and his cameraman on *Tokyo Story*, with a lot of analysis, samples from the cameraman's notebooks, and more:  
[http://www.um.u-tokyo.ac.jp/dm2k-umdb/publish\\_db/books/ozu/](http://www.um.u-tokyo.ac.jp/dm2k-umdb/publish_db/books/ozu/) Another good web site on his life and work is <http://homepage.mac.com/kwoy/ozu/ozu.htm>.

**KAZUO MIYAGAWA** (25 February 1908, Kyoto—7 August 1999, Tokyo, kidney failure) shot 71 films, the last of them *Maihime* 1989. His best known films were *Yojimbo* 1961, *Sanshō dayū/Sansho the Bailiff* 1954, *Ugetsu monogatari* 1953, and *Rashōmon* 1950.

## From *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*. David Bordwell. Princeton U Press 1988

I don't think the film has a grammar. I don't think film has but one form. If a good film results, then that film has created its own grammar.

Although I may seem the same to other people, to me each thing I produce is a new expression, and I always make each work from a new interest. It's like a painter who always paints the same rose.

I was still an assistant when I heard him say: 'Someday, I'm sure, foreigners will understand my films.' Then he added with a modest smile: 'Then again, no. They will say, like everybody else, that my films aren't much of anything.'—Yuharu Atsuta, assistant and cameraman for Yasujiro Ozu

Yasujiro Ozu lived the sort of unassuming life that most people take as their lot. He was born on 12 December 1903 and died of cancer on his sixtieth birthday. The major events of his life would qualify as muted climaxes in his own films: a youthful stint teaching grade school; acquisition of a job in the film industry; the death of his father in 1934; a life with his mother until her death in 1962; and at intervals the summons to serve in the army. Unlike Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, who accompanied their films to international festivals when the West was discovering Japanese cinema, Ozu stayed at home with films felt to be 'too Japanese.' He lived largely, it seems, to make and watch movies, to be with his mother, and to enjoy his friends.

October 5, 2004 (IX:6)



**UKIGUSA/FLOATING WEEDS** (1959)  
119 min.

Ganjiro Nakamura...Komajuro Arashi  
Machiko Kyô...Sumiko  
Ayako Wakao...Kayo  
Hiroshi Kawaguchi...Kiyoshi Homma  
Haruko Sugimura...Oyoshi  
Hitomi Nozoe...Aiko  
Chishu Ryu...Theatre Owner  
Hideo Mitsui...Kichinosuke  
Haruo Tanaka...Yatazo  
Yosuke Irie...Sugiyama  
Hikaru Hoshi...Kimura  
Mantarô Ushio...Sentaro  
Kumeko Urabe...Shige

Directed by Yasujiro Ozu  
Written by Kôgo Noda and Yasujiro  
Ozu

Produced by Masaichi Nagata  
Cinematography Kazuo Miyagawa  
Editing Toyo Suzuki  
Production Design and Art Direction  
Tomoo Shimogawara

'Film had a magical hold on me.' Ozu was almost certainly the most cinephiliac major director before the New Wave. Growing up in Matsusaka, he would steal away from school to see Chaplin, Pearl White, Lillian Gish, and William S. Hart. He welcomed expulsion from the school dormitory, since it gave him more time to go to the movies. He boasted that he took his examination for high school solely to get a trip to Kobe to see *The Prisoner of Zenda*. He disdained his nation's cinema, claiming that when he was interviewed for a job at Shochiku, he could recall seeing only three Japanese films. Throughout the 1930s he continued to follow American films. While he and his cinematographer Atsuta were stationed in Singapore in 1943-45, they screened captured prints of *Citizen Kane*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Rebecca*, *The Letter*, *The Little Foxes*, *Wuthering Heights*, and other recent Hollywood products. Admirals might plot strategy, but Ozu had a more direct gauge of the enemy's prowess: 'Watching *Fantasia* made me suspect that we were going to lose the war. These guys look like trouble, I thought.' Throughout his life he had a remarkable memory for the movies he saw, recalling dissolves in *The Marriage Circle* (1924) and criticizing Wyler's famous cut-in to Frederic March watching Dana Andrews' phone call in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The citations of Hollywood throughout his work, from the *Seventh Heaven* poster in *Days of Youth* (1929) to the poster for *The Defiant Ones* in *Ohayo* (1959), spring from his passionate love of American film.

Ozu's youth was consumed by a passion for Western culture. Apart from one remark about Japanese verse, which needs to be interpreted carefully, he typically refrained from comparing his work to traditional forms. The widescreen frame reminds him not of *emaki-mono*, or scroll painting, but of toilet paper. And he once remarked of foreign critics: 'They don't understand—that's why they say it is Zen or something like that.'

Several of Ozu's films, both silent and sound, contain over a thousand shots. Between 1935 and 1942, Mizoguchi's films range from an average shot length of sixteen seconds to ninety seconds, but Ozu's range from nine to fifteen seconds. Gosho is sometimes considered the fastest cutter in the classic Japanese cinema, but Ozu is often on par....Although Ozu's shots grew somewhat longer when he converted to sound, he disliked long takes, complaining that Shochiku hurried him in making *Toda Family* so that 'I couldn't avoid shooting lengthy shots. After this film, his takes got steadily shorter; his last six films, despite their impression of tranquil immobility, change shots, on the average, every seven seconds. This director of the image was no less a director of the cut.

And, of course, of *controlled* cuts. Ozu approached editing as he approached the shot, using the conventions of Western cinema as a pool of elements that could be selected and recombined. Whereas most of his Japanese contemporaries cultivated a decorative, eclectic classicism, Ozu limited his editing alternatives to a few simple but profound choices. He accepted the need for the unified sequence, establishing and reestablishing shots, shot/ reverse-shot cutting, matches on action, and other devices of continuity editing; but he found his own equivalents for them. He then took the crucial step of making these equivalents *more systematic* than the originals (and thus achieved an organization seldom found in his contemporaries).

In a 1934 interview Ozu is sensitive to the fact that the timing of sound film editing had to vary from that of silent cinema. In the

silent film, he claims, the actor had to display an emotion visually, which would then be interrupted by the title's specification of it: in a sense, the shot prepared for the information to be delivered in the title. But in the talkies, the actor delivers the line 'first', and the emotional effect of it emerges afterward. Time is required to absorb the full impact of the words. Ozu had to break his actors of the habit of conversing too quickly; he forced them to pause for a measured interval between lines. For the spectator, the dialogue pause becomes another cue for the rhythmic regularity of the *découpage*. If the speaker pauses and there is no cut, the speaker will continue. If there is a cut, another character is sure to reply or respond in some way. In either case, neither a character nor the narration will interrupt the speaker for the sake of 'picking up the pace'. The shot is an integral visual-verbal block.

But Ozu will interrupt character *movement*, especially if it threatens to disrupt the stability of the image. More often than even the Hollywood director, he continues physical action across a cut. His films contain perhaps the most consistently perfect matches on action the cinema has ever seen. He mastered the technique very early, as the skiing scenes of *Days of Youth* show. In the post-*Late Spring* films, when a person starts to stand up, the narration is almost sure to prompt a cut to a more distant view that continues the action. He will match not only principal gestures but subsidiary ones. He can match action in the center of the frame or on the edges of it. Significantly, Ozu's action cuts are smooth even if the shots constitute 180-degree reversals....Indeed, so prevalent and powerful are these matches that they become a major source of legibility of dramatic space. Contrary to Hollywood precept, which would discourage across-the-line action-matching, Ozu's movement cuts frequently tone down the radical shifts created by the 360-degree spatial system. At other times, as when characters seem to walk into themselves, the match on action can call attention to a flipped-over composition.

Masaichi Nagata, Mizoguchi's producer and president of Daiei, had often asked Ozu to make a film for him. By shooting *Ohayo* in early spring, Ozu met his annual obligation to Shochiku and was available. He turned to a remake of *Story of Floating Weeds*, originally planned for Shochiku but postponed. Ozu and Noda moved the locale to the seashore, and instead of calling it *Daikon* ('Radish Actor') they shortened the original title to *Floating Weeds*, Kazuo Miyagawa, Mizoguchi's habitual cinematographer in the postwar years, produced lustrous color images that confirm his great skill at handling chiaroscuro.

Except for touches that reflect the new sexual mores of post-1955 Japanese films, the finished work might as well take place in the 1930s. No automobiles, television, or hula hoops identify the period as contemporary. The notion of a traveling kabuki troupe, a commonplace of prewar cinema, was anachronistic in 1959. The troupe's show is accompanied by scratchy pop records of the early Showa era, and Komajuro's son Kiyoshi is studying for success as assiduously as any 1930s lad. The opening scenes' use of the lighthouse reworks an iconographic device seen in *First Steps Ashore* (1932) and Part 2 of *Minami no kaze* (*South Wind*, 1940). The film thus has no need for its characters to recall the prewar era, since its material and stylistic texture make it nostalgic through and through.

Part of the archaic flavor of the film is of course due to its being a fairly close remake of *Story of Floating Weeds*. The first seven scenes take place on a single Saturday, laying out all the prior story information and culminating in the first night's performance. The rest of the *syuzhet* [the substance and sequence

of narrative events explicitly presented in the film] is built around three melodramatic climaxes: a confrontation at Oyoshi's café after Sumiko has learned Komajuro's secret; a scene in the empty theatre, when he beats Kayo and Sumiko after learning of their plot; and a confrontation of father and son, during which Komajuro leaves. As in the earlier film, paternal authority ebbs away. An epilogue reunites Komajuro and Sumiko as two of a kind, both floating weeds.

There are, however, important revisions in the second version. Many small changes spring from the new milieu, so that the actors' clothes-washing in the first film is replaced by a day baking on the beach. The original plot has been stretched to include a leisurely exposition typical of Ozu's postwar work, a comic subplot involving the romantic dalliance of three actors in the troupe, a more dilatory handling of Sumiko's discovery of Komajuro's secret life, more frequent visits of Komajuro to his wife, and more explicit treatment of Kiyoshi's affair with Kayo. In addition, some scenes, such as the protagonist's confrontation with his woman outside the café, are handled more elliptically in the silent version. The result is a film over half an hour longer than the first version, and one less sharp in its depiction of the central situation. The central characters are similar in both films, but the old actor and his son are considerably more prominent in the first version. Sometimes the 1959 film lightly cites *Story of Floating Weeds*—by having Hideo Mitsui (the son in the early film) play a lustful actor in the troupe, by a shot of a bicycle that recalls the bike in the 1934 film, by the fluttering shreds of paper that fall during the theatre scenes, and by the posters which turn up unexpectedly all over town....Each film cuts more rapidly than was normal in its day: the average shot lasts 5.2 seconds in *Story of Floating Weeds*, 7.5 seconds in *Floating Weeds*. At some points the cutting pace of the two films is quite comparable. In the first dialogue between Komajuro and Kiyoshi, the shots average five seconds each, and one shot of Kiyoshi saying 'Okay' is only twenty-seven frames long. Ozu was aware that his late 1950s films were speeding up their editing. Some cutting schemata have not changed in twenty-five years. Compare the 180-degree match-on-action of the protagonist's first entry into his wife's café, seen through a neighbor's doorway. (These shots incidentally show that Ozu was right in suggesting that his later camera position was not as low as it had once been.) The outrageous play with oblique eyelines returns occasionally in the later version, most notably in the scene of two actors drinking in the *sake* bar, in which the angle of each one's glance gives the lie to any notion that they might be looking at one another. The use of depth is likewise comparable, as in the way that Oyoshi's café becomes a zigzagged space with marked foregrounds.

Yet there are also important differences—or, rather, novelties, extensions, and variants. The relatively straightforward *donden* (sudden reverse or 180-degree) cutting uses consistently oblique body, face, and eyeline. The remake uses more ambivalent frontality to make character positions more equivocal, as in the four-way conversation early in the film during which a character's body slants sharply one way, the face tilts in another direction, and the eyes in yet another. *Story of Floating Weeds* lays out the troupe's loft as a circular space, sometimes by means of overlapping figures and backgrounds, sometimes by means of the boy Tomibo, whose glance swivels around the room. *Floating Weeds*, on the contrary, slices the loft into two halves, filmed invariably in 180-degree and opposed setups, so that a pair of legs or a movement serves as a reference point across the cut. This tactic lets Ozu use less fragmentary editing and more encompassing long shots of the troupe. Sound also allows him to make some changes. As in *Story of Floating Weeds*, a sudden

rainstorm spoils a performance, but now it is presented on the soundtrack, as a metallic drilling.

Whereas the first version is built upon a tension between unpredictable style and sacred material, *Floating Weeds* vividly displays Ozu's interplay of rigor and playfulness. The plot structure is 'geometricized' to a much greater extent than in the early film, carrying on the tendencies of *Inn in Tokyo*.

The second visit to Oyoshi's home uses omniscient narration to take us where the characters aren't—starting at the ground floor and sidling upstairs. A shot initially marked as an optical POV will become a cutaway with which to end a scene. While the actors sell off their goods, cheerful vibraphone music runs along nondiegetically. Most outrageously, one scene ends with the drone of an airplane offscreen and the next starts with a shot of the theatre, a bird wheeling in the sky as the drone continues—a Tati-like gag in which it is virtually impossible not to attribute the sound to the bird.

The same undercutting of rigor by unexpected changes can be found in the opening movement from the lighthouse to the postoffice. By holding a composition, Ozu makes certain opaque long-shots shift into the graphic realm. He can play jokes by crossing the 180-degree line, as when the first barber-shop scene uses the frameline to dismember customers. And, as in *Equinox Flower* and *Ohayo*, color games emerge. Consider the transition from the rain-soaked quarrel to the theatre. The narration cuts from the street, seen in long-shot with a poster in the distance, to a corner, a hanging lamp and a pillar bearing a white placard in black characters. Cut to another placard in red characters; as an overtone, the poster of the first shot appears in the background. The graphic jumps between the red, white, and black recall the dancing written characters of the credit sequence.

Lest this point seem to betray excessive finesse, we can end by looking briefly at the second climax, the confrontation between Komajuro and two women in the deserted theatre. The narration punctuates this violent double climax with a motif set up earlier, the scraps of white paper that flutter down from the rafters; the image connotes evanescence, linking to the drifting weeds of the title and recalling the cliché of cherry blossoms. Across this emotional structure Ozu lays an astoundingly stringent pattern of staging and editing.

Komajuro confronts Kayo in frontal compositions. He grabs and slaps her, and they swing around so that each still faces one another. Reverse-shots reveal them with places changed. A 90-degree cut shows Komajuro grabbing her, swinging her ninety degrees and twisting her arm. Then he swings her a further ninety degrees, until she admits that Sumiko planned for her to seduce his son. He releases her, and after more frontal medium-shots, Ozu cuts 180 degrees so that the characters' positions are again reversed and Komajuro is in the foreground once more. Kayo leaves to fetch Sumiko. When Sumiko enters, she faces Komajuro exactly as Kayo had. He rushes to her and slaps her several times. As he starts to leave, he pushes her away so that they face off in spots 180 degrees opposite to those in which they had started. In the Kayo encounter, two attacks, two exact exchanges of position; in the Sumiko encounter, one attack, one exact change of position; in both episodes, a rotation of figures as precisely plotted as dance steps. And throughout the entire scene, the red and black placards—sometimes on either edge of the frame, sometimes in the background—serve as minute measurements of the shifts in position. The unpredictable reappearances of these placards offset the geometrical rigor of the staging, anchoring the shots but also providing flecks of color that participate in a more nuanced, open-ended parametric play.

from *World Film Directors*. V.I. Ed. John Wakeman. . H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987

Notoriously hard-working in later years, Ozu enjoyed his stint as an assistant director primarily because he “could drink all I wanted and spend my time talking.” He was nevertheless promoted before the end of 1927, joining the Shochiku division devoted to churning out period films. He made his debut as a director with *Zange no yaiba* (*The Sword of Penitence*, 1927), based on a Hollywood movie called *Kick-In* by the French-born director George Fitzmaurice. The script was by Kogo Noda, who was to write all of Ozu’s major films of the 1950s and 1960s. The young director was called up for another session in the reserve before shooting was complete, and when he finally saw the movie he disowned it.

This was Ozu’s only period picture. He switched once and for all to contemporary themes with his second film, *Wakodo no yume* (*The Dreams of Youth*, 1928), a comedy of college life made in imitation of American movies on the same popular subject. Between the beginning of 1928 and the end of 1930, Ozu made eighteen films on an assortment of topics—student life, the problems of young married couples, and the lighter side of life in the Depression. All of them were comedies, and some were made in as little as five days. . . . He was building up a team of regular collaborators, some of whom worked with him for the rest of his life.

At this stage, Ozu’s work still showed the influence of the Hollywood movies he had so loved during his adolescence. But increasingly he was finding his own way and moving in the direction of the *shomin-geki*—the “home drama” of everyday life among the lower middle-classes, in a Japan that was evolving at bewildering speed from feudalism to Western-style capitalism.

In the course of his career, Ozu would receive six *Kinema Jumbo* “best ones,” more than any other director in the history of Japanese cinema.

“Generally dissolves and fades are not part of cinematic grammar,” he remarked. “They are only attributes of the camera.”

Ozu’s own father had become reconciled to his choice of career, and by then he was living in the parental home in Tokyo, as he did for the rest of his life. He was terrified of women and, though he frequently fell in love with his actresses, and sometimes went so far as to arrange meetings, nothing ever came of these assignations and he remained unmarried. His father died in 1934, choosing him as head of the family “though he knew that I was the last person to be relied upon.” Much moved, Ozu seems to have taken his responsibilities very seriously and to have matured considerably, though he always remained a heavy drinker.

Ozu held out against sound long after other Shochiku directors had adopted it—he was intent on reducing his means rather than extending them. . . . The new medium affected his working methods less than he had expected: the stationary microphone gave him even greater control over his actors than before, forcing them to rely on the small stylized movements that for him spoke more clearly and precisely than more expansive actions.

Joan Mellen agrees that he was neither a propagandist nor an imperialist, calling him in fact “the least overtly didactic of any Japanese director, but argues that the movies he made during and after the war nevertheless endorse a reactionary Japanese spirit: “Ozu evoked traditional ideas not because the militarists forced him to, but because he believed in them,” and he accomplishes his propaganda for the war [which is scarcely mentioned] through

appeals to a traditional style of obedience, which is, however, only a brief step away from enlisting that obedience in the service of the State.”

The facts remain that at least one of Ozu’s wartime scripts was rejected by the censors as “unserious,” that he somehow avoided making a single militaristic or imperialistic film, and that he took serious risks in defending against the censors the work of fellow-directors like Akira Kurosawa. According to Masahiro Shinoda, “he always made such funny jokes, always got everyone in such a good mood, and was so expert in saying a serious thing in a light way, that nothing ever happened to him.” In 1943 Ozu was sent to Singapore to make propaganda films and even then managed to do no such thing. He passed the time viewing confiscated American movies and was impressed above all by one absolutely remote from his own style, Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. After six months as a prisoner of war, Ozu was repatriated in February 1946.

By this time he was very clear about what he wanted to do, and how he wanted to do it. Like many Japanese, he had begun by exploring Western styles and attitudes, but as he grew older turned more and more to the traditional Japanese ideals, defined by Donald Ritchie as “restraint, simplicity, and near-Buddhist serenity.” The conflict between the radical individualism of the young and the older generation’s nostalgic devotion to these qualities is often a source of tension in his films, whose theme is almost invariably the Japanese family—most often the relations between parents and children.

“Pictures with obvious plots bore me now,” Ozu said after the war. He thought that conventional drama made it easy for a director to arouse emotions in his audience, but was only an “explanation” of human emotions that concealed the real truth. His endless variations on a few simple and archetypal themes gave him all the scope he ever needed for his purpose, which was the rigorous exploration of character as a revelation of what was fundamental in the human condition.

Donald Ritchie writes that “Ozu’s later films are probably the most restrained ever made, the most limited, controlled, and restricted.” They are typically built up as a mosaic of brief shots—often one for each line of dialogue—taken from directly in front of the actor who is speaking, and from a very low angle. “The Ozu shot,” Ritchie says, is “taken from the level of a person seated in traditional fashion on *tatami* [matting]. Whether indoors or out, the Ozu camera is always about three feet from floor level, and the camera never moves. There are no pan shots and, except in the rarest of instances, no dolly shots. This traditional view is the view in repose, commanding a very limited field of vision but commanding it entirely. . . . It is the aesthetic passive attitude of the haiku master who sits in silence and with painful accuracy observes cause and effect, reaching essence through an extreme simplification.” Audie Bock maintains that Ozu consistently shot from a height of even less than three feet, however, and suggests that the effect of this on the audience “is to force [it ] to assume a viewpoint of reverence. . . toward ordinary people. Its power is not one of contemplation but of involuntary veneration.”

For many critics, the simplicity and purity of Ozu’s mature style reached its apotheosis in *Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953) described by Robert Boyers as “a work that fairly epitomizes transcendental style.” [Transcendental style is defined by Paul Schrader as “a form which expresses something deeper than itself, the inner unity of all things.”] . . . Stanley Kauffmann, rating this film as one of his ten personal favorites of all time, writes, “By holding to truth, much more than to naturalism, Ozu gives us a

process of mutual discovery, the characters' and ours.”  
from *The St. James World Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Ed.  
Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink Detroit 1998. “Ozu” by David  
Bordwell

Throughout his career, Yasujiro Ozu worked in the mainstream film industry. Obedient to his role, loyal to his studio (the mighty Shochiku), he often compared himself to the tofu salesman, offering nourishing but supremely ordinary wares. For some critics his greatness stems from his resulting closeness to the everyday realities of Japanese life. Yet since his death another critical perspective has emerged. This modest conservative has come to be recognized as one of the most formally intriguing filmmakers in the world, a director who extended the genre he worked within and developed a rich and unique cinematic style.

Ozu enriched this “home drama” genre in several ways. He strengthened the pathos of family crisis by suggesting that many of them arose from causes beyond the control of the individual. In the 1930s works, this often led to strong criticism of social forces like industrialization, bureaucratization, and Japanese “paternalistic” capitalism. In later films, causes of domestic strife tended to be assigned to a mystical super-nature. This “metaphysical” slant ennobled the character tribulations by placing even the most trivial action in a grand scheme. The melancholy resignation that is so pronounced in *Tokyo Story* and *An Autumn Afternoon* constituted a recognition of a cycle of nature that society can never control.

To some extent, the grandiose implications of this process are qualified by a homely virtue: comedy.

Ozu had one of the most distinctive visual styles in the cinema. Although critics have commonly attributed this to the influence of other directors or to traditions of Japanese art, these are insufficient to account for the rigor and precision of Ozu’s technique. No other Japanese director exhibits Ozu’s particular style, and the connections to Japanese aesthetics are general and often tenuous. (Ozu once remarked: “Whenever Westerners don’t understand something, they simply think it’s Zen.”) There is, however, substantial evidence that Ozu built his unique style out of deliberate imitation of and action against Western cinema (especially the work of Chaplin and Lubitsch).

Ozu limited his use of certain technical variables, such as camera movement and variety of camera position. This can seem a willful asceticism, but it is perhaps best considered a ground-clearing that let him concentrate on exploring minute stylistic possibilities. For instance, it is commonly claimed that every Ozu shot places the camera about three feet off the ground, but this is false. What Ozu keeps constant is the perceived *ratio* of camera height to the subject. This permits a narrow but nuanced range of camera positions, making every subject occupy the same sector of each shot. Similarly, most of Ozu’s films employ camera movements,

but these are also schematized to a rare degree. Far from being an ascetic director, Ozu was quite virtuosic, but within self-imposed limits. His style revealed cast possibilities within a narrow compass.

Ozu’s compositions relied on the fixed camera-subject relation, adopting angles that stand at multiples of 45 degrees. He employed sharp perspectival depth; the view down a corridor or street is common. Ozu enjoyed playing with the positions of objects within the frame, often rearranging props from shot to shot for the sake of minute shifts. In the color films, a shot will be enhanced by a fleck of bright and deep color, often red; this accent will migrate around the film, returning as an abstract motif in scene after scene.

Ozu’s use of editing is no less idiosyncratic. In opposition to the 180-degree space of Hollywood cinema, Ozu employed a 460-degree approach to filming a scene. This “circular” shooting space yields a series of what Western cinema would consider incorrect matches of actions and eyelines. While such devices creep up in the work of other Japanese filmmakers, only Ozu used them so rigorously—to undermine our understanding of total space, to liken characters, and to create abstract graphic patterns. Ozu’s shots of objects or empty locales extend the concept of the Western “cutaway”; he will use them not for narrative information but for symbolic purposes or for temporal prolongation. Since Ozu abjured the use of fades and dissolves, cutaways often stand for such punctuation. And because of the unusually precise compositions and cutting, Ozu was able to create a sheer graphic play with the screen surface, “matching” contours and regions of one shot with those of the next.

Ozu’s work remains significant not only for its extraordinary richness and emotional power, but also because it suggests the extent to which a filmmaker working in popular mass-production filmmaking can cultivate a highly individual approach to film form and style.

from *Yasujiro Ozu A Critical Anthology*. Edited by John Gillett  
and David Wilson, BFI 1976

“The Zen Artistry of Yasujiro Ozu” Marvin Zeman

If one is unsympathetic to Japanese art, one will probably be unsympathetic to Ozu. But if one considers Japanese art on the same level as European art, then Ozu’s art will become more lucid and more profound. R.H. Blyth wrote that the placing of Japanese literature on an equal standing with European literature is contingent upon the consideration of Bashô on the same level with Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, and Homer. I further contend that if one does indeed accept Bashô in this way, then by considering Ozu with respect to Bashô—and Bashô is Ozu’s creative ancestor rather than D.W. Griffith—one will come to the conclusion that Ozu is the finest artist to use the film as a medium.

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...email Diane Christian: [engdc@buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@buffalo.edu)

...email Bruce Jackson [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)