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 published texts on Ozu’s life and work and Tokyo Story are Donald Richie, Ozu (1977); David Bordwell, Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema (rep. 1994); David Dresser, Ed., Ozu’s Tokyo Story (Cambridge Film Handbooks Series, 1997); 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/ Another good web site on his life and work is http://homepage.mac.com/kwoy/ozu/ozu.htm.

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 Jumpo “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 fro 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 actors who are 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.”


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 homespun 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 Ozu’s use of editing is no less idiosyncratic. In opposition to the 180-degree space of Hollywood cinema, Ozu employed a 360-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
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.

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