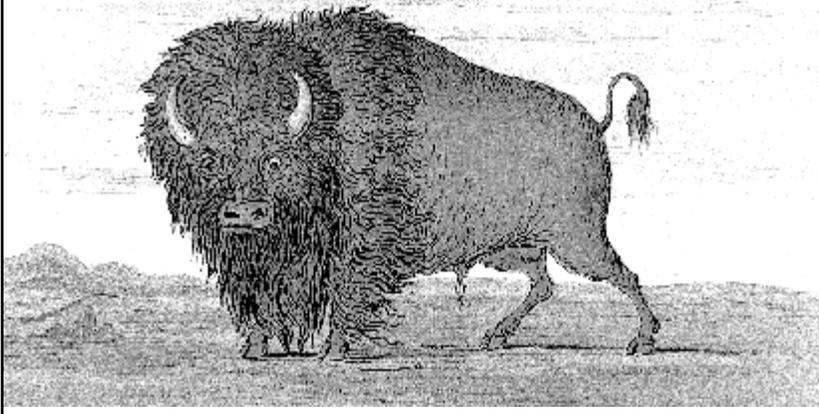


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce



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>.

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 assignments 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 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

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 wilful asceticism, but it 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.

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

“Tokyo Story” Robin Wood

The film [*Tokyo Story*] is pervaded by a profound sense of the inherent unsatisfactoriness of life, of the discrepancy between a person’s human qualities and what his life actually amounts to. We see that the parents have retained the image of their children as they were before they left for Tokyo and become embroiled in the struggle for day to day survival, with the resulting inability to see beyond the stresses of the moment. Only at the mother’s death and the sequences following it do we see where Ozu has been leading us with his quiet accumulation of scenes. Not only the meaning of her own life is called into question, but that of the lives of all the characters—the son who has grown up to be a doctor, the grandson who may grow up to be one. “Isn’t life disappointing?” bitterly asks Kyoko, the youngest child of Noriko, the widow of the son killed in the war. After the others have all left. The older woman sadly agrees.

“Isn’t life disappointing?” sums up the action of the film, but is not its last word. We feel that Kyoko has learnt from her experience, and learnt more than disillusionment, because the experience has included Noriko; and Kyoto is a teacher. . . . We recognise the perfect marriage of theme and style: by means of his style, Ozu communicates to the spectator precisely that detached consideration, the seeing of events in a wider perspective, which he regards as a prerequisite of successful human relations. Of this most of his characters are quite incapable, but it is embodied in the character of Noriko.

“The Zen Artistry of Yasujiro Ozu” Marvin Zeman

In my opinion, what the other great Japanese directors, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, have created is part of Western art (film) rather than Japanese art. Kurosawa, for instance, is for the most part a Western artist since even his themes are similar to those dealt with in the West, to say nothing of his technique. . . . Mizoguchi’s art, while dealing with Japanese themes, must also be considered Western: what one remembers from a Mizoguchi film is, most often, purely cinematic—the rippling of the water after Anju’s suicide in *Sansho*
from OZU. Donald Ritchie. U Cal Press, Berkeley, 1974

By ending the drama (the daughter-in-law) [in *Tokyo Story*] before he ends the film, by returning to the father, by showing us the by-now familiar port shots, which reoccur like closing chords in this final coda, by referring, finally, to the larger context of city, sea, mountains, he also suggests that what we are seeing occurs every day, that it is common, that it has happened before and will happen many times over, that it is the way of the world. The dissolution of this family, the transience of this world, the disappointment of this life—this is the theme of *Tokyo Story*, and this is what Ozu has illustrated in these final frames.

Join us next week, Tuesday, October 29 for Marcel Camus' **BLACK ORPHEUS**, 1958. Oscar, Best Foreign Film; Golden Palm at Cannes. Based on the Orpheus-Euridice legend, but updated and set in Carnival in Rio. A great score by Antonio Carlos Jobim and João Gilberto that put bossa nova into the musical mainstream and had a profound influence on American jazz.

Check out the other films, past films, and all the goldenrod handouts at <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>.

Write Diane at engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu. Write Bruce at bjackson@buffalo.edu.

Check out BUFFALO REPORT, Buffalo's only free and independent news magazine at <http://buffaloreport.com>.

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.

Dayo, the boat emerging from the fog in *Ugetsu*, the death scene in *Yang Kwei Fei*, ad infinitum, ad gloriam. These scenes, although undeniably great, are clearly imposed from without by Mizoguchi. One of the basic tenets of Japanese art is that it be artless art: the artistry must come from within the work. As for Mizoguchi’s themes, they, too, are not uniquely Japanese: for instance Max Ophüls’ *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a very Mizoguchian film. All this is not to say that Ozu is necessarily better than Mizoguchi or Kurosawa, but it does say that one must bring a new set of values to bear in discussing Ozu’s art. The criteria that one must use for Ozu should be those of Japanese art and not cinematic art.

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 Bashō on the same level with Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, and Homer. I further contend that if one does indeed accept Bashō in this way, then by considering Ozu with respect to Bashō — and Bashō 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.

The basic idea behind Japanese art is Zen. Zen is the immediate and therefore inexpressible individual experience whose aim is inner enlightenment. D.T. Suzuki has stated that “Zen is not subject to logical analysis or to intellectual treatment. It must be directly and personally experienced by each of us in his inner spirit.” Art is the form-language of the human soul. The soul tries to disclose through art beauty—the revealing principle of the cosmos. This beauty is found in the *mu* (roughly translated as nothingness). If one can penetrate the *mu*, then one can achieve inner enlightenment/. This beauty can be found anywhere—in a simple flower, in a solitary cloud, in a short poem. The revelation of beauty is the goal of art.