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DAVID DESSER

Introduction

A FILMMAKER FOR ALL SEASONS

An aging couple, Hirayama Shukichi and his wife, Tomi,[1] 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.

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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 Yasujiro'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 Yasujiro, 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.[2] 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,

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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.[3] 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

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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

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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

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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 (Figure 1). This is followed by a shot of people on a seawall (Figure 2), then by a shot of the sea seen from an interior (Figure 3), then a shot down the length of a hallway, and, finally, a shot of the old couple in a hotel (Figure 4). 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

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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.

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FIGURE 1

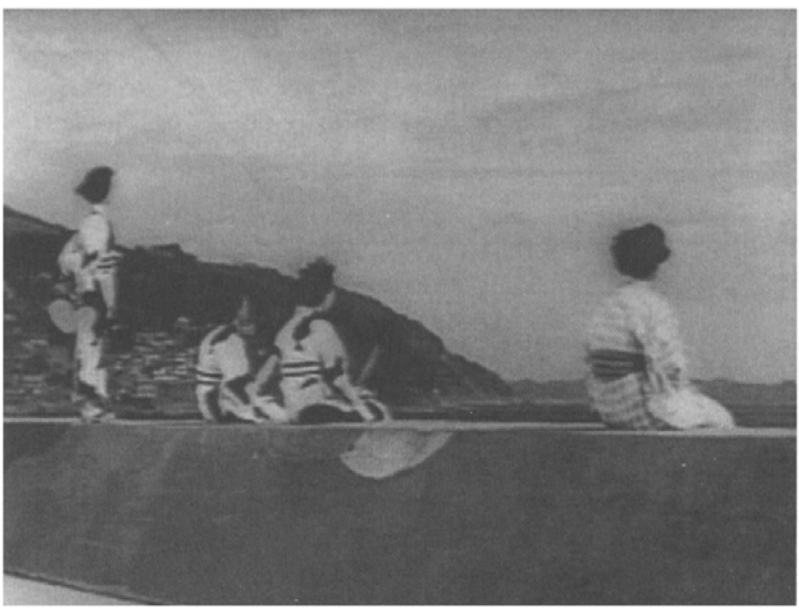


FIGURE 2

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FIGURE 3

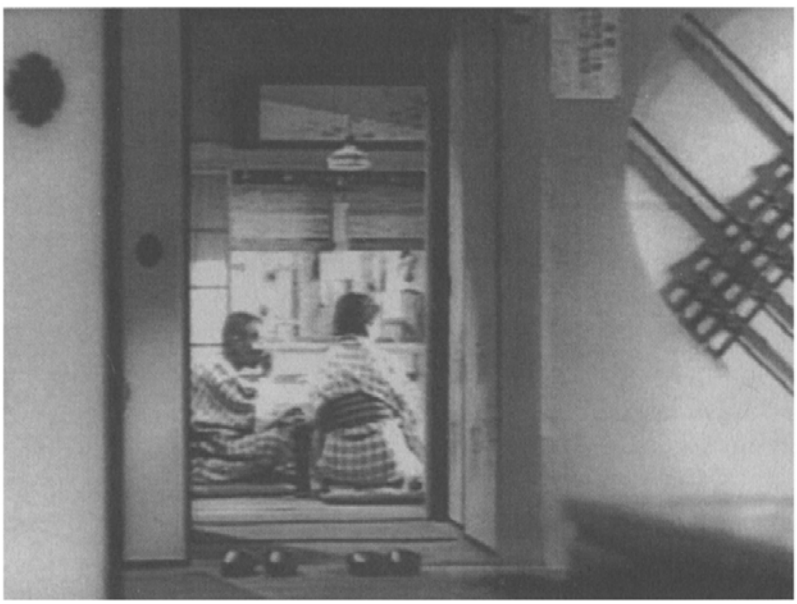


FIGURE 4

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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 (see Kathe Geist, Chapter 4, this volume) 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 (Figure 5). As Kathe Geist points out in Chapter 4, this is 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.[4] The next shot of power lines and a small railroad crossing (Figure 6) 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 (Figure 7) (though we do not know that Koichi, the oldest child, is a doctor; in Ozu's films it is typically

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