Ozu’s *Tokyo Story*

“Passing of an Era”


Undergraduate
An elderly couple living in Shimonoseki, in the south of Japan, decide to make a visit to their two married children in Tokyo. Upon their arrival, they are somewhat disappointed by their reception. Neither the son nor the daughter have time for their parents, and they quickly send them off to a hot springs resort, to get them out of the way. The only person happy to see them is the widow of their son, who was killed in the second world war, eight years previous. No sooner do the couple return home than the children receive a telegram that their mother is ill; they go to their mother at her deathbed. After the funeral, the children rush back to Tokyo, but the daughter-in-law stays on. Shukichi advises her to get married again and as a memento gives her the watch of his now deceased wife.¹

From this restrained, disillusioning anecdote comes Yasujiro Ozu’s 1953 Japanese masterpiece *Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*), a film generally acknowledged as one of the greatest of all Japanese pictures. It concerns an ordinary family of the post World Word II era, whose members are neither noble nor base. The parents visit their children, they are rebuked, later the mother dies — all of which are unexceptional incidents that generally occur in families. Yet, the viewer leaves the film profoundly moved. There is an undercurrent of compassion which, although not overtly expressed, is such that one can sense that there are deep, untapped feelings just below the surface. While events are expressed in the most tranquil way, Ozu has tapped into the personal and universal issue of eventual severance between parent and child.² This essay shall look at the remarkable techniques of Yasujiro Ozu, as implemented in his masterpiece *Tokyo Story*, and how these techniques are steeped in traditional Japanese propriety. Ozu’s framework for conveying Japanese traditions through film comes into conflict with the changing postwar Japanese society to show that there has been a steep decline in ordinary Japanese family values.

² Tadao Sato, reading from class work book: 193.
Of all Japanese directors, Ozu is considered the most culturally and stereotypically Japanese. His reputation as such continues even ten years after his death. He originated a genre that became known as shomin-geki (“common-people's drama”). Ozu had a talent for the detailed sensitive portrayal of the daily lives of average people. His theme was always the contemporary Japanese home, focusing on issues such as the love between parent and child, mischief of children, and the reconciliation between husband and wife. In the case of Tokyo Story, Ozu focuses on the aging parents and their disappointments with their children and their lives. Ozu is a pioneer in Japanese film because of his concentration on pictorial beauty, his detailed character portrayals and his focus on domestic relationships. Ozu’s films are among the most restrained, even by Japanese standards, and some young Japanese accuse him of being old-fashioned, bourgeois, and reactionary. His relatively plot-less films are heavily steeped in everyday life, and character study and atmosphere are prevalent. Penelope Gilliatt, when writing for The New Yorker Magazine on Tokyo Story, referred to Ozu as “reality’s artisan and its connoisseur.”

Ozu’s strategies are rooted in elements of aesthetic Japanese tradition, such as the poetic form haiku, flower arrangement, and tea ceremony. In particular, the time-honored institution of the tea ceremony, whose tradition dates back to the twelfth century, appears to have had a strong influence on Ozu’s work. The ceremony is rooted in the principle of Zen Buddhism and founded upon the adoration of the beautiful in the daily routine of life. It is an aesthetic way of entertaining guests, in which everything is done according to an established order. Generally, tea ceremonies focus upon harmony between guests, respect, simplicity, and tranquility, and significance is found in small, concentrated gesture. Japanese life became dominated by the aesthetic scruples of the tea

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3 Tadao Sato, 185
4 Tadao Sato, 186.
5 “Ozu Yasujiro” Encyclopædia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/>
6 Donald Richie, Ozu, (United States: Univ. California, 1974): xii
8 "tea ceremony" Encyclopædia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/>
ceremony, a marvel of constrained social ballet to which whole lives have been devoted. Ozu, in making films, is entertaining guests — the audience — and as such he strives to maintain tea ceremony ideals in his films. In order to understand Ozu’s traditional Japanese conventions it is useful to understand his film techniques.

The ellipsis — the omission of events (plot) — is a key narrative principal for Ozu that has a corollary to Japanese culture. It is minimalist and noninvasive and subtly forwards the plot, in the same way that tea ceremonies epitomize tranquil simplicity. Ozu’s omissions reflect Japanese literature, which similarly left out segments of speech necessary for easy comprehension of a statement, considering them unnecessary or as fussily precise. Ozu’s ellipses are similarly unexpected to the unwary, but still serve the purpose of forwarding the plot without cumbersome explanations. A subtitled version of *Tokyo Story* went so far as to use the subtitles to identify location changes whereas Ozu’s location changes are elided. Like in Japanese literature and cultural practices Ozu’s ellipsis require the audience to reflect on form rather than content.

When the two oldest children are discussing sending their parents to Atami, the scene is followed by a long shot of people on a seawall, then a long shot of the sea as seen from an interior, then a medium shot down the length of a hallway, and finally a medium shot of the old couple in a hotel. In this, it can be seen that the parents are already at the spa, and it is evident that Ozu has eliminated scenes in which the parents are told about the trip, catch the train at Atami, and arrive at the resort. This minor ellipsis type is quite common in cinema worldwide but is particularly apparent in Ozu’s work.

Ozu’s film requires us to pay special attention to the variety of his ellipses. At the start of *Tokyo Story*, the parents discuss changing trains at Osaka and seeing their younger son, but the next scene begins in Tokyo at the home of the older son, shortly after the parents arrive. The

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9 "aesthetics" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com>
10 "Japanese literature" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com>
12 Ed. David Desser, 7.
discussed visit to Osaka is never shown and the plot point prepared for with dialogue is elided. This is a surprise ellipse. More daring still is Ozu’s dramatic ellipsis, where something important occurs but entirely off screen. In *Tokyo Story*, this is the parents’ arrival in Osaka on the return trip and their overnight stay as the mother, Tomi, has become ill. The illness is only learned about after the fact from the second son.\(^\text{13}\)

Not only do Ozu’s pictures have less story than most (partly due to his frequent ellipses), but his pictures are longer than most and are very rigorous in the use of a steady calm tempo. This serves to maintain a tranquil condition, regardless of the portrayal of deep emotions just below the surface. Ozu intentionally tries to maintain an even tempo of everyday life, greatly disapproving of speeding up. To keep his compositions graceful, there is an avoidance of movement, particularly violence. All his actors and actresses follow a prescribed daily tempo, and his characters are usually calm, in contrast to the impassioned performances in the films of Akira Kurosawa or Kenji Mizoguchi. The Japanese director Kozaburo Yoshimura observed that “the characters in Ozu’s films were like vegetables,”\(^\text{14}\) referring to their performances constantly being metered. Uzo himself admitted that he was not a dynamic director — he wanted to make perfect still-life paintings on film.

Unsympathetic critics complain that as there is little overt action, the pace seems too slow. Donald Richie, a film critic who specializes in Ozu, points out that Uzo’s films “create a purely psychological time. One finds drama to justify the length... but the point is that one finds it, it is not deployed before one.”\(^\text{15}\) Once the internal and subtle drama of the characters has been identified, or “found” Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* no longer seems slow, and although there is a suppression of action and consequence the viewer concentrates on what movement there is. Suddenly, a slight change tone of voice or facial expression carries profound meaning.\(^\text{16}\) On the surface the film is

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\(^{13}\) Ed. David Desser, 7.
\(^{14}\) Tadao Sato, 192.
\(^{16}\) Tadao Sato, 192.
linked by the most tranquil sentiments, yet it is charged with quiet internal tension.

Ozu’s emphasis is on mood and tone, not story, paying particular attention to spatial composition, specifically his screen direction, which can be linked to aesthetic Japanese traditions such as flower arrangement. Flower arrangement as an art form developed from the custom of offering flowers to the Buddha,¹⁷ and has taken on complex conventions and symbolism. Most Japanese art is heavily influenced by Buddhism, emphasizing the relationship between visual art and spiritual development. Suggestion is valued over bold declaration¹⁸ and horizontal rather than diagonal arrangement is thought to suggest the contented and the serene. Likewise, Ozu strives to maintain his compositions with a horizontal stress and his works avoid bold declaration.¹⁹

Ozu readily sacrificed continuity for visual composition in all his shots, as can be seen by a humorous extract pointed out by Richie, of an incident recalled by Ozu’s assistant director, Masahiro Shinoda:

There was this table with beer bottles and some dishes and an ashtray on it, and we had shot the scene from one side and were going to shoot it from the other side when Ozu came up and began shifting the objects around. I was so shocked that I said that if he did that he would create a bad break in continuity, that everyone would notice that the beer bottles were now on the right and the ashtray on the left. He stopped, looked at me, and said: ‘Continuity? Oh that. No, you’re wrong. People never notice things like that — and this way it makes a much better composition.’ And he was right, of course. People don’t. When I saw the rushes I didn’t notice anything wrong with those scenes.²⁰

Shinoda was shocked that Ozu asserted such a blazingly cavalier attitude towards continuity, something usually held sacred by almost all filmmakers. This sacrifice for aesthetic composition was made under the observation that when a shot is composed beautifully, people tend not to notice the continuity break. For Ozu’s all-important belief in a pleasing composition, he would even go so far as moving actors who were supposedly stationary within a sequence. In Tokyo Story, when the

¹⁷ Ed. David Desser, 10.
¹⁸ "arts, East Asian" Encyclopædia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/>
¹⁹ Donald Richie, 132.
²⁰ Donald Richie, 126.
old couple are sitting on the Atami sea wall, in the immediately following shot one finds that they have switched places. Ozu did this for compositional reasons as he wanted the frame to balance itself, and the switch tends to go unnoticed by most people who view the film. Ozu proves that it is more important to achieve balance in a shot than to maintain continuity. I, for one, never noticed the break in continuity until it was specifically pointed out to me.

Ozu is clearly restrictive in his camera use, employing strictly straight forward, clearly framed, close to medium-close full face shots during dialogue, making his technique seem minimalist. Similarly, he almost totally abandons camera movement preferring stationary pictorial shots. When shooting indoors or out, he almost exclusively uses one kind of shot, that taken from the eye level of a person seated in a traditional fashion on the tatami mat. The camera is always three feet above the ground, and is rarely ever moved. A fascinating correlation to Japanese culture is that the camera is the position from which one partakes of the tea ceremony, looking up from a sitting position. The low angle has the effect of looking upon a stage upon which characters may be seen to the best advantage. We see them from below, with the background distant from the figure. The Japanese consider low posture as a form of respect, such a posture also represents respect for one's elders and one's parents. By insisting on using such a modest camera angle Ozu expresses his belief in the traditional values, the very values Tokyo Story depicts as disintegrating.

David Parkinson, noted film critic and author of History of Film, mentions Ozu’s fashioning of off-screen space through use of “curtain” shots, or “empty shots,” which reproduce a Zen Buddhist world view. In place of fade-ins, Ozu always inserts a number of curtain scenery shots in the intermediate spaces falling between action just completed. For instance, between the first scene in which the parents pack for their trip and discuss the Osaka stop, and the second scene which takes place at the eldest son's house in Tokyo (this transition is also an ellipsis as mentioned

22 “Ozu Yasujiro” Encyclopædia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/>
23 Donald Richie, xii.
24 Ed. David Desser, 10.
earlier), there are three transitional spaces of long shots. The first is a shot of smokestacks. The next shot is of power lines and a railroad crossing, and third shot is in Tokyo outside Dr. Hirayama’s office. These curtain scenes, devoid of figures, are speculative still life's of urban landmarks. In terms of narrative they are virtually meaningless, but they prompt the viewer to contemplate nature and other events occurring elsewhere. Parkinson suggests the shots, along with Ozu’s “unreasonable” style, are a “revolt against Hollywood classicism.”

One of the most revealing segments in Tokyo Story that relates to the breakdown of family values is the long drinking scene where in Shukichi, the father, goes out drinking with his wartime comrades after being turned away from his daughter’s house. Here we clearly see the discontent in Shukichi and his friends as Japanese old world values decline in the emergence of post war Tokyo. Specifically honor, respect, and filial piety, are breaking down. Shukichi, in getting drunk, is himself participating in this breakdown, as honorable elderly men should uphold a level of decorum. Shukichi himself admits, “As a youth, I always disgraced myself by drinking,” therefore drinking is acknowledged as a disgraceful act that parallels this notion of social decline.

Shukichi drinks with Mr. Hattori (we never learn his first name), his wartime friend, and their “old police chief,” Numata. On entering the shot we hear Numata exclaim “Drink up, for old time’s sake!” The emphasis here is in the past and a release from issues of the present. Ozu closes in, and presents us with his traditional medium-close low angle tatami mat shot; the camera is sitting at the table with the three friends. Shukichi exclaims “I haven’t touched a drink in years.” The talk continues and they reminisce about governors and geisha girls, then at one point Numata mentions to Shukichi, “You’re lucky: your children are all well settled,” to which Shukichi gravely replies, “I’m not sure.” Mr. Hattori exclaims “I often wish at least one of my sons were alive.” Numata adds “both were killed in the war.” It is evident that this is Japan Tokyo in the 50s, the full weight of the lost war is brought to bare. Numata motions to Shukichi “Didn’t you lose

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25 Ed. David Desser, 10.
one?” to which Shukichi replies “Yes, my second son.” The friend states, “I’ve had enough of war.”

Later in the scene, Numata is viewed contemplatively from the side in a close shot. This is unusual for Ozu as he usually has his characters give their dialogue directly to the camera. Numata says “It’s hard to lose one’s children,” now his face turns to look directly at the camera and he exclaims, “However, living with them isn’t always easy, either.” In Numata’s comment he is indicating that the post war generation of their children are difficult, and they lack respect for their parents. He turns to the side again, reaching for the sake jug to pour more sake for his friends. He feels sad, and wishes to drink away his sorrow. The friend mutters, “Let’s change the subject,” trying to keep him happy. As their drinking progresses, we learn more about the families.

Numata says to him, “I think you’re the luckiest of us all. You have sons and daughters to be proud of,” Shukichi replies “What about your son?” Numata exclaims “My son is no good. He’s henpecked, he ignores me. He’s a nobody.” His comment that his son is a nobody is in complete resolution and disappointment. His child is a failure. There is no filial piety. Numata concludes the topic with the surprising comment that, “Some young men today [in Tokyo] wouldn’t hesitate to kill their parents.” he laughs to himself. Numata is alluding that the situation has become exceedingly desperate in some spheres. Ozu’s traditional values emerge, and there is a strong sense of honor. All at the table feel shame from the loss of their children or shame of the failures of those that survived. At one point Numata comments, “My only son, so I spared the rod and spoiled him.” There is a desire to revert to the old ways, a stricter regime.

Numata is disillusioned with Japan, and feels that since the war they have lost all honor and fighting spirit. Numata addresses Shukichi, “You brought your eldest up successfully. He’s a doctor now.” Shukichi responds, “Yes, but he’s not as well qualified as other doctors.” Now Numata launches into a dialogue that is at the heart of Tokyo Story. “I’m afraid we expect too much of our children — They lack spirit, they lack ambition. I said that to my son; do you know
what he replied? ‘It’s hard to get on in Tokyo; there’s too much competition’ What’s your opinion? Have the men of today lost all fighting spirit? I’m really disappointed. You don’t agree with me? Are you satisfied?” Numata feels that the Samurai-like fighting ideals of the Japanese have all been lost. *Tokyo Story* is not a film just about Shukichi and his family. The symptoms being discussed are evident throughout post war Japan, and the nations capitol, Tokyo, is at the core. Ozu’s broad tempo and his shomin-geki genre used to understand the Japanese family gives one a feeling that this story could be applied to Tokyo as a whole — hence the title, *Tokyo Story*. In defeated Japan, the courage is gone, the honor is gone; honor to one's country (defeat) , and honor to one's parents have been forsaken.

Late that night, the staggeringlly drunken Shukichi and the equally drunken Numata are brought to Shukichi’s daughter’s house by the police. Shukichi collapses into one of the beauty parlor chairs, while the daughter, Shige, paces around him, whining and complaining and at one point even shoving him, pulling off his hat and dropping it unceremoniously back down again. The humor of the scene is not just that Shukichi has temporarily cast aside his dignity, but he has — albeit unintentionally — discomforted, inconvenienced, embarrassed, and angered Shige, who has elicited such treatment. “I never dreamed he’d come back here tonight, even if he’d been alone,” she says in disgust, referring to her throwing her parents out earlier that day. The humor has a sense of pathos and sadness that the father-daughter relationship has degenerated to this.27

This set of scenes is remarkable in that for all Ozu’s subtleness and indirectness, here he confronts the major issues of the story directly. Shukichi confides his family concerns frankly with his old friends, and Ozu’s story is made painfully clear. We see the disintegration of the Japanese family in light of post war change, and the inevitability of those remaining children growing up and the parents growing old. The title *Tokyo Story* has a double meaning, for it is not just the story of aged parents visiting their dysfunctional family, but it is a reflection on families in post war Tokyo as a whole.

27 Ed. David Desser, 37.
After Tomi’s death we see a long shot of Shukichi, standing at a distance in the early morning watching the sun rise. Noriko, the daughter-in-law, walks from the camera directly to him, into the image. As with all Ozu’s images this one is well-framed. He is standing slightly to the right of the frame, in amongst temple pillars. In the background can clearly be heard the sound of a train passing, indicating how time moves on, waiting for no man. When Noriko reaches Shukichi, Ozu cuts to a full shot. “Keizo has arrived, father” says Noriko. Shukichi contemplates, saying “It was such a beautiful sunrise.” She turns to look in the direction he is facing, at the rising sun. Shukichi meditatively states, “I’m afraid it will be another hot day,” then turns slowly to face the camera and walks back to the others at an even steady pace (tempo). This is how Shukichi reflects initially on his wife's death. Tomi, the wife of Shukichi is dead. In the scheme of things life is momentary, and in this lies an inherent sadness, what the Japanese call mono no aware.28 One must find a way to make the pain of life bearable, but it is impossible if one is dedicated only or chiefly to the self — here is where Western and Japanese views of life differ most profoundly.29

At the end of the film there is no sequence of happiness, or confrontation with the children, they remain free to believe they have done well by the parents. In the closing scene there is a medium shot, Shukichi sits alone fanning himself. The neighbor can be seen, she stops at the window looking into the house and says, “You’ll be lonely. It was so sudden” to which he responds, “If I’d known it would end like this I’d have shown more consideration when she was alive. Living alone, a day lasts too long.” Here Ozu shows us how life goes on, its ordinariness, beauty, and sadness. The neighbor comments “I know. It must be very lonely” Shukichi nods and keeps fanning himself. Ozu is playing on the audience emotions in a repressed way as Shukichi does not externally express his grief and his lonesome predicament. His children should be there to support him in his period of mourning.

28 In the late 18th century Motoori Norinaga, a leading literary scholar, summed up the essence of Japanese art and literature as the expression of a touching intimation of transience, which he captured in the famous phrase mono no aware, meaning roughly “the sensitivity to the sadness of things.” — "aesthetics" Encyclopædia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com>
29 Ed. David Desser, 47.
We see a medium close-shot with only Shukichi in frame, as he fans himself he moans inwardly, his face tight, holding in his sorrow. He looks out towards some boats below. We see a medium long-shot of just him in the room. This final scene is a companion to the opening scene in which Shukichi and Tomi were seated side by side, employing the same camera setup. Shukichi is to the left of the frame and there is space beside him where Tomi would usually be. In the center of the frame, we can see incense smoke burning. He taps his knees with the fan to assure himself, and looks sadly at the boats moving slowing down the river.

Ozu uses various film techniques to state his very traditional forms and to express that family values in post war Japan are indeed in a state of decline. His most effective means of showing this is a predominantly stationary camera; deliberate, meditative tempo; an unusually low camera position; full frontal shots of speakers; transitional shots of seemingly unrelated settings; and narrative ellipses. The conclusion of the film describes the unraveling of Japanese culture and the passing of an era. Ozu has portrayed in a powerful yet graceful manner the deep disillusioning feelings of the parents. Although the story is essentially unexceptional, it is very personal, and the subject is within easy grasp of the audience. The death of a parent, and eventual distancing of children are themes that are very common. Ozu reminds us that regardless life goes on. There is a sensitivity to the sadness of things, and as the boats slowly traverse the river, so too does Shukichi’s life relentlessly traverse onwards.
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