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The Foundation for Art in Cinema

CINEMATHEQUE

The Bay Area showcase for personal and avant-garde film

Yasujiro Ozu's EARLY SPRING (SOSHUN)

144 minutes, black and white, 1956

Written by Yasujiro Ozu and Kogo Noda
Photography by Yushun Atsuta
Music by Takanobu Saito
Starring Ryo Ikebe, Chikage Awashima, Keiko Kishi, Teiji Takahashi, and Chishu Ryu.

Film at its best is visual philosphy

Although every film by the nature of the medium reveals itself through the progression of shots and cuts, there are those filmmakers whose basic cinematic fabric is that of montage. These artists' works are based on a silent reality...a reality which demands that the progression of individual pictures communicates in itself. Most went on to make sound films, and when a critic asked John Ford if it were a particular problem he answered, "Well, people expect it these days." The sound on these films, however, is really just a flavoring to a basis in silence.

The cinema of Ford, of Hitchcock, of Eisenstein, of Brakhage, and of Yasujiro Ozu fall into this category. Each is a philosopher. Like Sitting Bull, each has firmly taken his own seat, and is firmly on the ground. The formalness of their position enables them to see the world more clearly. Ford, with his Homeric sense of the vertical is the great joiner of opposites. Heaven and earth, solidness and transparency, light and shadow, tenderness and ruggedness are joined in the marriage of shots and cuts. Hitchcock's films with their voyeuristic and sometimes sadistic montage literally click and snap with each cut. From STRANGERS ON A TRAIN, 1950 through TOPAZ, 1970 we see the direct visual expression of character subjectivity being popped and popped again. Eisenstein, when not preoccupied with heavy-handed irony brings the world alive through a collision of compositional juxtapositions. How vibrant is the revolt on the deck of the battleship Potemkin! And how similar it feels to the cinema of Stan Brakhage. Brakhage, the only filmmaker mentioned here who began working in film after the advent of sound, has brought to this tradition a quality of image which exists in the before-meaning sense of seeing...in that moment of first seeing which is actually feeling... that pure visual land which exists in our minds before verbal concept can solidify with "meaning". The cutting is stream-of-consciousness and shares the same upstream area of our being as the pre-verbal. It is a rare and unified world of shots and cuts. It is a new vision. Its abstract qualities, however, are rooted purely in tradition.

So before we get to the subject of tonight's director, Yasujiro Ozu, let me say in summary that whether or not a film has a story as such, sublime montage, and perhaps sublime filmmaking, is the balance and integration of shots and cuts. The story or "the about" is the going from one shot to the next, and the transcendence blossoms from the genuinely unified tension of these two basic elements.

Yasujiro Ozu was born in 1903 and spent most of his school years living in the country outside Tokyo with his mother and two brothers. He was quite spoiled; and a restless and indifferent student. His love of the movies started at a very young age and he was a passionate film-goer often missing school to sneak off and see the newest imports from America, Italy and Germany. He never entered college, failing the entrance requirements. Ozu proudly reports that he was in a movie house watching THE PRISIONER OF ZENDA during the most important exam. He had spent his childhood memorizing film plots and credits.

After a short period of being an assistant teacher in a small mountain village where he took heavily to drinking, he returned to Tokyo where an uncle, who apparently knew of his nephew's interest in film, introduced him to the manager of the Shochiku studios. So at the age of twenty, Ozu began working in the industry as an assistant cameraman. He left behind his wild schoolboy rebellion... he was, at last, contented and free. Soon he graduated to assistant director and then in 1927 directed his first film THE SWORD OF PENITENCE written with Kogo Noda who would be his principal screenwriter and dearest friend throughout his life. "If you really want to know the truth, I didn't want to be a director as quickly as all that. When I first saw the film I didn't feel it was mine at all. And though it was my first, I've only seen it once."

During his thirty-six years in the industry Ozu produced fifty-four films. Among his favorites were THERE WAS A FATHER, BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE TODA CLAN, TOKYO STORY, and EARLY SUMMER. Unmarried he lived with his mother whom he was very fond of. He loved to drink and the accounts of his screenwriting sessions with Kogo Noda are warm, illuminating, and very funny. This working relationship is greatly responsible for the particular excellence of Ozu's films. Their method of writing and structuring a film is excellently described in Donald Richie's Ozu. Noda kept a diary of their writing:

> One scenario usually took us from three to four months if we were working from scratch. That's how long TOKYO STORY took. We did it at this inn in Chigasaki. We had an eight-tatami room which looked out on the east and south to a long garden and had good sunshine. The buds came out, then the flowers, then the fruit, and we still weren't finished. Whenever we went for a walk we'd do the shopping. Ozu used to buy meat and make hamburgers. And we drank alot, too. By the time we'd finish a script we'd sometimes have over a hundred big empty sake bottles; though our guests would help drink them, too. Ozu used to number all the bottles. Then he'd count them and say, "Here we are up to number eighty already and we haven't finished the script yet."

There is a note of triumph in the diary at the conclusion of TOKYO STORY: "Finished - one hundred and three days; forty three bottles of sake." In 1959 Ozu commented in his diary, "If the number of cups you drink be small, there can be no masterpiece."

His career was interrupted during the Second World War when he was sent by the Imperial Army to Singapore to work on propaganda films. None were ever really made. He, however, had the opportunity to screen dozens of American films that the Japanese had confiscated. It is reported that after seeing John Ford's STAGECOACH, HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY, and GRAPES OF WRATH he said, "We're going to loose the war." It was CITIZEN KANE which most captivated him. He screened it over and over again.

EARLY SPRING, Ozu's last film in black and white, was a bit of an experiment. It is uncharacteristically modern in its flavor. The film opens with an extraordinary montage of Tokyo suburbanites waking in the morning and commuting to work. We see life as it is in 1956, the conditions of our industrialized civilization and the state of our society. We move forward through this rather grim story of an office worker bored with his job and restless in his marriage; but we are not moving through time as such. We feel the profound transparency of all that is thought solid. We are asked to touch ground and begin again. Ozu has said of this film:

> Although I hadn't made a white-collar story for a long time, I wanted to show the life of a man with such a job- his happiness over graduation and finally becoming a member of society, his hopes for the future gradually dissolving, his realizing that, even though he worked for years, he has accomplished nothing. By showing his life over a period of time, I wanted to bring out what you might call the pathos of such a life. It is the longest of my postwar films, but I tried to avoid anything that would be dramatic and to collect only casual scenes of everyday life, hoping in doing so that the audience would feel the sadness of this kind of life.

The picture also took more time to make than most Ozu films. It took eighty-seven days just to write the script. "They kidded me at the company saying I'd better call the film NEXT SPRING; actually the title, EARLY SPRING, refers to young people just starting out, that time of life. People seem to understand that kind of symbolism-and, besides, the President of Shochiku is very fussy about titles."

The humanity and gentleness of an Ozu film is made possible by the rigor of its construction...its exquisite montage. Shots and cuts are the marrow of the filmmaking. The camera seldom moves and almost all shots are taken from the eye level of someone sitting on the floor. This is the traditional view of life seen from the point of view of contemplation. It is the attitude for listening, for watching, for taking tea, for meditation. Without this rigorous frame, the intense humanity of the characters could not be so completely revealed. The cutting is of similar spirit. We slowly and precisely move from one shot to the next. Each has its own emotional tone and visual density. Very spaciously and without aggression we see life freshly revealed to us again and again; always fresh with each moment and each cut. The profound quality of our own stillness is revealed.

Ozu never used characters to advance a plot, not wanting to make them slaves to narrative necessities. He gives them full freedom to exist and it is this existence that we witness. These films are completely tender and completely sure. They are about very ordinary events and people. They are traditional and yet very far out. They have the true sense of ultimate exploration for time as such dissolves.

Donald Richie concludes:

> The spectator is led into the film, is invited to infer and to deduce. He gives of himself and of his time, and in so doing he learns to appreciate. What remains after an Ozu film is the feeling that, if only for an hour or two, you have seen the goodness and beauty of everyday things, and everyday people; you have had experiences you cannot describe because only film, not words, can describe them; you have seen small, unforgettable actions, beautiful because real. You are left with a feeling of sadness, too, because you will see them no more. They are already gone. In the feeling of transience, of the mutability and beauty of all life, Ozu joins the greatest Japanese artists. It is here that we taste, undiluted and authentic, the Japanese flavor.

Yasujiro Ozu died in 1963 on the evening of his sixtieth birthday.

The following is a listing of Ozu's work of particular interest:

TOKYO CHORUS, 1931
I WAS BORN, BUT, 1932
WOMAN OF TOKYO, 1933
THE ONLY SON, 1936 (first sound film)
WHAT DID THE LADY FORGET, 1937
THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE TODA CLAN, 1941
THERE WAS A FATHER, 1942
RECORD OF A TENEMENT GENTLEMAN, 1948
HEN IN THE WIND, 1948
LATE SPRING, 1949
THE MUNEKATA SISTERS, 1950
EARLY AUTUMN, 1951
TOKYO STORY, 1953
EARLY SPRING, 1956
TOKYO TWILIGHT, 1957
EQUINOX FLOWER, 1958
GOOD MORNING, 1959
LATE AUTUMN, 1960
AN AUTUMN AFTERNOON, 1962

Notes by Nathaniel Dorsky with the help of Donald Richie's Ozu.