OZU, Yasujiro (December 12, 1903 – December 12, 1963)

The Japanese film historian Donald Richie notes that the Japanese think of Ozu Yasujiro as the ‘most Japanese’ of all their filmmakers. His *Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953) has also been a regular in the ‘top ten greatest films of all time’ lists selected by prestigious institutions around the world, being on a par with such classics as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) and Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). The particular and universal intersect in Ozu and his films.

One of the three giants often said to represent Japanese cinema – along with Kurosawa Akira and Mizoguchi Kenji – Ozu directed a total of 54 films mostly at the Shochiku studio, where he was hired in 1923 and remained until his death. While more than a dozen of his prewar works are no longer extant, some of Ozu’s silent films, such as *Wasei kenka tomodachi* (*Fighting Friends Japanese Style*, 1929) and *Tokkan Kozo* (*A Straightforward Boy*, 1929), are wildly humorous, exhibiting the strong influence of Hollywood slapstick comedies. However, others of these early works, including *Tokyo no korasu* (*Tokyo Chorus*, 1931) and *Umarete wa mita keredo* (*I Was Born, But…*, 1932), revolve around the emerging middle class family, in part reflecting the then Shochiku producer Kido Shiro’s marketing strategy to translate modern everyday life into cinema. Indeed, in contrast to Kurosawa and Mizoguchi, whose oeuvres throughout their careers include a number of *jidaigeki* (period dramas), Ozu’s interest laid in portraying one particular subject: the contemporary family, often in dissolution. The postwar films he directed during his mature period, from *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949), *Bakushu* (*Early Summer*, 1951), *Tokyo Story* to *Aki biyori* (*Late Afternoon*, 1960) and his last work *Sanma no aji* (*An Autumn Afternoon*, 1962), all centre around incredibly similar stories of family matters, especially a father marrying off his daughter. Even casting the same actors for the same roles, his postwar works might strike the audience as variations of the same template, and this occasionally invites criticism as a conservative focus on only the domestic. However, Ozu’s idiosyncratic attention to the formal and technical aspects of these films has been studied rigorously (most notably by the film scholar David Bordwell) as marking his auteurist signature, positioning him as an ambitious modernist or transcendental cinematic poet effectively expanding the boundary of filmic art. He is often identified with his trademark styles including low camera positions, meticulous positioning of objects and actors to achieve pictorial rigor, use of the 50mm lens to flatten the image and reduce the depth of field, and subtle yet deliberate violations of the so-called 180-degree rule to create an impression that the characters look (back) directly at the camera. All these elements undermine the supposedly transparent continuity essential to the classical or standardized conventions of narrative cinema. At the same time, as was briefly suggested above, Ozu’s ‘radical’ filmmaking practice was achieved all within a studio system entirely aimed at the domestic audience. Unlike Kurosawa and Mizoguchi, Ozu was not shown abroad during his lifetime.

References and further reading:

- Bordwell, D. (1988) *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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- Richie, D. (1974) *Ozu,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Schrader, P. (1972) *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dryer,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

List of works

*Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953)

*Wasei kenka tomodachi* (*Fighting Friends Japanese Style*, 1929)

*Tokkan kozo* (*A Straightforward Boy*, 1929)

*Tokyo no korasu* (*Tokyo Chorus*, 1931)

*Umarete wa mita keredo* (*I Was Born, But…*, 1932)

*Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949)

*Bakushu* (*Early Summer*, 1951)

*Aki biyori* (*Late Afternoon*, 1960)

*Sanma no aji* (*An Autumn Afternoon*, 1962)

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Zange no yaiba (Sword of Penitence, 1927)

Wakodo no yume (Dreams of Youth, 1928)

Nyobo funshitsu (Wife Lost, 1928)

Kabocha (Pumpkin, 1928)

Hikkoshi fufu (A Couple on the Move, 1928)

Nikutaibi (Body Beautiful, 1928)

Takara no yama (Treasure Mountain, 1929)

Gakusei romansu: wakaki hi (Student Romance: Days of Youth, 1929)

Daigaku wa detakeredo (I Graduated, But..., 1929)

Kaishain seikatsu (The Life of an Office Worker, 1929)

Kekkongaku nyūmon (An Introduction to Marriage, 1930)

Hogaraka ni ayume (Walk Cheerfully, 1930)

Rakudai wa shitakeredo (I Flunked, But..., 1930)

Sono yo no tsuma (That Night's Wife , 1930)

Erogami no onryo (The Revengeful Spirit of Eros, 1930)

Ashi ni sawatta kōun (The Luck Which Touched the Leg, 1930)

Ojosan (Young Miss, 1930)

Shukujo to hige (The Lady and the Beard, 1931)

Bijin to aishu (Beauty's Sorrows, 1931)

Haru wa gofujin kara (Spring Comes from the Ladies, 1932)

Seishun no yume ima izuko (Where Now Are the Dreams of Youth?, 1932)

Mata au hi made (Until the Day We Meet Again, 1932)

Tokyo no onna (Woman of Tokyo, 1933)

Hijosen no onna (Dragnet Girl, 1933)

Dekigokoro (Passing Fancy, 1933)

Haha wo kowazuya (A Mother Should be Loved, 1934)

Ukigusa monogatari (A Story of Floating Weeds, 1934)

Hakoiri musume (An Innocent Maid, 1935)

Kagami jishi (Kagami jishi, 1935)

Tokyo no yado (An Inn in Tokyo, 1935)

Daigaku yoitoko (College is a Nice Place, 1935)

Hitori musuko (The Only Son, 1936)

Shukujo wa nani wo wasureta ka (What Did the Lady Forget?, 1937)

Todake no kyodai (Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family, 1941)

Chichi ariki (There Was a Father, 1942)

Nagaya Shinshiroku (Record of a Tenement Gentleman, 1947)

Kaze no naka no mendori (A Hen in the Wind, 1948)

Munekata kyōdai (The Munekata Sisters, 1950)

Ochazuke no aji (The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice, 1952)

Soshun (Early Spring, 1956)

Tokyo boshoku (Tokyo Twilight, 1957)

Higanbana (Equinox Flower, 1958)

Ohayo (Good Morning, 1959)

Ukigusa (Floating Weeds, 1959)

Kohayagawa-ke no aki (The End of Summer , 1961)

Paratextual material

<http://www.criterion.com/films/284-tokyo-story>

(Trailer: *Tokyo Story*)

Takuya Tsunoda

Yale University