Joe Miller

EALC Seminar

12/20/2023

Final Paper

Ozu and the Occupation

On August 15, 1945, Japan formally surrendered to The United States and its allies, ending World War 2 (Kyoko 2). Shortly after, The United States militarily occupied Japan, the first time in the country's lengthy history it had been completely subjected by a foreign power (Kyoko 3). America's primary objective during the occupation, which would last until April 28, 1945, was to completely dismantle and demilitarize the former Japanese empire (Kyoko 3). To quote Douglas Macarthur, the lead architect of the occupation's policy, Japan was to become the "Switzerland of Asia" (Kyoko 2). One of the routes through which this was to be accomplished was though censorship of films. Two censorship agencies were created by the American government for the purpose of ensuring Japanese movies would adhere to the ideals of American democracy. These were the CID, the American military's censorship office, and the CIE, the American civil censors (Kyoko 47). Both agencies carefully reviewed prospective film releases and gave the final say as to whether they could be released to the public or not. The two would also work closely with film studios and directors to demand changes in scripts regarding lines or details that were deemed to be incongruent with the occupation's values.

It was in this transitional environment that writer-director Yasujiro Ozu filmed and released *Late Spring (*1949). By 1949, Ozu was already famous in Japan. He had established himself as a director in the pre-war era at Shochiku studios, during which he made thirty-three

narrative films (Geist 9). After a stint in the Japanese army from 1937-1939, Ozu returned to Japan where he continued to make films during the war, under heavy Japanese censorship (Geist 101-102). After Japan's defeat, the undeterred Ozu continued making films at Shochiku. *Late Spring* is Ozu's third film of the occupation era, after *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (1947) and *A Hen in the Wind* (1948) (Geist 121). He directed the film and co-wrote the script with frequent collaborator Kogo Noda (Geist 132). The movie tells the story of Noriko, an unwed woman in her mid-twenties living with her widowed father Somiya in Kitakamakura, an outer suburb of Tokyo (Joo 153). Despite pressure from those close to her, Noriko refuses to marry, having a rather negative view of the institution itself. Only after learning her father's engagement to a woman named Ms. Miwa does Noriko commit to a marriage with an unseen groom. At the film's end, Somiya reveals that he has no plans to marry Ms. Miwa, but instead lied to Noriko to convince her to marry.

Punctuating this rather simple plot are snapshots of Japanese domestic life at the time, including casual tea ceremonies between Noriko and her friends and excursions to Tokyo and Kyoto. The film contains many references to traditional Japanese culture, including the aforementioned tea ceremony, an extended scene at a Noh theater, and various "pillow shots" highlighting traditional Japanese architecture. There are also some references to Western/American culture, including a conspicuous shot of a Coca Cola advertisement written in English. Because these cultural aspects are so conspicuous throughout the movie, some academics have characterized the relative positions of Japanese and Western influences in *Late Spring* as Ozu's criticism of the American occupation and Westernization of Japan. However, the blending of these cultural elements is actually an optimistic statement by Ozu on the potential of traditional Japanese culture and new Western culture to coexist in Japan.

It is difficult to glean Ozu's opinions on the occupation from this movie, mainly because the occupation forces are never directly addressed. This is unsurprising, as the censors expressly forbid any mention of the occupation. To quote Hirano Kyoto's *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo,* a book about occupation censorship, "Regarding the occupation, the American censors tried not only to suppress criticism of it, but also to hide the very fact that Japan was being occupied at all and that foreign officials were closely supervising the Japanese media" (Kyoko 54). Given this strict censorship directive, some have argued that Ozu discretely included references to the occupation as a means to subvert this censorship. The most obvious allusion occurs when Noriko and her father's assistant Hattori bike to Hiratsuka beach and pass two signs declaring "CAPACITY 30 TON" and "SPEED 30 MPH" (Ozu). This signs, written in English and using imperial units, were clearly posted for the benefit of the occupying American military, which were presumably using Hiratsuka beach as a naval base (Geist 134). The shot immediately following the previous one prominently features an advertisement for the American soft drink Coca Cola: "DRINK COCA COLA" (Ozu). The advertisement is so conspicuous that it is the focal point of her shot. The main character Noriko and her companion are literally out of focus as they bike behind the sign. Again, this is a clear nod to the Americanization and corporatization of post-war Japan.

Despite these shots clearly pointing alluding to the unseen American presence in Japan, the degree to which they are *criticisms* of American influence is probably overblown. For starters, I believe these are more representative of Ozu's desire to capture contemporary Japanese life than they are any kind of political statement. Ozu was clearly obsessed with naturalism. His character's dialogue includes frequent tangents to subjects unrelated to the plot and frequently include pop-cultural references. One notable example of this in *Late Spring* is when "Gary Cooper" is invoked by a character to describe a man's physical appearance (Ozu). Here, Ozu

also references American culture, not to criticize it, but instead to portray the way Japanese people of the time really talked. The advert serves a similar naturalistic purpose. At the time of the film's release, advertisements for Coca Cola and other American brands directed at both Japanese forces and the occupying soldiers were probably quite common. Ozu's admiration for American graphic design and English font styling was probably also an important motivation for including the Coca-Cola sign. According to academic Kathe Geist, "The Coca-Cola advertisement the couple subsequently passes has more to do with Ozu's longstanding fascination with American products and advertising graphics than with exposing the Occupation" (Geist 134). This inclusion of these signs, while alluding to an occupation Ozu could not actually show, was not particularly politically motivated.

Another Western cultural entity that figures prominently in the film is baseball. Baseball is a strong symbol for the impact and integration of American culture into Japan. The sport was invented in America and introduced to Japanese university students in the late 1800s, where it was conceptualized by the Japanese as a type of American martial art (Ikei 73). During World War Two the sport was repressed by the Japanese government who saw it as a symbol of the enemy, but upon the war's conclusion it immediately regained its popularity (Kyoko 175). The promotion of baseball was encouraged by the American occupation authorities, who saw it as representative of the "spirit of democracy" (Kyoko 176). In 1949, studio RKO rereleased the American film *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942), about the eponymous baseball team, a film which became a huge hit in Japan (Kyoko 175). Late Spring contains many references to baseball. During the aforementioned conversation with Noriko and her cousin about Gary Cooper, the later refers to him as being from "that baseball film," a reference to *The Pride of the Yankees*, in which Gary Cooper portrayed first basemen Lou Gehrig (Geist 135). The proceeding

scene depicts a pickup baseball game between Japanese youths. Ozu originally wanted this scene to take place on a burnt-out field, a detail that critic Lars-Martin Sorensen interpreted as a veiled criticism of the American bombing of Japan during the end of the war (Geist 136). However, as Geist points out, this interpretation seems far-fetched. For one, the significance of the burnt-out field is ambiguous. She interprets it as Ozu attempting to "show baseball and the young people playing it rising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of war (Geist 136)." Also, Ozu personally loved baseball, even encouraging his film crew to form a team (136-137 Geist). The idea that Ozu was trying to depict baseball in an ironic way or that he was forced include baseball by the censors is ludicrous. One only need to examine the final cut of the scene closely to reach the conclusion that Ozu saw baseball as a positive influence on Japan.

The scene in question occurs at approximately the 41:50 mark. It is a "pillow shot," a type of shot common in Ozu's films that Thompson and Bordwell describe as "spaces between pockets of narrative action" (Thompson 46). In it, several young boys play a pickup game of baseball, excitedly hollering over cheery music. In the background looms a traditional house in the traditional Japanese architectural style, partially masked by foliage. This setting is quite evocative. It lays bare the contrast between America (baseball) and Japan (the building). It's also worth noting that this is one of the few times in the movie we see children. In my belief, these elements and their staging portray Japan's integration with the west in a positive light. The enthusiasm of the children, highlighted by the diegetic yelling and clapping, represent an optimistic outlook towards Japan's future in the post-war era. The visual contrast between the Japanese architecture and the American baseball equipment and uniforms represents the possibility for both cultures to prosperously coexist in post-war Japan.

Another piece of evidence suggesting Ozu's optimism towards a culturally integrated future occurs when Hattori invites Noriko to attend a violin concert. The violin concert in question features Mari Iwamoto, a famous half-American, half-Japanese violinist (Geist 139). In a time in which many mixed-race children were being born in Japan, Iwamoto was a shining example of the potential of such children to be fully "Japanese" despite their ethnicity. Despite being bullied horribly in school, Iwamoto remained a strong supporter of Japan during the war, during which she toured tirelessly (Geist 139). The concert is one of the two live events depicted in the movie, the other one being the Noh play. The fact that Ozu decided to include both the violin concert and the Noh play suggests the Ozu valued the contributions of a half-American artist just as much as he valued Noh, one of the most traditional and respected Japanese artforms.

In fact, many aspects of the film reject the very idea of binary conception of East and West itself. This includes, as we have seen, baseball, which originated in Japan but soon became as fundamentally Japanese as anything else. It also includes Mari Iwamoto, whose multi-cultural origins defied simple categorizations of nationality. As Geist mentions, this simultaneity of Japanese and foreign concepts in Japanese life did not originate during the post-war, or ever modern era of Japan. Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, and Buddhism, a foreign religion imported from mainland Asia, are both extremely widely followed religions in the country (Geist 102). Most Japanese identify as both Shinto and Buddhist, without seeing a contradiction in following both. During the Meiji Restoration in the latter half of the 1800s, Japan became the first Asian country to industrialize, incorporating Western technology into daily society. Despite the foreignness of the technology, the Japanese fully embraced it, turning machines like trains into a lasting symbol of their nation. Just as Japan has historically exhibited this duality between native and foreign, so do the characters of *Late Spring.* Somiya, who enjoys Noh theater and the

old city of Kyoto, is also a member of PEN, a globalist organization of writers (Geist 138). Noriko's aunt Masa holds rather traditional Japanese viewpoints on marriage, yet she has clearly seen *The Pride of the Yankees* and uses Gary Cooper to make a flatting comparison. All characters move fluently between Western and Japanese locations: the Western concert hall, the bar, the Western tearoom, to the Noh theater, the traditional Japanese rooms, and Kyomizudera in Kyoto. In *Late Spring,* Ozu expresses a very seamless vision blend between the West and Japan.

Given the censorship of Japanese films of the era, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what Ozu's goals were in making the film. It is also worth noting that *Late Spring* is not an expressly political film by any means, but rather more of a traditional family drama. With these caveats in mind, it is probably fair to say that the film, at the very least, is not Anti-American or anti-Western as some scholars claim. The roadway signage before Hiratsuka Bay alludes to the presence of the Americans in Japan but does so in a neutral way. The excess of baseball scenes and references was not an artificial inclusion by wartime censors, but an expression of Ozu's admiration of the game. The way it is incorporated into the film signals a national embrace among the Japanese of the American game. The concert given by Mari Iwamoto and the duality between Japanese and Western influences amongst all the characters shows the embrace of aspects of Western culture in the post-war era.

In many ways, Ozu's portrait of 1949 was prescient. Today, Japan has continued to embrace the West, even long after the occupation's end. If Ozu's primary goal was to capture the realities and future of Japanese domestic life, he has greatly succeeded. When discussing his method of realism, Ozu said: "Postwar society is impure. It is messy and dirty. I do not like such things, but it is a reality. On the other hand, there is also a life that humbly beautifully and purely

blooms, which is another reality" (Joo 155). Despite their age, Ozu's films remain as relevant as ever in our globalized world.

Works Cited

Geist, Kathe. *Ozu: A Closer Look*. Hong Kong University Press, The University of Hong Kong, 2022.

Ikei, Masaru (2000) "Baseball, Besuboru, Yakyu: Comparing the American and Japanese Games," Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Joo, Woojeong. *The Cinema of Ozu Yasujiro: Histories of the Everyday*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Kristin Thompson, David Bordwell, Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu, *Screen*, Volume 17, Issue 2, Summer 1976.

Kyoko HIRANO, *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo: Japanese Cinema under the American Occupation, 1945-1952* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

Ozu, Yasujiro, director. *Late Spring*. Shochiku, 1949.