

The Zen of *Tokyo Story*

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Cinema classics are often disinterested in the realistic representation of time. This is reasonable, as one might expect for a medium concerned with capturing images evolving through time, that the logical conclusion to pushing cinema artistically is to warp the very fabric on which it is woven. From the time travel escapades of *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985), to the oneiric sequences of *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel, 1929), non-linear storytelling has existed in cinema ever since filmmakers realised they could cut and splice their film stock. As ubiquitous as it is however, one director's body of work stands in stark contrast to this common trope. Yasujirō Ozu's filmography is one defined by his endeavour to depict the realistic passage of time, often to an overwhelming degree. Drawing on Japanese philosophies, in particular Zen Buddhism, Ozu meticulously crafts films that employ the realistic passage of time to punctuate the beautiful mundanity of life, drawing focus to the relationships between the people that inhabit it. Nowhere is this transcendental style more apparent than his 1953 film *Tokyo Story* (東京物語 *Tōkyō Monogatari*) (Ozu, 1953), a compelling story about a Japanese family and their inter-generational rifts. In *Tokyo Story*, Ozu places great emphasis on the people behind the faces, and their complex interactions. The result is a bittersweet parable about the ephemerality and transience of life.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes Zen Buddhism as cherishing “simplicity and straightforwardness in grasping reality” in particular employing meditation as a process of gaining wisdom (Nagatomo, 2020). These values are apparent in the works of Ozu and indeed critic Paul Schrader makes the connection between Ozu and Zen culture and more broadly transcendentalism, specifically citing Ozu's tendency to abide by the principle of *mu*, the positive notion of non-existence or void (Schrader, 1972). In Ozu's works, much of the meaning is formed in the unseen or inaction. Perhaps the subject of the most scholarly writing is the scene in *Late Spring* (晩春 *Banshun*) (Ozu, 1949) where a vase is cut to right at the emotional climax of the film, subverting the expectation of a close-up shot showing the main character's emotions. One effect of this as Donald Richie describes is to make requisite the imagining and therefore feeling of emotion rather than to see it (Richie,

1977). The result of this is a shifting of gaze, and a deeper emotional bond between the viewer and the main character. Consequential to that, great weight is placed on this moment, as the viewer comes to the realisations the main character does in real time. This is one example of meditation as a process for gaining wisdom in Ozu's filmography, explicitly tying him to Zen philosophy. The absence of the expected shot generates new insight. These meditative qualities force the realistic perception of time in his films both through the literal pacing of his films, and the transcendental means as mentioned previously. Both of these means are found in *Tokyo Story*.

Yasujiro Ozu has a number of trademark shots seen throughout his filmography. One of these shots is the pillow shot, an often short, intermittent shot that is either a close-up still-life of an object, or a wide shot of a landscape. The term was first coined by Noël Burch who drew comparison between this style of shot and *makurakotoba*, literally pillow words, found in Zen-inspired Japanese poetry (Burch, 1979). In both cases, they don't contribute directly to the narrative, instead spacing out the cadence of the piece and creating new transcendental meaning. Perhaps the most remarkable use of the pillow shot in *Tokyo Story* is in the lead up to Tomi's death and her subsequent funeral. Here, pillow shots are used to punctuate three key moments, the realisation of what is to come, the death itself, and the realisation of what has passed. As Tomi lies on her deathbed, Shūichi fans her whilst reassuring her that her children will arrive soon. Tomi is mostly unresponsive. We then get a close-up shot of Shūichi as he reassures Tomi she will be alright. From this shot we see a faint smile indicating he believes what he is saying, but this quickly fades to a more urgent look as he realises what is likely to come. Rather than hold on this closeup to visually develop the emotion, Ozu cuts to a wide shot of ships passing on a river. This then cuts back to an internal shot of a moth drawn to a light bulb. Critics often go to great lengths to assign meaning to pillow shots, and while these shots could be read as symbols of transience and futility, their literal content has nothing to do with the narrative of the film. These shots rather necessitate that the viewer meditates on the emotions that welled up inside Shūichi, causing them to experience this realisation with him in real time.

Later, the eldest son Kōichi informs Shūichi and Shige that he doesn't expect Tomi to survive longer than dawn. Shige breaks down crying while Shūichi enters a shell-shocked state repeating "so this is the end" to himself. Eventually Shūichi makes his way to Tomi's side before another sequence of pillow shots: an empty jetty, an extinguished lamp, moored boats, an empty path, and vacant railroad tracks. When we return to the room everyone is around Tomi, and a cloth is over her face indicating she has died. The actual death of Tomi is a staggering omission as this is arguably the emotional climax of *Tokyo Story*, being the event that its parable is centred around. Once again, individual meaning can be ascribed to each of these shots, they all carry some notion of departure

or absence, most standing in direct contrast to earlier pillow shots of the same locations, but the function of this sequence is much closer to that of the vase shot in *Late Spring*. As in *Late Spring* the expectation of a certain shot is subverted, requiring the viewer to imagine and therefore feel the emotion along with the characters. Instead of being an event we observe impacting the characters of a film, Tomi's death impacts us much the same as if we were there. A sense of loss is gained from the absence of such a crucial scene and as such we feel the realistic passage of time accordingly.

Finally, we have the funeral scene. The scene begins and ends with expository shots of tombstones in the cemetery. In each case they ease us in and out of a space, from Shūkichi's home to the cemetery, and from the cemetery back to the wake at Shūkichi's home. During the ceremony, a distressed Keizō leaves the building. Having been the only child to miss the passing of his mother, the viewer understands the guilt that has come over him. As he sits on the doorstep, a close-up shot reveals a tear beginning to form in his eye before abruptly cutting back to the pillow shot of the tombstones. Once again we have the omission of one of the most poignant moments in the film, Keizō realising he hadn't been a good son and would never see his mother again. As previously, Ozu subverts the expectation of a close-up on Keizō crying forcing the viewer to imagine it rather than see it. We feel how this realisation affects Keizō on a visceral level as we come to the same conclusions by our own means. The pillow shot forces meditation and generates transcendental meaning within the scene, in doing so slowing the cinematic pace down to real time.

The second kind of shot for which Ozu is known is the *tatami* shot, a low-angle, stationary shot replicating the perspective of someone kneeling on a *tatami* mat. By positioning the viewer to have the perspective of a perceived diegetic observer, the viewer is invited to join the characters in the world of the film, to empathise and experience events with them. In *Tokyo Story*, this places visual emphasis on the mundane, everyday actions that take place, in order to enforce the realistic passage of time, and draw further attention to the relationships between characters. The first example of the *tatami* shot we get in *Tokyo Story* is in the introductory scene. Shūkichi and Tomi are packing their bags preparing to leave for Tokyo to meet their children. Both are kneeling facing in the same direction on different planes of depth such that little eye contact is made. The subject of conversation is mundane, discussing the whereabouts of an air cushion. The dialogue does little to drive the plot forward and of course this isn't the point of the scene. The contents of their bags isn't crucial to understanding the film later on, and other films wouldn't dwell on this part of the travel process, instead relegating it to a shorter scene if at all. Ozu dwells on this small, intimate moment as an act of meditation, providing insight into the nature of Shūkichi and Tomi's relationship. By fixing the camera, the only movement in the frame are the two as they shuffle to pack their bags, and

by setting it at the same height as them Ozu humanises them. All in all, the viewer is required to share this insignificant moment with Shūkichi and Tomi in real time, an act that makes us sensitive to them.

Another notable *tatami* shot is that where Shūkichi and Tomi have just arrived in Tokyo and are settling down for bed. Again we have a fixed, low camera angle with both Shūkichi and Tomi kneeling and facing the same direction. As before, having them face the same direction forces any eye contact to be a conscious engagement between the two, drawing particular attention to the act. The dialogue of the scene consists of short comments about how travelling didn't quite meet their expectations, again not dialogue that is crucial to driving forward the plot, rather it is as if we are overhearing their intimate conversation. This coupled with the low camera angle forces the viewer to engage Shūkichi and Tomi on a deeper level, to empathise with them as we seemingly sit there with them. As the viewer meditates on this quiet moment between the two, we get the feeling that the sense of disappointment that pervades the conversation may run deeper than just travel time and location. The viewer realises that they are disappointed with the unavailability of their children, all without it being explicitly stated. This is another example of the transcendental meaning Ozu puts into a scene, stemming from his realistic depiction of time.

Yasujirō Ozu is a director whose style stands out in a rich history of classic cinema. Where many classic films make a point of distorting time, and presenting narrative in a non-linear fashion, Ozu exists as a notable exception to this rule. Through the use of his trademark pillow and *tatami* shots that draw from Zen philosophies, Ozu seeks to humanise his subjects and create meditative moments, subjecting the viewer to a realistic depiction of time that draws focus to the relationships between his characters and generates transcendental meaning. The result of this in *Tokyo Story* is a truly unique cinematic experience that proves the mundane can rather counter-intuitively be the source for some of the most beautiful narrative content ever put to the screen.

References

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