

Director Yasujirô Ozu

Writing Yasujirô Ozu and Kôgo Noda wrote the screenplay

Producer Shizuo Yamanouchi

Music Takanobu Saitô

Cinematography Yûharu Atsuta

Editing Yoshiyasu Hamamura

Film critic Roger Ebert placed the film in his "Great Movies" collection, writing, "From time to time I return to Ozu feeling a need to be calmed and restored. He is a man with a profound understanding of human nature, about which he makes no dramatic statements. We are here, we hope to be happy, we want to do well, we are locked within our aloneness, life goes on."

Cast

Chishû Ryû...Shûhei Hirayama

Shima Iwashita...Michiko Hirayama

Keiji Sada...Kôichi Hirayama

Mariko Okada...Akiko Hirayama

Teruo Yoshida...Yutaka Miura

Noriko Maki...Fusako Taguchi

Shin'ichirô Mikami...Kazuo Hirayama

Nobuo Nakamura...Shûzô Kawai

Kuniko Miyake...Nobuko Kawai, his wife

Eijirô Tōno...Seitarô Sakuma, "The Gourd"

Haruko Sugimura...Tomoko Sakuma, his daughter

Kyôko Kishida...the proprietor of the bar "Kaoru"

Ryûji Kita...Shin Horie

Michiyo Kan...Tamako, his second wife

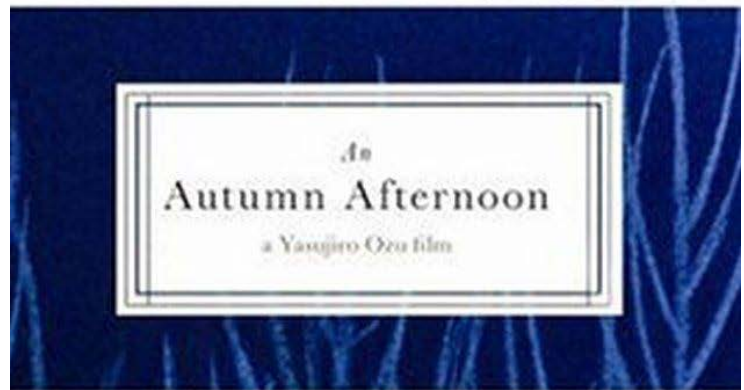
Daisuke Katô...Yoshitarô Sakamoto

Tsûzai Sugawara...Sugai

Masao Oda...Watanabe

Toyo Takahashi...Waitress at "Wakamatsu"

Shinobu Asaji...Yôko Sasaki, Shûhei's secretary



Matsuko Shiga...Woman at Kôichi and Akiko's apartment

Fujio Suga...First Tippy Customer at "Kaoru"

Zen'ichi Inagawa...Second Tippy Customer at "Kaoru"

Yasujiro Ozu (December 12, 1903, Tokyo—d. December 12, 1963, Tokyo) was a movie buff from childhood, often playing hooky from school in order to see Hollywood movies in his local theatre. In 1923 he landed a job as a camera assistant at Shochiku Studios in Tokyo. Three years later, he was made an assistant

director and directed his first film the next year, *Blade of Penitence* (1927). Ozu made thirty-five silent films, and a trilogy of youth comedies with serious overtones he

turned out in the late 1920s and early 1930s placed him in the front ranks of Japanese directors. He made his first sound film in 1936, *The Only Son* (1936), but was drafted into the Japanese Army the next year, being posted to China for two years and then to Singapore when World War II started. At war's end, he went back to Shochiku, and his

experiences during the war resulted in his making more serious, thoughtful films at a much slower pace than he had previously. His most famous film, *Tokyo Story* (1953), is generally considered by critics and film buffs alike to be his “masterpiece” and is regarded by many as not only one of Ozu’s best films but one of the best films ever made. He also turned out such classics of Japanese film as *Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice* (1952), *Floating Weeds* (1959) and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962). Ozu often employs the recurring theme of changes in post-war Japanese family and society, especially concentrating on relationships between the generations. He is also known through his cinematic trademarks such as rigorous use of static camera positioned only a few feet from floor, use of the color red, and characters looking directly into the camera. The camera was always placed low, close to the floor. He never used cranes, a moving camera, bird's eye shots. Once or twice, he tried them early in his career, but he abandoned them. When he edited, he never used overlaps, wipes, fade-ins. He was determined to create a sense of ordinary, everyday life without tricks or mannerisms. To Ozu the camera was never more than an uninvolved observer. It is never part of the action. It never comments on the action. It is through the repetition of short cuts moving back and forth from one character to another that Ozu created a sense of real life. Roger Ebert definitively said: “to love movies without loving Ozu is an impossibility.” Some of his other 54 directorial efforts are: *The End of Summer* (1961), *Late Autumn* (1960), *Good Tokyo Twilight* (1957), *Early Spring* (1956), *Early Summer* (1951), *The Munekata*



Sisters (1950), *Late Spring* (1949), *A Hen in the Wind* (1948), *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (1947), *There Was a Father* (1942), *An Inn in Tokyo* (1935), *A Story of Floating Weeds* (1934), *A Mother Should Be Loved* (1934), *Dragnet Girl* (1933), *Woman of Tokyo* (1933), *Until the Day We Meet Again* (1932), *Where Now Are the Dreams of Youth* (1932), *I Was Born, But...* (1932), *Spring Comes from the Ladies* (1932), *Tokyo Chorus* (1931), *The Sorrow of the Beautiful Woman* (1931), *The Lady and the Beard* (1931), *The Luck Which Touched the Leg* (1930), *That Night's Wife* (1930), *I Flunked, But...* (1930), *Walk Cheerfully* (1930), *The Life of an Office Worker* (1929), *Days of Youth* (1929), *Takara no yama* (1929), *Wife Lost* (1928) and *Wakôdo no yume* (1928).

Kogo Noda (November 19, 1893 – September 23, 1968) was a Japanese screenwriter (97 credits) most known for his collaborations with Yasujiro Ozu, which began with Noda supplying the script for the director's first feature *Sword of Penitence* (1927) and led to such postwar works as *Tokyo Story* (1953), regarded by many critics as one of the greatest films of all time. He co-wrote thirteen of Ozu's fifteen postwar films. When the Writers Association of Japan was formed in 1950, Noda served as its first chair.

Takanobu Saitô (b. December 8, 1924, Tokyo, Japan—d. April 11, 2004) went to the Tokyo University of the Arts with the intent to become a traditional composer. During his schooling, he joined a military music band and later became conductor of the Japan Air Self Defense Force Central Band, a position he held until he retired in 1976. Saitô's most well-known contribution to music was his adaptation of the Japanese national anthem “Kimigayo” adding in more orchestration for the symphony. He scored 24 films, including 8 of Ozu's films: *Tokyo Story* (1953), *Early Spring* (1956), *Tokyo shadows* (1957), *Equinox Flower* (1958), *Floating Weeds* (1959), *Late Autumn* (1960), *Song of hydrangea* (1960) and *Shirobanba* (1962).

Yûharu Atsuta (b. 1905, Kobe, Japan—d. 1993, Japan), along with Shigehara Hideo, was one of two cameramen with whom Ozu worked almost exclusively. Atsuta worked as a cinematographer or d.p. on 37 films including *What Did the Lady Forget?* (1937), *Toda Brothers and Sisters* (1941), *He Was a Father* (1942), *Story of an Owner* (1947), *A Hen in the Wind* (1948), *Late Spring* (1949), *Early summer* (1951), *The Taste of Green Tea Rice* (1952), *Trip to Tokyo* (1953), *Early Spring* (1956), *Dusk in Tokyo* (1957), *Equinox Flowers* (1958), *Hello* (1959), *Late Autumn* (1960) and *The Taste of Sake* (1962). In 1961 he won Best Photography at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival for *Late Autumn* (1960).

Chishû Ryû (b. May 13, 1904, Kumamoto, Japan—d. March 16, 1993, Yokohama, Japan) was the second son of the priest of Raishoji Temple in the village of Kumamoto Prefecture on the island of Kyushu. His childhood and religious upbringing had a great influence on his character later in life. In 1924, he went to Tokyo to study Indian philosophy at Toyo Daigaku. In 1925, the Shochiku Movie Company held its first auditions and Ryû's classmates dared him to go. By his own admission, he was not particularly good-looking, but to his astonishment he was accepted. He found out later he had won the audition because he was wearing his university uniform. Initially, he played extras and bit parts and became a permanent member of what was called the obeya, or 'big room', where all the small fry of the movies waited for the big break. In 1928 he was noticed by Ozu, who saw promise in this awkward young man who seemed not very talented. Ozu gave him a small part in *Days of Youth* (1929). Ryû was often cast by Ozu to play older men; in tonight's film, he was only 49, portraying a 72-year-old character. In 1936 when he was only 32, he appeared as an old man in *The Only Son* which was the first Ozu talkie. The coming of talkies in Japan had the same traumatic effect as it had in Hollywood. Ryû had the picturesque accent of his strong Kumamoto dialect, but it gradually became accepted as part of the unusual charm of his unassuming character. In 1949 he received the Mainichi Film Award for Best Actor, the first of many such prestigious acting awards.



Ryû disarmingly says he was not a natural actor, nor a good one, but for some strange reason Ozu saw potential and brought out hidden qualities that made him a star. In reviewing Wenders' documentary on Ozu, *The Independent* wrote, "Atsuta and Ryû go to Ozu's grave in Kamakura. There is no name on the stone, only the character for *mu*, 'emptiness'. Ryû kneels and prays with folded hands, all dignity, humility and stillness, qualities he embodied on film and in real life. He was unique, inimitable." He eventually appeared in 52 of Ozu's 54 films. He had a role (not always the lead) in every one of Ozu's post-war movies, from *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (1947) to *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962). Ryû appeared in well over 100 films by other directors. He was in Keisuke Kinoshita's

Twenty-four Eyes (1954) and played wartime Prime Minister Kantarô Suzuki in *Japan's Longest Day* (1967). Notably, from 1969 until his death in 1993 he played a curmudgeonly but benevolent Buddhist priest in more than forty of the immensely popular *It's Tough Being a Man* series. Ryû parodied this role in Jûzô Itami's 1984 comedy *The Funeral*. Ryû's last film was *It's Tough Being a Man: Torajirô's Youth* (1992).

Shima Iwashita (b. January 3, 1941 in Tokyo, Japan) is a Japanese actress who has appeared in about 100 films and many TV productions (117 credits). She is married to film director Masahiro Shinoda, in whose films she has frequently appeared. These are some of the films she has appeared in: *Dry Lake* (1960), *Late Autumn* (1960), *Killers on Parade* (1961), *Epitaph to My Love* (1961), *A Roaring Trade* (1962), *Kono ni uruwashi* (1962), *Harakiri* (1962), *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), *Kigeki: Detatoko shôbu - 'Chinjarara monogatari' yori* (1962), *Glory on the Summit* (1962), *Sing, Young People!* (1963), *Kyoto* (1963), *Legend of a Duel to the Death* (1963), *Samurai from Nowhere* (1964), *Assassination* (1964), *The Scarlet Camellia* (1964), *The Fool Arrives with a Tank* (1964), *Snow Country* (1965), *Radishes and Carrots* (1965), *Captive's Island* (1966), *Onna no issho* (1967), *Double Suicide* (1969), *Red Lion* (1969), *The*

Shadow Within (1970), *Forbidden Affair* (1970), *Black Picture Album* (1971), *Man on a False Flight* (1971), *The Petrified Forest* (1973), *The Demon* (1978), *The Politicians* (1983), *MacArthur's Children* (1984), *Time of Wickedness* (1985), *Gonza the Spearman* (1986), *Yakuza Ladies* (1986), *Childhood Days* (1990), *Yakuza Ladies: The Final Battle* (1990), *Sharaku* (1995), *Yakuza Ladies: Blood Ties* (1995), *Moonlight Serenade* (1997), *Ohaka ga nai!* (1998), *Owls' Castle* (1999), *Spy Sorge* (2003), and *Kamogawa shokudô* (TV Mini-Series) (2016).



Nick Wrigley: “Ozu, Yaujiro,” *Senses of Cinema* 3002

The films of Yasujiro Ozu examine the basic struggles that we all face in life: the cycles of birth and death, the transition from childhood to adulthood, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Their titles often emphasise the changing of seasons, a symbolic backdrop for the evolving transitions of human experience. Seen together, Ozu's oeuvre amounts to one of the most profound visions of family life in the history of cinema.

Ozu's career falls loosely into two halves, divided by the Second World War. His breezier early works are unafraid to acknowledge the influence of Hollywood melodramas or to flirt with farce. Such films contrast greatly with his later masterpieces, which portray a uniquely contemplative style so rigorously simplistic that it renounces almost all known film grammar.

Ozu's Background

Ozu was born on December 12, 1903 in Tokyo. He and his two brothers were educated in the

countryside, in Matsuzaka, whilst his father sold fertilizer in Tokyo. In 1916 he began middle school at Uji-Yamada and was an unruly pupil who loved mischief, fighting, keeping a photo of actress Pearl White on his desk, and drinking alcohol. (2) Drinking was a habit he gained early in life and one that he was to keep. Ozu developed a love of film during his early days of school truancy, but his fascination began when he first saw a Matsunosuke historical spectacular at the Atagoza cinema in Matsuzaka. (3)

Despite having few qualifications, Ozu secured a position as an assistant teacher in a small mountain village some distance from Matsuzaka—a post for which a college diploma was not needed. Little has been written or spoken about Ozu's time teaching in this community except that it is known he drank almost continually. Friends came to visit him and stayed for extended drinking sessions for months on end. Eventually, his father had to wire him money to pay off his drinking debts and Ozu went back to Tokyo, after a decade away, to live with his family.

Ozu's uncle, aware of his nephew's love of film, introduced him to Teihiro Tsutsumi, then manager of Shochiku. Not long after, Ozu began working for the great studio—against his father's wishes—as an assistant cameraman. It may be thought nowadays that Ozu more than landed on his feet when he began work in the movies, however, in 1923 the Japanese movies were not considered 'respectable' or 'proper' employment and there was consequently a shortage of enthusiastic, bright young men involved in their production. Even Ozu's father initially refused his son's wish to work in the movies and had to be persuaded otherwise by the uncle.

Ozu's work as assistant cameraman involved pure physical labour, lifting and moving equipment at Shochiku's Tokyo studios in Kamata. (4) After becoming assistant director to Tadamoto Okubo, it took less than a year for Ozu to put his first script forward for filming. It was in fact his second script *The Sword Of Penitence* that became his first film as director (and only period piece) in 1927. Ozu was called up into the army reserves before shooting was completed, and upon seeing the film afterwards stated that he would rather not call it his own. No negative, prints or script exist of *The Sword Of Penitence*—and, sadly, only 36 out of 54 Ozu films still exist.

Ozu's Films

Ozu's career began with an early fondness for American films and he later told Donald Richie that he particularly liked those of Ernst Lubitsch. However, in other conversations, Ozu seems unwilling to admit to influence. He did see large numbers of Japanese films after joining Shochiku in order to study his seniors' techniques and famously said, "I formulated my own directing style in my own head, proceeding without any unnecessary imitation of others...for me there was no such thing as a teacher. I have relied entirely on my own strength." (5) Audie Bock points out that it's difficult to look for parallels between Ozu's life and his films: "College, office, and marital life—none of which Ozu experienced—are the subjects of many of his films; army life never appears, and provincial life, such as he lived with his mother in Matsuzaka, only rarely." She concludes that Ozu must have approached film as an art of fiction from which a realism was to be distilled: "His inspiration came from outside his own life, from his mind and the lives of others observed to perfection with that mind." (6)

Days Of Youth (Wakaki Hi, 1929) is Ozu's earliest extant picture, though not especially typical (and preceded by seven others, now lost) as it is set on ski slopes. A variant on the then popular comedies depicting students at work and play, in this film two students endeavour to pass their exams and impress the girl to whom they have both taken a fancy. Stylistically it is rife with close-ups, fade-outs and tracking shots, all of which Ozu was later to leave behind.

Three years later came what is generally recognized as Ozu's first major film, *I Was Born, But...* (*Umarete wa Mita Keredo...*, 1932). This moving comedy/drama was a great success in Japan both critically and financially. One of cinema's finest works about children, the film begins as a riotous Keatonesque comedy but quickly darkens as it portrays a classic confrontation between the innocence of childhood and the hypocrisy of adults. A tracking shot of a line of

exercising schoolchildren cuts to a tracking shot of a line of office workers yawning at their desks. Using a technique he would later discard, Ozu here effectively associates school and office work as regimentary and the transition between the two as inevitable. Ozu liked *I Was Born, But...* so much that he remade it as *Good Morning (Ohayo)* in 1959.

In the 1930s, Ozu's protagonists were all lower/middle class ordinary folk. During this time in Japan the *shomin-geki* ("drama about people like you and me") was highly regarded for its honesty and relevance. Poverty was the bane of these characters' lives, along with class differences, but as early as the 1930s Ozu's message of acceptance was already clear. The restrained, lyrical work *Story Of Floating Weeds (Ukigusa Monogatari, 1934)* is the story of the leader of a small group of traveling players who returns to a small town and meets his son, the product of an earlier affair. Ozu transforms the slightly melodramatic tale into an atmospheric and intense study. Donald Richie has called this film "the first of those eight-reel



universes in which everything takes on a consistency greater than life: in short, a work of art." Its depiction of life on the boards—the pantomime 'dog' who misses his cue, bowls to catch raindrops through the leaking roofs, and the quick cigarettes between exits and entrances—is classic Ozu. He would later remake the film in colour as *Floating Weeds*.

A year later, Ozu pursued his examination of socio-economic conditions by showing Depression-hit Japan in *An Inn In Tokyo (Tokyo no Yado, 1935)*, one of Ozu's most moving pictures. A father and his young sons trudge the backstreets of Tokyo vainly seeking work and, with few possessions, must choose between food and shelter. In many ways it anticipates the neorealism of De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), but with an even more powerful ending. Although 'talkies' had reached Japan by 1935, Ozu, like Chaplin, held out for silence, but he couldn't stop the studio adding music. His subsequent films were all 'talkies'.

During the war, Ozu only made two films, *Brothers And Sisters Of The Toda Family* (*Toda-ke no Kyodai*, 1941) and *There Was A Father* (*Chichi Ariki*, 1942), the latter of which won the second prize in the Kinema Jumbo, made money at the box office, and became one of Japan's most treasured cinema classics. After the war Ozu, no war criminal, was placed in a British POW camp near Singapore for six months where he cultivated his love of poetry whilst doing the dishes and cleaning toilets. In February 1946 he returned to war damaged Tokyo and set about trying to make more films. Ozu's later, more refined style had been gradually percolating throughout the 1940s and *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) became the first and finest telling of a story Ozu was to remake, with variations, many times. A young woman, (Setsuko Hara) who lives happily with her widowed father (Chishu Ryu), will not consider marriage, preferring her state of comfortable dependence to the responsibilities of childbearing and household duties. The father, afraid that she will live a lonely and barren life, leads her to believe that he intends to remarry in order to free her. A dispassionate observation of the characters' environment and emotions, *Late Spring* was one of Ozu's own favourites (along with *There Was A Father* and *Tokyo Story*).

As the 1940s came to an end Ozu began to fuse his early American influences with an overriding desire to *reduce* his techniques. In his later films, he reduced all camera movement (pans, dollying, and crabbing) to nil; he disregarded classical Hollywood cinema conventions such as the 180 degree rule (where the camera always remains on one side of an imaginary axis drawn between two talking actors) and replaced it with what critics have termed the "360 degree rule" (because Ozu crosses this axis); and he replaced traditional shot/reverse shot techniques with a system whereby each character looks straight into the camera when speaking to someone else. This had the unusual effect of placing the viewer directly in the centre of conversations—as if being talked to—instead of the Hollywood convention of alternately peering over characters' shoulders during such sequences. Furthermore, Ozu decided to reduce his choice of transition effect; gone were fades, wipes,

dissolves, all replaced with the straight cut. Reducing his techniques in this way focused all attention on his characters—and their humanity shines through.

Ozu went further than limiting his vocabulary of film punctuation; he also sought to de-emphasize his films' plots—the direct opposite of what Hollywood cinema of the time was doing. He worked out the entire script, dialogue and camera positions himself before he started shooting. Ozu regular Chishu Ryu recounts:

Mr. Ozu looked happiest when he was engaged



in writing a scenario with Mr. Kogo Noda, at the latter's cottage on the tableland of Nagano Prefecture. By the time he finished writing a script, after about four months' effort, he had already made up every image in every shot, so that he never changed the scenario after we went on the set. The words were so

polished up that he would not allow us even a single mistake. (7)

In addition to being motionless in his later work, Ozu's camera—from early in his career—was often placed at a very low level as if the viewer were sat crosslegged. It has been noted that this is at the same level one sits on *tatami* for a tea ceremony in a Japanese home, or while meditating, sitting in silence, observing, reaching meaning through extreme simplification. (8) It is also the height Ozu had to position his camera when making a film about children, and it is said he liked it so much that he stuck with it. Ozu clearly had many reasons for adopting such a low position for his camera and it became one of the few facets of his pared down technique.

1951's *Early Summer* (*Bakushu*) is an extraordinary film about the lives of ordinary people, centering on a young woman who rebels against the wishes of her family by choosing her own husband. Through tangential stories and brief moments Ozu meticulously observes the lives of some 19 characters, expanding the boundaries of the film's simple plot with an elliptical narrative. The film is driven forward not by its plot but rather by Ozu's use of space, time and the constantly changing rhythm of the action.

The crown jewel in Ozu's career is widely regarded as being *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*, 1953). It consistently makes all-time top ten film lists

around the world along with *Citizen Kane*, *Rules Of the Game* and *Vertigo*. It is Ozu's sad, simple story of generational conflict where an elderly couple's visit to their busy, self-absorbed offspring in Tokyo is met with indifference. This ingratitude only serves to reveal permanent emotional differences, which the parents gracefully accept and then return home. It is in *Tokyo Story* where Ozu's form reaches its zenith. The apparent lack of plot (not of story, but of story events) is replaced by a series of moments which have a cumulative effect, and of ellipses. David Desser highlighted the different kinds of ellipses in *Tokyo Story*, (9) identifying them as follows. "Minor ellipsis" denotes the dropping of a minor plot event—for example, a character discusses sending their parents on holiday and the next shot shows the parents on holiday (Ozu having elided scenes where the parents are persuaded to go on holiday). "Surprise ellipsis" can be demonstrated by Ozu preparing the viewer for a scene and then simply eliding the whole event for effect—a risky strategy, as the greater the ellipsis the more alert the viewer must be. Finally, "dramatic ellipsis" is concerned with the offscreen



occurrence of something dramatic, which the viewer only hears about later—for example, the sudden illness of the mother that we only hear about secondhand. Ozu maintains the mood and tone without needing to portray the events that he is eliding (unlike classical Hollywood cinema which would, generally, base itself around the things that Ozu leaves out). Indeed, the ellipses convolve and dictate the pace of the film. Ozu's examination of the slow fracturing of the Japanese family in *Tokyo Story* is filled with quiet resignation, a never-ending acceptance and the realization that tradition is subject to change.

Early Spring (*Soshun*, 1956) is Ozu's longest film. In it, a young salaried office worker is bored with both his job and his wife. He has a small affair with the office flirt, he and his wife quarrel, and eventually he accepts a transfer to the country. Ozu said of the 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 has worked for years, he has accomplished nothing. ((10))

Thirty years into his filmmaking career Ozu was making films which, like Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), questioned the sense of spending your whole working life behind a desk—something that many of his audience must have been doing.

In 1958, Ozu made what was for him the giant leap into the world of colour filmmaking. *Equinox Flower* (*Higan-Bana*) was another close examination of family life, presented from the viewpoint of the younger generation. Focusing on a modern young woman (Fujiko Yamamoto) who wishes to choose her husband over her father's objections, Ozu opens an age-old discussion on

respect for the beliefs and values of elders and the tensions born of youthful rebellion. As the father is slowly won over, the entire family is subjected to Ozu's teasing irony and loving detail. The colour enhances the tone and mood of the film and showcases Yamamoto's famous beauty. The film begins and ends cheekily on the railway—first with a warning sign “strong winds

expected”, finally with a train chugging away into a blissful autumn afternoon, everyone reconciled.

All subsequent films were now to be colour, and none look more glorious than *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959), a remake of his earlier similarly titled film, this time photographed by Kazuo Miyagawa—one of Japan's greatest cinematographers (*Rashomon* [Akira Kurosawa, 1951], *Yojimbo* [Akira Kurosawa, 1961], *Ugetsu Monogatari* [Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953]). Ozu said, “About this time, CinemaScope was getting popular. I wanted to have nothing to do with it, and consequently I shot more close-ups and used shorter shots.” (Reacting against the long shots and long scenes typical to Scope movies of the time). Donald Richie called *Floating Weeds*, “the most physically beautiful of all of Ozu's pictures.”

Late Autumn (*Akibiyori*, 1960) is one of my personal favourites. A young woman living with her widowed mother (Setsuko Hara, now moving up the character ladder from eternal daughter to eternal mother)

finds the thought of her mother's remarriage offensive. Neither wants to leave the other to marry or remarry, and one of them eventually does. Ozu works his magic for two hours and achieves a pitch at the end whereby the simplest little expression seems momentous and heartbreaking. *Late Autumn* contains some of the funniest moments to be seen in all of Ozu. Mariko Okada plays the feisty young friend of the daughter in an unusually forthright way for Ozu—a reflection of the modern Japanese woman in the 1960s. She cuts through tradition, chastising the comic chorus of old rogues who are trying to sort out both women's future, and ensures a happy ending—proof that not all Ozu characters are meek and passive.

Sadly, Ozu's last film *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962) was undoubtedly influenced by the death, during filming, of his mother, with whom he had lived all his life. It is a serene meditation on ageing and loneliness as well as a final display of Ozu's wicked humour. Having arranged the marriage of his only daughter, a widower becomes painfully aware of his advanced age and his isolation. Solace is sought in alcohol and drunken comradeship which give rise to some more of the funniest scenes in Ozu's later films. Ozu died a year after its making, so it exists as his last thoughts on a recurring subject that recalls *Late Autumn* and *Early Spring*. (Literally, the Japanese title *Samma no Aji* means “the taste of mackerel”.)

Ozu's Legacy

Ozu's films represent a lifelong study of the Japanese family and the changes that a family unit experiences. He ennobles the humdrum world of the middle-class family and has been regarded as “the most Japanese of all filmmakers”, not just by Western critics, but also by his countrymen. However, this accolade led to Ozu being regarded as “traditional”, and a “social conservative” by young filmmakers of the Japanese New

Wave (such as Shohei Imamura, who had worked as an apprentice with Ozu). Like the children in Ozu's movies, the young filmmakers rebelled against his “old fashioned” acceptance of life as they saw it. Much has been written about the “most Japanese of filmmakers” tag; Hasumi Shigehiko believed it showed a lack of understanding of his work. Hasumi wrote that Ozu chose a persistent approach towards film and its limits, liberating himself from the ambiguity of outlines, dampness and shadows. He describes Ozu's filmmaking as preferring dry sunlight conditions (as opposed to Mizoguchi's fog, or Kurosawa's rain); its sole purpose being to “approach the dazzle of midsummer sunlight”, something that Hasumi points out is in many ways the opposite of those said to have a “very Japanese” aesthetic sense. [\(11\)](#)

Remarkably, Ozu's films were rarely seen in the West until the early 1970s (there had been a small tour of his films in the US in the 1960s). His barebone narratives and idiosyncratic style never appealed to distributors at the time who apparently felt they were just “too Japanese” for Western audiences. These distributors never accused Bresson of being “too French” however, and it seems that they alone were responsible for Ozu's delayed exposure to the

West. Maybe they thought Ozu's themes and titles were too similar and thus confusing? After all, most of Ozu's later work (1950s/60s) centered on the same motif: the marrying off of a loyal daughter so that she could begin to live her own life. When Ozu's films did start getting shown in the West, art cinema aficionados of Bresson, Bergman and Antonioni's formal styles were ecstatic to find a Japanese master whose films spoke as eloquently about Japanese life as their favourite European films did of their respective homelands.

There is an overwhelming sensibility running through all Ozu films that is difficult to put into words but Donald Richie does well to describe it as “a point of



view of sympathetic sadness”. (12) To expand upon this, the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* can be related to Ozu’s sensibilities and worldview. *Mono no aware* is the perspective of a tired, relaxed, even disappointed observer, perhaps someone sagely approaching death. It is not limited to reflection on death but touches all aspects of life and nature: a pure, emotional response to the beauty of nature, the impermanence of life, and the sorrow of death. The scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) invented the unique concept of *mono no aware* to define the essence of Japanese culture (the phrase derives from *aware*, which means “a sensitivity to things”). He believed that the character of Japanese culture encompassed the capacity to experience the objective world in a direct and unmediated fashion, to understand sympathetically the objects and the natural world around one without resorting to language or other mediators. (13) This concept became the central aesthetic concept in Japan, even into the modern period, allowing the Japanese to understand the world directly by identifying themselves with that world. Film director Kenji Mizoguchi said, “I portray what should not be possible in the world as if it should be possible, but Ozu portrays what should be possible as if it were possible, and that is much more difficult.” (14)

Whilst in China during his war service, Ozu asked a Chinese monk to paint the character “*mu*” for him (an abstract concept loosely meaning “void” or “nothingness”). Ozu died painfully on his sixtieth birthday in 1963 of cancer and his tombstone in the temple of Engaku in Kita-Kamakura bears the inscription “*mu*” from the monk’s painting that he had kept all his life.

from World Film Directors. V.I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987

Yasujiro Ozu, Japanese director and scenarist, was born in the old Fukagawa district of Tokyo, one of the five children of a fertilizer merchant. When he was ten his father ordained that he should be educated at Matsuzaka, in Mie Prefecture, the family’s ancestral home. Ozu grew up there, separated from his father and indulged by his mother. This imbalance in his own

family presumably accounts for the obsessive analysis in his films of the Japanese family as an institution—especially the role of the father—as well as his preoccupations with themes of separation and loneliness.

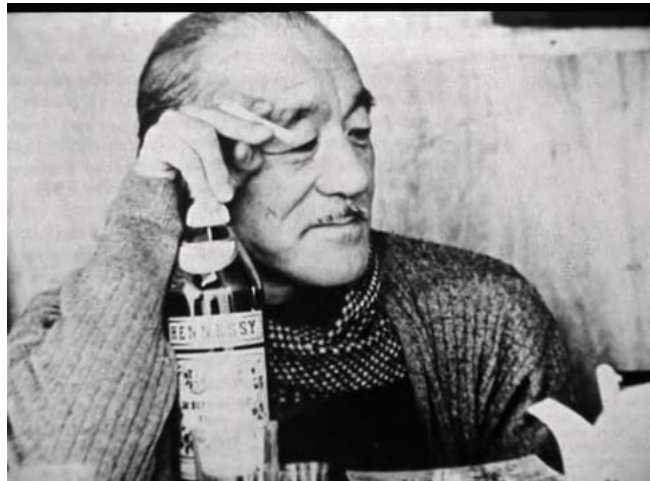
By the time he entered Uji-Yamada Middle School at the age of sixteen, Ozu was an intransigent and hard-drinking youth, intellectual in his interests but without academic ambitions. When he was seventeen, an indiscreet letter to a younger boy got him expelled from the school dormitory (though such billets-doux were common enough in single-sex schools like his). Thereafter he had to commute daily from home. Ozu adroitly exploited this punishment to gain greater freedom than ever, and this was typical of his contempt for restrictions of any kind, and his skill in bypassing them.

If his studies did not interest Ozu, literature did, and in middle school he developed a precocious taste for the work of such contemporary writers as Junichiro

Tanizaki, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, and Naoya Shiga. And he had an even greater passion for Hollywood movies, playing truant in Tsu and Nagoya to follow the latest exploits of Pearl White and William S. Hart, and writing fan letters to *benshi* (film narrators) in Kobe. He boasted that, when he should have been sitting the entrance examination to Kobe Higher Commercial School, he was

actually in a movie theatre watching Rex Ingram’s *Prisoner of Zenda*.

Having failed such examinations as he did take, Ozu was unemployed for a time after leaving middle school, then worked for a year as an assistant teacher in a village school near Matsuzaka. By the time the family was reunited in Tokyo in 1924, his heart was set on a film career. His bourgeois father naturally opposed this choice but Ozu, who became famous for his stubbornness, went ahead anyway and, through a family friend, secured an introduction to the Shochiku company, formed a few years earlier. The executives at Shochiku’s Kamata studios were astonished to learn that, in all his youthful years of dedicated moviegoing, he had seen only three Japanese films, but they hired him nevertheless as an assistant cameraman—in those days a menial who served as the cameraman’s caddie.



Ozu spent most of 1925 in the army reserve, feigning tuberculosis by “dipping the thermometer in warm water and coughing,” and thus contriving to spend the time restfully in hospital. A year after his return to Shochiku he talked his way into a job as assistant director to Tadamoto Okubo, who specialized in risqué “nonsense” comedies. Apart from his fondness for bathroom humor, there is no evidence in Ozu’s own films that Okubo had the slightest influence on him. Though he eventually made up for his ignorance of Japanese cinema by studying the work of his seniors at Shochiku, Ozu maintained that he then “formulated my own directing style in my own head, proceeding without any unnecessary imitation of others....For me there was no such thing as a teacher. I have relied entirely on my own strength

Notoriously hard-working in later years, Ozu enjoyed his stint as



an assistant director primarily because he “could drink all I wanted and spend my time talking.” He was nevertheless promoted before the end of 1927, joining the Shochiku division devoted to churning out period films. He made his debut as a director with *Zange no yaiba* (*The Sword of Penitence*, 1927), based on a Hollywood movie called *Kick-In* by the French-born director George Fitzmaurice. The script was by Kogo Noda, who was to write all of Ozu’s major films of the 1950s and 1960s. The young director was called up for another session in the reserve before shooting was complete, and when he finally saw the movie he disowned it.

This was Ozu’s only period picture. He switched once and for all to contemporary themes with his second film, *Wakodo no yume* (*The Dreams of Youth*, 1928), a comedy of college life made in imitation of American movies on the same popular subject. Between the beginning of 1928 and the end of 1930, Ozu made eighteen films on an assortment of topics—student life, the problems of young married couples, and the lighter side of life in the Depression. All of them were comedies, and some were made in as little as five days.

It was a hectic apprenticeship. Ozu said it was not until he had made four or five movies that he really knew what he was doing and “began to like being a director.” Even then, however, he was building up a team of regular collaborators, some of whom worked with him for the rest of his life. These early pictures were generally scripted by Ozu in collaboration with Kogo Noda, Akira Fushimi, or Tadao Ikeda, and photographed by Hideo Shiegehara. Early recruits to the directors’s stable of actors included Takeshi Sakamodo,

Choka Iida, and Chishu Ryu (who appeared in all but two of Ozu’s fifty-three films).

At this stage, Ozu’s work still showed the influence of the Hollywood movies he had so loved during his adolescence. But increasingly he was finding his own way and moving in the direction of the *shomin-geki*—the “home drama” of everyday life among the lower middle-classes, in a Japan that was evolving at bewildering speed from feudalism to Western-

style capitalism.

The first of his films to bear the hall-marks of the genre was *Kaishain Seikatsu* (*The Life of an Office Worker*, 1929), scripted by Noda. It is a wry comedy about a hard-up married couple who dream all year about the husband’s expected annual bonus, then have to come to terms with the fact that, because of the Depression, he loses not only his bonus but his job as well. Here, for the first time in Ozu’s work “nonsense” comedy gags took second place to the demands of social and psychological realism. ...

In the course of his career, Ozu would receive six Kinema Jumbo “best ones,” more than any other director in the history of Japanese cinema.

An original script from an idea of Ozu’s own, *I Was Born, But...* centers on two small boys whose admiration for their father leads them into a battle with his boss’s son. They are shocked when they see their “great man” toadying to his employer and, when he explains that he needs his job in order to feed them, they resolve to eat no more. But their hunger is stronger than their idealism. They abandon martyrdom and, their bellies filled, cheerfully accept the status quo.

This moving comedy was a great success, critically and financially, and is generally recognized to be Ozu's first major film. The father is shown to be weak, foolish, and inconsistent—for example smoking a cigarette while exercising—but his lazy and pompous boss is an equally ridiculous figure, and there is no moral justification for the difference in status between the two men. When the boys learn to accept this injustice they consign themselves, as their parents realize, to “the same kind of sorry lives that we have.” However amusingly presented, it is a bleak perception of the sort that has antagonized activist critics of Ozu's work, while establishing him in other eyes as “the artist of life as it is.”

The conformity and regimentation of Japanese society is wittily pointed up when a tracking shot of children drilling at a school is echoed, “in a marvelous use of matched cutting,” by one of yawning office workers at their ranked desks. However, as Audie Bock says, “Ozu would later dispense with such associative editing, camera movement, and cutting on action.” He was already deeply immersed in the exploration of cinematic theory and technique, and working his way steadily towards the chaste simplicity of his mature style. He only used dissolves once in his entire career (in *Life of an Office Worker*), promptly rejecting the device as “uninteresting,” and by 1932 he was finding the fade equally pointless. Generally dissolves and fades are not part of cinematic grammar,” he remarked. “They are only attributes of the camera.”

Another *Kinema Jumbo* “best one” followed in 1933, the “subtle, beautiful” *Dekigokoro* (*Passing Fancy*), scripted from an original idea of Ozu's. It deals not with the “people like you and me” of the conventional *shomin-geki*, but with the relationship between an illiterate brewery worker and his better educated son. The father, long abandoned by his wife, becomes infatuated with a much younger woman who has no interest in him. The son's recognition of his father's foolishness leads to a fight that brings the latter to his senses. The boy becomes seriously ill and

afterwards, to pay for his medical expenses, his father sets off for Hokkaido as a hired laborer. As the boat leaves Tokyo harbor he recognizes a more important responsibility, jumps overboard and swims ashore to rejoin his son, happily repeating a silly joke the boy has told him. “This is a sequence rare in Ozu,” wrote Joan Mellen, “involving a human being immersed in the elements and there achieving peace with himself. Kibhachi's swimming is filmed as a natural and beautiful act, expressive of an emotional resonance Ozu attaches to the return to his son.”

Ozu's own father had become reconciled to his choice of career, and by then he was living in the parental home in Tokyo, as he did for the rest of his life. He was terrified of women and, though he frequently fell in love with his actresses, and sometimes went so far

as to arrange meetings, nothing ever came of these assignments and he remained unmarried. His father died in 1934, choosing him as head of the family “though he knew that I was the last person to be relied upon.” Much moved, Ozu seems to have taken his responsibilities very seriously and to have matured considerably, though he always remained a heavy drinker.



The director's first picture had been based on one by George Fitzmaurice, and another Fitzmaurice movie, *The Barker* (1928), inspired *Ukigusa monogatari* (*A Story of Floating Weeds*, 1934), which was infinitely superior to its model. Ozu won his third consecutive *Kinema Jumbo* “best one” for his rendering of a traveling theatre troupe's visit to a mountain village where the group's leader, now married to a jealous actress, encounters a former mistress and the son he had casually fathered. Donald Richie called this “a picture of great atmosphere and intensity of character, one in which story, actors, and setting all combined to create a whole world, the first of those eight-reel universes in which everything takes on a consistency somewhat greater than life: in short, a work of art.”

Ozu held out against sound long after other Shochiku directors had adopted it—he was intent on reducing his means rather than extending them and he had, besides, promised his photographer Hideo

Shigehara to wait until the latter had perfected a sound system of his own. “If I can’t keep promises like this,” Ozu wrote in his diary in June 1935, “then the best thing would be to give up being a director—which would be all right, too.” He finally succumbed the following year, afraid that he was being “left behind by the other directors.” The new medium affected his working methods less than he had expected: indeed, the stationary microphone gave him even greater control over his actors than before, forcing them to rely on the small, stylized movements and changes of expression that for him spoke more clearly and precisely than more expansive action.

His first talkie was *Hitori musuko* (*The Only Son*, 1936), adapted from an old script by “James Maki” (Ozu). The heroine is an elderly woman worn out by her struggle to put her son through college. After a long separation, she uses up her meager savings to visit him in Tokyo and finds that her grand hopes for him have come to nothing—he is an ill-paid schoolteacher, scarcely able to support his wife and child. Nevertheless, he borrows enough to entertain her, and promises to resume his studies; she goes home to “die in peace.” In fact, the son seems already quite defeated by life and this is one of the darkest and most poignant of Ozu’s films.

He made one more picture before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, a gently ironic study of a marital crisis called *Shukujo wa nani o wasuretake* (*What Did the Lady Forget?*, 1937). The first film Ozu made at Shochiku’s new sound studio at Ofuna, it was also the first in which he addressed himself to the problems of upper middle-class professional people, the subjects of many of his later movies. The same year he was drafted and sent to China as an infantry corporal—an experience he could scarcely bring himself to speak of either in his diaries or in subsequent conversation.

When Ozu returned to Shochiku in 1939, his cameraman Hideo Shigehara had moved on to another company. The two films he made during the war were shot by Shigehara’s former assistant, Yuharu Atsuta, who became his regular cameraman....

Ozu’s admirers claim that, in his two wartime films, he refused to exploit his subjects for propaganda

purposes. Joan Mellen agrees that he was neither a propagandist nor an imperialist, calling him in fact “the least overtly didactic of any Japanese director, but argues that the movies he made during and after the war nevertheless endorse a reactionary Japanese spirit: “Ozu evoked traditional ideas not because the militarists forced him to, but because he believed in them,” and he accomplishes his propaganda for the war [which is scarcely mentioned] through appeals to a traditional style of obedience, which is, however, only a brief step away from enlisting that obedience in the service of the State.”

The facts remain that at least one of Ozu’s wartime scripts was rejected by the censors as “unserious,” that he somehow avoided making a single militaristic or imperialistic film, and that he took serious risks in defending against the censors the work of fellow-directors like Akira Kurosawa. According to Masahiro Shinoda, “he always made such funny jokes,

always got everyone in such a good mood, and was so expert in saying a serious thing in a light way, that nothing ever happened to him.” In 1943 Ozu was sent to Singapore to make propaganda films and even then managed to do no such thing. He passed the time viewing confiscated American movies and was



impressed above all by one absolutely remote from his own style, Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. After six months as a prisoner of war, Ozu was repatriated in February 1946.

By this time, he was very clear about what he wanted to do, and how he wanted to do it. Like many Japanese, he had begun by exploring Western styles and attitudes, but as he grew older turned more and more to the traditional Japanese ideals, defined by Donald Ritchie as “restraint, simplicity, and near-Buddhist serenity.” The conflict between the radical individualism of the young and the older generation’s nostalgic devotion to these qualities is often a source of tension in his films, whose theme is almost invariably the Japanese family—most often the relations between parents and children.

“Pictures with obvious plots bore me now,” Ozu said after the war. He thought that conventional drama made it easy for a director to arouse emotions in his

audience, but was only an “explanation” of human emotions that concealed the real truth. His endless variations on a few simple and archetypal themes gave him all the scope he ever needed for his purpose, which was the rigorous exploration of character as a revelation of what was fundamental in the human condition. It was an approach that had much in common with the work of one of Ozu’s favorite writers, Naoya Shiga, who in his novels also eschewed plot and dramatic effect to study in minute detail the often irrational interactions that take place within the microcosm of the family.

Donald Ritchie writes that “Ozu’s later films are probably the most restrained ever made, the most limited, controlled, and restricted.” They are typically built up as a mosaic of brief shots—often one for each line of dialogue—taken from directly in front of the actor who is speaking, and from a very low angle. “The Ozu shot,” Ritchie says, is “taken from the level of a person seated in traditional fashion on tatami [matting]. Whether indoors or out, the Ozu camera is always about three feet from floor level, and the camera never moves. There are no pan shots and, except in the rarest of instances, no dolly shots. This traditional view is the view in repose, commanding a very limited field of vision but commanding it entirely. . . . It is the aesthetic passive attitude of the haiku master who sits in silence and with painful accuracy observes cause and effect, reaching essence through an extreme simplification.” Audie Bock maintains that Ozu consistently shot from a height of even less than three feet, however, and suggests that the effect of this on the audience “is to force [it] to assume a viewpoint of reverence. . . toward ordinary people. Its power is not one of contemplation but of involuntary veneration.”

As Bock says. Ozu placed his characters in film after film in similar settings—“the home, the office, the tea salon, the restaurant or bar are the places in which the plain but deeply illuminating conversations occur.” And the director was notoriously perfectionist about the positioning of objects within these sets, often “demanding that furniture, teapots, cups, vases be moved one or two centimeters this way or that until he got exactly the composition he wanted, whether it maintained continuity from shot to shot and satisfied logic or not.”

Ozu was no less demanding in his direction, of actors, Bock says. He would allow no one to dominate a scene.....Like the stories, the settings, and the events, if

the acting became individualized and special, Ozu’s balance would be upset.” Chishu Ryu, who gave his finest performances under Ozu’s direction and in the later films became in effect the director’s spokesman, said he felt he “was only the colors with which Ozu painted his pictures....I once heard Ozu say, “Ryu is not a skillful actor—that is why I use him.” Less modest performers naturally resented Ozu’s habit of making them rehearse some minute gesture twenty or thirty times in pursuit of an effect that he would not bother to explain, even though his purpose would become clear when the film was finally edited....



from The St. James World Film Directors Encyclopedia. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink Detroit 1998. “Ozu” by David Bordwell

....Ozu had one of the most distinctive visual styles in the cinema. Although critics have commonly attributed this to the influence of other directors or to traditions of Japanese art, these are insufficient to account for the rigor and precision of Ozu’s technique. No other Japanese director exhibits Ozu’s particular style, and the connections to Japanese aesthetics are general and often tenuous. (Ozu once remarked: “Whenever Westerners don’t understand something, they simply think it’s Zen.”) There is, however, substantial evidence that Ozu built his unique style out of deliberate imitation of and action against Western cinema (especially the work of Chaplin and Lubitsch).

Ozu limited his use of certain technical variables, such as camera movement and variety of camera position. This can seem a willful asceticism, but it perhaps best considered a ground-clearing that let him concentrate on exploring minute stylistic possibilities.

For instance, it is commonly claimed that every Ozu shot places the camera about three feet off the ground, but this is false. What Ozu keeps constant is the perceived ratio of camera height to the subject. This permits a narrow but nuanced range of camera positions, making every subject occupy the same sector of each shot. Similarly, most of Ozu's films employ camera movements, but these are also schematized to a rare degree. Far from being an ascetic director, Ozu was quite virtuosic, but within self-imposed limits. His style revealed cast possibilities within a narrow compass.

Ozu's compositions relied on the fixed camera-subject relation, adopting angles that stand at multiples of 45 degrees. He employed sharp perspectival depth; the view down a corridor or street is common. Ozu enjoyed playing with the positions of objects within the frame, often rearranging props from shot to shot for the sake of minute shifts. In the color films, a shot will be enhanced by a fleck of bright and deep color, often red; this accent will migrate around the film, returning as an abstract motif in scene after scene.

Ozu's use of editing is no less idiosyncratic. In opposition to the 180-degree space of Hollywood cinema, Ozu employed a 460-degree approach to filming a scene. This "circular" shooting space yields a series of what Western cinema would consider incorrect matches of actions and eyelines. While such devices creep up in the work of other Japanese filmmakers, only Ozu used them so rigorously—to undermine our understanding of total space, to liken characters, and to create abstract graphic patterns. Ozu's shots of objects or empty locales extend the concept of the Western "cutaway"; he will use them not for narrative information but for symbolic purposes or for temporal prolongation. Since Ozu abjured the use of fades and dissolves, cutaways often stand for such punctuation. And because of the unusually precise compositions and cutting, Ozu was able to create a sheer graphic play with the screen surface, "matching" contours and regions of one shot with those of the next.

Ozu's work remains significant not only for its extraordinary richness and emotional power, but also because it suggests the extent to which a filmmaker working in popular mass-production filmmaking can

cultivate a highly individual approach to film form and style.

Geoff Andrews: "An Autumn Afternoon: A Fond Farewell" (Criterion essays)

It was never, of course, Yasujiro Ozu's intention that *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962) should be the final film of his thirty-five-year career as a writer-director. Indeed, before he died on his sixtieth birthday, in December 1963, he had made notes for another project, provisionally titled *Radishes and Carrots* (once again, as it happens, the story of a daughter about to marry and leave her father, though the parent in this instance was to have cancer, the affliction that would bring Ozu's own life to an end); and there is every reason to believe that, had he lived on, the Japanese master would have continued completing films at his steady rate of one a year. Sadly, however, that's not how things turned out,

and consequently *An Autumn Afternoon* has come to be regarded by many as Ozu's "testament."

An Autumn Afternoon is not the director's best known film, nor is it the title that most of those familiar with his work would cite as his greatest achievement; both those particular

superlatives would probably be best applied to *Tokyo Story* (1953). And some might even argue that the earlier film's generally more somber tone and funereal final scene—complete with unusually explicit philosophical commentary ("Isn't life disappointing?" observes a young woman, to which her sister-in-law simply replies, "Yes, it is," with a considerably less simple smile)—make it a more fitting swan song. Still, in its exquisite refinement of Ozu's style and themes, and its general air of nostalgia and loss, *An Autumn Afternoon* does in fact feel like a summation of his career—and it is, after all, his final masterpiece.

As can be said of so many of Ozu's works, the film is both typical and unique. It is typical in that, like all but his earliest pictures (which range from comedies about college life to gangster films, and which evince a little more clearly his movie fan's love of Hollywood fare), it is a gentle domestic drama about middle-class family life, a *shomin-geki* characteristic of his home studio, Shochiku. More specifically, it belongs to a particular subgroup of these films whose central stories



turn on the question of whether a young woman deemed of marrying age will wed or will remain at home to look after her widowed parent. In this case, even though her younger brother, Kazuo, has also yet to leave home, Michiko Hirayama (Shima Iwashita) seems to be in no hurry to wed; nor indeed has her father (Chishu Ryu) given the matter much thought. Still, his old college friends and drinking pals Professor Horie—recently remarried, to a woman little older than Michiko—and Mr. Kawai keep telling Hirayama he should find a husband for his daughter before she turns into a lonely, embittered old maid like the daughter of “the Gourd,” a former teacher they’ve recently re-encountered. Eventually, after reflection, some discussion with Michiko, and one failed attempt, Hirayama succeeds in following their advice.

Even without seeing Ozu’s name in the credits, anyone who has ever seen a single one of his films would probably recognize *An Autumn Afternoon* as his work within a minute or so, so idiosyncratic, consistent, and bold is his signature style. Early in his career, the director sought to find and develop a way of seeing and showing the world that felt right to him; as it happened, it was also pretty much his alone. The hallmark elements of the style are, famously, the use of relatively short shots, taken with a mostly stationary camera from an unusually low angle in relation to the characters in frame; simple cuts rather than fades, wipes, or dissolves; montage sequences of landscapes and buildings not only to begin films but also to provide punctuation and linkages between narrative scenes; a preference for ultra-naturalistic, “everyday” dialogue, often of the most seemingly trivial kind; and a related preference for low-key, almost de-dramatized stories evocative of the “ordinary” lives of the middle class, who made up the major part both of Japan’s population and, presumably, of Ozu’s audience.

So constant are all these elements in Ozu’s work that some have complained of there being little to differentiate between many of the films; not only did his mature style remain consistent, especially from *Late Spring* (1949) on, but the stories centered on a few fairly basic familial situations and dilemmas, while many of

the actors turned up in film after film. It’s hard to imagine any charge of repetitiveness being made against, say, Monet or Miró, Shostakovich or Sibelius—nor, closer to home, against the likes of Hawks or Hitchcock, Almodóvar or Angelopoulos; there are immediately distinctive voices in all areas of creativity. But more to the point, such a complaint is inaccurate and derives from not looking closely enough at his films.

So while *An Autumn Afternoon* is in so many ways wholly typical of Ozu, it’s also a very distinct variation, following beautifully from its predecessors. In



particular, it powerfully counterpoints its more comic aspects with repeated reminders not only of the loneliness that Hirayama might face in his final years but also of the fate that could await his daughter if he doesn’t find her a husband; the unhappiness of the Gourd’s daughter is all too evident in the unsettling scene where the teacher is returned home drunk after a night out with Hirayama.

Whether or not Michiko marries, it is inevitable that either Hirayama or his daughter will end up losing something that is a source of comfort and happiness; we’re never allowed to forget that the dilemma faced by the pair involves a no-win situation. Moreover, Ozu devotes rather more of the narrative to the father and his likewise elderly friends than to Michiko, which ensures that there’s an undercurrent of nostalgic melancholy to what is in many other regards a wonderfully playful film—a nostalgia exemplified by Hirayama’s being reminded of his late wife by the hostess of a watering hole he frequents, and by the hostess’s repeated playing of an old war march he knows from his army days.

Go beyond the apparent simplicity of Ozu’s films and you will discover immense sophistication at play in their construction and meaning. Take, for example, the subtle treatment of the interrelated themes of aging, loneliness, loss, nostalgia, and familial responsibility in *An Autumn Afternoon*. Though the film’s real focus is on what will happen between Michiko and her father (and even that aspect is quite complex enough in itself, given that both have a habit of concealing their real feelings about the question of her marriage), their relationship is endlessly reflected in and refracted

through the experiences of the other characters in the film: not just Hirayama's other children but his friends and their families, his secretaries and colleagues, his former teacher, and a man met in a bar who served under him in the war. These characters' experiences and words of advice serve a number of functions: they flesh out and enrich the story; they provide the hesitant Hirayama with an array of options to consider; they show that his problems are common and far from extraordinary; and they ensure that we don't identify or sympathize too simplistically with either Hirayama or his daughter. Ozu makes us feel deeply about his characters, but he does so by being honest rather than by manipulating us. If we are enormously moved at the end of his films, it is not because anyone has pushed the right buttons but because we have seen something that strikes us as truthful.

There are, I'd suggest, various reasons for this impression of veracity. First, there is the subtle way in which Ozu contextualizes his stories and characters within the wider world. *An Autumn Afternoon* comments obliquely on the legacy of the war: in one of the many bars Hirayama visits, different attitudes are expressed toward Japan's defeat, while the preoccupations of Hirayama's eldest son, Koichi, and his daughter-in-law, Akiko—playing golf, buying a fridge—indicate the increasing consumerism and Americanization of Japanese society. (The characters in Ozu's later films tend to be rather more affluent than those in his earlier ones, reflecting the country's changing fortunes.) Second, there is Ozu's abiding penchant for restraint and understatement, most immediately evident in the performances (Ryu's Hirayama is especially magnificent in this respect) but also in the determination to avoid melodramatic excess in the narrative. It's strange that we never actually see Michiko's wedding, or even the man she marries—strange until one realizes that the film is

not in fact about whether she will be happily married, but about the dilemmas faced by parents who want happiness for their offspring but feel aggrieved when they leave home.

The understatement is pervasive. Even when Michiko learns she cannot marry Koichi's friend, as she'd



secretly hoped, her response is not much more openly expressive of disappointment than her father's resigned "I feel bad for her." Indeed, though its narrative content might be suggestive of a weepie, for the most part, *An Autumn Afternoon* is anything but. Ozu's films are usually laced with comedy, and here there's much innuendo at the expense of Horie about his potency in the arms of his much younger

wife. Moreover, Ozu characteristically displays great visual wit, teasing and confounding our expectations in his imaginative use of off-screen space, and constantly surprising us with the way he positions a dazzling array of bright red objects—lights, signs, sweaters, mats, buckets, barrels, books, blankets, posters, fire extinguishers, etc., etc.—within the predominantly muted pastels of his meticulous compositions.

Those reds are at their most exquisite when Ozu finally allows us to see Michiko in her wedding gown; as the scarlet hem sweeps across the floor, announcing her departure both from the film and from the family home, the comedy starts to subside. Tipsy after the wedding, reluctant to return to a house now bereft of his daughter, Hirayama takes solace in a bar, where the barmaid, noticing his black suit and, perhaps, his likewise dark mood, asks if he's been to a funeral. "Something like that," he replies. What's so resonant about this response is that we are made to realize that his words are both self-indulgent and true at one and the same time. There's no sentimentality, only profound compassion.

THE SPRING 2022 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS #44:

All films in the series but two (*Notorious* and *The Power of the Dog*) are available from Criterion or Netflix: **c** after a title indicates it is available on Criterion, **p**=Amazon Prime, **p\$**=Amazon Prime with an extra \$4 fee. *The Power of the Dog* is available, for now, only on Netflix. *Notorious* is available on FlixFilm (low-resolution versions are free on YouTube and Tubi.). All four subscription services let you cancel at any time, so you should have access to all 24 films for well under \$100. *The Gunfighter* is on Amazon Prime and, in low rez, free on Tubi. Nine of the films—all with “UB” after the title—are available free to anyone with a UB email account via the UB Library’s Swank and Kanopy portals. Five films are available only on non-UB streaming services: *Le Corbeau*, *The Gunfighter*, *Naked*, *Salesman* and *The Power of the Dog*. (The Swank titles will be available at UB’s Library for a year; the Kanopy titles for 3 years.)

Feb 1: 1921 Victor Sjöström, *The Phantom Carriage* c UB-Kanopy
 Feb 8: 1934 Frank Capra *It Happened One Night* c p\$ UB-Swank
 Feb 15: 1941 John Huston *The Maltese Falcon* p\$ UB-Swank
 Feb 22: 1943 Henri-Georges Clouzot *Le Corbeau* c
 Mar 1: 1946 Alfred Hitchcock *Notorious* FlixFilm, YouTube, UB-Swank, Tubi (free)
 Mar 8: 1950 Henry King, *The Gunfighter* p\$, Tubi (free), [YouTube](#) (free)
 Mar 15: 1958 Orson Welles *Touch of Evil* p\$ UB-Swank
 Mar 29: 1962 Yasujiro Ozu *An Autumn Afternoon* c p\$b UB Kanopy
 Apr 5: 1973 Federico Fellini *Amarcord* c p\$ UB Kanopy
 Apr 12: 1993 Mike Leigh *Naked* c
 Apr 19: 2002 Phillip Noyce *Rabbit-Proof Fence* p\$ UB-Kanopy
 Apr 26: 2016 Asghar Farhadi *Salesman* p
 May 3: 2021: Jane Campion *The Power of the Dog* NETFLIX
 May 10: 2011 Martin Scorsese *Hugo* p\$ UB-Kanopy

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The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo

