

The Scene at the Kyoto Inn: Teaching Ozu Yasujiro's *Late Spring*

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1. Themes and Goals

Since the 1960s, Japanese director OZU Yasujiro (1903-1963) has been the object of popular and critical attention by international film scholars and audiences. Ozu is widely considered “the most Japanese” of Japanese directors, but what does “the most Japanese” mean? Do Ozu’s films express the special characteristics of Japanese cinema? If so, what constitutes the cultural specificity of Japanese cinema? Such questions are complicated by the fact that Ozu was an avid consumer of foreign films. The director considered “the most Japanese” was himself steeped in foreign popular culture. In addition to addressing the relationship between Ozu’s body of work and Japanese cinema in general, this unit asks how we might understand his films in relation to global film cultures and international histories of cinema.

This unit explores these and other questions through a close examination of *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), one of Ozu’s best-known films and a critical and popular success at the time of its release. Instructors are encouraged to use the complete film, but an option is also given for showing a single scene that addresses many of the unit’s main themes. The student readings present detailed analyses of the film, Ozu’s work, and Ozu’s place in international cinema studies. The unit also includes discussion questions aimed at helping students understand what the film might tell us about wider questions of “Japaneseness” and Japanese aesthetics.

2. Audience and Uses

The unit includes a screening of the film *Late Spring* (either inside or outside of class) and at least one class period of discussion. It can be expanded — through suggested comparative

viewings, expanded discussion, and/or lecture—to cover at least two further class periods. The unit can be adapted for either lower level or upper level undergraduate courses in topics such as:

- World History
- Film Studies
- World Cinema
- Asian Cinema
- East Asian Civilization and Culture
- Modern Japanese History
- Postwar Japanese History and Culture
- Japanese or East Asian Popular Culture

Because academics and critics have so often commented on Ozu’s “Japaneseness” the unit can also be incorporated into courses dealing with nationalism, globalization, and cultural authenticity. As such, it might be used in such courses as:

- Gender and National Identity
- Film and Nationalism
- Film and Globalization

3. Instructor’s Introduction

Ozu Yasujiro: Introduction

Ozu Yasujiro was born on December 12, 1903 in Fukagawa, part of the old downtown (Shitamachi) district of Tokyo. He died on December 12, 1963. Ozu made 54 films (37 films extant) between 1927 and 1962 and started his career at Shochiku Kamata studio, the leading studio producing “modern films” that depicted life in modern, urban, Japanese society. (Shochiku’s films are often characterized as imitations of American films such as the “sophisticated comedies” of Ernst Lubitsch or the crime films of the 1930s). However, the most popular films in Japan in the 1920s-30s were *jidaigeki*, “period films,” set in pre-1868 Japan. Such period films were detached from the troubled society of interwar Japan, revealing the strict class and feudal systems of the early modern period. Despite Ozu’s early focus on “modern” subjects and his rejection of *jidaigeki*, he soon earned a reputation (at home and abroad) as “the most Japanese” of Japanese directors, whose films embody Japanese traditional aesthetics. In the 1950s-60s, Ozu’s films were not considered suitable for export and were not released internationally. They were considered too Japanese for foreign audiences. Since the 1960s, when Ozu’s films were introduced to international audiences, film scholars in the US and in Europe have similarly regarded Ozu as the “most Japanese” of Japanese directors and, in general, have argued that Ozu’s films capture and affirm “Japanese tradition” or represent the essence of “Japaneseness.”

Ozu Studies/Japanese Film Studies in the US and Europe: Historical Overview

The first non-Japanese critics and journalists who saw Ozu's films tried to understand them by referring to Japanese traditional culture in religious terms. For instance, in one of the first influential books on Ozu published in 1974, Donald RICHIE explains Ozu's thematic motif using the traditional aesthetic term "*mono no aware*," by which Richie means the transience of things or pathos. In his 1972 book, Paul SCHRADER similarly sees Ozu as a zen master who made his films based on "transcendental" aesthetics. Influenced also by the auteur theory imported from France, they tended to argue that masters of Japanese cinema, such as KUROSAWA Akira, MIZOGUCHI Kenji and Ozu, were able to transparently represent Japanese national character and traditional Japanese aesthetics.

Following the development of film studies as an academic discipline in the United Kingdom and in the United States in the 1970s, film scholars began writing on Japanese cinema from theoretical perspectives. Many of them see Ozu's films as "very Japanese" in their own ways. For instance, in his 1979 book on Japanese cinema, Noël BURCH argues that Ozu draws on Japanese aesthetic traditions in order to challenge what Burch calls the "institutional mode of representation." Burch regards aspects of Ozu's film style—such as incorrect eye line matches that may confuse continuity or low-angle camera positions that create a flatness in images—as a refusal of the representational illusionism of the Western bourgeoisie and most particularly of Hollywood codes of realism.

David BORDWELL and Kristin THOMPSON, who started writing on Ozu in the late 1970s, share Burch's viewpoint in the sense that they regard Ozu's films as departures from classical Hollywood continuity narration. They were attracted to Ozu as a test case for a theoretical paradigm they called "parametric style." For Bordwell and Thompson, the "parametric style" means the presence of particular stylistic features that are not motivated by any story construction; rather, they appear to be dominant structuring devices there for their own sake. Thus, his style exceeds any unitary meaning. Moreover, Bordwell and Thompson argue that Ozu playfully uses non-narrative space, color and props to open up textual space to the free play of meaning. For example, Ozu prefers to include red objects in some spaces of the camera frames. A red kettle or a red label on a bottle of beer do not necessarily signify any specific meaning in the narratives but seem to exist simply as playfully placed objects. According to Bordwell and Thompson, this "parametric" style functions to separate Ozu's films from the narrational mode of classical Hollywood cinema that demands unitary meaning. One of the problems of this view is a presupposed dichotomy between Hollywood and Japan.

***Late Spring*: Introduction**

Synopsis: Noriko (Setsuko Hara) happily looks after her father Professor Shukichi SOMIYA (Chishu Ryu). In order to encourage Noriko to marry, Somiya and his sister trick Noriko into thinking that her father is going to remarry. Distraught, she agrees to meet a possible husband. Although she likes him, she resents the idea of her father's remarriage and hates the thought of leaving him. He has to persuade her that she will have a happy marriage if she works at it. At the end of the film, after Noriko's wedding, Somiya comes back to an empty house and remains alone.

Late Spring was made in 1949. It was the third film Ozu made after he was repatriated to Japan from Singapore at the end of the Pacific War. With its critical and financial success, *Late Spring* has been considered to be the film that returned Ozu to the status of master filmmaker after a period of relative anonymity in the immediate postwar period. *Late Spring* is also the first film of the so-called Noriko trilogy (*Early Summer* and *Tokyo Story* are the other two), arguably the best known Ozu films. HARA Setsuko plays characters named Noriko in each of the three films.

Among film scholars and critics, *Late Spring* is particularly known for one particular shot—the shot of a vase that concludes a sequence set in a Kyoto inn toward the end of the film (see “Close Analysis of a Scene” in the screening section below.) In this shot, Father (played by RYU Chishu) and Noriko reconcile. In addition to the vase shot, *Late Spring* is filled with such Japanese traditional art forms as *noh* drama, a rock garden, traditional tea service, etc. In this sense, *Late Spring* offers a valuable starting point for discussing Ozu’s “Japaneseness.”

4. Instructor Readings

- *** Most Important
- ** Recommended
- * Optional

Introductory reading on film terms and concepts:

**BORDWELL, David. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.

The glossary at the end of the book is particularly helpful.

Brief critical readings on Japanese cinema:

**YOSHIMOTO, Mitsuhiro. “The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Post Colonial World Order.” In *Japan in the World*, edited by Masao MIYOSHI and H. D. HAROOTUNIAN. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Pages 338-53.

Provides essential information about how concepts of “authentic Japan” or “Japanese tradition” have been constructed and used ambiguously in the study of Japanese cinema in Western academia.

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

Provides historical backgrounds on postwar Japanese cinema. Part I (Chapter 1 & 2), in particular, is relevant to *Late Spring*.

Brief critical reading on Ozu:

***MIYAO, Daisuke. "Translator's Introduction." In YOSHIDA Kiju, *Ozu's Anti-Cinema*, trans. Daisuke MIYAO and Kyoko HIRANO. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. Pages ix-xx.

Provides historical overview of Ozu studies in the US and Europe.

Brief reading on Japan's modernity and modernization

**IIDA Yumiko, "Approaching the questions of Japanese identity and nationalism." *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan: Nationalism as Aesthetics*. London: Routledge, 2002. Pages 1-24.

Provides insights about the formation of Japanese national identity across the modern period.

5. Film Screening and Close Analysis of a Scene

Screening

Watch Ozu's film *Late Spring* (one screening session) and discuss the film (at least one session).

Late Spring (Banshun). Directed by Yasujiro OZU. 1949. 108 min.

Availability: This film is somewhat hard to find, as it has not yet been released on DVD in the US. It is available on VHS through many university libraries. It can also be purchased on DVD as an import from some commercial internet sites, such as Facets Video (www.facets.org) and Ebay.com.

Close Analysis of a Scene

If an instructor does not have time to show the whole film, he or she can use the scene at the Kyoto inn as the basis for discussion. In that case, the instructor needs to summarize the plot of the film, which is listed in Instructor's Introduction. See the annotations for the student readings below for summaries of interpretations of this scene. Discussion questions for the scene are included in part C of the "Discussion Questions" section below.

The Scene at the Kyoto Inn

The scene begins with Noriko and her father chatting in the bedroom of the Kyoto Inn (the father is smoking) and ends with a shot of Noriko in bed. The shot of the stone garden marks the beginning of the following scene.

Start Time (DVD): 1:27:25

End Time (DVD): 1:29:22

6. Student Readings

*** Most Important

** Recommended

* Optional

*** THOMPSON, Kristin. “*Late Spring* and Ozu’s Unreasonable Style,” *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pages 317-52.

Thompson’s approach is typical of the more theoretically informed analyses that began to emerge in the late 1970s. In the first half of this article, Thompson provides historical background, introducing the socio-political landscape of pre and postwar Japan. The second half closely analyzes *Late Spring* as a text. In the first half, Thompson characterizes Ozu as “modern” and “Americanized” in terms of *Late Spring*’s conception of family. In the second half, she considers Ozu to be a “modernist” because he deviated from and challenged the “American” style of filmmaking.

Discussing the scene at the Kyoto inn, Thompson recognizes that a vase does not necessarily symbolize anything traditional in Japan: “given the film’s consistent use of cutaways in a non-narrative way, it seems more reasonable to see it as a non-narrative element wedged into action.... Ozu is in fact blocking our complete concentration on Noriko in order to prevent our taking this as the emotional climax of the film.... The choice of a vase is arbitrary; the shots could have shown a lantern in the garden, a tree branch, or whatever” (pp. 339-40).

** SCHRADER, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972. Pages 3-55.

A typical example of an early American study of Ozu that attempts to explain Ozu’s films using such traditional aesthetic or religious terms as zen and “transcendental.”

Schrader interprets the shot of the vase in the scene at the Kyoto inn as conveying Noriko’s sorrow at the necessity of parting from her father. The vase represents her emotion in purified form. “As in Zen, stasis evokes the moods of the *furyu* and particularly *mono no aware*. Man is again one with nature, although not with sadness.... The vase is stasis, a form which can accept deep, contradictory emotion and transform it into an expression of something unified, permanent, transcendent” (pp. 49-50).

**YOSHIDA, Kiju. *Ozu’s Anti-Cinema*, translated by Daisuke MIYAO and Kyoko HIRANO. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. Pages 60-86.

Yoshida, an important director of the “Japanese New Wave,” who also started his film career at Shochiku studio, criticizes views that connect Ozu to Japanese traditional arts. Referring to Ozu’s thematic motifs and styles, the history of the Shochiku studio, and his personal experience with (and interpretation of) Ozu’s work, Yoshida argues that “the vase in the moonlight is an image of purification and redemption.” “The viewers look at

the shot of the vase abruptly inserted in the scene. They cannot help staring at it. They are forced to think about the meaning of the vase and interpret it. Such a moment forcing them to think distracts them from their imagining the daughter's desire to be embraced by her father, or of any woman's desire to make love with a man" (p. 80).

*BORDWELL, David. *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pages 307-11.

One of a few English books that examines the whole career of Ozu. Bordwell, who initiated the notion of classical Hollywood Cinema shares Thompson's theoretical views of Ozu. Bordwell recognizes the "bamboo silhouettes" on the shoji screen in the vase shot but explains this scene merely as an alternative to "point of view"*** structure in classical Hollywood cinema, which makes it easy for the viewers to identify with characters in films (p. 117). Yet, Bordwell also shares Schrader and other early scholars' view, insisting that the stone garden that appears in the following scene "links the old men to the absolute purity of the Japanese spirit, as embodied in the earliest Zen garden." (p. 311).

***A "point of view" shot refers to a shot taken with the camera placed approximately where the character's eyes would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking.

*RICHIE, Donald. *Ozu*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pages, 136-9, 174-6. 1974.

Another example of early scholarship on Ozu. Provides a thorough look at Ozu's career. For Richie, the shot of the vase is an "empty" shot, which corresponds to such traditional Japanese aesthetics as *mono no aware* (pathos).

7. Optional Comparative Screening

Tokyo-ga. Directed by Wim WENDERS. 1985. 92 min.

Availability: This film is out-of-print, making it difficult to find for borrowing, rental, or purchase. It is available on VHS at some university libraries.

A documentary film in which Wim Wenders, a renowned director of New German Cinema, visits the people and the places that Ozu filmed and examine Ozu's films.

Suggested Questions:

- Discuss Ozu's influence on world cinema.
- How does Wenders treat Ozu in his film, thematically and stylistically?

8. Discussion Questions

A. Discussion: Ozu and the Question of “Japaneseness”

Discuss the following issues surrounding Ozu’s status as “the most Japanese”:

- What does the adjective “Japanese” mean? What does the term “Japan” signify as a concept? As for issues off-screen, it is necessary to contextualize Ozu’s films within 20th century Japanese history. What was the historical background of the making of *Late Spring*? Touch upon issues such as modernity and modernization, prewar nationalism and militarism, the effects of defeat in 1945 and the ensuing US-led Allied occupation of Japan, and postwar social and cultural reconstruction. Related to this historical question, we can also ask, what function the message, “Ozu is the most Japanese of all the Japanese directors,” contains. What is hidden behind this sort of message and what remains invisible, intentionally or unintentionally? [See Iida in Instructor Readings for background on modernity and Japan’s modernization.]
- Exactly what elements of Ozu’s films can be regarded as “Japanese”? Style? Film technique? Subject matter? Thematic motif? Acting? Setting? Or even Props? First and foremost, we must look very carefully at the film as a text and fully examine the elements on screen before simply calling them all “Japanese.” Do we really see traditional aesthetics such as “*mono no aware*”? Is this merely an “Orientalist” view?

In this discussion, the instructor should try to:

- Stress the importance of close textual analysis, watching carefully what is actually happening on screen, and how shots are edited.
- Suggest the possibility of multiple meanings. Examples of the multiplicity might include: the director’s intention/sensitivity [See Yoshida in Student Readings]; studio policy [See Yoshida for Shochiku studio’s policy]; production circumstances [See Hirano in Instructor Readings for postwar filmmaking]; cultural symbolism [See Richie in Student Readings], among others. Similarly, the meaning of the film is also contingent on the individual viewer and various diverse audiences, which will vary by class, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, age, etc. [See Yoshida’s interpretation, for instance].

B. Discussion: *Late Spring* and the Depiction of Japanese Culture

In *Late Spring*, Ozu seems to provide a catalog of traditional art forms: *noh* theater, shots of a rock garden, depictions of traditional tea service, etc. Can we argue that the presence of these things makes Ozu a traditionalist? How do they function in the film?

For instance, *Kakitsubata* is the play being performed on the *noh* stage. The scene included in the film shows the protagonist having turned into a flower spirit and insanely remembering a man whom she once loved.

- Why is this scene included?
- Does it have a narrative function? If so, explain that function in detail. If not, what purpose (if any) does the scene serve?

For instance, how did Ozu conceptualize Japan’s postwar Americanization in his films?

C. Discussion: The Scene at the Kyoto Inn

Discuss this scene (1:27:25 - 1:29:22 on DVD; see screening section above for visual scene markers) in detail. Focus on whether or not the scene articulates the concept of “Japanese tradition” and how it conveys meaning. In this scene, the heroine Noriko and her father retire for the night. The two lie on the futon next to each other. In medium close up, Noriko apologizes for saying the widow was “filthy” for remarrying but her father has already gone to sleep. She looks left and upward, smiling. In a long shot, the camera settles on a vase and a pattern of leafy shadows on a shoji screen. In a medium close up, Noriko, whose smile is gone, turns her head toward the vase and the shoji.

Compare various scholars’ analyses of the scene (see Student Readings) and discuss. Possible questions include:

- What might the moonlight and shadow patterns signify?
- Has Noriko made up her mind in this scene as Richie and Schrader insist (see below)?
- What kind of function does the musical score have in this scene?