

小津安二郎ありき

Ozu Yasujirō Retrospective at Yale University

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Presented by the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale University
and the Cinema at the Whitney

We are very pleased to be able to present thirteen films by one of the world's most renowned film directors, Ozu Yasujirō. Among the trio of great Japanese cinema masters, Ozu, Kurosawa Akira, and Mizoguchi Kenji, Ozu was the last to be introduced abroad (largely after his death in 1963), yet is now arguably the most celebrated. His *Tokyo Story* was selected as the fifth best film of all time in *Sight and Sound's* illustrious poll of world critics in 2002, and a legion of directors, from Wim Wenders to Hou Hsiao-hsien, have professed their admiration and influence. With the celebration of the centenary of his birth in 2003, there are still studies on Ozu coming out, including a translation of the director Yoshida Yoshishige's marvelous *Ozu's Anti-Cinema* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), in which the New Wave director who once criticized his studio elder, re-appraises him forty years later. There is a veritable cottage industry of books on him in Japan.

Why does Ozu still fascinate us after so many years? In some ways, it is because his films are so versatile and can speak to multiple perspectives and multiple generations. To some, he is the most Japanese of directors, depicting the sweet pathos of family life through a still camera that remains close to the floor, like a Japanese guest sitting on a *tatami* mat. To others, he is a modernist, taking apart the Hollywood-bred rules of cinema with editing strategies that break up space, create new norms and tests perception. To some, his careful but detached perspective finds a transcendental style that embodies the philosophy of Zen. To others, he is the most un-Japanese of filmmakers, engaging in a postmodern play of the cinematic sign that challenges and acknowledges the limits of the medium, if not of signification and identity itself. To some, he chronicles the historical trials and tribulations of the Japanese family encountering modernization, war, defeat and the rise of consumer culture. To others, he is a master of formal devices, playing with graphic continuities, rhythm, and space in such a way that audiences are forced to think about cinema and our role in it.

To all, Ozu seems unique, with a shooting style that anyone—once they have seen a film or two—can immediately recognize as Ozu's. But he was also deeply embedded in his times, starting out at the Shōchiku studios, which focused on middle class urban families through a combination of comedy and tears as well as through a style, also evident in work by Shimizu Hiroshi and Shimazu Yasujirō, that emphasized piecemeal editing over bold camera movement. Like many of his contemporaries, he was a fan of American film comedy, making absurd comedies like *A Straightforward Boy* and *The Lady and the Beard*, but also ended up living with his mother in the old capital of Kamakura and never married. He served in the army but never made a war film, even if some of his work, like *There Was a Father*, still fulfilled the needs of state propaganda. He could show prewar economic hardship in *The Only Son* or the dark side of postwar Japan in *A Hen in the Wind* and *Tokyo Twilight*, yet also present the delightfully bright world of precocious consumerism in *Good Morning*.

Our series presents all these different faces of Ozu, many through films that are rarely screened. We all hope you can see several and find an Ozu that speaks to you.

Recommended reading:

Burch, Noël. *To the Distant Observer*.

Bordwell, David. *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*.

Both books, classics in Japanese film studies, are available for free download at the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Michigan:

<http://www.umich.edu/~inet/cjs/publications/michclassics/index.html>