

Ozu and modern cinema

In Teiichi Hori's *Shitagaru Kasan : Wakai hada no hoteri / Mother who wants a man*; *Young Skin on Fire* (2008), a young Renoirian widow who lives with her late husband's son is approached by her in-laws about a marriage proposal with her husband's brother, and at the same time her former lover, who lives with his best friend, tries to get back together with him. In the process of doing with pink films what Mikio Naruse's *Yearning* (1964) and Yoshishige Yoshida's *A Story Written in Water* (1965) could not do, it is an attempt to confirm how far the codes of sexual portrayal on the Japanese screen can go, and in any case, it is an attempt to show that the background of the people is not the only thing that can be seen in the film, and that every nuanced light and direction placed in the back of the screen can be used to create a film that is both beautiful and beautiful. It is also a masterpiece that is dazzling in its richness of light and direction, which shines in every nuance in the background of the people. For example, the pony-tailed heroine and the green of background shining after her son's indignation in the scene after his jealous lover leaves, the white of the truck lighting up the doorway at night when she turns down her parents' offer, and the dazzling white light from outside falling on their naked, sweat-soaked bodies as they "cheerfully work hard" at the end. The dazzling white light that falls on their naked, sweaty, and finally "brightly exerting" bodies. The comical scene of darkness in which the brother of the deceased husband and his ex-wife, who for different reasons came to the heroine's house to have sex in a drunken stupor, crawl to hide their joined bodies when they hear the footsteps, makes one think that pink film has suddenly awakened to the gestures of the silent era. It is an uninhibited, vicious, and cunning film, which seems to ridicule Nami Iguchi's *Hito no sex wo warauna / Sex is no laughing matter* (2008) which got major success and the conservatism of the critics who support it, while depicting so many different generations of men and women in 70 minutes. It was a sumptuous experience to see this one of the best films of 2008 in a dimly lit theater with a sparse smoking audience in the daytime, despite the image of Japan in recession.

And exactly the films of Yasujiro Ozu, who inspired Teiichi Hori's later masterpiece *Tenryu-ku Okuryoke Osawa ; Fuyu (Winter)* (2015), remain a source of inspiration for the most progressive filmmakers. For example, in *Chichi ariki / There is a Father* (1941), Ozu constructed a scene in which a father, played by Chishu Ryu, has a seizure and collapses in real time, without omission, from the conversation with his son, played by Shuji Sano, to the time the son lies down in his room and realizes his father has a seizure through a maid's voice. In the postwar *Late Spring* (1949), however, when the daughter played by Setsuko Hara talks to her father, who is lying down on the bed next to her, the famous black shadow of a leaf swaying in the wind is used as the background, and the audience's gaze is drawn to the fleshiness of Setsuko Hara's face, whose laughter has disappeared before and after the scene. When the viewer's gaze is then counterpointed to the still stone garden of Ryoanji Temple, illuminated by pure white daylight, with the music growing louder, we must have experienced a symphonic leap from minute movements in the darkness to the pure white grandeur space of sunlight at the expense of our sense of real time.





Moreover, in *Floating Weeds* (1959), we can rediscover the great work on time accomplished by Ozu, the freewheeling freedom of continuity and disconnection of time/appearance of movement in a single work. The continuity of time in the scene where Machiko Kyo and Ganjiro Nakamura curse at each other in the heavy rain, and the disconnection of time in the scene where Hiroshi Kawaguchi and Ayako Wakao talk to each other against the background of a red boat bottom. The shock of the sudden appearance in the shot of the man of the greenery of the trees, which is not in the background of the full-frame background, by a shot-counter shot across the imaginary line, when they are supposed to be in the same place, makes the kiss scene between the two against the red background of the ship's bottom surreal and glamorous. The audience cannot help but be constantly aware of the characteristics of the cinematic medium. We are once again overwhelmed by this mysterious sensation that only cinema can create.

Yasujiro Ozu has constructed an astonishing cinematic space that leaves the viewer who is simply following the story in no doubt, yet never gives the viewer who is following the screen the slightest sense of relief. For example, in the scenes of the supposedly small apartment where the woman played by Setsuko Hara lives in *Akibiyori /Late Autumn* (1960) and *Kohayagawa ke no aki / The End of Summer* (1961), the background of the characters, except for the cutaway, is shot at 90 or 180 degrees to the previous camera position so that the audience sees them for the first time. Of course, we are told that these apartments were set in a studio and that the shooting positions were determined by moving the background from one shot to another, but when they are used together with the turn of the gaze across the imaginary line, which is a patent of Yasujiro Ozu's films, the viewer is caught in a surprisingly strange sense of discomfort, of being in the same closed room, but rather in a space that is completely open. However, this is not to emphasize artificiality. On the contrary, it is a sense of discomfort because the house itself is perceived as "natural" by the Japanese audience of that time and up to the present.

Ozu said at the time that when shooting in the narrow space of a Japanese-style room, «If you follow the grammar, the only background for one character is an alcove, and the background for another is a sliding door or a porch. That would not express the atmosphere of the scene I was aiming for.» He said that he tried to cross the imaginary line of sight in order to express the atmosphere of the scene that he was aiming for(1). But even more than that, Ozu's space, which seems to be the closest to the daily life of the time of shooting, yet constantly transmits an eerie sense of discomfort, is the most self-referential film that absolutely refuses to be discussed without first assuming that it is a "film," and thus it has become the starting point of contemporary Japanese cinema. This was made possible, perhaps, by Ozu's "repentance," who had once been a soldier in a poison gas unit on the Chinese front and was criticized after his return to Japan because of not using the war itself as a subject matter. Of course, we know that Ozu himself was unable to make a project about the war before the war, and that he also made a film about a returning soldier, *Kaze no naka no mendori* / A Hen in the Wind (1948), which also depicts violence. I use the word 'repentance' in light of the fact, but still believe that the following question may have been in his thought. "What should be done to prevent cinema, which have been used for war as a major visual medium, from being used for war again? The only way is for films to continue to secretly convey the message that cinema are quite different everyday life and reality, even while filming them?" Just before his death, Ozu said to Yoshishige Yoshida: "Cinema is drama, not accident". (2)

Once Ozu wrote, "My friends, such as Sadao Yamanaka, Hiroshi Inagaki, and Tomu Uchida, say that my films are difficult to watch. They say it is because the way I shoot is different. And they say, "No, only in the beginning, but we will soon get used to them." (3) At a time when classic films were at the pinnacle of the entertainment industry, the act of secretly inserting a crack in one's own perfection was a dangerous act, but in retrospect, it can be seen as the beginning of a self-destructive trend in postwar Japanese cinema, which "creates its own invisible parts. In reality, however, the mediocrity of the subject matter and the storyline (i.e., the textual information) ironically led Ozu to be criticized by those who followed him during his lifetime, and while to be supported by audiences who were completely unaware of or ignored his sense of discomfort. This is something that continues to this day, tragically, when the media treats Ozu's work as representative of cinema. But at a time when cinema has declined among the various visual media, Ozu remains one great source for contemporary cinema as the only image capable of self-criticism above all else.

The familiar conversation scenes in Ozu's films make us perceive two movements. The displacement of the viewer's gaze, as in the example of "there must be no other person where you are looking," seems to be constantly telling the audience, "This is a film, and it can only be a film." On the other hand, when one person speaks and the shot shifts to the other, Ozu makes sure that there is no interruption of movement. We are forced to follow the screen without time to dwell on the bewilderment caused by the sense of displacement, and we are forced to rewatch the film over and over with laughter, trying to figure out how the black and white and, in the color era, the red, green, and blue alternations are working.

There is something about Ozu's films that you cannot grasp unless you watch them at normal speed (but is that 24 fps or 25 fps? That's another mystery). Something

that disappears when you stop or slow down the film, and is missed when you fast-forward it. Something that appears and disappears every time Nobuo Nakamura, Ryuji Kita, Shin Saburi, and Chishu Ryu move their gazes and speak in *Late Autumn* (1960) and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962). When one scene ends, the hallway and outside space appear with laughter, and the music of Takanobu Saito is heard loudly. There is also a movement there that fills the space so that the movement is not interrupted. This is also something that can only be perceived at normal speed. So in the end, Ozu's films defend the cinema, a place that faithfully reproduces what must be at this normal speed created by others. This leads to the acceptance of other people's rhythms and the natural development of respect for others.

Ozu's films fixate on different combinations of the same gestures by the same actors, the same actors in different lights, the same actors ... in other words, moments that appear identical but are in fact encounters with a different world each time. It seems at first glance to demand the same role that fits the stereotypical mold, but in fact it is not. It is an excellent way to discover changes in the same person over a long sequence of time. Chishu Ryu in *Tokyo Story* (1953) and *An Autumn Afternoon*. Setsuko Hara in *Tokyo Story* to *Late Autumn*. Isn't this the kind of gaze that should be directed not only at films, but also at our family and friends with whom we spend our daily lives?

Of course, cinema has changed since Ozu's time, and so have people and techniques. Jean-Luc Godard, the master of modern cinema, has combined slow and stop motion since *Sauve qui peut / la vie* (1980) to bring out the spectacular beauty of people and gestures that were invisible at normal speed. In *Antigone* (1990), Jean-Marie Straub & Daniel Huillet let us discover the beauty of filming the same place, an amphitheater in Sicily, from all heights. They are exactly very different from Ozu, but Godard, for example, connects shots of camera positions placed at 90 degree angles to avoid overlapping backgrounds in the bank attack scene in *Prenom Carmen* (1984), or Straub=Huillet connects two long, rigorous shots in *Der Tod des Empedokles* (1987) that make us forget that Empedokles and Hermocrates are facing each other, which makes us feel uncomfortable about the positioning of the characters who are supposed to be in the same space. They are in solidarity with Ozu's films in that they make the viewer think about how they are made. By passing through the work of contemporary filmmakers, we too can rediscover the great work on time that Ozu accomplished, the freewheeling freedom of continuity and temporal disconnection in a single film.

- (1) "Grammar of Film" Yasujiro Ozu, gekkan (monthly) screen stage n.1, 1947, Jun.
- (2) Ozu Yasujiro no han eiga (Ozu's Anti-Cinema) Yoshishige Yoshida, 1998
- (3) "There is no Grammar in Film" Yasujiro Ozu, geijutu-shincho 1959, Apr.

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