
Kantoku Ozu Yasujiro

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To understand the power of Hasumi Shigehiko’s book *Kantoku Ozu Yasujiro* (Director Ozu Yasujiro) for a Western readership, it should be remembered that the view of Ozu in the West has been shaped by three writers, Paul Schrader, Donald Richie, and David Bordwell. (The impact of Noel Burch on the Western reception of Ozu has been less decisive, partly because of Burch’s commitment to a reading that completely dismisses the director’s postwar work, which includes his most widely seen and highly regarded films.)^[1] Schrader’s account of Ozu as one of the models of “transcendental style in film”, Richie’s reading of Ozu’s films in terms of the grand narrative of the decline of the traditional Japanese family, and Bordwell’s detailed examination of the stylistic procedures that set Ozu’s work apart from the norms of classical cinema continue to influence the way Ozu is viewed and discussed.

By putting the question, ‘What is it to watch an Ozu film?’, into the foreground of his concerns, Hasumi challenges the dominant constructions of Ozu in the West. Reproaching Richie for using a kind of “negative discourse” that defines Ozu in terms of absence and lack (e.g., the camera rarely or never moves), Hasumi asserts that “the view that is applied to his films is what suffers from an enormous lack” and that, in fact, Ozu’s “fecundity” is “incontestable” (25 F/13-14 J).^[2] Against Schrader, Hasumi argues that it is mistaken to see Ozu’s films as the reflection of a “transcendent” spirituality imbued with the values of Zen and Japaneseness.

In discussing the contradictory interpretations of the famous “image of the vase” in *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), Hasumi insists on the poverty of those interpretations that are based on cultural prejudices: “when the meaning of an image is not deployed fully, the interpretation belongs to the cultural domain” (221F/246J). He further remarks that “To the extent that seeing is a cultural gesture, the look is not free” (217 F/241J). These remarks have a broad significance, since a concern for the cultural dimension of seeing distinguishes the approaches of academic film studies, as directed and dominated by cultural studies, from film criticism.

Hasumi writes that Ozu's "thematic system" is responsible for displacing the critic's interest in Ozu's films from the narrative to a different level characterized by a rich fusion of elements. On this plane, Ozu's work "accords with the cinematographic sensibility of our look, as a movement internal to the film. This is what happens when we are moved by a film" (38F/28-29J). The thematic system is of tremendous importance: it is what makes the cinema a cinema of authors. "Let's say that the place where all authors - and not just Ozu - give free rein to their imagination is precisely the thematic system" (119F/102J).

In a characteristic inversion, Hasumi calls the sign ("Don't feed him, he has a stomach ache") a mother puts on her child's back in *I Was Born But* (*Otona no miru ehon - umarete wa mita keredo*, 1932) "a real document of the history of the city of Tokyo" (45F/35J). Ozu's films are documents of their times not because of the grand symbolic themes so often invoked to interpret his films (such as the postwar collapse of the multi-generation family) but because of a visual detail that belongs to what Hasumi has identified as the Ozuian thematic system of eating/not eating. Similarly, the social problem posed by the conditions of the lowly office worker is made manifest in *I Was Born But* because of the children's decision to go on a hunger strike, which expresses the situation in terms of the same thematic system (45-46F/35-36J).

Hasumi's criticism is directed toward and seeks to account for the experience of being moved by an Ozu film. To proceed in this direction, Hasumi starts from a willfully simple level of inquiry into the minimal structural constituents of film viewing: looking and time. Seeing cinema reduced to these terms, it is quite possible to say, as Hasumi has in another context, that "all movies are but variants on the silent film."[\[3\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Donald Richie, *Ozu: His Life and Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Noel Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, revised and edited by Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

[\[2\]](#) Page references to the Ozu book are given in parentheses in the text. A number followed by "F" refers to the French edition, *Yasujiro Ozu*, translated by Ryoji Nakamura, René de Ceccatty, and Shiguéhiko Hasumi (Paris: Éditions de l'Étoile/Cahiers du cinéma, 1998). A number followed

by “J” refers to the Japanese edition, *Kantoku Ozu Yasujiro* (Definitive edition) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2003).

[3] “Fiction and the ‘Unrepresentable’: All Movies are but Variants on the Silent Film,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26, Nos. 2-3 (2009), pp. 316-329.