
Space and Transition in the Films of Setsuko Hara

By Alastair Phillips

The apex of Setsuko Hara's stardom largely coincided with the reconstruction of the Japanese nation following its defeat after the end of the Second World War and the negotiation of a new interpretation of a nationally specific modernity. In numerous films for directors such as Mikio Naruse and Keisuke Kinoshita, but especially in the key postwar titles she made with Yasujiro Ozu such as *Banshun/Late Spring* (1949), *Bakushu/Early Summer* (1951) *Tokyo Monogatari/Tokyo Story* (1953), Hara's nuanced demonstration of feminine emotion articulated a specific sense of transition that had a bearing not just on female audiences' feelings about themselves, but also on their broader subjective relationship to the nation as a whole. In this sense, they vividly enacted a particular contestation between tradition and progress in Japan's immediate post-war social order at a time when the concept of a new formulation of nationhood was also, very importantly, intertwined with a concurrent and inevitable sense of loss due to change.

Hara's star persona played a fundamental role in relaying questions of continuity, tradition, timelessness, memory and change from a strong female perspective. This was enacted in three ways. Firstly, this was partly down to a close fit with the generic patterns laid out by Shochiku studio, under the managing guidance of Shiro Kido, who had already achieved a reputation among a popular, especially female, audience for humanistic, everyday fictions that evoked a carefully constructed melange of social criticism, comedy and melodrama. Secondly, the themes of memory and tradition embodied by Hara's female characters were given an extra dimension by being placed in a mode of representation which itself emphasised a sort of filmic heritage. Ozu and his regular team of fellow filmmakers that included the scriptwriter Kogo Noda, the set designer Tatsuo Hamada and the cinematographer Yuharu Atsuta used the flavour of the Shochiku genre and the repertoire of fellow Shochiku stars and character actors to produce a consistently recognisable product that had its own particular currency for the national audience. Then, thirdly, and very importantly, this currency then circulated in the film magazines and among the expectations of the filmgoer prior to and during the viewing of a new release.

Hara's cycle of post-war dramas with Ozu coincided with Japan witnessing an extraordinary surge of industrialisation and productive capacity. This was accompanied by the drift of the populace to the major

urban centres such as Osaka and Tokyo and an enhanced and much expanded material infrastructure. New patterns of consumption emerged during the 1950s. The upsurge in magazine publishing, the advent of television, the growth of rail and billboard advertising, all heralded an enhanced visual culture, which connected with the growth in disposable income and awareness of a new *seikatsu* (lifestyle or standard of living). Importantly, the *pace* of industrialisation was observed along with the development of commodification and the new consumer culture. Trains and stations were specifically incorporated into the narratives to suggest new kinds of movement and relationships between spaces and citizens. The conflict between the national tradition of the family unit and individual female desire became overtly played out in a prominently feminised cinematic space that recognized both the continuity of established gender patterns and evolving experiences of domestic frustration, containment and social exclusion. At the same time, new subjectivities posited by democracy were also given emphasis by the reluctance of the younger, especially female, generation to follow prescribed spatially related social norms.

The ways in which Setsuko Hara's persona straddled these somewhat contradictory ideas may be explored by examining the specific issue of stardom, femininity and spatial representation. The role of Noriko in Ozu's *Late Spring*, for example, gives particular prominence to feminine space in the home and with that several suggestive aspects of female friendship. Noriko's significant confidante and ally, especially when it comes to discussing the inadequacies of men, is Aya (played with great comic vivacity and flippancy by Chikage Awajima). Like Noriko, Aya is represented as a modern and independent woman, aware of the societal pressures on women to conform eventually to the standard pattern of dutiful wedlock and maternity. In the film, the pair are literally separated from the mainstream by their taste for private, non-Japanese style living spaces above the conventional patriarchal space below. Setsuko Hara is associated with markers of Western modernity in other sequences. The freedom and spontaneity of a seaside bicycle ride is famously linked with the prominence of a Coca Cola sign and her character is also revealed in a conversation with the uncle to have had a bobbed haircut which would have placed her before the war as a stylish *moga* (modern girl). Both Aya and Noriko have working lives outside the home and are pictured with a certain amount of mobility on trains, in street scenes, and in coffee shops.

Setsuko Hara's Noriko characters in all three features mentioned previously occupy more than one space in these films because of their narrative emphasis on transition and change. Her sensitivities to the continuities of the past, and especially her reconciliation with older forms of femininity, position Hara's characters as pivotal, if ultimately consensual, figures in Ozu's representations of the world of post-war

Japan. Kathe Geist has developed the idea of Ozu's extensive reliance on symbolic 'allusions to passing time'[\[i\]](#), such as the preponderance of clocks, shots of smokestacks and steam and so on, by signalling the use of weddings and funerals. Given this context, the figure of Noriko takes on added significance in these dramas; through marriage in *Late Spring* and *Early Summer* and through the death of her mother-in-law in *Tokyo Story*, she is literally embodied as the important link between one generation and the other. In the funeral sequence in *Tokyo Story*, for instance, the figure of Setsuko Hara is positioned centre-frame. The sign that Noriko has bridged the past and the present is given by her father-in-law Shukichi (Chishu Ryu) passing on his dead wife Tomi's watch. In an exquisitely moving sequence, Ozu links the continuity of female sympathy and the awareness of the passage of generations by soon afterwards showing Kyoko, the youngest daughter and newly placed friend of Noriko, looking out of her school classroom. She glances at her watch as she gazes onto the, as yet, unseen space. Ozu then cuts to a shot of Noriko aboard the Tokyo bound train and she looks down at the watch given to her by Shukichi. Here, the two women are specifically linked by their joint apprehension of the continuity of time.

Hara's nuanced and fluid performances thus clearly remind us that 'Japaneseness' always remains a mobile concept that must be understood according to historically specific terms and gendered differentials. To caution against any notion of an embedded fixity to the concept of a 'national culture' means instead to be aware of how the concept has been appropriated and, in turn, reformulated according to shifting social circumstances. I have so far argued that the post-war period in Japan saw much rapid and ongoing change, and it is tempting to say that Ozu's filmic representations suggested a clearly separable set of differences between the old and the new. But this was not always the case. Rather, I want to argue that Setsuko Hara's performances often activated a negotiation between the past and the present so that a more appealing consensual version of continuity, a sense of the past *within* the present, was formulated for national audiences. This can also be seen in the way her films appropriated discourses of the past and national tradition in their representations of place and femininity that lay outside the immediate sphere of the home.

Most national narratives, since they are organised along the principle of linear progression, evoke the idea of a journey. The developmental journey from pre-modern society to the modern is always seen as unfinished, in that there is always more to be achieved in the name of progress. This is necessary so that the contemporary citizen is allowed a part in the organisation of the way the future is going to be. It can be argued that in order for this narrative, this biography of nationhood, to be made sense of, a parallel journey must be conceived of to take account of

the past. In the face of the contradictions of Japan's post-war modernity, which existed partly because of the unresolved definition of the legacy of the war, and partly because of Japan's unfinished engagement with the West, Hara's female centred dramas for Ozu specifically enacted this process of two-way looking. Part of the reason that Ozu has been celebrated as the standard bearer of Japaneseness is that he appears to have undertaken this process of remembering, recording and inscribing what it means to be a citizen of Japan. His films worked as a form of census in that over time they captured the full range and vitality of the ordinary female and male members of the national community. The variety of social types and the attention given to modes and norms of everydayness constituted a kind of record. His films can even be seen as social and visual maps in that they describe with infinite precision the contours and details of places which, once again, seem chosen for their typicality. This much may be glimpsed in his representations of domestic space, but it can also be argued that the same is true for his many other destinations. Thus, for example, the railway, that all pervasive element of Ozu's cinema, can now be seen in its fullest context. The train not only visualised the mapping of the nation to the audience by literally picturing transition from one place to another, be it the journey Setsuko Hara makes from Onomichi to Tokyo in *Tokyo Story* or the one she makes from Kamakura to Tokyo in *Late Spring*, it also suggested the two-way nature of modernity through the duality of departure and arrival inherent in the nature of travel. To get to one place you have to leave something behind.

Many of Setsuko Hara's commercially successful films of the postwar period were home dramas which certainly coincided with a prevailing discourse which positioned women as facilitators of what Lisa Skov and Brian Moeran have called 'a transition from a patrilineal household system ... to a woman-centred nuclear family in which ... men's dominance in the public sphere was neatly complemented by women's power at home' [\[ii\]](#) But this evidently this did not mean a wholesale regressive tendency. Through the careful articulation of performance and spatial organisation, Hara's films also suggested a set of negotiated tensions about the places women can occupy in a nation in which the values of tradition and modernity were in flux. The values and conflicts of contemporary urban life in the post-war period were dramatised by suggesting a prevailing sense of typicality and ordinariness. It was particularly because of the sophisticated range of the Shochiku female stars such as Hara that prominence was so clearly given to the way this ordinary feminine space became the field where the contemporary and the traditional were fought over. Today, these films appear to be items of history—exquisitely composed images of a world already largely gone. But in their day, when cinema was still the way any nation saw moving images of itself, Hara's films spoke suggestively to a largely female mass entertainment audience ready to see an important visualisation of the

necessarily two-way perspective it had on its own relationship to the national past and present.

Notes

[i] Kathe Geist, 'The Role of Marriage in the Films of Yasujiro Ozu', East-West Film Journal Vol. 4, no. 1 (December 1989), p. 46.

[ii] Lisa Skov and Brian Moeran, 'Introduction: Hiding in the light: from Oshin to Yoshimoto Banana' in Skov and Moeran (eds.), Women, Media and Consumption in Japan (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), pp. 23-4.

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