
Japanese Transnational Cinema: ‘Tokyo Monogatari’ by Ozu Yasujiro

PHULL Rasandeep Kaur*

(Abstract)

Ozu Yasujiro has often been regarded as one of the greatest Japanese film directors of all time. Active during the thriving Golden Age of Japanese cinema, Ozu’s filmic releases were well known for their simple yet profound composition and for embracing the *shomin-geki* genre – a type of film which followed the trials and troubles of everyday folk. Perhaps his most celebrated work of all time is *Tokyo Monogatari*. *Tokyo Monogatari* is considered to exemplify Ozu’s unique style – his virtually non-existent camera movements, his low angled *tatami* shots and his famous pillow shots to name a few. The timelessness in each character’s behaviour in terms of relationships, expectations and interactions is perhaps why, despite being made more than sixty years ago, Ozu’s *Tokyo Monogatari* continues to remain relevant and recognisable even to this day.

Keywords: Japanese Cinema, Ozu Yasujiro, *Tokyo Monogatari*, *shomin-geki* genre, ellipsis

1. Introduction

Following on from the end of World War II, the Japanese cinematic landscape during the 1950's was a flourishing industry. In fact, this particular period has often been referred to by many as the Golden Age of Japanese cinema (Westby, 2020). It was during this so-called Golden Age where a number of critically acclaimed Japanese films were created, and a handful of directors – many of whom went on to have successful careers – managed to establish themselves both domestically and internationally as exceptional film makers (Phillips and Stringer, 2007). Examples of some of these directors include the likes of Kurosawa Akira, who is most prominently remembered for conceiving *Rashomon*, Mizoguchi Kenji, who notably created *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of Ugetsu*), and Honda Ishiro, whose *Godzilla* is considered to be a timeless classic (Chakravorty, 2017). Despite the accolades and

achievements of the aforementioned film makers, it has often been suggested that the greatest and “most Japanese” of all film directors was Ozu Yasujiro (Richie, 1974, p.1).

During the late 1920's, Ozu began his lifelong career at *Shochiku Studios*, where he is especially remembered for creating his 1953 masterpiece *Tokyo Monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*). Ozu's *Tokyo Monogatari* is considered by many to be one of the finest films ever made. Despite only gaining popularity in the west more than two decades after its initial Japanese release, the movie itself has world-wide critical acclaim. In addition to this, it was also voted as the greatest film of all time in a directors' sight and sound poll in 2012 (bfi.org, 2014). By using *Tokyo Monogatari* as a case study, this piece of work will be assessing the national and transnational character of Japanese cinema. It will do this by firstly taking into consideration the film's plot. Next, by referring to specific segments within the narrative, this paper will be critically examining the

* Graduate School of Social Sciences, Waseda University

underlying social issues that *Tokyo Monogatari* is perhaps trying to portray. Examples of some of these issues include the conflict between the new and old Japan, the breakdown of the traditional Japanese family unit and the lack of national ambition and spirit following the end WWII. Following on from this, this paper will also be considering Ozu's unique composition and cinematic style, as well as his use of camera and his use of ellipsis. Finally, this piece of work will be discussing the different views of transcendentalism and the notion of *Zen* in regards to Ozu's films.

2. *Tokyo Monogatari* (Tokyo Story)

Firstly, Ozu's films were well-known for portraying the *shomin-geki* genre. The *shomin-geki* genre – literally translated as “common-people’s drama” – heavily focused on depicting the daily lives of ordinary people (Joo, 2012). In addition to this, Ozu is perhaps best known for creating a series of films which represent the everyday trials and troubles of the typical Japanese family. *Tokyo Monogatari* notably follows a similar plot. An elderly couple takes a day long train ride from their home in *Onomichi*, which is located in South-western Japan, to *Tokyo* in order to visit their grown-up children. Their son *Koichi* is a doctor living with his wife and two sons in a modest suburban house – though he is hardly the success that they had initially imagined. We are also introduced to their daughter *Shige*, who is a beautician. Neither of these two has much time or patience for their parents, and it is only their daughter-in-law *Noriko*, who was married to a son killed in World War II, who treats them with any kind of want or kindness. Other notable works that Ozu created which also touch upon similar themes include *Banshun* (*Late Spring*), *Bakushū* (*Early Summer*) and *Sanma no Aji* (*An Autumn Afternoon*). Additionally, *Banshun* and *Bakushū* are considered to be the first two parts in the so-called *Noriko* Trilogy, which culminates with *Tokyo Monogatari* (Lyttelton, 2016).

It could be suggested that throughout the plot of *Tokyo Monogatari*, Ozu was trying to bring to light the more deep-rooted social issues that were facing Japanese families at the time the film was made. For example, during the post-war period Japan was undergoing rapid and continuous urbanisation. As a result of this, there was a gradual decrease

in the number of traditional multigenerational households, and a sharp increase in the number of nuclear family households (Choi, 2018). In addition to this, the film represents the often exploited conflict between children and parents, which in a sense is an extension of the “conflict between the old and new Japan” (Schrader, 1974, p.48). The film also places a great deal of importance on commonly overlooked aspects such as the disappointment of parenthood, and the simple fact that as time inevitably passes by children grow up, gain their independence, start their own families, and leave their parents behind (Desser, 1997). All of these themes are shown within *Tokyo Monogatari* through an unbiased and subtle lens. Moreover, during the movie Ozu disregards the melodramatic flare that, to a certain extent, most contemporary Hollywood films use to create drama. According to McDonald (2006), one reason why the film managed to become successful not only in Japan but also in the west, was because *Tokyo Monogatari* addresses numerous social issues that not only apply to Japanese society, but apply universally to most modern civilizations. Furthermore, these social issues are still relevant and important even to this day, which is remarkable considering that the film is more than six decades old.

In my opinion, one scene within the film that quite clearly illustrates the breakdown of the traditional Japanese family unit, is the segment in which the father, *Shukichi*, goes out drinking with his two friends. It is within this scene where we the audience can visibly see the discontent that *Shukichi* and his friends are feeling. Through the dialogue it is revealed that much of this discontent is centered around the fact that in the emergence of post war *Tokyo*, the younger generation appear to be disregarding the long-established traditional values of Japan. Therefore, as a result of this, these traditional values are steadily on the decline. In particular values such as respect, filial piety and honour are diminishing (Nolletti and Desser, 1992). Following on from this, it could be argued that by getting drunk himself, *Shukichi* is also playing a part in this so called “breakdown”, as according to Lowke (2003, p.7) “honorable elderly men should uphold a level of decorum”. It is also within this specific scene where *Shukichi* confesses that during his youth he too used to regularly disgrace himself by drinking – a matter that was previously mentioned in the film by his eldest daughter *Shige*. This could perhaps suggest that the act

of drinking itself, which is acknowledged by *Shukichi* as being disgraceful, could in fact be comparable to the social decline of traditional values (Centeno, 2016, and Lowke, 2003).

In addition to this, it is also within this scene where one of *Shukichi*'s drinking partners, *Numata*, provides a dialogue which according to McDonald (2006) is the crux of *Tokyo Monogatari*. *Numata* directly addresses *Shukichi* and says:

Maybe we expect too much of our children.
But they lack ambition, they lack real spirit.
That is just what I told my son. And then he said
to me that there are too many people in Tokyo
and so it's hard to get ahead. What do you think
of that? Young people today just have no
backbone (Richie, 2003, p.85).

Numata's dialogue infers that the old Samurai-like fighting ideals – which epitomised honour, courage and discipline – that used to be extremely prevalent within the country, and to a certain extent that had defined Japan in the past, have since been lost. Moreover, it is also within this scene where the disillusionment that the characters feel about Japan in relation to having lost the war (therefore having lost spirit and honour) comes to light. It could be argued that Ozu's *Tokyo Monogatari* is a film that is not solely about *Shukichi* and his family. Instead, the themes and issues that the film had highlighted were extremely prevalent throughout much of Japan during the post war period, with the country's capital, *Tokyo*, being a focal point. Additionally, I believe that by using the *shomin-geki* genre to focus on the typical Japanese family, Ozu's *Tokyo Monogatari* could have potentially been applied to any household within *Tokyo*, as well as to any household in any city or country within the world (Standish, 2012).

In regards to Ozu's composition, it is simple yet profound. Throughout *Tokyo Monogatari* he shoots within narrow confines, placing his actors in the background and the set in the foreground (Richie, 1974). An example of a scene which clearly conveys this is the segment in which *Koichi*'s wife *Fumiko* is shown, spending what could be argued by some as being more time than necessary, cleaning the house. By incorporating numerous scenes such as this one within his film, Ozu is considered to be placing an emphasises on the household instead of individual characters. By doing this, Ozu is showing us the audience the simple daily lives of the

characters as they partake in mundane everyday tasks such as cleaning up the house, studying, walking, and so on (McDonald, 2006 and Centeno, 2016). Furthermore, it is also during these particular scenes where we get the impression that by silently observing the ordinary everyday tasks that the characters are engaging in, that we as viewers are almost prying into their daily lives.

In addition to this, according to Yoshida (1998) Ozu's use of camera within *Tokyo Monogatari* is unique, breaking most traditional Hollywood conventional methods of cinematography. Within the film very rarely are dissolves, wipes, or even fades used as transitions. Instead, Ozu primarily only uses cuts to transition between each of the scenes. He often uses shots of the environment, such as a lantern or the view of the sea (something mundane) to introduce the audience to the next scene. Also, unlike most conventional Hollywood dramas, which make use of overwhelming dramatic music to emphasise the emotion of the characters, in *Tokyo Monogatari* many dialogue scenes lack any score, with music only being used during scene transitions. Moreover, Ozu generally tends to ignore immersive storytelling. He also does not respect Hollywood's traditional 180 degree rule (Ozu uses the 360 degree rule instead), and he often reverses camera placement, which in turn disconnects the line of sight, thereby keeping the audience at bay and allowing them to watch the story unfold equitably. In my view, Ozu's unique camera placements allow the audience to understand the feelings of each of the characters, thus enabling them to relate and connect with the characters on a far deeper level (Nolletti Jr. and Desser, 1992 and Yoshida, 1998).

Ozu has often been praised for his unique cinematic style. His films are particularly well known for three specific attributes; 1) his controlled "*mise-en-scene*" – in which he eliminates "any hint of asymmetry" (McDonald, 2006, p.257), 2) his low angled "*tatami*" shots – usually taken from around three feet off the ground, and 3) his famous "pillow shot's" (Burch, 1979, p.172). Pillow shot's are scenes that are held for several seconds, which usually tend to depict everyday life – for example clothes hanging outside to dry, a train passing by, etc. In addition to this, pillow shot's do not necessarily carry any detailed information about the development of the story or of the characters. In regards to *Tokyo Monogatari*, a series of pillow shot's are shown after

it is revealed that the unwell mother will eventually die. In my opinion, these particular pillow shot's can perhaps be suggestive of an impending darkness that cannot be avoided, and despite this there is still the sad acknowledgment that life must go on regardless of the mother's fate. Following on from this, the camera rarely moves in most of Ozu's films, with it only moving twice in *Tokyo Monogatari*. In fact, in Ozu's final six films the camera does not move at all, and he eventually eliminates camera movement completely when he starts making colour films. Furthermore, during scenes which heavily focus on dialogue, Ozu preferred to use frontal medium hit shoulder shots, as opposed to the industry standard over the shoulder shots. Moreover, very rarely did Ozu employ close-up shots of his characters within his films. Instead, he often used medium or long shots, thereby showing the audience all of the characters together, and how they interact with one another, rather than highlighting certain character actions or expressions for dramatic emphasise (Yoshida, 1998; Joo, 2012 and Standish, 2012).

An additional technique that Ozu was well known for incorporating within his works, and that I believe further distinguished his films from other directors at the time, was his deliberate use of ellipsis (omission of certain events) within the narrative of a film (Nolletti Jr. and Desser, 1992). For example, within *Tokyo Monogatari* when the couple's two eldest children *Koichi* and *Shige* are making plans to send their parents to a hot spring spa in *Atami*, this scene is immediately followed by a long shot of people sitting and standing on a seawall, a long shot of the sea and a mountain from within the interior of a room, a medium shot down a hallway and finally a medium shot of the parents in their room (Phillips and Stringer, 2007). It is this final shot that indicates to us the audience that the parents are already at the hot spring spa, and we therefore come to understand that Ozu has eliminated any scenes in which the children tell their parents about the trip, or in which the parents travel to *Atami*, or arrive at their hotel (Parks, 2016). Minor ellipses such as these, whilst being common in world cinema as a whole, are particularly prominent in Ozu's works. Furthermore, according to Desser (1997, p.6), these ellipsis involve the "principle of retrospectivity". This particular principle requires the active participation from the audience, who must continuously reorient themselves within the space and time of the film. This therefore suggests that the more greater an

ellipsis is, the more engaged a viewer must be with the film.

Many of Ozu's films, and in particular *Tokyo Monogatari*, require viewers to pay special attention to the variety of ellipses that are being used. This is because Ozu often uses "surprise ellipsis" (Desser, 1997, p.6). Surprise ellipsis occur when parts of the plot that are previously prepared for by an action or dialogue are omitted from the actual film. For example, at the beginning of *Tokyo Monogatari*, the parents converse with one another and discuss stopping at *Osaka* in order to see their youngest son. However, the scene immediately shifts to the eldest son's house in *Tokyo*, and not long after that the parents' arrival is shown. The visit to *Osaka* which was previously discussed is never shown, and therefore the plot point which was previously prepared for with dialogue is disregarded. More daring however is Ozu's use of "dramatic ellipsis", where an important event occurs, but it is not shown to the audience on screen (Desser, 1997, p.10). An example of this is shown in the scene in which the parents return to *Osaka* on their way back home to *Onomichi*, and the mother *Tomi* becomes ill and eventually passes away. Ellipsis themselves have always been prevalent in Japanese culture. In fact, Ozu's narrative omissions are considered to reflect traditional Japanese *haiku* poetry, which also used to leave out key words or sections, as they were considered to be unnecessary to the overall essence of a tale – some examples can be seen in the poetic works of authors such as Gyomoku Usami and Yoshie Miyamoto (Choi, 2018; Lyttelton, 2016, and McMurray, 2021). In addition to this, due to his regular use of ellipsis, Ozu's films tended to have less story within them compared to other films that were also being made at the time. However having said this, Ozu's cinematic works maintain a calm and even tempo, which tend to parallel the tempo of everyday life. Furthermore, his characters often retain a calm and tranquil aura, and very rarely portray any deep emotions (Joo, 2012).

Many of Ozu's films have often been discussed in terms of their "Japanese-ness", and *Tokyo Monogatari* is no different. It was within his book titled "Transcendental Style in Film" (1974) where Paul Schrader, for better or for worse, established the western view of Ozu as being steeped in traditional Japanese art and culture. Within his book, Schrader explores various notions of transcendentalism within Ozu's films, and in particular he extensively focuses on the notion of *Zen*. Geist (1983) goes further to state that,

especially towards the latter part of his career, Ozu's films contained a rich abundance of references towards traditional Japanese culture and arts – the majority of which were originally created and developed from *Zen* Buddhism. Examples of these arts include the tea ceremony, *Noh* drama, *sumi-e* or ink brush painting, and traditional *Zen* garden and temple architecture. Ozu's *Banshun (Late Spring)* is particularly well known for including multiple scenes relating to traditional *Zen* culture. For example, within this film certain scenes were filmed at *Ryoanji* – a famous *Zen* garden which is located in *Kyoto*. In addition to this, the film also included scenes involving *Noh*, the tea ceremony, and also incorporated various depictions of traditional Buddhist temple architecture. However, in contrast to this particular view Robin Wood, in his essay titled "Resistance to Definition", challenges Schrader's assumptions. Wood argues that there is "no need to be versed in the intricacies of *Zen* philosophy in order to appreciate" Ozu's works (Parks, 2016, p.285).

3. Conclusion

Despite being made more than sixty years ago, *Tokyo Monogatari* is a movie that is regarded as a timeless classic. In addition to this, the film contains many unique aspects that has led to its success both in Japan and abroad. For example, Ozu's use of the 360 degree rule (as opposed to Hollywood's traditional 180 degree rule), the reversal of camera placement, the use of pillow shot's and surprise ellipsis, etc. Overall *Tokyo Monogatari* is a simple and elegant film, that follows an uncomplicated plot, and is tied together with exemplary use of cinematography, narrative and plot. Through this particular film Ozu has truly transformed simple everyday tasks into insights into society and its people.

References

- [1] bfi.org (2014) "Director' 10 Greatest Films of All Time". [Online] Available at: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news/sight-sound-2012-directors-top-ten> [Accessed 15th December, 2021].
- [2] Burch, N. (1979) *To the distant observer: form and meaning in the Japanese cinema*, London: Scholar Press.
- [3] Centeno, M. (2016) "Kore-eda's *Our Little Sister*. A Return to Japanese Classicism". [Online] Available at: https://ble.soas.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/4419181/mod_resource/content/0/Centeno%20Marcos.%20Kore-eda%E2%80%99s%20Our%20Little%20Sister_%20A%20Return%20to%20Japanese%20Classicism.pdf [Accessed 19th December, 2021].
- [4] Chakravorty, D. (2017) "35 Films from the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema". [Online] Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls020450634/> [Accessed 15th December, 2021].
- [5] Choi, J. (2018) *Reorienting Ozu: a master and his influence*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- [6] Desser, D. (1997) *Ozu's Tokyo Story*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Online] Available at: <file:///C:/Users/Rasandeep/Downloads/A%20Filmmaker%20for%20All%20Seasons%20by%20David%20Desser.pdf> [Accessed 16th December, 2021].
- [7] Geist, K. (1983) "West Looks East: The Influence of Yasujiro Ozu on Wim Wenders and Peter Handke". *Journal of Art History and the Study of Film*, 43(3), pp.234-239. [Online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/776712?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [Accessed 15th December, 2021].
- [8] Joo, W. (2012) "I was born middle class, but...: Ozu Yasujiro's shoshimin eiga in the early 1930s". *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 4(2), pp.103-118. [Online] Available at: http://ud7ed2gm9k.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info%3Aasid%2Fsummon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info%3Aofi%2Ffmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Ajournal&rft_genre=article&rft.atitle=I+Was+Born+Middle+Class%2C+But+...%3A+Ozu+Yasujiro%27s+shoshimin+eiga+in+the+Early+1930s&rft.jtitle=Journal+of+Japanese+and+Korean+Cinema&rft.au=Joo%2C+Woojong&rft.date=2012&rft.issn=1756-4913&rft.eissn=1756-4913&rft.volume=4&rft.issue=2&rft.spage=103&rft.externalDocID=R04958682¶mdict=en-UK [Accessed 15th December, 2021].
- [9] Lowke, R. J. (2003) "Ozu's Tokyo Story: Passing of an Era". [Online] Available at: <http://www.lowkemediamedia.com/essays/Passing%20of%20an%20Era.pdf> [Accessed 20th December, 2021].
- [10] Lyttelton, O. (2016) "5 Essential Films By Yasujiro Ozu". [Online] Available at: <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/03/5-essential-films-by-yasujiro-ozu-263749/> [Accessed 12th December, 2021].
- [11] McMurray, D. (2021) "Understanding [...] Ellipses through Analysis of Haiku in English. *The IUK Graduate School Journal*, 13, pp.1-11. [Online] Available at: file:///C:/Users/rphu/Downloads/18838987_v13_D.McMurray.pdf [Accessed 25th January, 2023].
- [12] McDonald, K. I. (2006) *Reading a Japanese film: cinema in context*, Honolulu: Hawai'i.
- [13] Nolletti Jr. R. and Desser, D. (1992) *Reframing cinema: authorship, genre, history*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- [14] Parks, T. (2016) "Change, Horizon, and Event in Ozu's Late Spring". [Online] Available at: <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.3366/film.2016.0016> [Accessed 21st December, 2021].
- [15] Phillips, A. and Stringer, J. (2007) *Japanese cinema: texts and contexts*, 1st edn., New York: Routledge. [Online] Available at:

- <https://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=8&sid=16d0e0f1-b8a5-42ab-869b-2c2b79a4f577%40sdc-v- sessmgr06&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWiwLHNoaWlmc2l0ZT1lZH MtbGI2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=edp4097495&db=edspub> [Accessed 29th October, 2021].
- [16] Richie, D. (1974) *Ozu*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [17] Richie, D. (2003) *Tokyo Story, the Ozu/Noda screenplay*, Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.
- [18] Schrader, P. (1974) *Transcendental style in film*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- [19] contextualization of the early films of Ozu Yasujiro". [Online] Available at: https://ble.soas.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/4419179/mod_resource/content/0/1.%20Standish.%20The%20Ephemeral%20as%20Transcultural%20Aesthetic.%20Ozu.pdf [Accessed 17th December, 2021].
- [20] Westby, A. (2020) "Films From the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema". [Online] Available at: <https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/films-golden-age-japanese-cinema> [Accessed 18th December, 2021].
- [21] Yoshida, K. (1998) *Ozu's anti-cinema*, Michigan: University of Michigan.

⟨Author Biography⟩

PHULL Rasandeep Kaur: received a BA (Hons) from the University of Hertfordshire in 2018, and an MA from SOAS University of London in 2020. She is currently a Ph.D. student at Waseda University's Graduate School of Social Sciences. Her primary research interests include Japanese Studies, Film Studies and Gender Studies.