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THE RIDDLE OF THE VASE

Ozu Yasujirō's *Late Spring* (1949)

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During the 1990s, a re-evaluation of Ozu Yasujirō in Japan stimulated a publishing spree that resulted in a veritable stack of books about the director. Among the most curious of these efforts was a biography of the director which was serialized in *Big Spirits Comics Special* between 1998 and 1999 and entitled *Ozu Yasujirō no nazo* [*The Riddle of Ozu Yasujiro*] (Sonomura and Nakamura 1999). The opening installment of the *manga* shows an American director named Stan on a visit to Japan. The first request he makes of his young handlers is a pilgrimage to Ozu's grave in Kamakura, the setting of *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949). At the graveyard he finds a modest, black gravestone carved with a single Chinese character: *mu*. 'What does it mean?' he asks. 'It means "Nothing"', his young escorts translate. The director responds, 'Nothing . . . Why . . . WHY? This giant of world cinema, why "Nothing?"' He is rendered speechless, and the remaining twelve installments follow the foreign director as he attempts to uncover the meaning hidden in this obscure message from the dead.

Ozu's grave is indeed marked by this intriguing character, a favorite of Ozu's since he encountered a Chinese monk painting it during his military stint in World War Two (Tsuzuki 1993: 414–20). However, this rather mundane explanation leaves many dissatisfied. The inscription's lack of context – a simple marker amid a field of graves – invites its readers to imagine other, more profound meanings. They treat it as a puzzle, just as Stan did. This Hollywood director is typical of various publications in the 1990s, which inflated Ozu's reputation through homages provided by various Western fans and filmmakers such as Wim Wenders, Jim Jarmusch and Peter Greenaway. Wenders dedicated his *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, West Germany/France, 1987) to Ozu, calling him 'an angel of the cinema', and his own visit to Ozu's grave in *Tokyo-ga* (USA/West Germany, 1985) was probably the actual model for the *manga*. However, Stan is ultimately a stand-in for all of Ozu's admirers, because Ozu certainly did leave us with a collection of perplexing films. Most of them are delightful comedies or powerful melodramas, but what ultimately sets Ozu far apart from other colleagues working in these





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genres is his unique approach to film style. This is the real puzzle 'mu' is meant to symbolize.¹

We often speak of a given director's style in individual, personalized terms; however, in actuality these filmmakers are almost invariably reproducing the codes of cinema they inherited, especially when they work in a popular mainstream industry. By contrast, Ozu developed, over the course of his career, his own particular and peculiar approach to film-making. This was a method that was largely in place by the production of *I Was Born, But . . .* (*Umarete wa mita keredo*, 1932) and it reached a certain kind of hermetic cohesiveness by the time of *Late Spring*. That we can refer to this as a kind of 'emplacement' of style indicates the degree to which Ozu consciously regularized and systematized its various component parts. Always playful, but rarely wavering from his self-imposed rules and strictures, Ozu refined his cinematic narration into an approach of remarkable elegance, precision, and intricacy.

On the surface, however, its mind-boggling complexity is not readily apparent and the casual viewer is probably oblivious to Ozu's astonishing departure from the rules of form that filmmakers around the world have adopted. If viewers do notice, they usually refer only to a few of the more obvious features to describe a certain 'aestheticism', much like the Japanese press throughout most of Ozu's career. Foreign filmmakers, critics, and scholars scarcely knew of his existence until major retrospectives were staged in the US and Europe starting in 1963, the year of his death. As word spread of these extraordinary films, Donald Richie devoted his second auteurist study to Ozu (1974). It helped spark a lively critical debate which has never been substantially resolved to this day.

In the course of this discussion, a significant literature has developed around Ozu's oeuvre. Its importance extends far beyond the hagiography of a master filmmaker. The key terms of the debate essentially start with the question raised by that cartoon director from Hollywood and move into some of the most central issues of film studies: What are we to make of Ozu's perplexing style, and how are we to position this exceptional cinema in relation to the cultures, ideologies, and cinemas of Japan and the world?

This chapter will examine the foreign debate over Ozu's cinema which, curiously enough, coincides with the institutionalization of film studies in the Euro-American academy. It will scrutinize the foreign reception of Ozu in relation to a single scene from *Late Spring*, where the director inserts two cutaways of a beautiful vase. The shots are excessively long. Nothing in all of Ozu's films has sparked such conflicting explanations; everyone seems compelled to weigh in on this scene, invoking it as a key example in their arguments. We will look at some of the analyses to see how the engagement with Ozu's work, which arguably constitutes the richest body of scholarship on the Japanese cinema, has gone hand in hand with the development of film studies. I am not interested in answering Stan's question – 'What does it all mean?' – as my approach is in line with a critical shift in film studies during the 1980s which turned toward historical audiences and argued for a multiplicity of readings for a given text. But at the same time, I point to the way Ozu's intriguing design actually targets a variety of readily identifiable spectatorial stances and their pleasures,





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from the engagement in melodrama enjoyed by historical audiences to the particular desires of scholarly spectators. This is precisely what draws me to Ozu and *Late Spring*: my ability to identify with and circulate between these different audience positions.



Figure 9 Father and Noriko travel to Kyōto for one last trip before she gets married in *Late Spring* (1949). Shōchiku/The Kobal Collection.

The vase scene comes late in the film when the father, played by Ryū Chishū, and his daughter, Noriko (Hara Setsuko), travel to Kyōto for one last trip before she gets married. After a long day visiting temples with the father's friend, they lay in their *futon* at an inn. They chat about what a nice day they had, and after a beat Noriko begins what would certainly become a serious conversation. The father does not respond. A shot shows him sleeping, followed by another shot of Noriko looking at him. Ozu cuts to the vase, perfectly placed in an alcove with moonlit shadows of bamboo gracing the walls. Another shot of Noriko shows her staring at the ceiling, thinking. Ozu returns to the vase, holding the view for a long ten seconds. When he cuts back to Noriko she is flush with emotion and seems to be on the verge of tears. This is where the scene quietly ends.

The reason this scene has attracted the attention of so many writers is to do with its emotional power and its unusual construction. The vase is clearly essential to the scene. The director not only shows it twice, but he lets both shots run for what would be an inordinate amount of time by the measure of





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most filmmakers. At the same time, the vase is too obscure an object to hold symbolic or metaphoric meaning, which would constitute a conventional strategy. Ozu rarely ever deploys imagery in such a direct and transparent manner. Meaning, in Ozu's cinema, has a slipperiness that makes a wide range of interpretations possible. Ultimately, it is this undecipherable quality that the vase best represents, and which makes Ozu criticism so vibrant a tradition.

When Ozu came to the attention of the West, serious film study had yet to establish a disciplinary identity. The first extended treatment of the director came from an unlikely place, a critic under the tutelage of Pauline Kael named Paul Schrader (who would later become one of the great post-war American directors). Schrader came from a strict Calvinist background in Michigan, and his family was anti-icon, anti-image. While he obviously rejected the austere logocentrism of Calvinism, Schrader remained deeply indebted to its sense of spirituality. He was profoundly attracted to films shot in what he called a 'transcendental style'. In his *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972), the key stylistic features Schrader identified were an austerity of means, a privileging of decisive narrative moments, a gap between setting and action, and an unusual use of stasis. For Schrader, these constituted a spiritual cinema brought to perfection in the work of Carl-Theodor Dreyer, Robert Bresson, and Ozu Yasujirō.

'Perhaps the finest image of stasis in Ozu's films is the lengthy shot of the vase in a darkened room near the end of *Late Spring*', notes Schrader (1972: 49), after arguing that stasis – frozen motion – is a hallmark of religious art around the world and represents an image of another reality that stands beside ordinary reality:

The vase is stasis, a form which can accept deep contradictory emotion and transform it into an expression of something unified, permanent, transcendent . . . The transcendental style, like the vase, is a form which expresses something deeper than itself, the inner unity of all things.

(149–51)

What Schrader is essentially attempting to describe is the remarkable power that self-restricting cinema can achieve. This is the complex and contradictory quality that attracts him to Ozu – an approach to cinema in bold opposition to the narrative-driven, over-the-top affect of most popular cinemas. And, as Schrader points out today with dry irony, it is also a style in opposition to his own cinema, which invariably uses psychological realism to chase excessive pleasurable affect.²

Schrader continues to use the term transcendental style to discuss Ozu, although no one else has. At the same time, the more general terms of his approach were extremely influential at this early stage of Ozu criticism. At its heart, the premise of Schrader's methodology asserts that even though filmmakers may emphasize the particularity of their own cultures, they also express the universal. This notion dovetailed powerfully with two new approaches in the nascent field of film studies, auteurism and national character studies, and





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Japanese cinema thus became a kind of Petri dish for working through issues central to the new discipline. The writings of Donald Richie made this positioning possible. The book Richie wrote with Joseph L. Anderson, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* ([1982] 1959), remains one of the finest studies of an entire national cinema. Likewise, examples plucked from Japanese cinema were important when auteurism, which credited the source of a film's meaning to the genius of the director, found a foothold in American criticism in an apolitical form. Among the first auteurist studies were Richie's books on Kurosawa (1999 [first published in 1965]) and Ozu (1974).

Richie's *Ozu* was the first monograph on the director in English. It is a critical biography filled with incisive discussions of Ozu's extant films and laced with fascinating anecdotes. Richie's approach at the time, best evidenced in his 1971 *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character*, emphasized the cultural particularity of a given film. In discussing Ozu, so often called the 'most Japanese' of all directors, Richie sprinkled his analyses with references to religion (*mu*, the 'nothing' carved on Ozu's tombstone) and pre-modern aesthetic categories such as *mono-no-aware* and *wabi-sabi*. The Kyōto inn scene in *Late Spring* was a privileged moment, where he describes the vase as a 'container' for the emotions of the spectators. Note how he opens with a move reminiscent of Schrader's articulation of the particular and the universal:

Primary to the experience is that in these scenes empty of all but *mu*, we suddenly apprehend what the film has been about, i.e. we suddenly apprehend life. This happens because such scenes occur when at least one important pattern in the picture has become clear. In *Late Spring* the daughter has seen what will happen to her: she will leave her father, she will marry. She comes to understand this precisely during the time that both we and she have been shown the vase. The vase itself means nothing, but its presence is also a space and into it pours our emotion.

(Richie 1974: 174)

Richie never explains the apparent contradiction between these aesthetic categories of high art and the essentially popular nature of Ozu's films. (How many ordinary Japanese filmgoers entered theaters with a refined sense of *mono-no-aware*, or could even define it in the first place?). However, while the book is replete with such references, the quotation above suggests that Richie was ultimately a humanist. He concludes his book with this forceful example of his humanism: 'Having spent a few hours with [his characters], we find that we do not want to leave them. We have come to understand and consequently to love them. And with this understanding we come to know more about ourselves, and, with that, more about life' (Ibid.: 191). Other, far less compelling, writers such as Zeman (1972) and Vasey (1988) conformed more closely to Schrader's spiritualism, with its roots in 1960s popular appropriations of Zen. They too often generalize from narrowly defined categories of 'tradition' and 'aesthetics' into a simplified and impoverished vision of Japanese culture.

These approaches came under vigorous critique in the 1970s when the discip-





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linery qualities of film study began to coalesce under the influence of post-structuralism. A major thrust of this theory, which is most closely associated with the influential British journal *Screen*, brought the global hegemony of Hollywood under close scrutiny. The new scholarship theorized the ideological underpinnings of the continuity style, calling attention to the way film form is imbricated with political economy. By inviting spectators to immerse themselves in the narrative machinations of the film, films shot in the continuity style allegedly interpolated people into ideological positions determined by (especially American) capital and patriarchy. In a globalized industry where American film style claimed the norm, the search was on for alternatives.

It was in this context that the Ozu retrospectives staged by Richie and others provided grist for the theoretical mill. Here was a filmmaker whose own precision in style matched the rigor aspired to by new scholars such as David Bordwell and Noël Burch, many of whom were now based at major universities. The first articles were primarily taxonomies of the director's style. They celebrated Ozu's difference as a radical alternative to the Hollywood continuity system; however, at this early point, their attempts to explicate the political implications of Ozu's alternative were weak. In a kind of reaction to the traditionalism previous criticism had attributed to the director, some called Ozu a modernist.³ This was quickly dropped when debate turned to the popular nature of his film-making and its industrial context. After a number of articles established the basic contours of Ozu's mystifying approach to film form, Burch's *To the Distant Observer* (1979) closed the decade's Ozu-related criticism with controversy, simultaneously marking a transition in our understanding of Japanese cinema.

Burch was a major film theorist in this early phase of film studies, and *To the Distant Observer* represents a brilliant, if flawed, attempt to rethink the whole of film history through a single national cinema. Although he is a Marxist theorist, Burch's basic argument holds striking similarities to the culturalist readings of Richie and Schrader. Japanese aesthetics, Burch argued, were fundamentally set in the Heian period (794–1185) and have thus continued, essentially unchanged, to inform every aspect of Japanese culture and artistic production into the modern era. Noting that most filmmakers displayed a remarkable ambivalence to Hollywood continuity style until the so-called 'Golden Age' of the 1950s, Burch argued that the timing of this shift was decisive. Filmmakers continued to use the codes of early cinema because Japan was one of the few cultures in the world to enter the nation-state system without being colonized by European or American empires. Previous critics who celebrated cinematic production in the 1950s did so because this was precisely when, thanks to the American Occupation (1945–52), Japanese filmmakers adopted Hollywood codes and 'their' cinema started looking like 'ours'. In this way, Burch uncovered the dominant values underlying the historiography of Japanese film, thus radically politicizing Japanese film scholarship while bringing the riches of the pre-war era to everyone's attention.

Burch's argument places Ozu in a central position, although he has nothing to say about *Late Spring* since it is an Occupation era production. Like a number of the 1970s critics before him, Burch felt that Ozu's techniques interfered with





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the smooth transparency of the narration (which is why some initially called Ozu a modernist). The director's work thus constituted a radical alternative which was informed by a thousand years of aesthetics unsullied by Western influence.

While those in film studies were sympathetic to – and indeed influenced by – Burch's larger project, *To the Distant Observer* sparked a storm of controversy that centered on what to do with Japanese cultural difference. Edward Said's influential book *Orientalism* (1978) had just been published and despite Burch's best intentions, he had provided an archetypal example of a discourse built on an 'othering' of a non-Western culture and a radical bifurcation of East and West. Scholars in both Japan area studies and film studies latched on to the Burch book in order to critique their respective disciplines with the new intellectual tools provided by Said. Burch was apparently stung by the criticism and basically disowned the book, but many of the provocative issues he raised in *To the Distant Observer* have yet to be adequately addressed and the role of Japanese culture in the historical transformations of Japanese cinema has hardly been put to rest.

The next major collection of work on Ozu de-emphasized the importance of politics and culture to focus on the transmutations of film form in the director's career. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson had already written the best descriptions of Ozu's style during the debates of the 1970s. When Ozu began attracting the attention of filmmakers and scholars, solving the interlocking puzzles they found in the films must have been exciting and intimidating in equal measure. While many critics were offering culturalist explanations, Thompson and Bordwell countered with detailed formal descriptions that were challenging for their rigor. These two scholars helped establish what exactly we were looking at. At the same time, they were also laying out larger theoretical critiques within film studies through their engagement with Ozu's work. By the 1980s, Thompson and Bordwell were central figures in a faction within film studies that had rejected post-structuralist scholarship for what they called a 'historical poetics'. Essentially, they argued that Ozu's stylistic quirks constituted a set of parameters within which he worked. They suggested that the way in which he consciously manipulated these features with such undeniable sophistication gave them a prominence in the film that exceeded their contribution to the narrative or whatever meaning might have been invested in them. He playfully made 'unreasonable choices' that exploited our assumptions about cinematic narration, and Bordwell and Thompson were particularly attracted to Ozu for the amazing degree to which these choices were determined by a system intrinsic to the director's own particular cinema.

Contra Burch, Thompson and Bordwell convincingly argued that at the heart of the apparent difference of Japanese cinema in the 1930s, the continuity system still served a normative function. Thus, Ozu, in fact, took Hollywood style as a starting point, and elaborated upon it with those 'unreasonable choices' and according to his own idiosyncratic predilections. For example, rejecting Richie's metaphor of the vase as a container for emotions, Thompson wrote:





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If the vase . . . is really there to help release our emotions in some way, why does Ozu put it in too soon? Given the film's consistent use of cutaways in a non-narrative way, it seems more reasonable to see it as a non-narrative element wedged into the action. The choice of a vase for such a purpose is arbitrary; the shots could have shown a lantern in the garden, a tree branch, or whatever . . . They have never even glanced at the vase. The very arbitrariness of the choice should warn us against such simplistic readings.

(Thompson 1988: 339–40)

In addition to her demand for precision, Thompson suggests that *Late Spring's* virtual cataloging of traditional Japanese iconography should not be exploited by culturalist or quasi-religious readings. She emphasizes the way these invocations of tradition serve to reconcile conservatism with the liberalism of the Occupation, particularly in terms of changing definitions of the structure of the family.

In the same year as Thompson's *Late Spring* chapter, David Bordwell released his massive *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988), which contained perhaps the definitive description of the formal properties of Ozu's cinema. Bordwell's remarkable close analyses of Ozu's extant films demonstrated the degree to which Ozu *orchestrated* his often minute manipulations of film form. Not surprisingly, Bordwell invokes the *Late Spring* vase to describe Ozu's peculiar elaboration of the cutaway and point-of-view [POV] shot. He suggests that it exemplifies the fundamental instability of point of view in Ozu's cinema and refers to a 'fraying of POV cues' (1988: 117) that is emblematic of the director's overall approach to cinematic narration. The shot of the vase therefore becomes an image at odds with the singular spectatorial position envisioned by previous ideological criticism. It in effect loosens up the representation of character subjectivity and allows Ozu to depart from the strict demand to motivate everything through causality and the normative rules of the continuity style.

Bordwell and Thompson's seminal work did not, in the end, displace mainstream film theory, but instead became one possibility among many critical approaches to Ozu. One of the recent alternatives is represented by *The Flash of Capital: Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (2002), in which Eric Cazdyn places Ozu's treatment of time within the context of the reverse course policies of the American Occupation. He notes that late 1940s polls showed that a majority of Japanese recognized the American Occupation's betrayal of its own lofty rhetoric as Cold War politics over-ran policy. Apparently picking up on what Bordwell referred to as the 'fraying of POV' in the shots of the vase, Cazdyn turns this indeterminacy toward a reading of Ozu's film as an allegory for the socio-political moment in history:

The time images of the vase and the clocks are read here as a way of coming to terms with a world in which various needs and desires were interpreted as symptoms of something larger, as something that, in however distorted or unknowable a form, exceeded immediate





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demands. To be attentive, weary, and respectful of this 'something larger' . . . this is how a cutaway to a clock quietly implores us not to recoil into an exclusive and hazardous particularism. This is also how a seemingly apolitical film quietly implores us to read it allegorically.

(Cazdyn 2002: 235)

Similarly, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto places *Late Spring* in the post-war moment of the Occupation, but he is ultimately more interested in a historiography of Ozu criticism and the way the previous generation of scholars were trapped in a 'simplistic understanding of cultural exchange, permeation, and traffic, so that regardless of whether it is accepted, appropriated, or rejected by the Japanese, Hollywood film – particularly its mode of narration – is said to play the role of norm for Japanese cinema' (Yoshimoto 1993: 125). Yoshimoto suggests that people use 'tradition' to describe Ozu because for them it helps to explain the general feeling or atmosphere created by the director's films. He writes:

What is at stake here is something which is much too amorphous to be articulated by the explicitly discursive language of the tradition/modern dichotomy. This amorphous something is not an illusion but a concrete presence in people's social experiences. But as an emergent form of thinking, it does not have its own language or the articulate form of a discourse. Therefore, it can be expressed only in some already existing discursive form, or to be precise, it becomes apparent only as the difference introduced into the obvious use of language. It is this difference eluding any hegemonic use of language that Raymond Williams calls 'structure of feeling'.

(Ibid.: 124)

Yoshimoto does not follow this up with any satisfying suggestions for getting at this 'structure of feeling' in Ozu's cinema. However, it is precisely this that Bordwell and Thompson's approach veers away from in its formalism. When they correct Richie's and Schrader's loose descriptions of point-of-view in the Kyōto inn scene, they fail to engage with the two writers' central question, which asks why that vase is so oddly powerful. This power has something to do with style, but it cannot be reduced to Ozu's playful orchestration of cinematic tools.

A fascinating cinematic homage to Ozu by Suō Masayuki points to the crux of the problem. *Abnormal Family: My Brother's Wife* (*Aniki no yomesan*, 1983) is one of the most interesting examples of the soft-core *pinku* (pink) genre, and perhaps the only film that ever replicated Ozu's style down to the most minute detail.⁴ The story, style, characters, and settings constantly invoke Ozu's iconography, and especially *Late Spring*. Suō's homage to Ozu's narrative ellipses delegates the wedding to off-screen space while making us privy to the conjugal bed. A Ryū Chishū look-alike frequents his favorite bar, whose hostess just happens to be a dominatrix. Apparently, the audiences for this film were roughly split into two camps, both of which were laughing at different parts of





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the movie.

Actually, this is a rather revealing anecdote. As Thompson writes, 'The very fact that we so often must define Ozu's style by what he does *not* use indicates its sparseness . . . Ozu's differences from other filmmakers suggest that a distinct set of perceptual skills may be appropriate to his work' (Thompson 1988: 341). I believe Ozu was also making his films with two audiences in mind. One segment can watch *Late Spring* and be moved to tears while being completely oblivious to its strange narrative machinations. The other – a segment of the audience with as sophisticated a sense of film aesthetics as Ozu himself – is called out to play by the director.

There is finally, however, another possibility. It could be that all of Ozu's elaborations of cinematic narration were merely a personal thing primarily meant for his own pleasure – a private obsession that went largely disregarded until the 1970s. Yamada Sakae (2002) has pointed out that Ozu was a great admirer of fine textiles and pottery, *kabuki* and *nob* theater. In fact, among the carefully arranged props on his stage are his own favorite pieces. Ozu was a collector, and his own art displays all the prototypical hallmarks of a collector's activity: the totalizing obsession with tiny detail, the fetishistic arrangements of favorite objects such as props and actors in space, the unending quest for refinement and the perfect collection, and a love of display combined with an obstinate indifference to the significance others might find in the collection's arrangement and composition. If anything makes the collector and the film director allies, it is their love of organizing all the elements of their collections and bringing every constituent part of that world under total control – spinning their comfortably individualized world within the historical world. That is to say, Ozu's 'unreasonable choices' may in fact have been those of a collector *par excellence*, which helps explain why the director refused to explain them away until his dying day.

Although film scholars have traditionally been sophisticated viewers able to recognize that Ozu was up to something extraordinary, his other more mainstream audience may have been all but oblivious to his 'unreasonable' narrative sleights of hand. Even when they noticed the difference, their main concern was naturally to immerse themselves in the proliferation of more melodramatic meanings exemplified by the image of the vase. They were too engrossed to care how bizarre Ozu's world actually was. Several film scholars have tried to bridge these two positions, although we could say that – like Suō's audience – Bordwell and Schrader were laughing at different parts.

Now that we know what we're looking at in an Ozu film, and recognize the traps of reducing the director to an emblem of an essentialized national idiom, the way lies enticingly open to a proliferation of approaches to Ozu's filmography. Richie was writing at the formative moment for film studies, when cinema was seen as the expression of national character and/or the genius of exceptional artists. Burch, Bordwell and Thompson's work was part of a dialogue over film study, and the manner in which they all cleave close to each other's arguments indicates the cohesiveness of the discipline before the 1990s. At the turn of the century, however, a sense of crisis over disciplinary identity





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has become widespread. Books on the state of the field have proliferated and film studies departments have started contemplating name changes along with the integration of digital technologies into their pedagogies. A wrenching debate within the English language's main scholarly organization provoked a name change from the Society of Cinema Studies to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. There are signs that film studies, which began as a thoroughly interdisciplinary discipline that coalesced into a solid identity around specific technological and textual concerns, has now begun reinvigorating its interdisciplinary roots.

Japanese film studies (television is slowly coming into the sights of scholars) has capitalized on the fluidity of this situation with the embrace of area studies, especially concerning history and literature. Younger scholars are bringing a diverse set of disciplinary and methodological assumptions to the study of Japanese film, in addition to an ability to richly exploit the Japanese language archive. There may never be the kind of coherent dialogue evidenced in the Ozu criticism of old. This produced a small mountain of writings whose significance for us today is their authors' attention to the specificities of film texts in historical contexts, and their commitment to discovering the pleasures, powers, and politics of the moving image. Disciplinary questions haunt the background of most Ozu criticism of the past, and institutionalized film studies was as restricting as it was enabling. It will be interesting to see where the next sustained engagement with Ozu takes us. However, it would perhaps signify the end of the discipline itself if someone, sometime in the future, ever imagined a way definitively to explain that vase in *Late Spring*.

Notes

- 1 It would behoove us to describe Ozu's style in detail: however, to accomplish this adequately is far beyond the scope of this chapter as Ozu's style and its articulation in any given film is exceedingly complex. For the best introduction to this topic, I would direct the reader to Thompson (1988) and Bordwell (1988). Neither is without controversy, as I discuss, but they are by far the most careful analyses of Ozu's approach to cinematic narration in any language. Ozu has inspired such analysis and debate because he systematically rejected many of the core rules and regulations constituting the continuity style of filmmaking. Because his self-imposed rules were followed comprehensively, we can presumably find them in any part of *Late Spring*. Indeed, after seeing several works by the director, you will instantly know an Ozu film when you see it. The look and feel of the films is that distinctive. For further reading on *Late Spring*, see Ozu and Noda (1984), Desser (1985) and Yoshida (2003).
- 2 Paul Schrader in conversation with the author, January 2004.
- 3 The most important article here is Thompson and Bordwell (1976), although they quickly repudiated this position. Richie (1964) had already compared Ozu to Antonioni as early as 1964.
- 4 One could also say the film is an homage to the vastly influential Japanese language Ozu criticism of Hasumi Shigehiko. See, in particular, Hasumi 1983; Hasumi 1997.





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Ozu yasujirō filmography

See Chapter 1, on *I Was Born, But . . .*, for a full filmography.

