Ozu, Yasujirō

Encyclopedia of India


Ozu, Yasujirō • Director, also screenwriter. Born Tokyo, December 12, 1903; died December 11, 1963. Edoc. Waseda University. Few filmmakers outside the avant-garde have developed a personal style as rigorous as Yasujirō Ozu. While his films are in a sense experimental, he worked exclusively in the mainstream Japanese film industry, making extraordinary movies about quite ordinary events. His early films include a ghost story, a thriller, and a period piece, but Ozu is best known and admired for his portraits of everyday family life shot in what one critic has called a most "unreasonable style."

Ozu's early fascination with cinema soon turned into an obsession; as a student he reportedly went to great lengths to skip school and watch movies, usually Hollywood fare. His own filmmaking career began with his entry in 1923 into the newly formed Shochiku Studios, where he worked as an assistant cameraman and an assistant director. He directed his first film in 1927, and over the next four years directed twenty-one more.

The years 1931 to 1940 saw some of his greatest films, and he received the Best Film award from Kineema Jumbo three consecutive times, for *I Was Born, But...* (1932), *Passing Fancy* (1933) and *A Story of Floating Weeds* (1934). During the war, he directed two relatively successful films before being sent to Singapore to make propaganda pictures. There, he had the opportunity to screen captured films of American films later he would comment: "Watching Fantasia made me suspect that we were going to lose the war. These guys look like trouble, I thought."

Upon his return to Japan, he directed several exceptional films before returning to form with *Late Spring* (1949). From this point onward, Ozu scaled down his output to about one film a year, while maintaining the high standards he had set during the thirties. The most distinctive aspect of Ozu's cinema is its self-imposed restraint. The elements of his unique style were in place by the mid-1920s and are deceptively easy to list. They represent a range of "unreasonable" choices, which the director continually refined (or re-invented) throughout his career. Ozu's signature feature is his camera placement, which is usually (but not always) close to the ground. Its position is actually proper, the height can change, as long as it stays lower than the object being shot.

Ozu also developed a curious form of transition, which various critics have labeled "pillow shots" or "curtain shots."

Between scenes, he would always place carefully framed shots of the surroundings to signal changes in setting, as well as for less obvious reasons. Basically a hybrid of the cutaway and placing shots, these transitions were considered unusual for extraneous shots, sometimes seem motivated more by graphic composition and pacing than by the demands of the narrative.

Ozu's most radical departure from classical style was his use of 360-degree space. By convention, Hollywood style dictates that the camera should stay within a 180-degree space to one side of the action. This is to provide proper "screen direction" and a sense of homogenous space. Ozu's cameras, on the other hand, orbit around the characters. Furthermore, this 360-degree space is broken down into multiples of 45 degrees, into which the camera angles generally fall. This produces a number of unusual effects, but the overall style is so engrossing that they don't disrupt the story.

One effect of jumping over the 180-degree stage line is that actors facing each other must move off in the same direction. Ozu's response to this was to place characters in identical positions between (as well as within) shots. He favored a sitting position with the actor's body "torqued" to face the camera. Frustrated actors found their bodies treated as objects to be carefully manipulated within the frame, theories to be delivered with a minimum of emotion and movement.

Ozu pushed this "graphic matching" between camera extremes: it is unusual to see props such as beer bottles moved across tables or closer to the camera to preserve their size and screen position from shot to shot. Any effects that interfered with composition were cast away; Ozu never used a zoom and only once dissolve (in *Life of an Office Worker*, 1929). He also subordinated camera movement to composition; he never used pans because they disturbed his framing. The few Ozu tracking shots were designed to maintain a static composition (by moving along a road with a character, for example). When Ozu began shooting in color (with *Hiyokon* 1956, 1958), he did away with camera movement altogether.

While Ozu's films are not flashy, they are exceedingly complex. An essay in this brief cannot begin to suggest the extent to which all these stylistic features are systematically choreographed. The permutations of form and variation become so minute that they are visible only on close, multiple viewings.

The motives for Ozu's style have been the subject of rigorous debate. Because he thought "too Japanese" for foreigners to accept or understand, for many years his films were not exported. When critics in the West finally discovered his work, his "unreasonable style" was usually explained in thematic, anthropomorphic and even religious terms. His low camera, for example, was described as the point of view of a child, a dog, a god or a person sitting Japanese style. Some critics attempted to explain his style through questionable premises, such as Buddhism. Most critical Noel Burch, on the other hand, felt Ozu exemplified a rejection of Hollywood style and its ideological baggage. To date, the most plausible explanation has been offered by Kristolph and David Bordwell, who suggest that in Ozu's cinema questions of style may be detached from themes and narrative. Ozu's films feature a playful, overt narration in which stylistic features do not have to mean anything and can be appreciated for their own sake.

Despite the restraint, Ozu's films, with their families in the throes of marriage and death, are among the most touching of melodramas. As important and representative as he is, Ozu has not yet been recognized as a major figure. The emphasis on the details in a number of Japanese filmmakers, including Wayne Wang, Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders, who called Ozu's films a "sacred treasure of the cinema."

MN  • Zagô no Yabai/The Sword of Penitence 1927; *Wakako no Yume/The Dreams of Youth* 1928; *Nozoki na Hishô/Smallest Light* 1928; *Kabocha/Pumpkin 1928; Hikokishi Futsu/A Couple on the Moon 1928; *Nikutarai/Body Beautiful 1928; Shitsu-to-Seki/twelfth Night 1929; *Wakabi Hi/Days of Youth 1929; *Wasel Kenka Tomodachi/Fighting Friends—Japanese Style* 1929; *Daigokudan wa Shita Keroedo/1 Graduated... But 1929; Kaisenito Sekawas/The Life of an Office Worker 1929; *Tokkan Kaka/A Straightforward Boy 1929; Kekkon Gaku no Hisshoku: An Introduction to Marriage 1930; *Hogaraka no Aiyame/Well Cheeryfully 1930; *Rakudai wa Shita Keroedo/Flukked, But... 1930; *Sono Yo no Tsukeru/This Night's Wife 1930.*
Erogami no Onryo/The Reneging Spirit of Eros 1930 (d); Ashi ni Sawatta Kan / Lost Luck/Luck TOUCHED My Legs 1930 (d); Ito/Young Miss Miss 1931 (d); Szkryu to Hige/The Lady and the Beard/The Lady and Her Favorite 1931 (d); Hijin Aisha/Beauty's Sorrows 1931 (d); Makino Gasho/Tokyo Chorus 1931 (d); Haru wa Gofudz Kana/Coming From the Ladies 1932 (d); Umegue wa Miso Kereko/I Was Born, But... 1932 (d); Seishin no Yume Ima Izuko/Where Now Are the Dreams of Youth 1932 (d); Matsu Ashi Maza/Untill the Day We Meet Again 1932 (d); Tokyo no Onna/Women of Tokyo 1933 (d); Hijou na Onna/Dragnet Girl/Women On the Finishing Line 1933 (d); Dokugakiri/Passing Fancy 1933 (d); Haha o Kawasaya/A Mother Should Be Loved 1934 (d); Ukigusa Monogatari/A Story of Floating Weeds 1934 (d); Hakoiri Musume/A Nun Is Jealous/Maid/The Young Virgin 1935 (d); Tokyo yo Yado/An Inn in Tokyo 1935 (d); Daigaku Yoi Toko/College Is a Nice Place 1936 (d); Hitori Musuko/The Only Son 1936 (d); Shakujou wo Nani o Watashi wa, Watashi wa Nani o Watashi wa 1937 (d); Todako ke no Kyodai/The Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family 1941 (d); Chi Chi Arikii/There Was a Father 1942 (d); Nagoya no Shinkai Rokku/The Record of a Tenement Gent 1943 (d); Kaze no Naka no Mendori/A Hen in the Wind 1948 (d); Banaban/Late Spring 1950 (dsc); Minakata Shinichi/The Minakata Sisters 1948 (d); Bakushu/Early Summer 1951 (d); Occhaze No Aji/Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice and Tea and Rice 1952 (dsc); Tokyo Monogatari/Tokyo Story 1953 (dsc); Soshun/Early Spring 1956 (d); Tokyo Boshoku/Tokyo Twilight/Twilight in Tokyo 1937 (d); Higakombu/Euphonia 1950 (dsc); Ohayo! Good Morning 1959 (d); Ukigusa/Flaoting Weeds 1950 (d); Akibiyori/Late Autumn 1960 (d); Kongoyose-ke No Aki/End of Summer 1961 (d); Suma No Aji/An Autumn Afternoon 1963 (dsc).

PABST, G. W. • Director; also actor, screenwriter. • Born Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Raudnitz, Bohemia, August 27, 1885; died 1967. Educ. Academy of Decorative Arts, Vienna. Georg Wilhelm Pabst's greatest contribution to filmmaking is his being not limited by a domi-
nant style. His films have been criticized for their lack of stylistic unity, rather than diminishing their impact, that eclectic approach pushed him be-
Yond narrative to break away from convention. This experimentation contributed to the evolution of the "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity) in Germany, a movement which re-
jected the extremist values of Expressionism for a less intrusive, quasi-dramatic style.

Pabst began his academic career in engineering. The interests gravitated to the theater and in 1904, he entered the Vienna Academy of Decorative Arts. He made his directorial debut in New York with a German-language theatrical troupe. Upon his return to Europe in 1914, he was detained as an enemy alien in a French prison camp, where he organized a theater company. After the war, he directed theater in Prague and later in Vienna. The German cinemastographer and film pioneer, Carl Freudlich, coaxed him into filmmaking, offering him a job as assistant director. In 1923, Pabst directed his first film, Der Schatz/The Treasure. His use of "cheers" and his ability to arrange physical objects in highly expressive (though seemingly objective) ways demon-
strated his technical prowess. His next film, Gruen Donelli/Countess Donelli (1924) was a commercial success but it was Die Freudlose Gasse/The Joyless Street (1925) which established Pabst as an important director. The Joyless Street is a gritty look at how the residents of Melchoir Street are affected by the post-
war ills of corruption, prostitution and inflation. Among the film's accomplishments is its creation of a prototype for the naturalistic "street film" genre. One of the first directors to shape his location, Pabst developed a photographic style that effectively depicted the stark realities of the streets. Among the cast of The Joyless Street was a young Greta Garbo. When Hollywood executive Louis B. Mayer saw the film, he re-
cruited her to a contract with MGM.

Always fascinated by the human psyche, Pabst's next film, Geheimniseiner Seelen / Secrets of a Soul (1926) dramatized a Freudian case history. The extra-
ordinary dream sequences, which utilized optical distortion and other special effects on screen with a surreali-
sm. Die Liebe Der Jeanne Ney/The Love of Jeanne Ney (1927), with its undercur-
rent of modern angst, marked an important advance in Pabst's technique. The editing reveals Pabst's technical adeptness, the rapid cutting on movement oc-
cupying the viewer's attention on movement, the manipulation of the cuts "invi-
ible." This method, especially useful with reverse cuts, where a shift of speaker could be implied, foreshadowed the dia-
logue cutting of sound film and accounts in part for why Pabst's silent films seem surprisingly modern today.

His most controversial films were Die Buche Der Pandura/Pandora's Box (1928). Criticized for its inconsist-
tent style and its blatant sexuality, including a lesbian scene, the film received a hostile reception. Recent critics have praised the film, especially Louise

Pacino, Al • Actor. Born Alberto Pacino, New York, NY, April 25, 1940. Educ. High School for the Performing Arts, New York; Herbert Bergof Studio, New York; Actors Studio. Award-

Pacino, AI