# Three Masters of Japanese Cinema

Keiko I. McDonald

After almost a decade "away," Japanese cinema is in the international limelight again. Recent triumphs at Cannes, Venice, Berlin and other festivals have brought a number of Japanese directors old and new to the attention of viewers around the world.

Four examples stand out. Imamura Shōhei's Eel (Unagi) won the Palme d'or for best picture at Cannes in 1997 (The film shared that honor with Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's Taste of Cherries). Imamura, now in his seventies, has a lifetime of fine films to his credit. Among them, The Ballad of Narayama (Narayamabushikō), also the winner of the Grand Prize at 1983 Cannes. Eel continues the director's longstanding commitment to fiercely candid social critique.

The 1997 Cannes jury also awarded its best first feature Camera d'Or to Suzaku (Moe no Suzaku, 1997) by twenty-eight year old Kawase Naomi. Her work gives promise of a refreshingly innovative approach to the dissolution of a rural family in Japan today. Since then this woman director on the rise has explored issues related to Japanese family life in a number of feature-length films.

The coveted Golden Lion at the 1997 Venice Festival went to Fire Works (Hana-bi) by the enormously popular, multi-talented Kitano ("Beat") Takeshi. He has been active in filmmaking for a number of years. His works are what one critic has called, "innovative, blackly humorous explorations of society's fringes."

Suō Masayuki's Shall We Dance? is still fresh in memory as an international hit in 1996. No wonder it went on to win the National Board of Review Award as the best foreign picture of 1997.

Miyazaki Hayao's animation Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi, 2002) made history by earning the all-time highest gross in Japanese cinema. It also won the award for Best Director at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival and more recently won a 2003 Oscar in the Best Animation category.

It is no disrespect to the achievements of Miyazaki and his peers today to say that their successes owe much to their predecessors of half a century ago. Three of those old masters are especially relevant to an educated understanding of today's young masters of Japanese cinema. They are Mizoguchi Kenji (1898-1956), Ozu Yasujirō (1903-63) and Kurosawa Akira (1910-98).

Questions of artistic inheritance can be set aside here in favor of another aspect of continuity too often overlooked: the role those old masters played in building today's vast international audience for Japanese cinema. Most critics agree that Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Kurosawa all did

their best work in the 1950s, a decade universally acknowledged as a Golden Age of Japanese Cinema. Fascinating questions flow from that confluence of masterworks. How, for example, did the best of those pictures alert international audiences to the rich heritage of the nation's cinema? How did that generation of directors help elevate Japanese cinema to such a high level of artistry? How did each old master's international career take shape?

These questions have been mulled over by critic after critic in book after book over the years. Some of the best have appeared in English. All, in general, agree that Kurosawa's Rashōmon Ugetsu (1953) and Ozu's Tokyo Story (Tokyo monogatari, 1953) can serve as touchstones of Japanese cinematic art in the 1950s. They also agree that the international audience drawn to these masterworks got more than a superficial exposure to "exotic" Japanese culture--they gained a deeper understanding of the art of cinema itself.

Mizoguchi's critics too have done their best to elucidate "the art part" of these classics. But what of the audience itself? Has enough been done to help non-Japanese viewers see all that there is to see? After all--as the need for subtitles itself suggests--viewing in such a case calls for a kind of "reading" too. Not of course just dialogue translated, but all manner of cultural specificities must be translated as well. That has been my mission for decades in the classroom, and in a number of books and articles: to help audiences "read" Japanese cinema. Like any skill, this one seeks ease in method--the critical one I have developed over the years, thanks to the patient enthusiasm of more students and colleagues than I can count.

## Rashōmon (1950)

On September 7, 1998, Kurosawa Akira died of a stroke at his home in Tokyo. He was eighty-eight. The next day's New York Times obituary was one of the longest the paper had published in the last decade.

Its length alone was a fitting tribute to the scope of Kurosawa's achievement and the recognition it earned him at home and abroad. Film lovers East and West know him as the masterful director whose annus mirabilis was 1951. The judges at that year's Venice Festival awarded its Grand Prize to his Rashōmon. The film also won an Oscar for the best foreign-language picture of 1951. Thus, his tenth film, marked the beginning of the Golden age in Japanese cinema.

The film opens with ten rapid shots of a half-ruined gate, the Rashōmon, in the midst of a pour down. Then the priest at the gate says: "War, earthquakes, great winds, fires, famines, plague--each year is full of disaster."

Here Kurosawa counts very heavily on the Japanese audience's knowledge of their nation's history. The film is set in the ancient capital of Japan, Kyoto, in the twelfth century. The era marked Japan's transition from aristocracy to feudalism; it was a period characterized by civil wars. Moreover, Buddhist religious thinkers of that century believed that they were witnessing the final degenerate phase of the world. According to them, Buddhism would enter into the descending cycle known as the last phase of the Dharmic Law (mappō). This degeneration was evidenced by growing political strife and disorder, and in general the rapid disintegration of

morals. So the ruined Rashōmon gate is a microcosmic representation of the political, religious and moral chaos that prevailed in twelfth-century Japan.

The word "Rashōmon" literally means the gate in which Ra (one of Devas) was born. When the Heian capital was originally built at the end of the eighth century, it served as a glorious southern entrance to the capital.

Thus the film starts with a keen awareness of the fragmented state of the world. However, the world is not utterly chaotic beyond redemption. The gargoyle and the signboard appear intact amid the devastation. The integrity of these two religious symbols implies that the fragmented world still holds out a potential for restoration. Kurosawa is a moralist whose premise of a tortured, fragmented world leads to a question demanding a committed inquiry, namely: 'Where is the basis for hope of renewal to be found?'

In fact, the film Rashōmon took its cues from two short stories by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: "Yabu no Naka" (In the Grove) and "Rashōmon." A great deal has been written about Kurosawa's adaptation of these stories. Still, one can hardly mention his achievement without pausing to consider the sure touch he brings to adapting these two works.

In Rashōmon, Akutagawa invests the Rashōmon gate with multiple meanings. A servant dismissed leaves by way of the gate of his master's house--fit symbol for the life of a law-abiding citizen. In contrast, the Rashōmon gate, once a glorious Southern entrance to the capital, is shown degraded, serving as a hideout for thieves and petty criminals. Unclaimed corpses are also abandoned there. The gate has become a world in itself, a microcosm representing the religious, moral and political chaos prevailing in twelfth-century Japan.

The gate also symbolizes the boundary between two worlds: an entrance from one level of existence to another. The servant, waiting for a break in the rain, must decide what he will do with his life. Does he emerge from the gate morally intact or corrupted? This is the central question posed by the author. He shows the man passing through a series of moral conflicts. By the time he vanishes into the depths of night, his descent into the bestial is complete. Kurosawa's film retains the original symbolic function of the gate. But he enriches it with a contemporary comparison--with the chaos of postwar Japan. Akutagawa's ruined gate, like the servant's flawed complexion, speaks for a world deformed beyond redemption. Kurosawa insists on a ray of hope, though signifying it ironically, by means of a gargoyle and a signboard still intact in blinding rain.

Importantly, the servant in the original short story is transformed into the commoner at the gate in the film. In the end, the commoner strips the clothes off a foundling and disappears in the rain.

The other original source, "In a Grove" is basically different versions of the story about the murder/rape that takes place in a forest. It begins with the testimony of a woodcutter questioned by a high police commissioner. Then an itinerant monk, a policeman, an old woman, a bandit and a wife give their own testimony. The short story concludes with the confession of a

samurai/husband given through a medium. Akutagawa leaves the ending open, inviting the reader to bring his/her sense of closure. The bandit, the wife and the husband are directly involved in the crimes committed in the forest. When we play one version of the story against another, we can surmise that each person's self-image is completely different from the image conceived by others.

Kurosawa incorporates all these geographic settings of the stories into his film: the Rashōmon gate, the police station, and the forest. As might be expected, the police station, the place for each individual's testimony, is pervaded by light. This scene is very important cinematically. Through his camera work Kurosawa knows how to manipulate the spectator's point of view. The priest, the woodcutter, the wife and the bandit all seated in a row across the screen. They are shot from the eye-level of the police chief taking their testimony. He is, of course, off screen. However, the camera angle elevates us to the position of the chief, the objective judge. Each person is avoiding the eye of the camera, as if afraid of the judgment. Thus, the camera's position encourages us, the viewers, to search beyond the surface in order to distinguish reality from appearance. In other words, each viewer is the judge. He/she must play over version of the story against another and come up with a meaningful interpretation of these incongruous stories given by the four major characters: the samurai, his wife, the bandit and the woodcutter.

Let's see how it works. The woodcutter confesses that he has not seen the dagger that penetrated the husband's chest; and therefore, he is innocent of its theft. However, towards the end, the commoner claims that there is an ample ground for us to believe that he stole it. The wife, Masago, insists that she was raped, but the stories given by her husband and Tajōmaru affirm that she enjoyed the sexual encounter. Moreover, the woodcutter's second story tells that the wife is an instigator of murder. Along with Masago's, his story also describes the husband as lacking in physical strength and devoid of compassion. On the contrary, the husband's version asserts that he was true to the samurai code. In his confession, Tajōmaru stresses his bravery and excellent swordsmanship. He says that he and the samurai crossed swords over twenty times. However, in the second version of the woodcutter's story, the duel turned out to be a match between two cowards.

The forest is dark and the police station is sunlit. Quite obviously, they suggest a bifurcation of man's nature: reason versus impulse. Exposed to the sunlight at the police station, the woodcutter, the samurai, Masago and Tajōmaru all tell their stories, faithful to their own illusion of what they should be. The sunlight over their heads symbolizes their return to reason. They don their social masks and confess in a manner that will protect their self-images and will sanctify their sense of moral justice.

Then, why does Kurosawa place three individuals at the gate? Kurosawa seems to be posing this important question: "What is man's nature?" "Is man's nature essentially good or bad or a combination of both?" Each time the scene is cut back to gate where the film started, the debate over man's nature between the priest and the commoner becomes more intense. The woodcutter remains silent until the final sequence. The film offers three answers in response. An idealistic view is presented by the priest. Throughout the film the priests tries assert his view that man is capable of good; that even when he lies he lies through recourse to reason, even if a

purely selfish reason like self-defense. A pessimistic view is represented by the commoner, who says: "The world we live in is a hell. Everyone is selfish." A more positive response emerges in the final part of the film. The final answer, given through the woodcutter, is a synthesis. It claims that man is good to the extent that he tries to be good.

Kurosawa seems to say we must probe the question of man's nature by playing the various accounts of the murder against one another. The existence of the incongruous stories implies that if man is put through the ordeal of life, the way he acts will reveal his inner nature.

The second version of the woodcutter's story and the final sequence are both added by the director. In fact, the film turns around with the introduction of the baby. Here, the commoner and the woodcutter now act out their respective views on man's nature. When the commoner sees the baby, he kneels over it and strips it of the clothes.

The baby is a symbol of fertility and future--a hope for a better society. Until this point, the woodcutter has been verbally inexpressive of his own view of man's nature. Now he shows his opinion through action; he tries to support the priest's view and defend goodness.

The commoner disappears into the rain. Three shots follow, showing the priest and the woodcutter standing under the gate. Each is terminated by a dissolve. Referring to the dissolve, the film critic Donald Richie states that this technique usually suggests time passing and is at the same time a formal gesture--a gesture which makes us look, makes us feel. It emphasizes the lapse of psychological time, during which the woodcutter's mind goes through a radical transformation--a transformation which might have escaped the audience's attention had a simple cut been used. The guilt and remorse over what he did in the forest-the theft of the dagger--awaken compassion for the foundling. The transition from rain into sunlight through the dissolves clearly corresponds to the woodcutter's shift in values.

The ending of the film brings a sense of closure to the film. It also offers an answer for the question posed by the moralist Kurosawa. After the finale of traditional Japanese music, the woodcutter leaves the gate into the sunlight, with the infant in his arms. Then the camera swiftly moves to a long shot of the woodcutter from the opposite angle. As he walks toward the camera, he stops and bows to the priest, beaming with happiness. The film ends with a close-up of the signboard still intact amid the devastation.

The woodcutter's decision to adopt the abandoned baby is clearly altruistic, clearly a means to save a fallen society. Moreover, this redeeming instance of a compassionate individual obviously takes the place of institutional responses, as evidenced by the priest in this tale.

## Ugetsu (1953)

After so many attempts, Mizoguchi broke out of his postwar doldrums with two of his finest films: The Life of Oharu, (Saikaku ichidai onna), 1952 and Ugetsu (1953). The first brought him into the international limelight when he shared the best director award (The Silver Lion) with John Ford for The Quiet Man at the 1952 Venice Festival. The latter, his seventy-eighth film, won the

Silver Lion along with the Italian Critics Award at the same festival the following year. In fact, success of these films had a lot to do with Mizoguchi's hallmark-the long take which helped him create the same kind of rhythmic beauty seen in the medieval emakimono, or picture scrolls, as we shall see.

Ugetsu was inspired by two different literary sources: "The House Amid the Thickets" (Asaji ga Yado) and "The Lust of the White Serpent" (Jasei no in), two tales from Ueda Akinari's collection of supernatural stories, Tales of Moonlight and Rain (Ugetsu Monogatari, 1776) as well as the French 19th century author Guy de Maupassant's story "La Décoration." But these stories were superbly transformed by Mizoguchi's veteran scriptwriters, Yoda Yoshikata and Kawaguchi Matsutarō, to accommodate the director's life-long thematic constant: women's confrontation with a male-dominated, money-oriented society.

Ugetsu rises above many Mizoguchi films because it lifts personal issues to a more universal plane and does so brilliantly. In this film the question of social injustice is related to the suffering masses and to their struggle to survive the forces of oppression. Mizoguchi explained these convictions in a letter to his scriptwriter, Yoda:

Whether the war originates in the ruler's personal motives, or in some public concern, how violence, disguised as war, oppresses the torments the populace both physically and spiritually! . . . . I want to emphasize this as the main theme of the film.

The film's action concerns two ways of confronting the Japanese postwar situation was through the use of historical period of the sixteenth century. The first, represented by Genjūrō, Tobei, and to a certain extent, Ohama, Tobei's wife, is the way of opportunistic greed that involves geographic mobility. The second, represented by Miyagi, Genjūrō's wife, is the way of optimistic endurance that entails devotion to community and orientation towards the future.

The first part of the film focuses on the clash of these opposing values and the resultant dissolution of the family. The second concerns Genjūrō's obsession with illusion and the restoration of the family. Mizoguchi explores the clash of values in a rather fundamental manner: through the depiction of each character's attitudes towards money, when wartime provides are opportunities for riches.

We initially glimpse the power of money to pit wife against husband, woman against woman, when Genjūrō and Tobei return from their first pottery-selling trip. Genjūrō boasts about the value of this windfall for his family. Miyagi values family solidarity more than material gain. Then too, the wise village headman warns him not to be greedy.

Genjūrō's change of character is reinforced by the clash between Miyagi and Ohama. Miyagi laments her husband's transformation. Ohama defends their spirit of opportunism. She even acts on her materialistic drive by joining the two men on their selling expedition. Miyagi, a paragon of the submissive wife, follows her husband's orders to remain behind.

As the rest of the film clearly shows, it is these women who typify wartime suffering and oppression most strongly. Tobei's ambition leads him to a mistaken attempt to act above his

social status. Tobei decides to buy the suit of armor he needs to become the great samurai of his dreams, and in this process Ohama becomes a victim of male selfishness. After she is raped by roaming samurai, we see her working in a brothel.

Miyagi's traditional endurance has a more tragic consequence. She is betrayed by her husband's commonplace greed and later by his sensual abandon in the arms of the demonic Lady Wakasa. To fend for her child, she fights against the deserters and is killed.

Mizoguchi's ideal type of woman is the one who nobly forgives. In this film too, both Ohama and Miyagi prove to be such. The wife's forgiveness and the husband's growing self-knowledge are to effect the latter's redemption. Ohama's reconciliation with Tobei takes place in the brothel scene. Tobei, as a client, sees his wife relentlessly pursue a nonpaying client in order to get the money that is due her. Her action here show that she has mettle enough to turn each stage of her suffering into some act of aggression in defiance of her male oppressors. Even so, we see that her fallen status has not, in fact, compromised her wifely devotion at all. She says: "I wanted to kill myself so many times, but I couldn't because I wanted to see you just one more time!"

Miyagi and Genjūrō's reconciliation is presented in a supernatural scene confirming her familial role as a devoted wife and mother. Here, she appears as a ghost to keep watch over her family. Her nobly forgiving character powerfully surges when she simply says to her remorseful husband:

"Don't say another word. You are back safe now. That's all matters!"

The theme of those four individuals' confrontation with a chaotic feudal society might be expected to yield a highly realistic, politically committed, docu-drama, yet Mizoguchi does something different. He engages with his material on several levels of perception-realistic, aesthetic, religious, and mystical-in a uniquely successful integration of theme and style.

The famous boat scene in the first half of the film is often cited as the prime example. Genjūrō and Tobei load their wares into a small boat and both families start out on a trip across a lake to the town: Genjūrō, Miyagi and their small son, along with Tobei and Ohama. The scene opens with a long shot of the boat emerging from the mist approaching the camera. This in itself engenders a supernatural mood. It is also enhanced by Ohama's monotonous singing that merges with distant drum beats. The sound of distant guns from time to time reminds us of the realism of war as experienced by the passengers. The boat, turning ninety degrees, shows its side. Mizoguchi's famous long take (one-scene, one-shot method) follows, fixing our attention on the five in the boat. The passengers and the boat are completely subsumed into a general texture of gray, as mist slowly erases the monochromatic contrast.

When the supernatural atmosphere wanes gradually, the film takes on a marvelously realistic dimension both visually and auditorily. The two men in the boat, drinking sake, begin to discuss how to capitalize on the war. In contrast, Miyagi silently nibbles food, her face showing sad resignation.

Suddenly the long take yields to a shifting mood. The supernatural atmosphere returns again as a point-of-view shot reveals a strange boat approaching from the distance. The mist still hovers over the lake. It steeps everything in a kind of supernatural ambiance. The drum beats become louder and louder, as Ohama's singing diminishes. A long shot of the two boats almost stern to stern quietly gives way to a medium shot of both.

The opening long take is noted for the liquid flow of the camera panning across a field. Its effect is that of unfolding an emakimono, a Japanese medieval scroll painting. The same liquid camera movement closes the film. The exterior of the potter Genjūrō's house, is first presented. The formerly barren ground is now changed it: a farm which Tobei is tilling. The camera follows the little boy toward his mother's tomb and stops as he kneels to place offering. Its movement offers us a moment for reflection on the effect of war upon the lives of the four persons and their entire village. Then it pans up and travels across the field to show the entire community.

More significant, a crane shot of the entire village implies a deeper philosophical idea, the concept of mujō (the impermanence of all earthly phenomena), deeply rooted in Buddhism. So many changes in the individuals' lives including Miyagi's death and Genjūrō's brief love affairs make this vision possible. Then too, the potter's rotating wheel, introduced twice, represents a perpetual cycle of life, as opposed to a teleological belief in history. The film begins and ends with a similar stylistic manner. Yet there is a change. The tension of war is gone, and ease of peace is suggested as part of a cyclical pattern working itself out in the fullness of time.

## Tokyo Story (1953)

Despite the highly critical acclaim Ozu's films enjoyed at home, recognition abroad was very slow to come. The Japanese film industry was largely to blame. Studio heads were convinced that foreign audiences would be baffled by films so quintessentially Japanese in their approach to cinematic art. How could foreigners possibly engage with this master non pareil of the stationary camera trained on a leisurely unfolding of subject matter so simple and direct?

So it was that Ozu's films weren't entered in international festivals, much less given a share of overseas marketing budgets. When finally Tokyo Story made its way to the 1957 London International Film Festival, it won the Sutherland Award for best picture. In hindsight it looks like a prescient choice, since Ozu was not an overnight success, even with those in the know. critics and filmmakers took nearly a decade to see Ozu at his true worth. Like viewers in general, they needed time to acculturate, to absorb and savor the distinctly Japanese character of his cinematic style, all made possible thanks to improved international distribution of Ozu's films.

By the 1970s Ozu joined Mizoguchi and Kurosawa as a master of cinema renowned worldwide. He made more than fifty films in the course of a very long career, though Tokyo Story holds pride of place with audiences everywhere, even in Japan. A good many Ozu connoisseurs consider it his best as well.

Let's begin by saying that Tokyo Story is the locus classicus of Japanese "simplicity." It is a word one might use to characterize most of the fifty-four films that Ozu made since his debut in 1927.

Unfortunately, Ozu's simplicity needs a cultural "footnote" for those who are unfamiliar with Japanese cultural traditions and life-styles. A good example can be found in the famous garden of Ryōanji Temple in Kyoto. Consisting of five clusters of rocks arranged on raked sand, the garden elicits complex responses in the viewer. It is a classical instance of simplicity-as-complexity. It is precisely such mastery of simple means that Ozu, in the words of the film critic Donald Richie, is "the most Japanese of all directors."

What is the basis for this simplicity in his films? It begins with the kind of simply patterned story he prefers: the story of the life of the middle-class Japanese family. Ozu continually returns to this theme that seems peculiarly his and tells how the relationships of the family members are affected by events in their daily lives. As Donald Richie notes, events in his films lead typically to the dissolution of the family: the daughter gets married and leaves the father or the mother alone; the parents go off to live with one of the children; or perhaps the mother or the father dies.

Given this strong attachment to familiar scenes and events, Ozu is free to make the most of his very simple means. The tempo of his films is leisurely. In most cases, his view is quite literally "on the level," the camera being fixed at the eye level of a person sitting on a Japanese tatami straw mat. He uses only the three standard shots: long, medium, and close-up. As might be expected, the medium shot is the basic unit of his style. Close-ups are never overly large, even when they are used. There is no waste in the alignment of characters. Scenery is presented with an austere formal symmetry and delicate selectiveness reminiscent of Japanese brush painting.

Sequences tend to open with a rather formal patterning: a cut from an empty exterior to an empty hallway to an empty room that the character enters. Significantly, a shot of uninhabited landscape is central to an understanding of Ozu's films because it is charged with emotive qualities and philosophical overtones, as we shall see.

Tokyo Story illuminates the close interaction of these three elements. Despite the simplicity of its story and theme and the economy of its cinematography, the film is complex in ways that Japanese audiences find immediately available, given their intimate knowledge of the cultural milieu which Ozu presents so skillfully. For example, Ozu, the scriptwriter of most of his films, has a masterful way with nuances of meaning and subtle ironies conveyed through the Japanese language itself. Sometimes, a world of meaning is conveyed in little more than a monosyllable spoken by a character. The father in Tokyo Story is a famous example of this "hinting eloquence." Gestures, too, even the most insignificant ones, are apt to portray shades of feeling that cannot be in plain words.

As mentioned above, the same can be said of "commonplace" views of landscape. One might say that Ozu can and does count on a rich intuitive response from his Japanese audiences. How does he achieve his desired effect? Here an analysis of a few major scenes will suffice to provide some insight into the method of this masterly director.

Tokyo Story was inspired by the American director Leo MacCarey's silent film Make Way for Tomorrow. The story is a simple three-part tale that focuses on the aged parents' relationships with their children. The first and shortest section is set in the little town of Onomichi in western Honshu. It shows an old couple-Shūkichi and Tomi-preparing for their trip to Tokyo. The middle section covers their reunion there with their two married children and the widow of their second son. It focuses on Shūkichi and Tomi's disillusionment with their own children. The only true kindness that they receive comes from their daughter-in-law Noriko.

The third section, again set in Onomichi, depicts Tomi's death. The children are called to her deathbed and hurry away after the funeral. Again it is Noriko who stays behind to see the old father settled in. Then, she, too must return to Tokyo, leaving him alone with his youngest daughter Kyōko.

Thus, the central problem that Tokyo Story offers is: "How does each family member come to terms with the dissolution of a family, and ultimately, with its epitome, death?" Revolving around it are three choices of action. The first, represented by Shūkichi, Tomi and Noriko, is a calm resigned acceptance of these human conditions as necessary to our existence. This choice is made by those who possess both compassion and sensitivity-common emotional traits of Ozu's characters. The second alternative, represented by the three older Hirayama children (Kōichi, Shige and Keizō), is an indifferent acceptance of these human conditions. Lacking compassion and sensitivity, they regard the separation of the family as just another inconsequential fact of life. The youngest child of the Hirayama family, Kyōko, represents the third stance-refusal to accept the dissolution of the family. Young and inexperienced, Kyōko claims that each family member should attempt to shore up the weakening family solidarity. This stance, however, is not as distinct an issue as the other two are.

Importantly, Tokyo Story, like other Ozu films, does not present a dynamic conflict among these three choices. Rather, we see them co-existing in a complementary way.

One of the major events in the second section of the story concerns the old couple's trip to Atami, a hot spring resort. Too busy to take care of their parents, Shige and Koichi decide to send them to a cheap Japanese inn at Atami for a few days of recreation. There is their expedient means for releasing themselves from the burden of personally entertaining their parents. The hot spring scene not only exposes the nature of the children's attitudes towards their parents but also reveals the way in which the aged couple face their own lives.

Unaware of their children's real intentions, the old couple dressed in the summer kimonos, enjoy a moment of relaxation. Shūkichi, looking at the sea that stretches beneath the window of their room, says in a monotonous voice: "the quiet sea . . ." Tomi responds: "Yes."

Through the seemingly banal experience of the old couple, Ozu keeps us reminding that Shūkichi and Tomi try to face changes in life in accordance with the traditional view of life. When Ozu cuts to the exterior of the inn and presents a single shot of the calm ocean and the island, this single shot is extremely effective in marking for us the moment of the couple's inner peace.

Tomi's funeral, the most dramatic event in the film, offers us Ozu's masterful artistry. To guide us to the interior of the temple, the site of the funeral, Ozu uses two shots of empty scenes: first, a close-up of the temple wall; and then a long shot of the entire building. The priests' prayer and the wooden prayer drum coming from inside the main hall pervades the sound track. When the camera cuts inside, we see Shūkichi and his children seated in a row in mourning: they are facing the same direction and holding their head at the same angle. The filmic composition of this take is an impressive combination of Ozu's aesthetic and thematic concerns. The Japanese film critic Satō Tadao has observed that the viewers come to imagine that the characters in the narrative, by concentrating on one thing, have fallen into a state of mind similar to meditation. Or, it is one, which makes us imagine that the characters in the story, by concentrating on one thing, have fallen into a state of mind similar to meditation." Then too, this composition serves as an adept medium for reinforcing the concept of mujō (the mutability of all earthly phenomena) sustained throughout the film.

The last section of the film offers a revealing moment of bond between the father and the daughter-in-law. Noriko, who stayed behind to take care of him, is ready to return to Tokyo. Shūkichi goes to the Buddhist altar and takes out a woman's watch from one of the drawers. It belonged to his late wife. He offers it to Noriko as a memento and says: "I'm really concerned about you. I want you to be happy-I really mean it."

Thereupon, Noriko begins to cry. Ozu shows her face covered with her hands, in close-up (but not an extreme one). He does not explain the reason for Noriko's sudden emotional outburst; he merely presents it as a fact.

It is another of those rare close-ups, marking the moment of crystallization of family solidarity. The affection between Shūkichi and Noriko finally surges to the fore. Shūkichi says: "It's strange—You have been kinder to us than our own children—Thank you." In spite of the monotone of his voice, his gratitude is directly transmitted to Noriko's sensitive heart. The scene ends with a medium shot of Noriko trying to suppress her tears.

At the very end of the film, the scene shifts to the Hirayama house. Ozu recapitulates familiar commonplaces of everyday life. Shūkichi fans himself, looking out to the distant sea. The next-door neighbor, who talked to Shūkichi and Tomi in the opening sequence, enters and speaks to him. All this "connects" Shūkichi with his new condition: he is alone. Ozu manages these repetitions so deftly that we, the audience, feel what we have seen: Shūkichi's solitude and his resigned acceptance of his wife's death.

Now Ozu takes us to the conclusion of the film. He offers a point-of-view shot of a tiny ship gliding on a distant inlet. Then he cuts to the profile of Shūkichi still watching the sea. The ship gradually leaves the inlet for the open sea. The last shot presents the ship as a tiny point on the inlet, while we hear the whistle on the sound track. In this final shot Ozu expresses the world view that is implicit in the film. The view is like a still-life view, which suggests Oneness. In the complete fusion of the man-made object and nature the universal law manifests itself: in the reservoir of the fertile life force, human transitions comprise only a single segment, such as this small boat on the vast stretch of the ocean.

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## Suggested Reading


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Satō, Tadao. *Currents in Japanese Cinema: Essays*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1982

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