

Tokyo Story / Tokyo Monogatari (1953) Ozu

P Michell, 2014

Creative Talent:

Producer: Takeshi Yamamoto

Director: Yasujiro Ozu

Script: Kogo Noda and Yasujiro Ozu

Photography: Yuharu Atsuta

Art Direction: Tatsuo Hamada

Costume Design: Taizo Saito

Editing: Yoshiyasu Hamamura

Music: Kojun Saito

Cast: Chishu Ryu (Shukishi), Chieko Higashiyama (Tomi), Setsuko Hara (Noriko), Haruko Sugimura (Shige), Nobuo Nakamura (Kurazo), So Yamamura (Koichi), Kuniko Miyake (Ayako), Kyoko Kagawa (Kyoko), Eijiro Tono (Sanpei), Shiro Osaka (Keizo), Zen Murase (Minoru), Mitsuhiro Mori (Isamu).

B&W - 136m.

Synopsis:

A bitter sweet story:

An elderly man (Ryu) and his wife (Higashiyama) decide to visit their two married children in Tokyo. But the son (Yamamura) and daughter (Sugimura) are busy with their own lives and send them off to a resort. Only the widow (Hara) of a son killed in the war is kind to them. When they return, the mother falls sick and the children are sent for. But she can no longer recognise them and, after the funeral, they rush away again. Only the daughter-in-law stays on until the father advises her to get married again. Then he is left alone in an empty house.

Sadoul, Dictionary of Films (ed Morris) 1965, translation 1972.

Yasujiro Ozu (1903 – 1963) – Director

One of the great artists of the cinema, a filmmaker the Japanese themselves consider the most Japanese but one whose work was until recently (1965) little known in the West. He joined Shochiku at the age of twenty and four years later made his first film. Apart from his early nonsense-comedy films he specialised throughout his 40 year film career and 54 films in *shomingeki*, social comedies and dramas about the lower middle-class – especially office workers – their family life and the traditional ways of life. He was much more interested in character and observation than in action or plot: "Pictures with obvious plots bore me now. Naturally, a film must have some kind of structure or else it is not a film, but I feel that a picture isn't good if it has too much action."

Donald Richie wrote: "With little or no interest in plot movement, Ozu concerns himself with character development, and all of his better films represent a leisurely disclosure of character, the like of which is rare in the films of any director ... Ozu's characters and his tempo are in perfect synchronisation with this time system he has created. His is time as it actually is. It is psychological time and so clock timing has no meaning. Critic Tsuneo Hazumi's remark that 'Ozu's world is one of stillness' is accurate only if one realises that this stillness, this repose, is the surface which it presents and that, beneath this world, lies the thwarted yet potential violence found in the Japanese family system."

His style is economic and sparse in the extreme yet completely rigorous. He eschewed most accepted cinematic and editing devices and almost never moved the camera during shooting. Continued scenes were almost always shot in one take and from the same viewpoint, about three feet from floor level, the level of someone seated in traditional fashion on *tatami*: "It is the attitude of a haiku master (with whom Ozu shares much) who sits in utter silence and with an occasionally painful accuracy observes cause and effect, reaching essence through an extreme simplification. Inextricable from Buddhist precepts, it puts the world at a distance and makes the spectator a recorder of impressions which do not personally involve him" (Donald Richie).

He took great pains preparing his scripts (usually in collaboration with Kogo Noda), selecting the right actors for the roles he was evolving and choosing carefully the properties used on the sets so that they played a role in revealing the personalities of his characters.

"Ozu's attitude to the films has always been that of a perfectionist ... In everything that Ozu does in films, the parts fit so perfectly that one is never conscious of the virtuosity with which it is done. His pictures are so subtle – the precise opposite of Kurosawa's that one never things to praise the skill which his effects are achieved" (Donald Richie).

Sadoul, Dictionary of Film Makers (ed Morris) 1965, translation 1972.

Trivia:

- The film is notable for its use of the "tatami-mat" shot, in which the camera height is low and remains largely static throughout.
- Thus ceilings have to be shown (not often seen in films).
- Ozu painted the banners.
- Although made in the early 50s alongside many other Japanese films now considered classics - *Rashomon* (1950), *Ugetsu* (1953) and *Gate of Hell* (1953) - this didn't receive US release until 1964, by which time Ozu was already dead.
- Voted #7 in Total Film's 100 Greatest Movies Of All Time list (November 2005).
- Voted the greatest movie of all time in Sight & Sound's 2012 director's poll.

- American cinema expert Donald Richie took (the Indian director) [Satyajit Ray](#) to see the film. Ray was overcome with emotion by the end.

Source – imdb.com

Other writers have uniformly called *Tokyo Story* a masterpiece, or, as the late Penelope Gilliatt labeled it, “one of the manifest miracles of cinema.” Even that staunch critic of narrative film, Jonas Mekas, said that “there is in it none of the stuff from which movies are made—images, movement, light. But, my God, what a movie!” Speaking of God, Ozu’s strongest advocate, Donald Richie, refers to the spiritual or religious nature of the director’s films, but paradoxically emphasizes that Ozu’s worldview is completely people-centered. I find it slightly ironic that Ozu, whose movies are all about family life, never married, spending most of his adulthood living with his mother. He died on his 60th birthday and is buried in Kamakura, where he was born. The cemetery is next to the train station, just a short ride from Tokyo and modern reality. I spent a rainy day there once, trying to find him.

Charles Silver, Curator, Dept of Film, Museum of Modern Art, NY. 2012.

Mr. Ozu looked happiest when he was engaged in writing a scenario with Mr. Kogo Noda, at the latter’s cottage on the tableland of Nagano Prefecture. By the time he finished writing a script, after about four months’ effort, he had already made up every image in every shot, so that he never changed the scenario after we went on the set. The words were so polished up that he would not allow us even a single mistake.

Recounted by Chishu Ryu (father in Tokyo Story) Source – senses of cinema – Ozu in Depth - below

Links:

British Film Institute

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/ozu-yasujiro-master-time>

Yasujiro Ozu – in depth

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/ozu/>

Analysis:

The crown jewel in Ozu’s career is widely regarded as being *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*, 1953). It consistently makes all-time top ten film lists around the world along with *Citizen Kane*, *Rules Of the Game* and *Vertigo*. It is Ozu’s sad, simple story of generational conflict where an elderly couple’s visit to their busy, self-absorbed offspring in Tokyo is met with indifference. This ingratitude only serves to reveal permanent emotional differences, which the parents gracefully accept and then return home. It is in *Tokyo Story* where Ozu’s form reaches its zenith. The apparent lack of plot (not of story, but of story events) is replaced by a series of moments

which have a cumulative effect, and of ellipses. David Desser highlighted the different kinds of ellipses in *Tokyo Story*, (9) identifying them as follows. “Minor ellipsis” denotes the dropping of a minor plot event—for example, a character discusses sending their parents on holiday and the next shot shows the parents on holiday (Ozu having elided scenes where the parents are persuaded to go on holiday). “Surprise ellipsis” can be demonstrated by Ozu preparing the viewer for a scene and then simply eliding the whole event for effect—a risky strategy, as the greater the ellipsis the more alert the viewer must be. Finally, “dramatic ellipsis” is concerned with the offscreen occurrence of something dramatic, which the viewer only hears about later—for example, the sudden illness of the mother that we only hear about secondhand. Ozu maintains the mood and tone without needing to portray the events that he is eliding (unlike classical Hollywood cinema which would, generally, base itself around the things that Ozu leaves out). Indeed, the ellipses convolve and dictate the pace of the film. Ozu’s examination of the slow fracturing of the Japanese family in *Tokyo Story* is filled with quiet resignation, a never ending acceptance and the realization that tradition is subject to change. Source – senses of cinema – Ozu in Depth - above

Reviews:

Yasujiro Ozu: Tokyo Story

Derek Malcolm

The Guardian, Thursday 4 May 2000

Those brought up on the energetic diet of American cinema may find it hard to appreciate the quietist art of the great Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. He has been called the poet of family life, capable of taking the seemingly trivial and making great drama of it. Nothing was too small to be significant.

Ozu steadfastly peers into the hearts and minds of his characters until we feel we know them intimately. And the loyalty of those who love his work is as absolute as his own conviction. The number of film-makers who have made pilgrimages to his grave (marked simply by the Japanese word for nothing) runs into dozens.

Ozu started making films in 1927 and was one of the last to forsake the silent cinema. Much of this early work has been lost or destroyed. But we know from examples that he wasn't always as calmly contemplative as he was in his late work, which reached the west only in the 60s. He could make boisterous comedies and earthy chronicles of family life, containing outrageous sight gags. In the last stretch of his life, however, he had refined his art so much that it hardly seemed like art at all.

His most famous film, and certainly one of his masterpieces, is *Tokyo Story*. In it an elderly couple are taken to visit their grown-up children in Tokyo. Too busy to entertain them, the children pack them off to a noisy resort. Returning to Tokyo, the

old woman visits the widow of another son, who treats her better, while the old man gets drunk with some old companions. They seem to realise they are a burden, and simply try to smooth things over as best they can. By now the children have, albeit guiltily, given up on them; even when their mother is taken ill and dies, they rush back to Tokyo after attending the funeral. A simple proverb expresses their failure: "Be kind to your parents while they are alive. Filial piety cannot reach beyond the grave." The last sequence is of the old man alone in his seaside home, followed by an outside shot of the rooftops of the town and a boat passing by on the water. Life goes on.

The film condemns no one and its sense of inevitability carries with it only a certain resigned sadness. "Isn't life disappointing," someone says at one point. Yet the simple observations are so acute that you feel that no other film could express its subject matter much better.

Ozu shoots his story with as little movement of the camera as possible. We view scenes almost always from the floor, lower than the eye level of a seated character. He insisted that no actor was to dominate a scene. The balance of every scene had to be perfect. Chishu Ryu, who often played the father in Ozu's films about family life, once had to complete two dozen (takes) devoted to raising a tea cup.

Tokyo Story was followed by eight other films, all of them as masterful, and a group named after the seasons, including *Early Spring* and *An Autumn Afternoon*. Each was about the problems of ordinary family life. While their conservative nature made younger more polemical Japanese directors, such as Imamura and Oshima, impatient, their universality has come to be recognised the world over. Ozu was the most Japanese of film-makers, but his work can still cross most cultural barriers.

Tokyo Story: Compassionate Detachment

When *Tokyo Story* was released in late 1953, Western audiences were just being exposed to Japanese cinema. Akira Kurosawa had made his breakthrough with *Rashomon* three years earlier, and Kenji Mizoguchi was moving to the forefront of the international festival scene. In 1955, Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* would win two Academy Awards. The time would have been ripe for a very different sort of Japanese film to arrive on the global stage. Yet Yasujiro Ozu remained unknown abroad, chiefly because decision-makers considered him "too Japanese" to be exported.

Although other Ozu films were shown sporadically in Europe and the UK, it was *Tokyo Story* that broke the barrier. There were screenings here and there in the mid-1950s, an award from the British Film Institute in 1958, and programs organized by Donald Richie, throughout his life our great champion of Japanese cinema. Then the film opened in New York in 1972, coinciding with the publication of Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film*, and it won the hearts of influential critics. When Richie's *Ozu* was published two years later, critics came to realize that this quiet filmmaker was one of cinema's finest artists. In the 1992 and 2002 *Sight & Sound*

international critics' polls, *Tokyo Story* was ranked as one of the ten greatest films ever made. In the 2012 poll, it came in third, behind *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane*.

The capricious way in which this work entered world film culture might make us suspect that its renown is accidental. Surely *Late Spring* (1949) and *Early Summer* (1951), to cite only two examples, are no less excellent. Ozu himself hinted at a reservation: "This is one of my most melodramatic pictures." But *Tokyo Story* is in fact a generous introduction to his distinct world. It contains in miniature a great many of the qualities that enchant his admirers and move audiences to tears.

There is, first of all, the mundane story. Ozu and his scriptwriter, Kogo Noda, often centered their plots around getting a daughter married, a situation through which an array of characters' lives could be revealed. But *Tokyo Story* lacks even this minimal plot drive; it carries to the limit Ozu's faith that everyday life, rendered tellingly, provides more than enough drama to engage us deeply. An elderly couple leave the tiny town of Onomichi to visit their children and grandchildren. Inevitably, they trouble their hosts; inevitably, they feel guilty; inevitably, the children cut corners and neglect them. In the course of the trip, the old folks become aware of both the virtues and vanities of their offspring. On the train ride home, the mother is stricken, and shortly thereafter, she dies. This simple arc of action conceals a strong and cunning structure.

After leaving their youngest child, Kyoko, behind in Onomichi, the Hirayamas are shown visiting their other children, in descending birth order. First they stay with Koichi and his family, then with Shige and hers, then with Noriko (the widow of their third-born child), and finally with young Keizo in Osaka. Offscreen, they have already visited Keizo first, en route to Tokyo, but Ozu and Noda portray only their stopover during their return trip—partly to allow us to form expectations about how hospitable their youngest son will be, but also to respect the family-tree structure. (Ozu had experimented with this device in his first extended-family film, 1941's *The Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family*.)

This patterning would seem overneat were it not carefully buried in a wealth of details of gesture and speech, from the frantic energy of the grandsons (one whistles the theme from John Ford's *Stagecoach*) to the plaintiveness of three elderly fathers fretting over their sons' failures. Again and again, personalities emerge through concise comparisons. The businesswoman Shige is hardheaded enough to pack a funeral kimono for the trip home, but it never occurs to Noriko that her mother-in-law, Tomi, will die, so she is unprepared. Who can say that pragmatism is less virtuous than innocence? Jane Austen, Anton Chekhov—these are the artists who come to mind when we confront a story told through such tactful revelations of temperament and states of mind. Yet there is nothing soft about Ozu's tact, which can be astringent. "What a treat," reflects Tomi, "to sleep in my dead son's bed."

Tokyo Story also exemplifies Ozu's unique style—low camera height, 180 degree

cuts, virtually no camera movements, and shots linked through overlapping bits of space. In dialogue scenes, Ozu seldom cuts away from a speaking character. It's as if every person has the right to be heard in full. In other films, he deploys his distinctive techniques more playfully, but here he seems chiefly concerned with creating a quiet world against which his characters' personalities can stand out.

The same delicate poise emerges in a refusal to tilt the scales. It would be easy to sentimentalize the father, Shukichi, for instance, but when he staggers back drunk from his reunion, Shige remarks that he's reverted to his old ways. The implication is that his carousing once caused family problems. (This resonates after Tomi's death: "If I had known things would come to this, I'd have been kinder to her while she was alive.") The warmhearted Noriko confesses to forgetting occasionally about her dead husband, measuring herself against a cruelly high standard. Likewise, most of the siblings aren't deeply selfish, just preoccupied and caught up in the lives they have made for themselves. Even Shige, whom Western viewers are inclined to censure, surprises us with her sudden, copious, utterly sincere burst of tears at her mother's death; and her harsh edges are mitigated by the fact that she's played by Haruko Sugimura, one of Japan's most beloved female performers.

Thanks to Ozu's compassionate detachment, the final scenes take on enormous richness of feeling, as we watch characters contemplate their futures. Noriko smilingly says to Kyoko, "Isn't life disappointing?"; Shukichi assures Noriko that she must remarry; the neighbor jovially warns Shukichi that now he'll be lonely. Yet the momentous revelations are tempered by the poetic resonance of everyday acts and objects. Shukichi greets a beautiful sunrise—signaling another day of brisk fanning and plucking at one's kimono. An ordinary wristwatch links mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law in a lineage of hard-earned feminine wisdom. And the roar of the train headed back to Tokyo dies down, leaving only the throbbing of a boat in the bay.

David Bordwell is a professor of cinema studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the author of Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema. He writes about cinema at www.davidbordwell.net. A version of this piece originally appeared in the 2003 Criterion Collection DVD release of Tokyo Story. It has been updated by the author for the film's Blu-ray and DVD dual-format release.

Ozu's Quietly Brilliant Masterpiece Deserves Your Attention

[Ed Uyeshima](#)

I think this movie is amazing for reasons I was not expecting. I had heard of Yasujiro Ozu's "Tokyo Story" for several years but never had an opportunity to see it until Criterion resuscitated it as part of their DVD collection. Over fifty years old, this wondrous 1953 film resonates just as deeply today. Those outside Japan rarely get

to see a Japanese film classic that doesn't involve samurai warriors in medieval battles. This one, however, is a subtly observed family drama set in post-WWII Japan, and it is the quietude and lack of pretense of Ozu's film-making style that makes this among the most moving of films.

The plot centers on Shukishi and Tomi, an elderly couple, who traverse the country from their southern fishing village of Onomichi to visit their adult children, daughter Shige and son Koichi, in Tokyo. Leading their own busy lives, the children realize their obligation to entertain them and pack them off to Atami, a nearby resort targeted to weekend revelers. Returning to Tokyo unexpectedly, Tomi visits their kindly daughter-in-law, Noriko, the widow of second son Shoji, while Shukishi gets drunk with some old companions. The old couple realizes they have become a burden to their children and decide to return to Onomichi. They also have a younger daughter Kyoko, a schoolteacher who lives with them, and younger son Keizo works for the train company in Osaka. By now the children, except for Kyoko and the dutiful Noriko, have given up on their parents, even when Tomi takes ill in Osaka on the way back home. From this seemingly convoluted, trivial-sounding storyline, fraught with soap opera possibilities, Ozu has fashioned a heartfelt and ultimately ironic film that focuses on the details in people's lives rather than a single dramatic situation.

What fascinates me about Ozu's idiosyncratic style is how he relies on insinuation to carry his story forward. In fact, some of the more critical events happen off-camera because Ozu's simple, penetrating observations of these characters' lives remain powerfully insightful without being contrived. Ozu scholar David Desser, who provides insightful commentary on the alternate audio track, explains this concept as "narrative ellipses", Ozu's singularly effective means of providing emotional continuity to a story without providing all the predictable detail in between. Ozu also positions his camera low throughout his film to replicate the perspective of someone sitting on a tatami mat. It adds significantly to the humanity he evokes. There are no melodramatic confrontations among the characters, no masochistic showboating, and the dialogue is deceptively casual, as even the most off-hand remark bears weight into the story. The film condemns no one and its sense of inevitability carries with it only certain resigned sadness. What amazes me most is how the ending is so cathartic because the characters feel so real to me, not because there are manipulative plot developments, even death, which force me to feel for them.

I just love the performances, as they have a neo-realism that makes them all the more affecting. Chishu Ryu and Chieko Higashiyama are wonderfully authentic as Shukishi and Tomi, perfectly conveying the resignation they feel about their lives and their children without slipping into cheap sentimentality. Higashiyama effortlessly displays the sunny demeanor of a grandmother, so when sadness does take over in her life, it becomes all the more haunting. In particular, she has a beautiful scene where Tomi looks forlornly at her grandchild wondering what he will be when he grows up and whether she will live to see what happens. Even more

heartbreaking is the scene where Shukishi and Tomi sit in Ueno Park realizing their children have no time for them and are resigned to the fact that they need to find a place to sleep for the night. The closest the film has to a villain is Shige, portrayed fearlessly by Haruko Sugimura, who is able to show respect, pettiness and conniving in a realistically mercurial fashion. Watch her as she complains about the expensive cakes her husband bought for her parents (as she selfishly eats them herself) or how she finagles Koichi to co-finance the trip to Atami or how she shows her frustration when her parents come home early from the spa. So Yamamura (familiar to later Western audiences as Admiral Yamamoto in "Tora! Tora! Tora!") displays the right amount of indifference as Koichi, and Kyoko Kagawa has a few sharp lines toward the end of the film as the disappointed Kyoko.

But the best performance comes from the legendary Setsuko Hara, a luminous actress whose beauty and sensitivity remind me of Olivia de Havilland during the same era. As Noriko, she is breathtaking in showing her character's modesty, her unforced generosity in spite of her downscale status and her constant smile as a mask for her pain. She has a number of deeply affecting moments, for instance, when Noriko explains to Shukishi and Tomi how she misses her husband, even though it is implied he was a brutalizing alcoholic; or the touching goodbye to Kyoko; or her pained embarrassment over the high esteem that Shukishi holds for her kindness. Don't expect fireworks or any shocking moments, just a powerfully emotional film in spite of its seemingly modest approach.

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An interview about the film ...with DAN JARDINE AND BEN LIVANT

www.slantmagazine.com/house/2010/02/tokyo-story-japan-1953-yasujiro-ozu/

Wherein Ben and I struggle to compose ourselves as we compose two very similar reviews.

Ben Begins:

I am going to start by way of Beckett with a specifically formal point in mind. In my experience, *Waiting For Godot* is the most plot-less drama ever. Just about nothing

happens. At all. Just about. Of course, nobody is more aware of this than the characters themselves; constantly talking about the fact that they are doing nothing, that there is nothing to do, that nothing can be done, nothing nothing nothing. But now I am moving from the form of the thing into its content.

Tokyo Story does not get into this sort of content, this self-reflective existential business, but speaking strictly formally, it is just as plot-less a drama as *Godot*. Seriously, the big event in *Godot* is that Pozzo shows up and falls over. The big event in *Tokyo Story* is that they go home and she falls over for good. Sure, sure, there are many more episodes in *Tokyo Story*. They go here. They go there. But with respect to the formal requirements of DRAMA, just about nothing happens. At all. Just about. Yet the drama is sooooo powerful. *Tokyo Story* knocked me out.

Let me announce up front, however, that it is not Ozu's social consciousness that impresses me. It is too narrowly focused on The Family, always the primary unit for traditionalists, conservatives, reactionaries, call 'em what you will. For this camp, inter-generational discontinuity is the main expression of social disorder and decay. Certainly, this is not dogmatic in *Tokyo Story* because the complexity of the characters—they are deceptively complex—facilitates nuanced readings. Still, this reactionary familial sociology is obvious enough in the film and in the context of 1953 Japan, the political ramifications are decidedly not progressive.

It is instructive to compare *Tokyo Story* with Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952). It also touches on family life but only as an aspect of a broader concern. It locates familial breakdown in the damaged features of post-WWII Japanese society at large. *Ikiru* connects inter-generational discontinuity to foreign cultural domination and its vulgar consumerism. *Ikiru* clearly criticizes the reinstallation of the political bureaucracy in Japan under the direction of the US State Department. Against a background of supposedly upbeat capitalist development, it presents a positive image of a grassroots, working-class, bread-and-butter mobilization. Because guess what folks—the prosperity was not universal and it takes more than the family to protect the family.

In its way, *Tokyo Story* is also extremely sensitive to the realities of post-WWII Japanese society—not the least of which being the son lost to the war—but this sensitivity is confined to the private emotional world within the family. It is never brought to bear on the family from without, from social forces outside of and larger than the family itself. Again, I'm not trying to dump Ozu in a right-wing cage. There's a lot of room for interpretation. Still, even though I'm hardly educated about Japanese history I can see how Ozu's outlook would have been popular among a very wide demographic of his society in 1953. There is something Frank Capra-like about the cultural reassurance he is providing for his own people.

This comparison may sound false because ultimately Capra delivers an optimistic message whereas Ozu articulates one of resignation fraught with disappointment—Jesus; this is explicitly spoken in *Tokyo Story*! But this difference reflects the

opposite objective trajectories of America and Japan in the first half of the 20th Century as much as the subjective dispositions of the filmmakers. *Tokyo Story* is terribly sad and even sad about having to be sad. Yet, it is also comforting. I get the impression that Ozu is telling his domestic audience that any feeling of disgrace they may feel coming out of the military defeat and political occupation is OK. It's a special sort of shame, a vital part of knowing how you are unique in the world, of being truly Japanese at that moment in history. The fallout from the atomic bombs irradiated the soul of the nation. *Tokyo Story* is crawling out from the cancer, but the rekindled spirit it flickeringly offers is just numb nostalgia.

But so much for what is implicitly ideological in my eyes and looked upon by me critically to boot. That's definitely enough of that because, really, this film knocked me out. Add my name to the list of Ozu fans because all the stuff that bugged me about him before just came together this time as high art. The still shots, the flipping back and forth between speakers looking directly at the camera, the slow delivery of dialogue and complete lack of overlapping or rapid response dialogue, the almost painfully grinding pace of it all... I guess it boils down to a refusal to accelerate anything. Not just the tempo of the dialogue, but even more so, the tempo of the cuts. Ozu will not be rushed. The film is set to a silent metronome from which it uncompromisingly will not budge.

Be romantic and call this a gentle heartbeat. Or go for some coffee table Zen and say the whole thing is paradoxically driven by a no-drive; the passion comes from passionlessness, the tremendous drama from no plot at all. This must be what it is about Ozu's aesthetic that is quintessentially Japanese. Minimalism and delicacy are fundamental principles. It's the antithesis of baroque excess and novelty for its own sake. Everything is spare. No unnecessary energy is expended. This applies to the performances, the framing of individual shots, the editing of scenes, the recapitulation of images, the telling of the story as a whole—all aspects of the film are thusly informed. Less is sooooo much more.

That drama of such power can be achieved through such means is just staggering to me. For all that aesthetic restraint, the emotional appeal is spread on thick. Is this what you meant when you handed me this film and dropped Chaplin's name? *Tokyo Story* is the amazing experience of humdrum life coming off as seriously profound and this notification we receive from our hearts more than our heads. I was, of a piece, basically bored and moved to tears.

But you know, a lot of power comes from really saying something when the occasion arises. And in keeping with the conventions of drama, the occasions arise towards the end of *Tokyo Story*. And talk about really saying something! Contrary to probably racist clichés about Orientals in general being circumspect when it comes to making ad hominem comments, there are a few lines of dialogue in *Tokyo Story* that are direct bullets to the gut. I already referred to THE killer line in the film but there are a number of super-direct lines. They just burst out of the small-talk/polite-chat/dull-practical conversation like comets of truth that burn the flesh. Love hurts.

It is as sad as sad can be. But it is love. So it is also beautiful.

The pain in *Tokyo Story* is beautiful. The French come close with their category of poignancy. But this is too sensual, too openly felt, too French. When comparing Ozu's *Floating Weeds* from 1934 and his 1959 remake, I tried to suggest that although the latter was in many ways superior, something was lost from the '34 original. This quality I referred to as "a certain austerity." Yet, this is also not quite right; too Scandinavian. I can't do any better though, which is fine as long as you see the specifically Japanese thing for which I am reaching. Specifically Japanese. Universally accessible. Ozu. Art.

The smokestacks alone blew me away.

Dan Responds:

Here's what I wrote about *Tokyo Story* a few years back. You may notice a similar reference in my review.

"None can serve his parents beyond the grave." —Confucius.

Let's face it, filial piety ain't what it used to be. But it ain't all it's cracked up to be either. I mean, as a social goal, it's always seemed awfully old-fashioned to me; the sort of quiet obedience that marks devotion to one's parents has never struck me as a vital quality around which to build an enlightened society. I mean, who the hell hasn't been terminally embarrassed by one's parents? And if we don't kick and rail against everything they stand for, how are we ever going to carve out a distinct reality and identity for ourselves? So how is it that, despite much scepticism going in, I am forced to admit that Yasujirô Ozu's lifelong fascination with the familial dynamic in a rapidly-changing Japan has resulted in the production of one of the most quietly powerful studies of the gradual and inevitable erosion of filial piety in just such a world. And just how is it that, despite my misgivings regarding the value of this sort of studious and anachronistic obeisance, and regardless of how I spent much of my youth fighting against the very things that this film seems to be championing, *Tokyo Story* STILL managed to knock the pins out from under me?

A bittersweet wash of brittle facades and forced pleasantries, Yasujiru Ozu's *Tokyo Story* is a mournful movie about the disappointment innate in the experience of being a parent in a world in a state of flux. The film certainly adopts the parental point-of-view at the expense of the petty children whose self-absorption couldn't be more sponge-like. This certainly didn't incline me to get me to climb aboard this cinematic train, as the painful properness of this aging couple's relationship, both with each other and the outside world—as represented at first by an inquisitive neighbor and later by their own children—seems, like the troubling stricture of their forced smiles, strained and painfully repressed, almost to the point of obsequiousness.

However, as the film marches quietly on, it becomes clear that these are people who have arrived at some hard-fought wisdom after struggling through life's many

challenges. While these two are hardly saints themselves, as their later willingness to rake over coals of their tattered relationship with their children suggests, they have a willing acceptance of those things they cannot change. Characteristically, Shukishi (Chishū Ryū) sagely comments to an old friend who complains of the many ways he feels let down by his progeny that we "expect too much from our children."

Tokyo Story is most incisive as a study of the corrosive effects that modernity has upon the Japanese family unit. The whingeing of the ancient couple's grandson is an early sign of the discord that the parental visit is going to bring, as well as an indicator of the sort of unpleasantness seething just beneath the surface. It also shows us that the journey from parent's home in the country to the children's Tokyo setting, which happens in a heartbeat of screen time, is a long one, both literally and metaphorically. The parents have traveled far, as they have not been to Tokyo before, and are not likely to make the trip again.

When Shukishi and Tomi (Chieko Higashiyami) arrive in Tokyo, they are greeted by their children respectfully, but coolly. Their kids bicker over what to feed them, and search for ways to slip out of the noose of familial obligations, largely, it seems, because it costs them both time, and more importantly, money. At one point, the elderly couple's embarrassed daughter even denies her parents' identity, telling an acquaintance that they are just friends visiting from the country. Clearly, the distance between the parents and their children isn't just that of age and geography, but also outlook and lifestyle, values and belief. The generational conflicts serve to emphasize the separation of rural and urban, ancient and modern, east and west in a contemporary Japan seeking to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the Second World War through a near single-minded devotion to economic prosperity. Eventually the children shuffle their parents off to a coastal spa, which not only removes from them the burden of entertaining the old folks, but also saves the children money, because they won't have to miss work to take mom and dad out on the town. At the spa, as the parents gaze out at the sea, their mouths may honor their children for sending them there, but their eyes tell a different story, one of disappointment and regret.

Tokyo Story is rife with this sort of pervasive sense of loss, not just of a single life, but of what Japan has surrendered in order to enter the modern industrial world. While ominous, Tomi's morbid musings on mortality as she watches grandson pluck blades of grass also acts as a reminder of the finality of this visit, which takes on allegorical overtones for all of us—the elderly couple, like we in the audience, will not be passing this way again. Likewise, the film is an elegy to a Japanese society that is rapidly giving way. Ozu's fixation on the distinctive manners of traditional Japanese society is reminiscent of Victorian era period pieces, placing us in a world of tightly controlled emotions where you have to be patient and attentive to spot minor but significant shifts in characters' thoughts and feelings.

Those familiar with his work will see much evidence of Ozu's touch—the tatami-mat level POV, the serene camera work, the elegant mis-en-scène, and his thematic

concerns with familial discord evident throughout. While he is a much different sort of filmmaker, Ozu's *Tokyo Story* shares much in common with countryman Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru*. Both films are intimate ruminations on the power and fragility of an individual's life, both sneak up on you and slug you where it hurts, and with both films the pain stays with you for days afterwards. There is very little comfort ("Life is disappointing") and a terrible amount of sorrow ("If I'd known things would come to this, I would have been kinder to her") in *Tokyo Story*, which is remarkable given how much there is of the former and how little there is of the latter up there on the screen. How Ozu manages this is the secret of every great master; he trusts the audience to bring to the film a certain level of intelligence and emotional commitment. If you are willing and able to do the same, you should find, as I did, that *Tokyo Story* is a profoundly moving experience.

And, as for your query about Chaplin, yes, most certainly. But even more so in the comedy, which Ozu (sadly: heh) pretty much deserts after 1950, you see that same humanitarian affection that lifts Chaplin above all but a chosen few. And yes, the smokestacks. Not to mention the clotheslines.

Then Ben:

Yeah, the clotheslines too.

Well, we agree but from different directions. We agree that the authority of the elders—the father's, to be precise, in a word, patriarchy—is at least in need of questioning if not radical challenge in the hope of progress. However, you approach this individualistically and classify the family problematic in *Tokyo Story* as the collapse of filial piety. I approach this socially and classify the problem in the film as the breakdown of inter-generational continuity. For you, Ozu is upset that the children are not loyal to the parents and do not respect them accordingly. For me, Ozu is upset that the parents fail to command the respect of the children and do not attract their loyalty accordingly.

I reckon either approach to the social obligation involved is sustainable because of the complexity of the characters. Nevertheless, your approach is probably more in keeping with Japanese culture, at least that of 1953. On behalf of this concession, it occurs to me to contrast the Freudian paradigm with that of Naikan therapy. The former gives the introspective individual a license to blame his parents. The latter does the exact opposite. The introspective individual is prompted to blame himself for failing to live up to his parents' expectations. Clearly, this is your side of the spinning coin more than it is mine.

We are definitely tossing the same coin though. Between you and me there is the deeper agreement that the treatment of the family in *Tokyo Story* has essentially a conservative bent in need of criticism. And I was impressed that both of us organized our reviews in the same way. We could not overlook the ideological aspect of the film that bothered us and felt the need to address this first. But we didn't want to make too much of this, preferring instead to gush about the aesthetic

and emotional power of *Tokyo Story* for the remainder of the review.

As for the *Ikiru* comparison, we agree enough to have both adopted this strategy but we do so for opposite purposes; you, what they have in common; me, how they are different. I don't think there is any substantive disagreement between us, however, (alas). I trust you concur with my assessment of Kurosawa's explicitly larger sociological treatment and radical orientation. For my part, I like your review for acknowledging the implicitly larger sociological elements in Ozu, to which I gave only a single line of lip service: "In its way, *Tokyo Story* is also extremely sensitive to the realities of post-WWII Japanese society." You spread some butter on this bread.

Last observation, you allow yourself to employ the term "bittersweet" whereas I did not allow myself to use the term "poignant." Is there some Japanese word we need to learn?

OK, one more observation. What the hell is wrong with us? Can we not seriously disagree about a film? (We'll always have *Mulholland Drive*.) You said, *Tokyo Story* "managed to KNOCK the pins out from under me." I said (twice), *Tokyo Story* "KNOCKED me out." Well, knock knock fellas. Who's there? It's the God of Vocabulary at the door. Seems she's shown up to knock our heads together. Seems she's noticed this exact-same-language thing we've got going on. Seems we're supposed to knock it off.

And Dan:

Do you suppose the uniformity in our choices of expression has something to do with the similarities of our education, culture, interests, appetites and the like? All in all, we're just another brick in the wall.

I, too, sense a cultural gap in our inability to articulate exactly what it is that Ozu is expressing here, but whatever it is, he's damned good at it—particularly when you consider how pretty much all of his plot outlines read like melodrama.

Then Ben:

I hear you and I agree with you (again, sigh). But come on, this time the two reviews were frighteningly similar. I mean, Mary-Kate and Ashley scary. One thing is for certain, we're never gonna get our own TV show if we keep on agreeing like this. (I'm planning on being the fat one, just to let you know).

I reckon if we studied some traditional Japanese philosophy and painting and martial arts and such, we might get somewhere. Ozu is bringing something prior from his culture into cinema that us Westerners cannot quite fathom.

By the way, do we each have to be another brick in the wall? I'd much rather that we be two peas in a pod.

Dan Jardine is the publisher of Cinemania. Ben Livant is a jazz lover and good friend of Dan's who he has been lending movies to for a while now.