

## On a Screening of Ozu

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Henri Langlois

There are a great many films which attract only a small minority of people. The tragedy of all cinémathèques is that they are trapped between public taste and the need to mould that taste. Most of them are therefore forced to – how shall we put it – to trail after a public taste instead of blazing a way for it.

Take Ozu, for instance. It took time for people in Paris to realise that he deserved the reputation he enjoyed in Japan. Only a couple of years ago the prevailing opinion was ‘Mizoguchi and Kurosawa are geniuses, but Ozu, yes, well...’ Every time an Ozu film was shown, there were only ten or twenty people in the audience. Thanks to some persistence in screening his films, and the retrospective we devoted to his work, realisation that he was an extraordinary film-maker finally dawned.

I was conquered by his genius while lecturing on the contemporary cinema. I was speaking about Japanese cinema and as usual had taken along some reels of film to illustrate what I was saying. And suddenly I realised that what I was saying no longer bore any relation to what I was seeing. In showing extracts from Mizoguchi and Kurosawa and Ozu I was praising the first two at the expense of the third, whereas I discovered that Ozu virtually demolished the other two. Sandwiched between Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, a reel of Ozu revealed his genius, a genius not instantly accessible, however, for Ozu is full of delicate nuance and his films comprise a great deal of talk. Five years ago audiences found this Japanese intimist oppressive because

he had neither the brilliance nor the charm of Mizoguchi, and by the charm I mean the true, mythological charm of the Fates, not the charm of a pretty woman. Ozu, however, is life. His films possess that extraordinary quality inherent in the American cinema: the purity of life.

In Mizoguchi there is an aesthetic element, though the arabesque it traces is so consummate that it succeeds in serving the theme, so that when one is drawn into the world of the film one does not at first realise how consciously skilful it is. Then comes the flash of illumination and one realises the extent to which a Mizoguchi film is composed. A Kurosawa film is also composed, though differently. Either way, all composition involves artifice. Except with Ozu. His characters are perfectly distilled, yet living beings. ●

*Excerpt from Nogueira, Rui and Zalaffi, Nicoletta, 'The Seventh Heaven: An Interview with Henri Langlois', Sight and Sound, 41:4, Autumn 1972, p. 182–193*