

# Ozu's Films<sup>1</sup>

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Manny Farber

One of the strongest images in Ozu's *The End of Summer* (1961) is the crematorium smokestack at the top of a bland, inexpressive landscape, symbolizing the end of an old rake, who sneaked a day at the bicycle races with his mistress and died of overexposure. The sinewy sturdy old man (Ganjiro Nakamura, who looks like Picasso himself with his cockiness and golden sturdy vigor) is the only rambunctious member of a very restrained, duty-conscious family—the invariable cornerstone around which Ozu constructs his pared down home drama perfections. The tactics of the long lead-in to the crematorium shot (besides the smokestack aimed at heaven, some equally sobering, numb landscapes shot nearly from sand level of two peasants washing clothes in the river, and three crows pacing very nervously, waiting for the old man's cremation, plus a few moments with the querulous, self-concerned family, impatiently put out) smacks a little of an over-obvious crossing of t's and dotting of i's.

Ozu's rigidly formalized, quaint hominess, a blend of Calvin Coolidge, Blondie, and Mies's neo-plastic esthetic, is like coming into a beautifully ordered home and being surrounded by respectful manners. It doesn't quite reach the pedestal of being "utterly Japanese," or "an unusually profound presentation of character." Simply poised linearism is probably closer to

the truth. The simple-minded Jane Austen script (who's going to marry whom) shows a Fifties image of Japanese life in which there is often a bland proper face with a spectacular keyboard of gleaming white teeth. "Profound characterization" seems to be a minor concern of the director compared to that of creating a delicately poised domestic panorama and in the process making workable some of the oldest tools in movie construction. Two people standing, sitting, kneeling, always amazingly decorous, deciding whether the family's brewery will have to merge with "big capital," their conversation spaced out in one-shots of each speaker. Ozu is much more formalized than this 1930s early talkies technique suggests. Where Hawks is matter-of-fact and eye level at the two speakers, Ozu hieratically shuttles one-two-shots, the camera always on speaker, never on listener, and autocratically dismisses anything (no dolly, fades, punctuation) that smacks of movement or congestion. Ozu uses big still-life shots—barrels outside a brewery—as chapter divisions between the little heartaches of the Kawamild family: should Number One sister marry the owner of a small steel mill? Must father embarrass his three grown daughters by renewing an early infidelity with an innkeeper?

The whole story moves towards the serene, ironic death of a lecherous father, unlike any other movie, in a kind of Morse code une. You

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see a little segment of family drama, then silence, followed by three shots of the brewery's wide tubs lined against a wall just outside the omnipresent doorway, which is Ozu's most consistent compositional device, and then another piece of middle-class soap opera. This scene-silence-bridging routine (sometimes wildly emotional music is played against the chapter division landscapes) repeats until the last of the three shots of black crows on a very blue-serene shore ends the graceful dot-dash parade and leaves the Ozu message: all is transitory, but the family remains.

Ozu's shorthand syntax most resembles Bresson's in his attention to the beauty of restricted movement, ritual-like repetitions, a human emphasis that is either agonized (Bresson) or sunnily benign (Ozu). This film, the September song for a cheerful old rascal, makes any Bresson seem the darkest dungeon of morbidity and sexual obsession. Lighting, theme, acting: you'd never find a row of white teeth fronting Bresson's graffiti-like shadowy imagery.

Ozu seems dedicated to that three inch doll whose head bobs up and down in the rear window of a philistine's automobile, but there's something likable, possibly profound, about these decorous, doll-like people. A hypnotic goodness pours out of restricted actors in coupled compositions.

Ozu's long career, which started in Snub Pollard-type silent comedies, never outgrows the Hal Roach idea of a movie image being naive and making you feel good. From start to finish, it's benevolence day with a family of short people who are short of every possible neurosis except an infinite capacity to sit still and grin happily at each other. Funny compositions: the two speakers are parallel rather than facing each other and they're boxed in by a vertical-horizontal order that is more emphatic than the tranquil pair. A person gets a little bored watching this family worry over its future, but, despite all the linear ploys, the use of up-down views in which there is a sense of a person looking straight ahead from a repose position on a mat, the movie

stays light, airy and fresh because of its rigorous abstracter style. As it travels across a nearly empty landscape of precisely poised static compositions, the film leaves no doubt of being in the hands of a masterful housekeeper who has both sympathy for his family and a deep belief in his Morse code style of moviemaking.

"You haven't got any real body, any dark sensual body of life. What you want is pornography, looking at yourself in mirrors." This frothing philosophizing causes Eleanor Bron, a fiercely self-conscious actress of smirks and mincing, to come down on Alan Bates's passionately yammering head with a lapis lazuli paperweight. This blow to kill an elephant produces the funniest response to sadism. "Oh no you don't Hermione, I don't let you," and, instead of rushing for a doctor, Bates runs straight through all kinds of Nature, thickets-turfs-clumps, pulling off his clothes, ending up in a grass-squirming act where he tries to cleanse himself of Hermione's hothouse corruption and culture mongering. Like *Isadora* and *Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Women In Love* is a lush decorator's job split between spurts of steaming, whipped-up acting and longer amorphous stuff where a whole production crew immerses itself in scene setting: a yearly picnic for mine workers jammed with choreographies, cows moving like Rockettes, and the double drowning of two young lovers—a treat for necrophiliacs (their naked bodies are discovered entwined in the mud after the lake is drained).

This sprawling period reconstruction is not as florid a production as *The Damned*, but it's in there, and much more of a multi-auteur product. The script (Larry Kramer) is carefully collaged D. H. Lawrence, the direction (Ken Russell) is an extravagant rouge job, each scene an operetta with its own private mahogany-to-hayseed yellow color, and the movie is further pushed out of whack by four actors who loom and bulk like Maillol sculptures, but have the quirky idiosyncratic faces of a Lautrec. All these people pushing the film in personal ways are really dominated by Lawrence and his

apocalyptic vision. So the movie ends up like a gaudy chariot pulled by twelve furious stallions who have been nibbling on locoweed.

Lawrence wrote about restless people, of quick irritations and tenacious wills, more involved with the idea of love than the act. The exact scenes of his self-nominated “best novel” have been cheapened because they now echo a hundred films. Glenda Jackson in *Nighttown* has been rendered by conventional romanticists, Carol Reed style, with the same hulks of necking couples in chiaroscuro alleyways; two Joe Sawyer types washing themselves in their backyard watch

Jackson’s hard-eyed glitter pass them by, and they hit her with the same over-centered, bragging crack that might appear in Ford’s *Informer* sculpture or even Richard Lester: “I’d give a week’s wages for five minutes of that.” Oliver Reed, the only character with enough script time to make his brute-strength-under-a-stiff-collar character halfway understandable, is in one formalized action film cliché after another, spurring blood from his horse’s flanks in a race to the crossing with a freight train. Kramer’s script cuts out all the quiet spots, particularly the inner thoughts and Lawrence’s favorite image, the always-changing emotions of conversation. •

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