



Ozu: His Life and Films

Donald Richie

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"Substantially the book that devotees of the director have been waiting for: a full-length critical work about Ozu's life, career and working methods, buttressed with reproductions of pages from his notebooks and shooting scripts, numerous quotes from co-workers and Japanese critics, a great many stills and an unusually detailed filmography."--*Sight and Sound*

Yasujiro Ozu, the man whom his kinsmen consider the most Japanese for all film directors, had but one major subject, the Japanese family, and but one major theme, its dissolution. The Japanese family in dissolution figures in every one of his fifty-three films. In his later pictures, the whole world exists in one family, the characters are family members rather than members of a society, and the ends of the earth seem no more distant than the outside of the house.

Ozu: His Life and Films Details

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Steve Leach says

Going through another Ozu phase and wanted to reread this thorough guide as I watched and rewatched the movies.

Mitchell says

Richie's book on Yasujiro Ozu is less opulent but richer than his book on Kurosawa. This may be because Ozu's work fits so well into the kind of Japanese cultural analysis that Richie does so brilliantly. Instead of going film by film, the book is divided into sections describing Ozu's approach to creating a film. Hence, there are sections on script, shooting and editing.

There is also a brief survey of all his films at the end of the book that is woven into a biography of the director. Very valuable resource, I find.

Ozu is one of the great masters of cinema. This book is a great help if you need to understand why.

Patrick McCoy says

Donald Richie's Ozu (1977) is a seminal look at one of Japan's and the world's greatest directors. Recently, the British film magazine Sight & Sound ranked his masterpiece, *Tokyo Story*, as the greatest film of all-time. The book is divided into several sections and after the "Preface" in which Richie discusses Yasujiro Ozu's reputation as the most Japanese of their directors, he launches into the "Introduction," which identifies the elements that comprise an Ozu film: the low tatami view (also known as dog's view) camera angle and the dissolution of the family as the main subject. In the next section Richie discussed the importance of Ozu's script writing that was often done in tandem with a collaborator. For Ozu the emphasis was on character rather than plot. Surprisingly, Richie discusses Ozu script writing for a comedy, *Good Morning*, in which farting or "breaking wind" is a recurring motif. I haven't seen the film in question and seems to differ from the later dramas, which is probably why Richie uses this example. Richie also points out several characteristics of an Ozu screenplay: a lack of absolutes (there are no all bad or good characters), he often employed the minor motif of light romantic attachment as a parallel to a major theme, used visual parallels, and often employed irony in the mix. The next stage in film making and the book is "Shooting." Here Richie analyzes Ozu's particular style of shooting a film. Most distinctive is his camera point of view of a person sitting on a tatami mat, about three feet off the ground. Ozu is also known for the lack of camera movement, there are some tracking shots, but he largely avoids using cranes and dollies. The focus is on pictorial composition which involves shooting at right angles to achieve a balanced composition, framing people in all manners of ways, compositions with the person in the background out of focus with the foreground in focus. These compositions break the action and are essentially empty so that the viewer can fill it with the appropriate emotion. Ozu was particular about casting and often wrote characters with an actor in mind. He tended to stay away from popular actors. He was also known as a demanding director who called for a particular action from an actor, but never gave any advice on how to play the role. This resulted in legendary stories from a number of actors about astonishing numbers of takes for problematic scenes over the years. In

his shooting Ozu has shown the preference for the full face shot in order to give the observance of enryo (restraint) and to portray a deep sense of regard. All of this resulted in a sense of immediacy. After "Shooting" comes "Editing" in the book and film making process. In comparison to other film makers like Akira Kurosawa, Ozu did little editing in that he had most of what he wanted in the shooting process. However, he usually followed this pattern: long shot--medium shot--close up--medium shot--long shot. This was especially true of establishing shots that open his films. Ozu often used object as transitional devices like the bicycle in *A Story Of Floating Weeds*. Furthermore, his use of still lifes and empty scenes were seen as containers for emotion supplied by the audience. His film always had a very subtle tempo unlike the active tempo of many other directors. Richie sums up his editing style by observing that all aspects of Ozu's film (dialogue, scene, sequence, and sound) were pattern into module units. In the "Conclusion" Richie draws a comparison of Ozu's style of film to the Japanese concept of wabi from ikebaba (the art of flower arranging). Thus, the more ordinary, or even poor, container reflects the stronger, properly displayed effect. Ozu has been celebrated and criticized for being a traditionalist, but there's no denying the fact that he is. At the end of the book there is a "Biographical Filmography" which gives commentary about milestones and important turning points in Ozu's life and career.

I can appreciate Ozu's craft and subtlety and recognize him as a great artist. I will concur that *Tokyo Story* is one of the greatest films of all-time. I have seen and appreciated most of his later works, which are interesting forays into the dissolution of the family, his great theme. However, he is like a hedgehog, to borrow Isiah Berlin's metaphors for artist who focuses on one great truth. I tend to prefer artists that are foxes (e.g. those artists that focus on many truths, like Kurosawa who worked in many genres). That being said there is no denying that he is one of Japan's greatest artists.

Ericpegnam Pegnam says

the best book on Japanese film I've ever read. Ozu's style and career lend themselves to Donald Richie's precise analysis. Highly recommended for people who love OZU.

Tosh says

Donald Richie and Ozu. A perfect combination. A great book length study on the great Japanese filmmaker. Richie did a remarkable job in nailing down what is great about Ozu's work. Essential.
