

Japanese Film After World War II October 24, 2005

- Yasujiro Ozu, *Tokyo Story* (1953)
- Other directors:
 - Kenji Mizoguchi, *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954)
 - Akira Kurosawa, *Rashomon* (1950)
 - Akira Kurosawa, *Seven Samurai* (1954)

History of Japanese Film

- Large silent film industry
- Use of live narrator (benshi) to accompany silent films
- Relatively slow transition to sound (silent films continue to be made until 1937)
- Censorship during World War II
- Reorganization of film industry under American occupation (after 1945)
- Mizoguchi and Ozu

Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963)

- Starts making films in silent era
- Often seen as the most “traditionally Japanese” of all Japanese filmmakers...
- But actually he was very interested in, and knowledgeable about, American film
- Most of his films are quiet and understated, and confined within a single family
- A minimal and highly original style

Tokyo Story (1953): Context and Themes

- Traditional Japanese life disrupted by modernity
- Aftermath of World War II
- Small towns vs. big city (Tokyo)
- Clash of younger and older generations
- Emphasis on the extended family

Ozu: Visual Style (1)

- Low camera angles, from the POV of someone “seated in traditional fashion on the tatami” (Donald Ritchie)
- “Pillow shots” as transitions
- Lingering camera, after scene has ended and actors have moved offscreen
 - As treatment of space
 - As treatment of time

Ozu: Visual Style (2): The 360° System

- Different from Hollywood continuity system, but in its own way just as orderly
- No axis of action, no 180° limitation
- Camera moves all around the circle in which people are seated
- “Mismatched” eyelines and body postures
- Graphic matching among shots (e.g. in shot/reverse shot)
- Graphic matching across action

Ozu: Visual Style (3)

- Stationary framing for the most part
- No zooms, almost no pans
- Tracking shots only to maintain graphic consistency as characters move
- Straight cuts; no fades or dissolves
- Elision of many parts of the action

Ozu's Aesthetics

- Mistreatment of the old people by the younger generation
- “Life is disappointing”; “Children are disappointing.”
- Subtlety and obliqueness of presentation
- Space and time become “prominent aesthetic elements in their own right.” (Bordwell & Thompson)
- Traditional Japanese aesthetics? Or response to modernity?

Kenji Mizoguchi (1896-1956)

- Preference for historical dramas
- Tragedy
- Admired von Sternberg
- Started as an actor
- Numerous silent films, from 1922
- Best known for sound films of 1950s
- Emphasis on suffering female characters
- (Exception: *47 Ronin*, during the War)

Sansho the Bailiff (1954)

- Emphasis on mise-en-scène
- Very few close-ups, very little montage
- Long takes, moving camera (pans, tracking shots, crane shots)
- Close attention to framing and lighting
- A lot of movement within the frame
- Composition along diagonals
- Long shots emphasize natural landscape
- Emphasis on memory: present into past
- Theme of women's suffering
- Fatalism, tragedy

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998)

- Originally a painter
- Enters film industry in mid-1930s
- 1943: first film as director
- *Rashomon* (1950): his breakthrough film, first international hit from Japan
- Films in various genres (thrillers, historical films, samurai films) in 1950s and 1960s
- Epics as well as personal films towards the end of his life

Seven Samurai (1954)

- Fusion of American/European and Japanese styles
- Borrowings from American genres (e.g. the Western)
- Influenced later American films in turn
- Epic story
- Movement between large scale, and intimate look at particular characters
- Frame composition and sound editing