

VIEWING NOTES FOR YASUJIRÔ OZU'S *BAKUSHÛ* (EARLY SUMMER)

On setting, architecture, space

Ozu began making films in the 1930s, but his postwar films are some of his most famous. Like the celebrated *Tokyo Story* (1954), *Early Summer* (1951) is concerned with similar themes: the infusion of American popular culture into Japanese during the period of “Occupied Japan,” and the influence of major postwar social changes on family structures.

Several critics have written about the way Ozu uses architectural spaces within his films. The settings are more than just the natural backdrop of the world the director inhabits; they are infused with meaning because of traditional Japanese architectural concepts, especially the idea of “*ma*,” a notion of space as inseparable from time, and therefore impossible to fully capture in visual terms. “A concept that is indescribable with a single Western term, *ma* combines an understanding of spaces, pauses and gaps; an intuitive grasp of events, emotions and phenomena that have been, and are yet to come. It becomes intrinsically linked with the void, with absence and with the multiple intangible phenomena that exist in an indefinable space “between” architectural elements rather than in a limited, measurable space enclosed by them” (Cairns, Graham, et al. *The Architecture of the Screen: Essays in Cinematographic Space*. Intellect, 2013: 241).

Note, as critic Leo Goldsmith does, how “[Ozu’s] camera investigates the structure of living and working spaces, the geography of small suburban towns, the architecture of homes and sake bars and offices, and the emotional spaces that divide and unite the films’ characters.” Consider when characters are sitting on the floor (often a domestic posture) and when the camera either looks down to them or up from the floor, vs. when characters sit in chairs or stand in spaces of commerce, and the related camera angles in those scenes. How do these postures and camera angles influence the characters’ relations within one another? Or between the characters and the viewers?

On Ozu’s storytelling style

The patient pacing of the narrative lulls viewers into the daily rhythms of the Mayima family’s life, lingering on the pleasures of the quotidian in its comical episodes as well as in the moments of “distilled drama.”

Critic Susan Mason’s ideas are useful helping to frame our viewing mindset for Ozu’s work. She calls on the concept of “mindfulness” and advises us to watch his films with “mindful spectatorship.” His focus is on “conscious observation of the present.” She points out that the ways he maintains a focus on the present is through the use of repetitions, ellipses (gaps that omit obvious details and require the viewer to engage and fill them in), and sequencing that connects scenes by their connected meanings instead of by chronological logic. She attributes this in part to traditional storytelling modes within Japanese literature.

The screenplay (written by Ozu and his regular collaborator Kogo Noda) meanders into and out of the focus on each member of the family, finally landing on Noriko and her dilemma. As you watch, think about how this technique connects the generations of the household, how Noriko’s story functions as the story of an entire family during a period of change.

Critic Ira Jaffe celebrates Ozu’s work in the category he has dubbed “slow movies,” a particular style that pushes against action films with high levels of décor and special effects. The style of slow movies often includes an unusually still camera, long shots more than close-ups, very few edits or quick-cuts, plots with leisurely pacing, and very contained acting styles. While some may argue that “nothing much happens” in such films, Jaffe argues that the empty spaces are filled with worldly wisdom—and even grace. Consider how Ozu creates aesthetic pleasure in the details of everyday life, in the quiet, unexplained moments, and in the nuances of emotional experience.